

Research Paper

The Mental Gremlins of Inspector Javert: Can Psychoanalysis of a Fictional Character Throw Light on The Culprit Behind Harm OCD?

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ABSTRACT

Though its significance has been questioned time and again, there can be no denying the fact that humanities serve as a torch-bearer to the multiple mysteries lying in the deepest fathoms of the human mind. In the words of Barack Obama, former President of the US, “Throughout history, the arts and humanities have helped men and women around the globe grapple with the most challenging questions and come to know the most basic truths.” It can even be said that part of the vast body of study on the formation of human character have been made possible via bildungsroman portrayals of characters found in the pages of literature. These portrayals help unravel the complexities of the human mind and thought. By doing so, it provides insight not just into maladaptation in the human psyche but also the factors responsible for causing them. Often christened a “tragic legalist” by critics, the character of Inspector Javert from Victor Hugo’s ‘Les Miserables’ may be considered a maladaptive character—one obsessed with living in strict adherence with the codes of law. His obsession leads to compulsive behavior on his part where he appears obsessed with upholding law even at the expense of humanitarian consideration. This ultimately leads to his undoing as he is unable to adhere to the unrealistic moral standards which he sets for himself in the face of humanitarianism. Ever fearful of the imaginary outcome of being unable to meet his self-defined moral standards, Javert may be exhibiting characteristics of a sub-type of OCD called ‘Harm OCD’. This article, via a detailed psychoanalysis of the character of Inspector Javert tries to determine the causative factor behind Harm OCD.

Keywords: *Psychoanalysis, Maladaptation, Superego, Harm OCD*

Javert as a self-critical man:

Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* has been adapted for both the stage and the screen innumerable times. A large part of the novel centres around the protagonist, Jean Valjean and his nemesis, Inspector Javert.

Throughout the novel, the latter remains determined on having the former prosecuted. This may have prompted a few readers of the novel to dub him a villain at face-value. However, a closer reading of Hugo’s depiction highlights the fact that Javert is a man whose misguided

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Received: August 14, 2023; Revision Received: September 27, 2023; Accepted: September 30, 2023

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and oft self-destructive pursuit of justice is more pathos-evoking than villainous. Due to this, critics have often described Javert as “one of the most tragic legalists in Western literature.”

Born to a gypsy fortune-teller and a convict, Javert grows up with a profound negativity towards his own origin. He views himself a misfit in a society which he felt, irrevocably closed doors on two sets of people- those who attacked it and those who guarded it. This self-imposed alienation might potentially have provoked a plethora of defense mechanisms in his mind, all channelized towards keeping him away from the sense of guilt and shame which he felt towards his own birth circumstances.

However, his self-imposed alienation and, by extension, his defense mechanism is threatened on being faced by Jean Valjean. It may be hypothesized that Javert, being born in what he regards as a much less-than-favourable situation, is one who remains constantly on the edge as out of fear. A fear which makes him feel that he, as a result of his birth circumstances, may be potentially vulnerable to committing slips—something which he holds in severe disdain. This side to his character finds a subtle portrayal in Russell Crowe’s performance in the 2012 version of ‘Les Miserables’ where Javert is twice seen walking on the edges of steep edifices. Being always on the edge, Javert is unable to decipher the abounding shade of grey inherent in most facets of life and classifies the world as being either black or white. However, this view, in turn, renders Javert a severely myopic legalist, ruthless and straightforward to a fault—one who refuses to grant grace either to others or even to himself.

At face-value, the character of Javert might appear to be rather straightforward. However, on a closer reading, it may be ascertained that he has serious issues with his worldview and, by extension, his image of himself. As one who denies grace to a certain section of people, who, in his view are unworthy, as well as to himself, he subconsciously aligns himself to the very section of society which he ruthlessly pursues. On multiple occasions, it is vividly depicted in the novel that Javert does not consider himself as a candidate deserving grace or kindness as on the occasion when he asks Valjean under the alias of Monsieur Madeline to press charges against him and fire him for have wrongly accused him of being a convict on the legal front. The lengths at which he goes to condemn his own perceived crime and, instead of resigning, asking for being dismissed from the police force with due punishment, depicts him as a very conflicted individual.

Possible causes for the formation of a rigid Superego:

According to Sigmund Freud’s iceberg theory, the human mind is complex tripartite structure where two of its components—the Id and the Superego are constantly at war with each other. According to Ben Ringler, if an individual constantly finds himself relentlessly plagued by a critical internal voice, then in all likelihood, such a person may be dealing with an uncharacteristically harsh superego. In Ringler’s opinion, a harsh superego may exert a control over an individual which may be akin to ‘living under the shadow of an intimidating, abusive parent’.

Opinion on the factors leading to the formation of the superego of an individual remains largely divided. In Freud’s opinion, the superego is formed during infancy as the result of an individual trying to internalize the voice of its parents. Melanie Klein, however, argues that superego is not the product of an infant trying to internalize parental voices but rather a byproduct of an infant’s attempt to protect the self from aggressive and destructive thoughts and feelings.

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However, despite differences in opinion as to the process of formation of superego, it may be accepted by common consensus that a child's early environment may be the biggest factor contributing to the formation of its superego. While a mildly critical or supportive superego may perhaps be the outcome of supportive parenting, a rigid one may point to critical parenting or emotionally and physically absent parents. A rigid superego may mentally handicap a person to such an extent that acting independently of its proscribed behaviour may lead to intense feelings of guilt and dread over some imaginary undesirable outcome.

Proposed relationship between a rigid Superego and Harm OCD:

A sort of maladaptation, regarded as an anxiety disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) may be defined as a mental illness that causes repeated unwanted thoughts or sensations (obsessions) or the urge to do something over and over again (compulsions). Obsessions and compulsions have a kind of unhealthy symbiotic relationship in OCD. Sometimes compulsive behaviours against agonizing intrusive thoughts turn to obsessions when individuals procrastinate over them for extended periods of time. This in turn leads to compulsions turning into obsessions.

Harm OCD may be defined as one of the subtypes of OCD. This subtype is generally characterized by fear on the part of an individual that they might end up doing something that their conscience could never justify, or prove to be a potential threat to the wellbeing of either themselves or others. These fears may often be stirred up at the behest of a fleeting thought which might turn intrusive where an individual pictures himself/herself indulging in actions which might be disturbing to his/her mental framework with respect to the ethical and moral values upheld by the individual.

The relationship between a rigid superego and Harm OCD is complex. In Harm OCD, individuals experience intrusive thoughts or fears of causing harm to themselves or others, despite having no intent to do so. As the superego represents the internalized moral standards of an individual, a rigid superego can greatly exacerbate this condition by intensifying feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety associated with the intrusive thoughts. The strict adherence to moral standards imposed by the superego can potentially create a heightened sensitivity to these thoughts, culminating in increased distress.

Does psychoanalysis of Inspector Javert display symptoms of OCD/Harm OCD?

It is worth noting that the character of Inspector Javert in 'Les Miserables' is a literary creation of Victor Hugo. As such, diagnosing a fictional character with a specific mental health condition like OCD can be subjective and open to interpretation owing to the heterogeneity encompassed by psychoanalytic reading and, by extension, psychoanalysis. The beginnings of the practice of psychoanalytic reading may be traced back to the days of the early development of psychoanalysis itself. Gradually, it developed into a heterogeneous interpretive tradition, the essence of which is summed up by Celine Surprenant as "the idea that literature... is fundamentally entwined with the psyche." Going by that spirit, it could be argued via psychoanalysis that the character of Inspector Javert exhibits certain traits or behaviors that may resonate with aspects of OCD.

Javert's relentless pursuit of Jean Valjean, the main protagonist, may be seen as an obsessive preoccupation with ensuring that Valjean faces the consequences of his past actions. This obsession with capturing Valjean may be regarded as a manifestation of intrusive thoughts or fears of harm as Javert believes that one branded a criminal in the eyes of law is incapable of

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redemption and, by extension, unworthy of grace. Going by this line of thought, Javert possibly feels that letting Valjean walk free may lead to potential societal harm which would be wrought by his own actions.

A detailed analysis of the character as portrayed in the sung-through-musical version of ‘Les Miserables’ originally written in French by Claude-Michel Schonberg, Alain Boubil and Jean-Marc Natel may imply that Javert displays certain characteristics which may portray a super-rigid superego at work and traces of Harm OCD too lurking in the depths of his mind.

In the musical, the chapter titled ‘The Confrontation’ projects an enraged Javert trying to arrest Valjean whose identity as a former convict had been disclosed as an act of mercy by the latter in order to prevent an innocent man from being arrested in a case of case of mistaken identity. In the moments when both characters are locked in altercation, Javert reveals that his understanding of the world comes from the fact that he was born unworthy. Validation of this mindset of his can be sought when Javert hurls or sings the following words at Valjean:

“You know nothing of Javert.
I was born inside a jail!
I was born with scum like you...
I am from the gutter too!”

Through the above lines, Javert while expressing his severe disdain of criminals unfortunately projects his own vulnerability—the fact that he can’t forget his ‘seemingly unfortunate’ birth circumstances and perhaps, deep down in his subconscious mind, he feels that he too might potentially be one of those whom he hunts down and persecutes with a dogged devotion. By way of argument, it may be discerned that Javert perhaps sees an unfavourable version of himself in criminals which he feels, may be caused by an atavistic reversal caused by a potential slip. As this possible intrusive thought might triggered by his knowledge and sense of shame about his birth circumstances which he felt was aligned with criminals by nature, he seethes at them.

It may be worthwhile to point out that OCD is a behavioral cycle of sorts which builds up in the subconscious mind. In this sphere, the obsession is realized in response to an intrusive thought and then compulsive behaviour comes as a defense mechanism to seek relief from the obsession, thus crafting the cycle of OCD. Javert is known for his unwavering commitment to upholding the law and enforcing strict moral standards. He constantly seeks to bring justice and maintain order, often at the expense of breaching and denying personal relationships and compassion, two of the basic standpoints of humanity. His act of denial may be his compulsion stemming from his staunch obsession to prevent himself from aligning himself with the people he persecutes but, unfortunately, also identifies with.

However, though Javert denies kindness and pity, at the end, his pitfall lies in the fact that he too is not devoid of humanity. Javert is known for his strict adherence to the law and his relentless pursuit of those whom, he believes, to be the scourge of society at large. However, there is a notable act of humanity that Javert displays in the narrative.

The act of humanity occurs during the barricade scene, where the revolutionaries, including Marius Pontmercy, are engaged in battle against the government forces. Javert infiltrates the barricade disguised as a spy, intending to gather information and aid in the capture of the

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revolutionaries. However, when he is unmasked and recognized as an inspector, Javert is taken captive by the revolutionaries. As the night progresses, Javert finds himself in a moral conflict. He witnesses the courage and selflessness of the revolutionaries, particularly Jean Valjean, who saves him from execution, even while knowing that the act may cost him his freedom. His experience at the barricade makes Javert question his rigid adherence to the law and the black-and-white view of justice he has held throughout his life.

Ever engaged in a moral dilemma, Javert is torn apart by the fact that his mindset was slowly but surely connecting empathically to the concept of grace and beginning to view even a former convict as worthy of redemption—something that his rigid superego had hitherto refuted. In a moment of internal struggle, Javert makes a surprising decision. He releases Valjean from the clutches of law. This act of mercy and forgiveness goes against everything Javert has stood for, revealing a glimpse of his humanity. Javert while acknowledging the complexity of human nature and the limitations of the justice system he has so passionately upheld cannot yet reconcile to the fact that in setting a former convict free, his acts won't be causing any damage to the society which he had so passionately defended and thus align him with the people he had come to regard as undesirable. Though deep down, Javert acknowledges that Valjean is a human capable of redemption, however his rigid set of beliefs stemming from his inflexible superego render him incapable of mentally ruling out the possibility of harm to law and order that might be caused by his act and potentially render him an ally to those he had held in severe disdain. This may surely be deciphered as the symptom of a man suffering from Harm OCD as patients suffering from this disorder often do realize that they are unlikely to cause any harm along the lines of the triggering intrusive thought but still remain incapable of validating the same to themselves.

Ultimately, Javert, unable to reconcile his conflicting beliefs to the act of humanity he exhibits becomes burdened with the guilt of giving in to granting grace and thus failing at what he had so passionately upheld all his life. Unable to live with his newfound compassion and the dissonance leading to an upheaving guilt it creates within him, Javert takes his own life by jumping into the Seine River. It may be note-worthy that in his last act of life, Javert breaks the law as committing suicide was regarded as a crime in France at that time. Thus, Javert's death culminates in a victory of sorts over the rigidity of his own superego, the imposed burden of which had become too heavy.

Javert's act of humanity serves as a powerful moment in the story. It demonstrates the potential for redemption and change within even the most rigid characters, highlighting the internal struggles and complexities of human nature that lie beneath the surface.

CONCLUSION

Through a detailed analysis of the character of Inspector Javert, it may be seen that his eventual fate stems from a system of inflexible beliefs to which his consciousness cannot always reconcile. The superego is definitely important as far as human behaviour is concerned. From informing the ego about moral considerations, curbing the id's unacceptable desires and promoting an individual's endeavour of striving towards perfect behavioral standards, the contribution of the superego cannot be denied.

However, a very rigid superego may potentially birth a myriad of imaginary unfavourable images in response to some intrusive thoughts which may be generated either by a picturization of the id's fleeting desires or external triggers. This action of the superego may

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actually stem from fear of falling prey or giving in to some action which may cause harm to the self or to others. This in turn may lead to individuals procrastinating over these imaginary outcomes, leading to feelings of fear, shame and guilt. Such feelings cause mental suffocation causing individuals to seek devising arguments or ritualistic practices to keep the discomfort arising from these imaginary outcomes at bay. However, as long as procrastination continues at the behest of the superego, the arguments and ritualistic practices too become repetitive, giving rise to the cycle of Harm OCD in the subconscious. Unless individuals suffering from Harm OCD come up with some way to mitigate their rigid superegos to reconcile to intrusive thoughts as well as chances of materialization of possibilities suggested by them, the light at the end of this dark tunnel is still very far from sight.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Sengupta, S. (2023). The Mental Gremlins of Inspector Javert: Can Psychoanalysis of a Fictional Character Throw Light on The Culprit Behind Harm OCD? *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(3), 4462-4467. DIP:18.01.415.20231103, DOI:10.25215/1103.415