

An Analysis of Ben in *The Fifth Child* and Its Sequel from the Perspective of Freudian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract: As one of the most prestigious female writers succeeding to Woolf, Doris Lessing delivers profound reflections on human nature and marginal groups in her representative works *The Fifth Child* and its sequel *Ben, in the World*. Centering on the deformed protagonist Ben, the two novels depict his miserable life trajectory: excluded and disgraced by his own family since childhood, Ben is eventually abandoned. Struggling in a utilitarian and indifferent social environment, he harbors a sincere longing for warmth and stable family life, yet can only drift aimlessly. Suffering from long-term bullying and ruthless exploitation from the outside world, he falls into endless despair and ultimately chooses to end his life. This paper explores Ben's tragic fate based on Freudian personality structure theory and psychological defense mechanism theory. It interprets the dynamic evolution of the protagonist's personality in his growth experience and explores the psychological coping modes he adopts in the face of continuous misfortunes. The analysis further excavates the essential causes of Ben's personal tragedy, exposes the selfish and greedy dark side of human nature hidden behind social and family indifference, and provides new perspectives for understanding the complexity of human nature. This study also helps promote rational and inclusive attitudes towards vulnerable and marginalized groups in society.

Keywords: Doris Lessing; *The Fifth Child*; Freudian Psychoanalysis; Human Nature

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is a renowned contemporary British female writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007. She has been hailed as the greatest female writer since Virginia Woolf. Lessing's works have received widespread attention both domestically and

internationally. The themes of Lessing's novels can be divided into four categories. The first is set against African colonial life, focusing on national independence and freedom. The second focuses on modern women's challenges and self-liberation [1]. The third uses fables and fantasies to depict crises faced by humanity. The fourth returns to realistic narrative, targeting social reality problems.

The Fifth Child belongs to the fourth period. The novel tells the birth of the fifth child Ben, which breaks the calm of a middle-class English family. Ben is born with brute force, extremely aggressive and even bloodthirsty [2]. His father sends him to a sanatorium where he is abused. His mother, feeling guilty, takes him back, but the home continues to fall into trouble, and eventually Ben runs away from home. Ben, in *The World* is the sequel written twelve years later. After experiencing deceit and betrayal in a ruthless society, Ben becomes desperate and commits suicide by jumping off a cliff.

The research on Lessing's work both domestically and internationally has been relatively systematic, mostly analyzing "The Fifth Child" and its sequels from multiple perspectives such as feminist themes and ethical perspectives [3,4]. However, few people have interpreted it from the perspective of psychoanalytic criticism theory. Therefore, this study applies Freud's psychoanalytic theory to analyze the development of Ben's character structure and psychological defense mechanisms, explore the causes of his tragic marginalization, and deeply reflect on Lessing's reflection on human nature and society in the novel, as well as his relentless pursuit of the theme of harmonious coexistence [5].

2. An Overview of Freudian Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud was an Austrian psychiatrist and founder of the psychoanalytic school. Freud's theory mainly includes aspects such as the subconscious, psychodynamics, and personality structure [6]. This thesis primarily uses Freud's

personality structure theory to analyze Ben's personality changes during his development, and then employs his theory of psychological defense mechanisms to explore how Ben defends against real-life difficulties, as well as the trajectory of his subsequent psychological and behavioral changes.

Freud's personality structure theory is the cornerstone of his theory, depicting the complex structure of human psychology composed of three interacting parts: the id, ego, and superego. The "id" symbolizes the most primitive impulses within an individual, such as sexual desire and aggression, originating from biological instincts, pursuing immediate satisfaction, and following the "pleasure principle." The ego is a manifestation of the reality principle, responsible for mediating between the id and the external world. Through rational thinking, the ego enables individuals to satisfy id impulses while avoiding conflicts with the real world. The superego represents the internalization of social norms and moral values, formed in childhood through family and social education. The superego pursues moral perfection, follows moral principles, and exerts strong constraints on the individual [7].

Psychological defense mechanisms refer to unconscious strategies adopted by individuals facing inner conflicts, anxiety, and pressure to protect themselves and maintain psychological balance. This concept was first proposed by Freud and further developed by Anna Freud. Defense mechanisms can be divided into several types: escape defense mechanism (repression, denial, regression), self-deception defense mechanism, attack defense mechanism, and constructive defense mechanism (identification, sublimation, humor). Repression is the most basic form, eliminating unacceptable impulses or thoughts from consciousness. Regression refers to an individual's childish behavior when facing setbacks. Identification refers to unconsciously imitating others' traits or behaviors to enhance one's sense of identity.

3. Personality Structure of Ben

3.1 The Bottom Layer: Release of Id Desires

The id follows the pleasure principle, seeking immediate satisfaction and avoiding pain. Its impact is reflected in the pursuit of basic needs [8]. Harriet and David had four children and lived a peaceful life. But when the fifth child

arrived, everything was disrupted. During pregnancy, Harriet felt aggressive pounding in her abdomen. When Ben was born, he followed his instinct to suck milk with a strong reflex, gripping her nipples hard, causing her great pain. Ben's id played a leading role—he only followed hunger instinct, ignoring his mother's pain. When his mother tried to stop him, he bit her nipples. He was savage, and his mother called him a little primitive.

Ben's strength was astonishing. When Paul went upstairs to play with Ben, Ben tightly grabbed Paul's hand, twisted his arm back, and cheered proudly. Ben had no concept of respecting older brothers. He relied on his id's desire, followed the pleasure principle, attacked those he disliked, and cheered when he knocked down threats.

The first sentence Ben learned was not "mother" or "father" but "I want cake." He had no emotional pursuit and did not seek care from his parents. He was completely in an instinctive id state, accommodating his chaotic desires. Ben's friends were a group of idle children who used the Lovett family's money. They wandered to London and appeared on television reporting robberies. Ben did not care about value, good or evil, or moral standards. He acted completely according to untamed instincts not allowed by modern ethical and legal norms.

After running away, when Ben suffered hunger, he would grab meat from the butcher's shop and run away. The desire to eat prevailed, and the id dominated. Besides food and safety, Ben also had a strong sexual desire. He followed Rita into her rental house. When she searched for money, Ben had none, but instead of leaving, he raped her. Ben lacked logical thinking and reality perception, only pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, disregarding consequences.

3.2 The Middle Layer: Constraints of Ego

The ego follows the reality principle, regulating the contradiction between id and superego, and realizing id desires in the real world. Ben learned to speak normally. To integrate into the family, Helen taught Ben to respond to greetings. Ben would stare, ponder, then clumsily respond, observing other children's movements and social interactions. He tried to adapt to the environment and act according to everyone's expectations so that his mother and siblings would no longer reject him. At this time, Ben's ego dominated, constraining his unreasonable behavior.

Ben was sent to a sanatorium due to his irritable

and bloodthirsty personality. He was inhumanely abused but finally his mother took him back. Out of fear, he made a tremendous row. Harriet threatened to tie him up and send him back to the sanatorium. Ben, out of survival instinct, repressed his fear. He was afraid of death and of being sent back. To avoid returning, he followed his mother's teachings, acted like a normal person, and suppressed his rough nature.

After running away, Ben looked for a job. He met Mrs. Biggs, who taught him table manners. Feeling warm, Ben followed her teachings, ate properly, and obeyed social morality. In the past, he would steal meat when hungry, but now he was careful with every move. To satisfy Mrs. Biggs and continue being taken in, he suppressed his id's desires. The ego regulated reality needs.

When Ben returned home to obtain a birth certificate, he found Paul, whom he disliked, by his mother's side. He could not suppress his anger but finally left home forever. Facing his mother, the birth certificate, anger toward Paul, and disgust from the family, he suppressed his desires. To protect himself from losing control and harming Paul, he compromised with reality and left.

After returning, Ben found a job at a construction site, but people deceived and squeezed him. The foreman owed him forty pounds, and other workers took his money. No one gave him justice. Ben knew that if he rebelled, they would beat him and take the rest. He learned to assess the situation, analyze pros and cons, and suppress his desire to resist. He silently took the money and left.

3.3 The Top Level: Supervision of Superego Morality

The superego includes moral values, responsibility, and rational thinking, supervising and evaluating individual behavior.

Ben did not obtain a birth certificate from his parents, so he could not find a normal job. But he knew Mrs. Biggs did not have the money to support him. He liked her because she treated him kindly, taught him etiquette, and provided shelter. To repay her, he worked at the construction site to earn money for both of them. He learned to clean himself, take showers, and change clothes. Ben developed moral concepts and daily life common sense. He took on the responsibility of caring for Mrs. Biggs. The superego regulated and supervised his behavior.

If he did not do so, the superego would promote anxiety and guilt.

At first, Ben was repulsed by Mrs. Biggs's cat, and the cat ran away. After time together, they began to trust each other. Previously, Ben had killed the family dog. Now, Ben developed emotions and understood liking. He experienced warmth from Mrs. Biggs, so he took care of her cat. His superego demanded that he behave like a normal person with proper emotions and a sense of responsibility.

Ben had strong sexual desire. Kind-hearted Teresa respected him, talked to him, and comforted him. Ben thought she liked him like Rita. One night, Ben took off his pants in front of Teresa, trying to satisfy his long-suppressed desire. But Teresa trembled with reluctance and fear. Ben liked this friend, so he restrained his desire, put on his pants, and returned to his room. Morality told him not to force his friend. Unlike when he first met Rita and raped her, now his superego was developing. He warned himself to respect friends and comply with legal norms. However, his superego had limitations. He could not discern others' hidden malice, so he was deceived into transporting drugs to France. He could not conceal his anomalies and was caught by a research institute. In the end, seeing a painting on the wall, he lost his belief in survival and committed suicide.

4. Ben's Psychological Defense Mechanism

4.1 The Causes of Ben's Tragedy

Ben encountered various misfortunes causing great physical and mental pain. This pain came from three aspects: family, society, and personal shortcomings.

Lack of family care means children cannot receive sufficient emotional support, security, and proper guidance. This deficiency may lead to emotional loneliness, helplessness, anxiety, depression, lack of learning interest, social isolation, and even aggressive tendencies [9]. Ben had a peculiar appearance and was naturally irritable and bloodthirsty. His father hated him and sent him to a sanatorium. His brothers and sisters kept away. Living in such a repressed family environment, no one gave Ben the care and love he deserved. They ignored Ben, did not teach him proper etiquette or social norms. Ben lacked normal family values, social morality, legal knowledge, and logical thinking. He lived in a repressed, abandoned environment, leading

to insecurity, depression, anxiety, and serious psychological problems.

Ben was not a mentally sound child. He lacked comprehensive judgment, could not make correct decisions, lacked correct values of good and evil, and lacked basic life skills. After running away, he worked on a farm and had no complaints about an employer who never paid him. Johnston told him he needed to go to France to deliver something to get a passport. Ben did not inquire about what to deliver or how to live abroad. He boarded the plane. He also could not handle social relationships, making it difficult to succeed in the workplace. His friends were idle thugs who took him to do robberies. He could not get his salary on the construction site. Various misfortunes drove him to a dead end.

Social marginalized individuals like Ben are not valued by society and cannot integrate into mainstream groups. Their social status is low. Society does not give them tolerance and care. Instead, they are easily exploited, oppressed, and deceived. Ben did not receive proper salary, was deceived into transporting drugs, and was arrested by a research institute. People saw Ben's flaws: abnormal intelligence, lack of legal understanding. They slightly deceived him, and Ben easily took the bait. After profiting, they mercilessly abandoned him. Without a birth certificate, Ben could not find a good job and was excluded by most people. He tasted the hardships of society, and his psychology became distorted, tormented by oppression and anxiety.

4.2 Escape Mechanism: Ben's Regression

Regression unconsciously excludes certain emotions or thoughts from consciousness to reduce internal conflicts and anxiety [10]. Ben was sent to a nursing home due to violence and suffered inhumane abuse there. In the end, his mother reluctantly brought him back home. But when he showed bad behavior again, his mother threatened to send him back to the sanatorium, so he controlled himself, learned to suppress his nature, erase all unpleasant memories, calm his emotions, and obey his mother's orders. He was tricked into Brazil by Alex. When he realized he had been deceived, he shared a room with Alex. Ben was filled with anger and sadness. He could kill Alex, but he knew it was dangerous and wrong. He restrained his anger, sat, let it subside, and finally let go of his fist. He understood that killing Alex meant endless trouble and danger.

He suppressed himself again, burying anxious thoughts in his subconscious.

Ben lived in constant repression, always encountering people using and deceiving him. He could not distinguish malice until after being deceived. For his safety, he constantly suppressed sadness, fear, anger, and anxiety. This ensured his survival but caused long-term oppression. When he finally discovered that his own kind was only a mural portrait, it became the last straw, leading to his tragedy.

4.3 Escape Mechanism: Ben's Regression

Regression is an unconscious return to childish behaviors when facing extreme pressure. Alex originally wanted to take Ben to an ancient tribe to shoot a movie. After getting familiar with Brazilian life, Ben did not want to leave. When rejecting Alex failed, Ben started banging his head against the wall, crying like a child. He pressed his furry face against Teresa's chest, and Teresa comforted him like a child, promising he would not have to go anywhere. When filled with extreme anxiety, Ben behaved like a helpless child. He did not know how to express rejection, or his rejection was ignored. He could only cry and hit the wall to attract attention and tell his thoughts. He retreated to a childlike state, releasing stress and pain.

When Ben got injured fighting with others, he let out a grunt in Teresa's arms. Teresa knew the sound could turn into a whimper. Ben was brave during the fight, but when he saw his friend coming to protect him, his grievances could no longer be suppressed. He lay in Teresa's arms like a child, making growling sounds like a small animal, expressing grievances and seeking protection. He felt warmth and dependence. By regressing to a childlike state, he satisfied his lack of security and found peace.

4.4 Defense Mechanism: Ben's Identification

Identification is the unconscious absorption and imitation of others' traits and behaviors. Ben knew he was different and seemed excluded. But he tried to integrate. When he first learned to speak, he imitated how older children ate and moved. Watching TV, he laughed with the family even though he did not understand why. He wanted to be like a normal person. He hoped that by taking the same actions, he would no longer be excluded. He identified with his family, imitating their behavior to gain recognition. After coming back from the sanatorium, he

continued imitating family actions to prove he was not an exception.

When living with Mrs. Biggs, she taught him how to shower, take clothes to the laundry, take care of the cat, and pour water. Ben absorbed and imitated her actions out of liking for the kind old woman. He wanted her to take him in. He imitated her behavior to become more independent and integrate into society.

When Ben was in a foreign land and bullied by a group of boys, his accumulated grievances could no longer be suppressed. He realized clearly that he was different from everyone. He yearned for identity, belonging, and finding his own kind. When he finally received news of his own kind from Teresa and realized it was only a portrait on a mural, he understood he was lonely, an outsider. This also led to him ending his life.

5. Conclusion

Ben is an ugly, deformed child who experienced many misfortunes. He received no care at home and was abandoned by his parents. In society, he was deceived into transporting drugs, had his wages taken, and was arrested for research. He remained suppressed throughout, and finally jumped off a cliff. But Ben also met kind people: Mrs. Biggs, gentle Rita, good friend John, and caring Teresa. This warmth helped him survive. But with Mrs. Biggs's death and the departure of Rita and John, and no recognition from his own kind, Ben's life lost meaning.

Doris Lessing shows us that marginalized individuals, as vulnerable groups, live in harsh environments. They do not receive necessary rights protection, and society cannot provide legal protection. From Freud's personality structure theory, we see that Ben's id desires are violent and rough, his ego monitoring ability is limited, and his superego is not fully developed. From his defense mechanisms, we see his struggle to survive in a strange and cold family and society, suppressing himself to an unbearable extent, ultimately leading to tragedy. This allows us to reflect on human nature and our attitude toward anomalies.

With the development of social civilization, people increasingly pursue self-interest and neglect spiritual civilization. When dealing with vulnerable groups, parents should take responsibility, care for their children, provide basic needs, and attend to mental health. Society should not discriminate against marginalized individuals, give them opportunities and

tolerance, and treat them fairly. Moreover, the government should provide necessary basic guarantees. Only then can society develop harmoniously.

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