

# **Alienation, Aggressiveness and Aphasia: A Lacanian Psychoanalysis of the Cowley Father and Son in Sherwood Anderson's "Queer"**

**Zheng Wenqian**

Department of English, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China

**Email address:**

wenqian.zheng@mails.ccnuc.edu.cn

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**Abstract:** Sherwood Anderson's capture of the subtlety of inner worlds in his short story "Queer" collected in *Winesburg, Ohio* shows great insights into the complexity and paradoxes of human psychology, in terms of his deep exploration into issues including identity, neurosis and speech impairment, which demonstrate surprising coincidence with symptoms examined by Lacan. Elmer Cowley's queer behaviors suggest that he has developed "self-punishment paranoia," a mental disorder Lacan found and examined in his doctoral thesis. The term illustrates the paradoxical and alienating nature of the relationship between subjects and their identities. Elmer's attacking of George Willard, the only newspaper reporter of Winesburg and the incarnation of the big Other, is equivalent to the attacking of himself, for George serves as Elmer's ego-ideal through the mechanism of symbolic identification. Besides, the Cowley father and son also show a certain degree of aphasia. The seemingly nonsensical expression about laundry, which the Cowleys often utters unintendedly when they try to confront Winesburg residents, discloses the truth of the unconscious subject that they desire to be normal like other town folks. The Cowleys' aphasia indicates their failure of being integrated into the Winesburg community. Anderson's foresights of Lacanian psychoanalysis yet to be born in his time prove the prophet role a truly insightful writer can assume.

**Keywords:** Lacan, Identity, The Big Other, Self-punishment Paranoia, Aphasia

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## **1. Introduction**

As one of the first American authors to "explore the psychology of sexuality and the unconscious in his fiction" [1], Sherwood Anderson is widely regarded as a Freudian writer, even though he himself denied his acquaintance with Freud's works. Anderson recalled in his *Memoirs*: "Well, I hadn't read Freud (in fact, I never did read him) and was rather ashamed of my ignorance" [2]. Instead, he acquired the basic concepts of psychoanalysis from his friends Trigant Burrow and Floyd Dell [3]. While Anderson might recognize the justice of Freud's theory and alluded to it in his stories, he regarded Freudian model as an oversimplification of the workings of human psyche [4]. Despite the undeniably Freudian quality of such aspects as compositional free association, resemblance to dream and focus on the eccentric in Anderson's works, it would be a mistake to describe Anderson as a Freudian writer [5]. Indeed, Anderson's capture of the subtlety of inner worlds

of his major characters in "Queer" shows great insights into the complexity and paradoxes of human psychology, in terms of his deep exploration into issues such as identity, neurosis and speech impairment, which transcends the Freudian scope and shows surprising coincidence with symptoms examined by Lacan, the "French Freud" who introduces the linguistic dimension into psychoanalysis. As a short story collected in Anderson's masterpiece *Winesburg, Ohio*, which is considered by Irving Howe "a condition of psychic deformity" [6], "Queer" involves grotesques whose behaviors are so bizarre that they even elude critics. Despite enormous academic attention directed to *Winesburg, Ohio*, "Queer" has been largely neglected.

"Queer" narrates a story centering around its protagonist Elmer Cowley, who is the son of Ebenezer Cowley, a used-to-be farmer and now an owner of a store in Winesburg. Due to their peculiar dressing style and equally peculiar store, they are shunned by the townspeople. Elmer Cowley feels

lonely and develops a paranoia that George Willard, the town's only newspaper reporter, spies on him and laughs at him and his family for their queerness. Elmer Cowley is eager to prove himself to George that he is not queer, but he fails to utter the right words and fails two times. In the end, Elmer Cowley beats up George heavily and then escapes by train. From the brief plot summary of the short story, it can be seen that Elmer Cowley demonstrates a set of neurotic symptoms similar to the case of Aimee, of whom Lacan offers an analysis in his doctoral thesis *Paranoid Psychosis and Its Relations to Personality*. In this thesis, Lacan coins the term "self-punishment paranoia" to delineate the logic behind Aimee's seemingly irrational act. Lacan argues that Aimee indeed strikes herself by attacking the actress, who occupies a high social status and leads a prestigious life, and whom Aimee herself desires to become. Such logic can be applied to the case of Elmer Cowley as well, for both Elmer and Aimee are afflicted with a delusion of persecution that they are laughed at and condemned by people around them, and both of them burst out anger and attack someone utterly innocent. Apart from these symptoms, Elmer Cowley and his father Ebenezer Cowley have demonstrated a certain degree of aphasia, a neurotic symptom that also interests Lacan. This paper intends to offer a Lacanian psychoanalysis of the Cowley father and son.

## 2. The Development of Self-punishment Paranoia

### 2.1. Symbolic Identification

The beginning of the story brings readers to the point that Elmer Cowley perceives George Willard as spying on him and eavesdropping on him. Through the "dirty" window of the printshop, he spots George staring at him, imagining that the reporter can hear him. The word "dirty" and "imagined" suggest the unreliability of Elmer's perception. Worse still, Elmer regards George as the opinion leader of the town and believes he gossips about and ridicules him with other people. "He thought the boy who passed and repassed Cowley & Son's store and who stopped to talk to people in the street must be thinking of him and perhaps laughing at him" [7]. Yet Elmer's accusation of George is immediately negated by the omniscient third-person narrator, who discloses Elmer's ignorance of George's thoughts: "Elmer Cowley could not have believed that George Willard had also his days of unhappiness, that vague hungers and secret unnamable desires visited also his mind" [7]. The narrator then illustrates that George is instead curious about Elmer, intending to make friends with him. Such false accusation indicates Elmer is stricken with his illusion and prejudice.

Despite his fear of George Willard, Elmer, paradoxically, thinks highly of him: George "belonged to the town, typified the town, represented in his person the spirit of the town" [7]. It can be also inferred from the text that Elmer believes George's power originates from his control of language, because George, the town's only news reporter, represents

"the public opinion of Winesburg condemned the Cowleys to queerness" [7]. Public opinion, a linguistic form of social norm that dictates how one should behave and what can be socially accepted or not, refers to the Symbolic Order, the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts which precede one's birth, and in which the subject is structured. Accordingly, George Willard, the representative of public opinion, turns out to be the incarnation of the big Other, with whom Elmer Cowley intends to identify, though at an unconscious level. Deep in his heart, Elmer wants to be "like other people" and make friends with them; in other words, he desires to be like George Willard, the representative of the town. In this light, George serves as the ego-ideal for Elmer. "Ego-ideal" was first put forward by Freud as a concept opposed to "ideal-ego," both of which were further elaborated by Lacan. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, "the ideal ego is the image you assume and the ego ideal is the symbolic point which gives you a place and supplies the point from which you are looked at" [8]. That is to say, ideal-ego is the identification in the Imaginary, whereas ego-ideal is one's identification in the Symbolic, or the symbolic identification.

Lacan's definition of "ego-ideal" as "the point from which you are looked at" is surprisingly coincident with Cowley's obsessive illusion of being gazed at by George, which can be further translated into the subject's sense of the gaze cast from the big Other. Only through the identification with the big Other can the subject be recognized as a qualified member in the Symbolic and then be taken as a well-functioning social subject. By winning recognition from George, Elmer means to win the respect from the townspeople, so that he can become a "normal" member of the Winesburg community. This explains why Cowley insists on proving himself to George. Elmer's case set a perfect example of Lacan's paradoxical argument about identity: how the identity of the human being can extend beyond oneself and be constructed within a complex social network; that is to say, the big Other is external to the subject, yet is internalized by the subject through the mechanism of symbolic identification.

### 2.2. The Rise of Aggressiveness

The idea of being laughed at by the townspeople not only haunts Elmer but infuriates him, which suggests his aggressive tendencies. The thought of George's spying on him "made him furious" and he cannot stand it. His aggressiveness finds its first expression in his intimidation of the travelling salesman, who just wants to sell. Elmer's aggressiveness is then taken notice by Mook, the half-wit man, who says to his cows: "Elmer is crazy...He'll hurt someone yet, Elmer will" [7]. Mook's words foreshadow Elmer's strike at George in the end.

According to Lacan's doctoral thesis, Elmer's delusion of persecution and aggressive tendencies are rooted in one's personality which is largely shaped by three things: "biographical development, meaning the way subjects reacted to their own experience; self-concept, meaning the way they brought images of themselves into their consciousness; and tension of social relations, meaning their impressions of how

they affected other people" [9]. Since the subject's identity is rooted in social relations alien to oneself, there must be an inherent and unresolvable discrepancy between subjects and their self-identities. And such a gap will be brought to light and broadened as life turns out unsatisfying and frustrating. In sharp contrast with "being normal" as is dictated by the big Other, Elmer Cowley believes his family and himself have been "queer long enough." Elmer's obsession with the idea that Cowley's being ridiculed for their queerness may result from his noting of the difference between their dressing style and that of the townspeople:

Father is queer and mother was queer, too. Even the clothes mother used to wear were not like other people's clothes, and look at that coat in which father goes about there in town, thinking he's dressed up, too. Why don't he get a new one? It wouldn't cost much. I'll tell you why. Father doesn't know and when mother was alive she didn't know either [7].

The dressing style, in close relation to one's image, signifies a matter of identity. In Elmer's mind, his father and mother are queer because they don't dress like others. And Anderson offers a detailed description of the coat Ebenezer wears going about in town. "When he sold the farm to become a merchant he wore the coat constantly. It had become brown with age and was covered with grease spots, but in it Ebenezer always felt dressed up and ready for the day in town" [7]. Ebenezer's coat, worn-out and greasy, forms a sharp contrast with George's. "George Willard had on a new overcoat and looked very spruce and dressed up" [7]. The enormous gap in dressing style between the Cowleys and the townspeople is intendedly foregrounded by Anderson, implying that the Cowleys are not behaving like other residents in the town, and that they fail to be identified as town folks even though they've moved to Winesburg from the countryside. Ebenezer still knows nothing about business, running a queer store, lousy at dealing with others and dressing himself up. In the meantime, Elmer, having lived in Winesburg for a year, has made no friends and has been isolated from other people due to his queerness. When he goes to the post office or the depot to see the train, no one says anything to him. "Everyone stands around and laughs and they talk but they say nothing to me" [7]. And this loneliness is gnawing at him. "He was, he felt, one condemned to go through life without friends and he hated the thought" [7].

Elmer's labelling of himself as "queer" suggests his failure of living up to the big Other's expectation: be normal. The disparity between his self-image and his ego-ideal incarnated by George then gives rise to the aggressiveness Elmer feels towards George. On one hand, Elmer desires to stand up to George, i.e., to seek recognition from him; on the other, he projects his sense of frustration and dejection onto George through paranoia, in which he sees George as the source of threats. The relationship between Elmer and George exemplifies a typical Lacanian love-hatred mirror relationship. In his essay *Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis* published in 1948, Lacan explicates the relationship among self-image, misrecognition and aggressiveness, arguing that tension will rise in the relationship between the self and the alienated

identity and precipitate into "aggressive competition" [10]. As the sense of frustration brought on by his failure to declare to George his determination not to be queer adds up to his misery, and the queer expression "I'll be washed and ironed and starched" that falls from his lips renders him still queerer to George, Elmer cannot help but vent out of his pent-up aggressiveness. "With a snarl of rage he turned and his long arms began to flay the air" [7]. The substitution of "his long arms" for "he" as one of the subjects of the coordinate sentence may hint at the absence of Elmer's subjectivity: Elmer is out of his mind when striking George. Lacan in his doctoral thesis offers a paradoxical explanation for such a sudden unmotivated outburst of violence. According to Lacan, Elmer's attack on George is equal to the attack on himself, in that George serves as Elmer's ego-ideal, an internal element of Elmer himself. By striking George, Elmer strikes his ego-ideal, the intimidating voice that whispers relentlessly at his ears that he is queer, the source of the otherness that alienates himself from his identity and then causes the split of the subject. With his ego-ideal beaten down, Elmer is released from his captivity in his alienating identity. Since the incarnation of the big Other, the image of the norm, has been wiped out of his personality, its opposition "queerness" disappears as well. As a result, Elmer protects his subject from further splitting by retaining an imaginary unity, and his paranoia dissolves: Elmer feels pride surge in him and he believes he finally manages to show George he is not queer.

### 3. Aphasia

#### 3.1. Signs of Trauma

Apart from the self-punishment paranoia, Elmer also demonstrates a certain degree of aphasia: neither can he talk with Winesburg residents nor can he utter the right words when he tries to confront George. Rather, unintended words slip off his tongue as if they were out of the control. The symptom is shared by Elmer's father, Ebenezer Cowley. In the face of the silver-tongued travelling salesman, Ebenezer remains silent the whole time wearing a wavering uncertain look. "A friend of mine told me about you. 'See that man Cowley,' he said. 'He's a live one'" [7]. The salesman's ironic banter indicates that Ebenezer does not talk with the townspeople either. Worse still, Ebenezer is not considered a well-functioning person, for he is unable to address others. Instead of speaking normally after Elmer chased out the salesman with the threat of a gun, Ebenezer utters something quite queer, as if he were hypnotized: "I'll be washed and ironed and starched" [7].

On the surface, Ebenezer seems unaware of his queerness, thus enjoying an imaginary unity of the subject. His immunity from the torture of the split of the self that inflicts his son may result from his tendency to repress bad feelings. Although Ebenezer concerns over his store that never sells, at night "he sits by the fire upstairs and says trade will come after a while" [7]. After selling his farm and moving to Winesburg, Ebenezer must have noticed his difference with others and his isolation

from the townspeople, but somehow he manages to repress the miserable awareness into the unconscious. Yet his symptomatic repetitive aphasia, which recurs when he tries to confront others, discloses that he has been traumatized to the core, so has his son, because "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" [11], in other words, traumatic experience emerges "in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena" [12].

### 3.2. *The Truth of the Unconscious*

Nonsensical as the unconscious expression appears, it may convey the truth of the subject. For Lacan, the subject is the subject of the unconscious, which is structured like a language and is a "locus in which situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject" [13]. Lacan elaborates the operations of signifiers of the unconscious by relying on the work of Roman Jakobson, who holds that all languages and systems of signification revolve around two poles: selection and combination. Selection refers to the choice of a term over other similar ones, while combination refers to the formation of a larger unit with the terms selected. For Jakobson, aphasia takes place when either one of the two functions is suppressed, and he associates selection disorder with metaphor, the substitution of one word for another, and combination disorder with metonymy, the displacement of words [14]. The Cowleys' symptomatic expression about laundry demonstrates their impaired function of combination. The pronoun "I," which refers to a person, cannot be combined with passive voice of acts describing laundry. Therefore, it is reasonable to interpret the expression about laundry as a metonymy, which conveys the suppressed desire of the Cowley father and son they themselves have no access to.

For Lacan, the coded messages conveyed through symptoms are not addressed to another real human being but to the big Other [15]. This suggests that the laundry metonymy is indeed addressed to George Willard, whose new overcoat sets off Ebenezer's greasy and old coat. Hence, the passive voice of acts about laundry can be decoded as a metonymy for George's coat, and then for George himself. That is to say, what the Cowley father and son truly desires is to be like George, the representative of the normal way of life in Winesburg, even though they may never be aware of it. In Lacan's view, speech is an act that can give one a place, to be more specific, a place in the symbolic. "To the extent that Lacan associates speech and the symbolic, it is possible for the subject to be recognized, to find some kind of identity, in the symbolic order" [8]. In this sense, the Cowleys' aphasia in confrontation with local residents suggests their failure of being integrated into the Winesburg community.

## 4. Conclusion

It is surprising to find that Anderson's insights into the workings of human psychology manifested in "Queer" involve a linguistic dimension, which is highly consistent with

Lacanian psychoanalysis. The big Other incarnated by George Willard, who is a news reporter, rather than a clerk, a cop, or a businessman, may imply Anderson's conscious or unconscious stress on the power of language or the Symbolic. Before jumping onto the train to leave Winesburg, Elmer turns in the two ten-dollar bills he steals from his father to George, suggesting the authoritative role assumed by George. That is to say, George not only represents the social norm of the town but functions as the "judgement of Winesburg," or the embodiment of the law. More than that, Anderson also hints at the paradoxical nature of the Symbolic, which is both external and internal to the subject in that one has to internalize the Symbolic to construct his or her identity. The failure of mastery of language declares one's failure of being registered in the Symbolic. All of these Lacanian ideas can find their mirror reflections in Anderson's literary text.

A closer examination of the end of the story reveals Anderson and Lacan's intellectual coincidence lies beyond their awareness of the power of language, since both of them hold a pessimistic view of the destiny of the subject. In the short story, despite Elmer's desperate attempts to prove himself to George, he fails to utter the right words and fails two times. In the end, Elmer has to resort to violence to dissolve his paranoia. As for Ebenezer, even though he maintains an imaginary unity on the surface, his aphasia implies his being traumatized by the aggressiveness inherent in the big Other, which has been suppressed into the unconscious. The Cowley father and son's tragedy communicates a Lacanian psychological truth that one's identity is alienating in nature and that there are always discontinuity, discrepancy, and division in between, leaving it impossible to achieve a perfect unity, coherence and completeness.

The summation of Lacan to the interpretation of "Queer" brings it to light that how a canonic writer can convey truth through art beyond restraints of historical context. After all, in Anderson's time, Lacanian psychoanalysis was not yet born. His foresights prove the prophet role a truly insightful writer can assume.

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