

# Pleasure versus Morality:

## A Psychological Approach to Leslie Huben

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According to the Rule of Pardes, a modern literary method usually applied to the interpretation of biblical text, there are four levels of interpretation: p'shat (literal), remix (allegorical), d'rash (moral), and sud (anagogical). Although it is not a biblical text, Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* demonstrates the various levels of interpretation a literary work can contain. For example, on the literal level, it is a story about American missionaries who attempt to convert a local tribe called the Niaruna to Christianity while dealing with a renegade American named Moon. However, through a psychological approach to this piece of literature, it becomes evident to the reader that Matthiessen utilizes the motif of masks to establish a more profound theme. These masks are literal for members of the Niaruna, Tiro, or Mintipo tribes. However, more commonly in the novel, the reader witnesses the Americans and various other more "civilized" characters adorning many figurative masks in order to conceal their true objectives and to assist them in appearing as though they are conforming to the accepted societal ethics. These masks offer different levels to the identity of a person, much like Freud describes in his theory of personality. According to Sharon Heller, the author of *Freud A to Z* and a professor of psychology at Northcentral University, "in this new theory, he concluded that the mind can be broken down into three independent structures forever at war: id, ego, and superego" ("The Ego and the Id" 90). The interchanging of the masks of each character, representative of the interactions of the different personality levels, provides the reader with

insight into who each character truly is. The most prominent example of this effect is seen in the character of Leslie Huben, a Protestant missionary set on converting the Niaruna. By using the psychological approach in the analysis of Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, it becomes evident that Matthiessen utilizes the motif of masks with the character of Leslie Huben to comment on instinctual nature of the three structures of the human personality.

The most visible component of Freud's personality theory in Matthiessen's characterization of Leslie Huben is the superego; this is the façade that Huben wishes to be associated with. According to Carl R. Green, Ph.D. and William R. Sanford, Ph.D., in their text, *Psychology a Way to Grow*, "the superego absorbs the social and moral values taught by your parents, teachers, and other adults" (184-185). The superego is the part of the personality that is responsible for determining right from wrong and holding the person to moral code. In Leslie Huben's case, the superego is his mask that permits him to give the impression that he is an upstanding citizen who abides by the moral standards of society. For his guise, Huben has chosen the role of a Protestant missionary so that he may be perceived by the public as a modest man whose only mission is to serve the Lord to the best of his ability. He assumes this persona because the superego structure of his personality encourages him "to block instincts that are unacceptable by society"; thus, being a missionary is ideal because it allows him to play the wide acceptance of religion as a foundation for many successful societies ("The Ego and the Id" 90). Through his letters in *Mission Fields*, the monthly publication of the New Fields Mission that he belongs to, Huben relays his progress with the Niaruna Indians and encourages his readers and followers to pray for the conversion of the Niaruna, consequently assisting him in spreading the Word. In one of his letters, Huben writes, "all your prayers are needed, for Satan is marshaling his forces and the Opposition is ever ready to take over at our first misstep" (Matthiessen 17).

Huben appeals to his readers because he makes them feel as though they are playing an active role in his success with the Niaruna, while instilling in them the belief that the Catholic way and the Niaruna way are Satanic and menacing. Behind his mask, he appears sincere to the readers by gaining their trust by claiming that he is doing God's work by the best methods possible. This gains him quite a reputation amongst his fellow missionaries. About Huben's remarkable reputation the narrator states, "in the New Fields Mission, this young man was already a legend" (10). His status as a legendary apostle amongst his fellow missionaries provides him with a method to hide his true intentions of business for profit under the guise of business for the Lord and fuels him to make larger strides towards his personal goals with the Niaruna.

According to the theories of Freud, Huben was encouraged to assume this guise by the ego structure of his personality. Unlike the superego, the ego plays a behind-the-scenes role in Matthiessen's novel and in the characterization of Leslie Huben because it functions as the mediating function between Huben's true desires and his ability to uphold the standards that society expects him to uphold. Nonetheless, the ego is responsible for finding a method for Huben to successfully conceal his true intentions with the Niaruna while seemingly conforming to the expectations of the real world. Huben discovered that the most effective way for him to make a profit while gaining an outstanding reputation amongst society was through religion; it provided Huben with a method to convince society to support his actions and trust in his work. In *Freud A to Z*, Heller discloses that Freud "described religion... as a system that kept the masses in check with its rules and fear of a god who rewarded and punished" ("Religion" 193). Huben takes full advantage of this Freudian theory; he encourages his readers by promising them that his work with the Niaruna is rewarding while instilling in the savage Niaruna tribe the concept of a God who punishes those who do not worship Him. Huben's ego is very successful in choosing

an effective mask; however, as the novel progresses, the reader is exposed to Huben's true character. His religious ramblings and letters home reveal that he is an overzealous, self-righteous swindler more than a servant of God. Unfortunately, the reader discovers this truth before the other characters in the novel do. Fellow missionary, Martin Quarrier, mentally notes that "it seemed to him that Huben's faith, to judge from the support it had had from the Almighty, must be far greater than his own" (128). Quarrier, however, has not yet discovered that Huben's faith is not vast; his greed is. Huben's ability to pull off such a ploy with so many people is fully the work of his ego. Carl R. Green and William R. Sanford state that "the ego's primary task is to satisfy the id, not to frustrate it" (184). The ego is not concerned with being morally in the right; it is only concerned with satisfying the pleasurable desires of the third structure of the personality and avoiding pain.

This third and final structure of Freud's personality theory plays the most important role in the characterization of Leslie Huben; however, it is also the most secretive of the structures. This section of the personality is known as the id. The id is what Huben struggles to hide from the view of his fellow missionaries and those that he intends to convert to the Word. According to *Psychology a Way to Grow*, "the goal of the id is to maximize pleasure and to avoid pain"; this is why Freud often described it as the "pleasure principle" (184). In many instances, the id seeks to satisfy sexual urges; however, in the case of Leslie Huben, it seeks to gratify his ever growing pride. Throughout the novel, Matthiessen gives hints of the desires of Huben's id through the correlation of the character's name with the Greek word hubris. As the novel progresses, however, the mask is forcibly removed by many of the other characters and Huben's display of excessive pride and self-glorification is less subtle. Huben's hubris stems from his history as a star athlete in high school. Addicted to the glory that he achieved as a young man, Huben craves

the same glory in his achievements as a missionary. Consequently, Leslie Huben seeks to make the conversion of the Niaruna to Christianity a competition. About Huben's first letter home, the narrator states, "despite Huben's modest tone, it was quite clear that he had not only contacted the Niaruna but had administered a stinging defeat to the Forces of Rome" (Matthiessen 10-11). Here, Huben's competitive nature and his propensity to display his masculinity are shown through his contending with the Padres Xantes and the Catholic faith. Sharon Heller, author of *Freud from A to Z*, describes the id as "a chaotic 'seething cauldron of desire' inhabited by selfish, sexual, destructive, and barbaric emotions that constantly threaten to break loose"; Huben clearly demonstrates the barbaric desire to achieve superiority and defeat an enemy (Heller 90). Further into the novel, Huben's id becomes progressively prominent and chaotic. This causes him to become increasingly detestable as a character as he recklessly endangers the lives of many of his colleagues in order to achieve his goal of successfully conducting business with the Comandante while converting the Niaruna and maintaining an upstanding reputation with his readers at home. Huben's id embodies the aspect of the third structure of the personality theory that William L. Guerin discusses in his book, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Guerin claims, "safety for the self and for others does not lie within the province of the id: its concern is purely for instinctual gratification heedless of consequence" (205). Huben's blatant disregard for the safety of his fellow missionaries and the well-being of the Niaruna he is setting out to convert is evident in his statement, "If the Niaruna *can* be cowed a little, they will be softened up for an outreach of the Word, and this will make our work...a darn sight easier. Don't you forget the Opposition is just lying in wait to see us lose the advantage that I have won in Jesus' name" (Matthiessen 24). Huben seems obsessed with increasing the glory associated with his reputation. He openly admits on several occasions that he is fully prepared to harm the

Niaruna in order to spread God's word and prefers their death over "living in sin" (Matthiessen 191). These comments reveal the truly selfish nature of Huben that ignores morality for the sake of the instantaneous gratification of his desire to feed his pride and gain a greater reputation.

Peter Matthiessen in his stirring novel, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, utilizes the motif of masks to make a comment on the human propensity to manipulate the different levels of their personality, or hide behind masks, to conceal their true motives. It is through the progression of this novel and the development of the characterization of Leslie Huben that the reader is exposed to the psychological concepts of the personality; Huben's duality validates Freud's concept that the various layers of the personality are constantly at war with each other. As the novel progresses, the reader sees Huben losing his battle to keep his mask of piousness. Through the powerful motif of masks and Huben's constant struggle with the mask, the author provides his reader with undisputable proof that even those who appear to be the quintessential examples of morality can be self-serving and that, more often than not, the superego, or morality principle, loses its battle with the id, or pleasure principle. Moreover, Matthiessen fully demonstrates the danger of blindly trusting a mask. After all, it is the blind faith in Huben's mask, or the super ego, that causes the deaths of the most innocent of characters in the novel.

## Works Cited

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