

**THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF THOMAS CHATTERTON'S PERSONALITY
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The paper presents a study of the psychological assessment of Thomas Chatterton's personality. The author dwells upon the key arguments concerning Chatterton's mental condition, the thorough analysis of which is absolutely essential to the proper understanding of Chatterton's literary legacy and his tragic death. Finally, conclusions are made regarding Chatterton's mental aberration, the mere fact of which is rarely included in the contemporary literary studies on the poet's life and works.

Key words: Thomas Chatterton; mental condition; neurotic; psychosis; insanity; suicide.

Was Thomas Chatterton just a forger with immense literary talent, or was he a great artist, who resorted to mystification as the only means for the impeccable representation of his artistic conscience? Is it possible to give an intelligible clarification concerning his very uncanny and tragic life? To answer these questions, it is imperative to comprehend the nature of that man. Some notable critics of Chatterton (Robert Southey, David Masson, and Esther Ellinger) thought that there was insanity involved. This argument, essential to the proper understanding of Chatterton's life and literary legacy, has not been disproved. On the contrary, its implications have been entirely ignored in many contemporary literary studies on Chatterton. The aim of this article is to provide (by means of psychoanalysis) sufficient evidence of the poet's aberration of mind which presents his innumerable mystifications, as well as his suicide, in a new light.

A very important fact to bear in mind (which so many literary critics seem to forget) is the presence of hereditary insanity in the Chatterton family. His mother, Sarah Chatterton, having received the news of her son's death, was struck with a nervous affection from which she never recovered. His sister, Mary Newton, and his niece were later confined to a psychiatric institution [1, p. 35]. His father, Thomas, an eccentric poet, a sexton, and a dabbler in the occult, whom Chatterton had never seen, really believed in magic, and in Cornelius Agrippa the necromancer. Whether this hereditary disease came from the old line of ancestral sextons of St. Mary's Church in Bristol, or directly from his parents, we shall never know. But one thing is certain – it had finally manifested itself in Chatterton in a way not to be mistaken.

The following is the final diagnosis of Chatterton's mental condition two weeks prior to his death by Dr. Forbes Winslow, a leading British psychiatrist and an authority on insanity during the Victorian era. This is what he concludes: «No one acquainted with the history of this unfortunate youth would doubt for one moment that he was insane. <...> ...his mind received a rude shock... misfortunes followed in rapid succession, until he was frenzied by mental agony and physical suffering. <...> Under such circumstances it is not surprising that poor Chatterton's mind should have been overthrown, and that he should have been led to commit suicide. <...> One very important fact connected with Chatterton's case ought to be borne in mind – viz., that insanity was in his family» [2, p. 244–245].

Never had the idea of suicide been Chatterton's spontaneous one-time decision, i. e. whenever he felt melancholic, or in the outmost distress of mind (and that happened a lot), he constantly argued in favour of suicide. Long before he left Bristol, he had intimidated many people by his intention of ending his life. It appears, Chatterton was about to execute this plan on Easter Sunday, 1770, when he wrote a paper, his suicide's farewell to the world, entitled *Last Will and Testament*, which he left on his office desk for his terrified master, Mr. Lambert, to come across. In this very peculiar document, which is still extant, Chatterton (proudly) writes the following: «...the most perfect masters of human nature in Bristol distinguish me by the title of the Mad Genius; therefore, if I do a mad action, it is comfortable to every action of my life, which all savored of insanity» [3, p. 64].

It is quite probable that Chatterton (during his residency in Brooke Street) came to think of this final contrivance as an attractive course of action because against his neurotic feeling of uncertainty (his friends forsook him and he was in want of common necessities of life) it was his most drastic defensive strategy, hence it provided safety against further humiliation [1, p. 41]. It would not seem weird at all if Chatterton considered suicide as a very reasonable solution. In his famous essay, entitled *Thomas Chatterton*, Esther Ellinger explicitly delivers his verdict of the poet's mental state when he notes: «Once risen to the surface of the neurotic mind, suicide ingratiates itself with the desperate as the only desirable method of adjusting the particular crisis where old habits or attempted accommodations have proved inadequate, where in consequence continuation of existence is actually threatened» [1, p. 41]. Chatterton's histrionic *Last Will and Testament* clearly demonstrates that the suicidal tendencies had already manifested themselves in the unconscious mind, awaiting the motive to present itself. It is an indisputable fact that after Horace Walpole had ridiculed and belittled the literary significance of Chatterton's «Rowley antiques», the poet showed a gradual progression from a neurosis to a perfect frenzy, which culminated in a psychosis, resulting in sui-

cide, hence the preceding Dr. Wilson's diagnosis of Chatterton's mental state seems to be completely well founded. It was that form of insanity, which contemporary psychotherapists recognize as the «suicidal tendency», attributing most of suicides to the result of a particular impulse which powers of reasoning cannot prevail over.

According to the Adlerian psychology, abnormal mental condition reveals itself through a gradual process of various stages, i. e. it is symptomatic. The environmental conditions during Chatterton's early years laid the solid foundation for his neurotic predisposition, i. e. we should never forget that his father died suddenly (nobody knows why) before the poet was born, and his brother, Giles, also died (in infancy). Shortly after this his mother (then barely twenty-one) was forced out of her residence and, confronted with many harsh obstacles, took on full responsibility for raising and supporting young Chatterton and his sister while living in penury. From that moment on there had been symptoms of Chatterton's neurosis – «...his fits of weeping, his sudden paroxysms of passion, his long reveries when he gazed at people without seeming to see them, his frequent mutterings aloud» [4, p. 243].

The mere fact that the poet began writing satirical verses at age eleven (his little lampoon, entitled *The Churchwarden and the Apparition; a Fable* was printed in a prestigious weekly newspaper in 1764) is indicative of his deep psychological problems. In *The Neurotic Constitution* Dr. Alfred Adler postulates that the inclination to satire, especially from a very young age, often-times reveals the individual's subconscious desire to compensate for the feeling of inferiority, insecurity, and uncertainty (Chatterton had all these traits) and serves as an emotional vent for the neurotic to secure his superior position in life by deprecating and trivializing others.

Other neurotic characteristics in Chatterton's case include his abstemious way of life (during his residency in London) and total indifference to diet, i. e. living on a crust and water, he very often refused to accept food from the people who cared about his well-being. The Adlerian theory predicates this sort of behaviour as the neurotic feeling of inferiority which is expressed in the difference between the subject and his superiors. Extreme abstemiousness also represents «a self-torturing expedient whose purpose is to enhance the feeling of personal esteem» [5, p. 42] and makes the subject indulge in self-remonstrance even to the point of suicide.

The proclivity to satire also leads to abstraction which brings about a transcendental compensation making it possible for the individual to escape from reality to some imaginary world, in which he gets consolation from the pressure of the actual existence. This proclivity «manifests itself at a very early age, and proceeds steadily in the direction of an idea which, in the child ... finds concrete embodiment in the form of an imaginary person» [1, p. 40].

Thus, the creation of Thomas Rowley (Chatterton's alter ego) becomes completely understandable. Rowley's world was a dream-state where, in a time of great distress and sadness, the poet found solace and security. Chatterton would rather live in this imaginary world of spirits than endure the dull and harsh reality of life. This way of living in two different worlds simultaneously, affected most of Chatterton's writings and his short-lived and tragic life, i. e. «Rowley, once the darling phantasm of his poetical imagination, now dogged him as a hateful demon, evoked by himself from the world of spirits, and not to be laid to rest» [4, p. 242]. This spirit would haunt Chatterton up until his death at age seventeen. Thomas Rowley, a Bristol monk of the XV century, was himself, Thomas Chatterton.

Considering all of the antecedent arguments, a conclusion must be made – the psychological assessment of Thomas Chatterton's personality strongly suggests that the hereditary history of insanity as well as the environmental conditions of his first years may have induced in him a nervous affection, i. e. neurosis. Consequently, the poet developed the corresponding symptoms, viz., hypochondria, anxiety, severe depression, obsessive behaviour, insecurity, an inferiority complex, and (probably) a personality disorder, which made the poet resort to abstracting fiction and develop his own symbolic style of writing, providing him with a way of transference between the real and the imaginary. Finally, it appears, that Chatterton experienced an acute psychosis which resulted in his suicide.

The current analysis provides a definite explanation to Chatterton's satires, his «Rowley mystifications» and has absolutely no intention whatsoever to reduce their great literary value.

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