

# Prevalence of Id in Abel: Self-indulgence for No Way-out

**Xiangmin Li**

*Zhongyuan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, Henan, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *According to the theory of personality structure, the id is a part of the psyche relating to a person's unconsciousness and impulses. It is imperceptible but has an influence on one's behavior. When id prevails in a person, nothing can stop him from satisfying his desire. In the novel House Made of Dawn, Abel, the hero is dominated by his id at a time. He joins the army in the Second World War, in which he has undergone the grueling war, seen crews' death and struggled in the world full of violence and prejudice. The war experience has disillusioned him and broken his dream of seeking recognition outside his native land. Now, the war is over, he is on the way home, and his long-pressed id begins to stir.*

**Keywords:** *House Made of Dawn; Abel; id*

## 1. Introduction

The young Native American torn in two indulges himself in alcohol and sexual desire and kills the albino impulsively drawn by his prevailing id. It is apparent that when his id becomes prevalent, Abel loses his way, caring nothing but his desire which leads him to the hell.

## 2. Indulging Himself in Alcohol

The story begins with a brief scenery description of a town in the valley. The river runs down; great angles of geese fly through the valley in winter; the smoke rises from the houses and the bird's feathers are prized by the townsmen in summer. It is such a harmonious scene of nature and human that you could touch on this

scene of quiet beauty. Before the appearance of Abel, his grandfather, Francisco an old man drives a horse and wagon on a hot day in late July. He is on the way to meet Abel in the bus station. The old man remembers the hunting and harvest which is Indian tradition and the legend he has had when he is young. But now he feels unaccustomed to the strange sound – grinding brakes and the whine of the bus running on the road – he considers the noise as the thing of an unknown world. Yet he is waiting for Abel in excitement and expectation, “he could feel the beat of his heart.” (Momaday 8) Afterwards the door of the bus opens and “Abel stepped heavily to the ground and reeled.” (8) Out of his grandfather’s expectation Abel is drunk, and he bumps into his grandfather and even does not know his grandfather. Tears blink the old man’s eyes, but he refrains himself, thinking he must laugh – his grandson comes back alive from the war.

The elaborately designed scenery description and Francisco’s waiting for Abel serve as a foil to the unexpected appearance of Abel – a drunk and depressed man. As a rule, homecoming is sweet and desirable; home is a shelter that a traveling man longs to return. However, home to Abel, is a place that puts him in mind of the miserable life in his childhood. His mother passes away when he is only five years old. Abel has never seen his father since birth time and he lives with his grandfather. In his childhood, he is looked down upon by his people so that he is determined to flee from his native land for adventure outside. At the age of 17, Abel joins the army, filled with fantasy and ideal vision of the outside world, leaves his hometown Indian reservation. However, there is a sharp contrast between the reality and Abel’s expectation before joining the army. He is exhausted by the experience and painful at being discriminated by his white comrades during the grisly war. The miserable childhood and the experience in the war make him lost in his way. Thus, he holds his expectation so tightly that the pain is deeply hidden in his minds, and that he is often unconsciously stranded in his previous life during the war. The complex for the past causes his self-occultation, which forms the id of Abel. He is constantly obsessed by the past experience and hides in the dark and inaccessible part of his personality. His hope for freedom and a real identity has vanished. For an average man who survives the war, going home is the aspiration in the deep heart. Wishes for reunion with family are supposed to fill a man with expectations and excitement as nobody wants to miss the reunion moment. But not so for Abel, he knows exactly his grandfather will come to meet him in the station, but he appears

too drunk to recognize his grandfather. It reflects his disappointment with going home. His mind is in chaos, therefore self-indulgence prevails in Abel and he gets drunk before going home. In his mind, the only way to flee from the sorrow for the moment is to indulge himself in alcohol. He even spends a day and a night in sleeping off his liquor after returning home.

Alcohol keeps him company when he loses his way. Abel's escape into alcohol reveals a lack of inner stability and a flawed strategy of coping with the horror and turmoil of his war experiences. Throughout the novel, Abel's approach to alcohol seems to indicate a pattern of binge drinking. And alcohol abuse continues to be steady companion in his confrontations with setbacks after returning from the war: "He tried to think where the trouble had begun, what the trouble was. ...that was the trouble; but he had no way of knowing. He wanted a drink; he wanted to be drunk." (93) Whenever he comes across setbacks, alcohol will take over his mind or body beyond his control. What he does quite fits in with what Freud states:

Conative impulses which have never got beyond the id, and even impressions which have been pushed down into the id by repression, are virtually immortal and are preserved for whole decades as though they had only recently occurred. They can only be recognized as belonging to the past, deprived of their significance, and robbed of their charge of energy, after they have been made conscious by the work of analysis, and no small part of the therapeutic effect of analytic treatment rests upon this fact. (Freud *The Ego and the Id* 84)

It is apparent that Abel's desire for alcohol can be traced to the past experience. After suffering long-term depression and frustration he considers alcohol as part of himself unconsciously. Instead of trying to assimilate into his own tribe, Abel drowns his sorrow in alcohol. In accordance with "pleasure principle" alcohol and being drunk are bound to come to his mind in case of setbacks without organization and unified will.

Abel's indulgence in alcohol is showed in his miserable life in Los Angeles as well. On account of the relocation policy, Abel is once again kicked into the modern society, suffering from the pains of being an alienated American Indian. He keeps silent; tries to be patient; his endurance is tested to the utmost. But a peaceful life is still unavailable to him-work at the plant begins getting more pressure-filled. Abel is severely discriminated both for his criminal record and for his Native American

blood. He and some Indian co-workers can't live with the heavy stress so that initially an episode and then frequent episodes of drunkenness. He is drunk about half the time, and just gets mad whenever his friend says anything about his drunkenness and it makes him worse. Right away his money runs out and he starts hitting his friend up for a loan almost every night to buy the alcohol. Pretty soon his friend wouldn't give him any more, but he begins asking his girlfriend Milly for money and he would just blow it in on liquor right away. One of the relocation staff gets him a job taking care of the grounds and other affairs with the schools, but he shows up drunk several times and they dismiss him after the first week and a half. A period of aimlessness and apathy follows: "He was crazy drunk and ugly. He had thrown up all over himself, and he couldn't do anything about it... Pretty soon he got up and staggered around and he was all red and sweaty and shaking, and he was looking wild..." (160) Ultimately Abel seeks more frequent bouts and drinking and then turned up at the apartment building-drunk, bloody, covered with vomit, and nearly unconscious.

According to Freud, "Naturally, the id knows no values, no good and evil, no morality. The economic, or, if you prefer, the quantitative factor, which is so closely bound up with the pleasure-principle, dominates all its processes" (Freud The Ego and the Id 84). Intemperance resembles Abel's shadow, and will take over him as long as he stands at a difficult position. Alcoholism, originating from the past experience, seems like the chain reaction to frustration in his mind, and controls his psyche. Gradually it develops into his way of venting frustration.

### **3. Indulging Himself in Sexual Desire**

According to Freud, the id comprises the part of personality structure of basic drives. It is "a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs." (Freud The Ego and the Id 86) people's psyche is like icebergs: above the water, the part of the iceberg you can see is your superego; slightly below the water line is an area you can dimly make out, so-called ego, and finally, down deep in the water where you can't see anything you'll find id, which is not accessible to you. Id is an accumulated sum of all sorts of primitive instincts. It lies in the deep layer and serves as the original foundation of the structures of the mind. Id, being unconscious, pursues instinctual impulses and gratifies suppressed desires.

Abel is split by two worlds he lives in after returning from the war. He is supposed to follow the tradition of his ancestral tribe but it seems that he loses the basic contact with the Indian conception and couldn't keep up with Indian lifestyle. After the absence of several years from his native land he couldn't locate himself in the white society as a Native American so that he can't find anything to hang on to. His attempts to resolve this dilemma have resulted in nothing. Abel's id is suppressed deep in his unconsciousness. "The id acts according to the pleasure principle, seeking to avoid pain or displeasure aroused by increases in instinctual tension." (Freud The Ego and the Id 86) Therefore, once excited, id will project itself upon befitting opportunities. Abel's affairs with Angela and Milly is a case in point.

Angela Grace (Mrs. Martin) is a rich white woman from Los Angeles who visits Walatowa in the early stages of her pregnancy, on the advice of her physician husband, to seek treatment at the mineral baths for a nervous condition. This woman turns to Father Olguin for help, asking for someone to chop firewood for her, and Abel obtains this job through the priest chopping wood for Angela. Angela seduces Abel to distract herself from her own unhappiness. At the same time her morbid beauty has an irresistible attraction for Abel. Thus he risks his reputation falling in sexual relationship with her. It is her charming appearance and temptation that touch him and arouse the passion in the depth of his heart. Being suppressed for so long, Abel's id begins to get provoked and something is stirring within it-sexual desire or "libido". Sex drive, the human nature, plays a vital role in one's id. It is totally unconscious and serves as the source of instinctual impulses and demands for immediate satisfaction of primitive needs.

In Freud's view, the id comes into play with the guidance of "pleasure principle" and won't take values and morality into consideration. As the primitive instinctual impulses prevail in Abel's mind, he will care nothing about Indian religion and tradition though his relationship with Angela implies betrayal of his tribe. On the other hand, Angela is a married woman with a husband. It is immoral and risky to have sex with her. However, id aims at satisfaction of want and doesn't care about hurting or harming others. A brief "yes", Abel's immediate response to Angela's seduction, demonstrates that he is controlled by "libido".

Under the Indian background, Abel's id is suppressed deep in the structure of

the mind. However, there are unsteady factors concealed in id and Abel will release the instinctual impulses upon subtle opportunities.

When Abel is relocated in Los Angeles, he gets to know another woman Milly and soon has an affair with her, who plays a similar part as Angela in the novel. Milly, with blond hair, a plain but smiling face, is a social worker on Abel's case. She starts calling on Abel no more than on a social level, which leads Abel to take to her. They eventually become lovers, and she takes care of him even when he loses his job and starts drinking heavily. Though Milly is not so attractive to Abel as Angela, he is moved by her concern and devotion. Abel's id is suppressed due to the frustration and depression in and out of the jail. Therefore her gentleness and interest in him awaken a tender emotion in Abel more or less so that the demand for sexual passion in his id is evoked and they develop an intimate relationship which is stored as a sweet memory in Abel's mind.

Abel's wanting Milly resembles his desire for Angela: his id is suppressed and he lets it out upon being cared for and seduced. He is supposed to resist the seduction from Milly, but the powerful id stands out to bend him. It features Abel's id indulging in sexual desire. His id abides by "pleasure principle" so as to abreact his sex drive in subconsciousness under the guidance of instinctual impulses regardless of morality, tradition and his own situation, making itself the supreme tyrant.

#### **4. Impulsive Killing of the Albino Recklessly**

According to Indian tradition, the feast of Santiago is supposed to be held every July 25th, reenacting the events of history. But unfortunately for Abel - he is selected as the attacking target of another participant, a brilliant horseman the albino which means a white man in Pueblo language. The ceremony features by the rooster pull. The mounted men line up and take turns riding past and trying to grab a rooster that has been partially buried in sand. Unfortunately Abel fails, and the albino succeeds in grabbing the rooster. The albino outdoes Abel and the rest of participants. The tradition has it that the winner is supposed to flail the loser with the rooster. Therefore, "Again and again the white man struck him, heavily, brutally, upon the chest and shoulders and head, and Abel threw up his hands, but the bird fell

upon them and beat them down.“ (39) Angela is invited to attend the feast of Santiago and watches all that has happened. On one night after a couple of days, among many drunken Navajos at the local bar, Abel and the albino have a fierce conversation and leave the bar. Abel kills the albino with a knife abruptly and watches his blood drip in the rain.

Scholars and critics hold different views on the reasons of Abel’ s murder of the albino. A great number of people may agree with John Scenters-Zapico’ s view that Abel “lashes out in secret and kills the albino“ out of setback brought about by albino’ s striking with rooster in his “Cross-Cultural Mediation: Language, Storytelling, History, and Self as Enthymematic Premises in the Novels of N. Scott Momaday“. Scenters-Zapico believes that “the episode fully exposes his misunderstanding of this rich cultural tradition“ on account of that the albino’ s “reward is to show off and hit with the rooster whichever of the participants he wishes“ (Scenters-Zapico Cross-Cultural Meditation 508). The point of view of H. S. Mcallister differs from that mentioned above. He holds that “Abel kills the albino because of his belief that the man is a snake witch, a belief corroborated by his manifestation of reptilian characteristics at death and earlier in Francisco’ s cornfield“ (Mcallister, H.S. Be a Man, Be a Woman 20). In a nutshell, scholars and critics consider the killing as Abel’ s giving vent to his setback or his belief that he should eliminate anyone who is the enemy by running against his culture. However, the author of the thesis holds the belief that Abel kills the Albino out of impulsivity recklessly. Whether he intends to vent his frustration or kill the evil spirit, he is driven by his id that prevails in his mind-his ego is utterly useless during the killing. According to Freud, id is the “irrational, instinctual, unknown and unconscious part“ of the psyche. It contains “secret desires, darkest wishes and most intense fears. Id wishes only to fulfill the urges of the pleasure principle“ (Bressler Literary Criticism 150). As for Abel, the pleasure can result from the death of the albino.

It is normal for a man to develop feelings of fear and worry in response to such a situation. There is, however, strong evidence to suggest that Abel gains satisfaction from the death of the albino-he “carefully“ removes the glasses from Albino’ s face, interested in watching the dying white man. Only the death of the white man could satisfy Abel and he doesn’ t take the consequence into consideration. Instead of fleeing away from the scene he kneels over the dead “for a long time in the

rain“ (74). All mentioned above indicate that Abel’ s id takes over his mind which leads to his irrational devotion to killing the albino.

To dig deep, the action of violence results from suppression and fear. Abel has been estranged from his tribe by the American culture, and his attempts to assimilate himself into Indian culture come to nothing; he has failed to maintain a long-term intimate relationship with the white woman Angela. A battery of setbacks constitutes one root of the killing-the inhibited id struggles to find an outlet in the morning and evening. The other lies in deeply rooted fear which has dwelt in him since his early childhood-the fear that evil forces in the universe may exert their influence on him. Abel’ s incompetence to understand the complicated nature of witchcraft results in his instinctual and reckless response to the albino. “He was suddenly conscious of some alien presence close at hand [...] evil had long since found him out and knew who he was“ (59). In the community the albino is believed to be witch. Intensified at the sight of the “striking“ albino, his fear of witchcraft becomes Abel’ s unconscious motif of killing the white man-he will follow his belief that he is supposed to kill a witch without hesitation. Some characters, such as Father Olguin, consider Abel’s action as instinctual. Olguin believes that Abel misinterprets the albino as some other alien that is pure evil. Faced with such an enemy, it is only natural and instinctual that Abel would kill the albino.

When we review the climatic plot of the first chapter-Abel kills the albino, who has defeated him at the feast of Santiago, we can see that Momaday doesn’t give us the conversation between the albino and Abel intentionally. We just know that Abel knifes the albino, and that the albino is totally expressionless and emotionless as he dies - what they say to each other is never revealed. Why does the author leave Abel’ s motive for killing the albino completely open to interpretation? He explains that he shows us an ineffable aspect to the violent killing so that we can simply point to it. Though there exist a great number of viewpoints on Abel’s motif, we insist on the view that he kills the albino out of the prevailing of his id. Momaday does not mention Abel’s motive because the content of the conversation is redundant in that Abel’s id has ever taken control of his mind so that his killing of the albino is inevitable and only by stabbing the albino could he vent the frustration and fear.

The fear, frustration and pain are intensely implanted in Abel’s deep psyche and constitute his id, some of which will take shape into ego when he confronts the



reality with reason.

### References

- [1] Freud, Sigmund(1948). *The Ego and the Id*. London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., PP. 84-86.
- [2] Lawrence J. Evers(1977). Words and Place: A Reading of *House Made of Dawn*.“ *Western American Literature*, Vol. XI, No. 4, pp. 297-320.
- [3] Matthias Schubnell(1985). *The Crisis of Identity: House Made of Dawn*. N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background, University of Oklahoma Press.
- [4] Oleson, Carole(1973). The Remembered Earth: Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*.“ *South Dakota Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 59-78.
- [5] Trilling, Lionel(2007). “Freud and Literature.” *The Scholar's Library of the Study of American Literature*. Ed. Tianjin: Nankai University Press.