

Totemism and Neurosis in Two Brazilian Novels

Both José Lins do Rego's *Menino de engenho*(1932) and Erico Verissimo's *Noite* (1954) are works in which the protagonists, Carlos and O Desconhecido respectively, are psychologically alienated from their environments yet physically trapped within them. Each novel relates the experiences of two men which suffer from intense psychological disturbances and periodic emotional breakdowns as they attempt to cope with surroundings which defy familiarization. They are outsiders trying to discover their own identities in hostile environments.

Carlos and O Desconhecido attempt to recover their pasts through an inspection of their childhood memories. Their psychological conflicts and the resulting behavioral abnormalities are similar to symptoms described by Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex, stemming from a hatred felt for their fathers and a sexual attraction for their mothers. In order to understand the psychological problems from which suffer both *Menino de engenho's* young Carlinhos, the child sent to live on his grandfather's *engenho* or hacienda, and *Noite's* O Desconhecido, the amnesia victim who roams the streets searching for his past, one must turn to Freud's theory of the origins of the Oedipus Complex set forth in *Totem and Taboo*, in which the German psychoanalyst explains its psychological conflict in depth.

Freud searched for the origins of the incest taboo and its relation-

ship to neurosis in the development of the Oedipus Complex in his models of primitive societies. The two protagonists likewise search for the origins of their own neuroses in their own formative environments, those of their childhoods.

The translation of *Totem and Taboo* used throughout this paper will be that of James Strachey published in 1950. The application of Freud's analysis and theory concerning the Oedipus Complex to these novels will be conducted in three parts: 1) The tribal environment in which both characters live their childhood; 2) The perversions which arise in both novels as a result of the extension of the incest taboo to the totemic society within which each is submerged; and 3) The neuroses resulting from the conflict of the tribal, totemic values of their childhoods and those of the Twentieth Century Brazilian society to which each character also belongs.

According to Freud, totemic culture is the basis of all advanced civilizations. In both *Noite* and *Menino de engenho*, elements either pertaining to or resembling totemic cultures resurface and are imposed upon the young characters. The explanation of the origin of totemism which will be used here is based upon both Freud's and a synthesis of several of Freud's analyses of the rise and fall of the primal father set forth in Patrick Mullahy's *Oedipus Myth and Complex* which organizes and avoids some of the contradictions found in Freud's early works; Mullahy's is therefore a synthesis of the Oedipal theory set forth in various stages by Freud and by his proteges.

In the totemic system, a powerful father (the patriarch) both possesses sexually and rules politically the women of an extended family while exiling his sons whom he views as his potential rivals. The sons must hate their oppressor who is the source of their imposed celibacy

in exile, and, upon invading the mythic patriarchal home, kill the father and find themselves rivals for the women (matriarchs) and victims of a powerful guilt arising from the fact that they also loved and admired the father (Mullahy 66). This strange inconsistency is explained by Freud through his theory of ambivalence (Freud 33). The ambivalence theory states that love and hate are aspects of one emotional impulse; for this reason (one later utilized in this paper) the son, who is a victim of the Oedipus Complex, must also identify himself with the victim of his crime. The sons' guilt causes them to renounce the women whom they want most: their mothers and sisters.

The totemic system is erected for the purpose of never forgetting the father, who, after exiling and then being killed by his sons, is transformed into a protecting and avenging god which enforces the laws against incest. Totem societies therefore are exogamous ones in which sexual relations are forbidden between members of the same totem, the totem now including all people who pay respect to the same deified animal or plant, a symbol of the sons' crime, this being both sacred and forbidden (another example of ambivalence) (Freud 4). The totem relation crosses blood boundaries and its incest taboo forbids sex between members of a belief system as much as that between true blood relatives. Just as the sons were forbidden to touch the other sons' mothers and sisters after killing the tribal father, now the males of the totem must renounce sexual relations with the woman belonging to their mythical father, the totem animal or plant.

The origin of the totem is also the origin of the incest taboo and its prohibition of incest is the source of conflict for the son who, according to Freud, instinctively wishes to sexually possess his mother and other women belonging to his father's harem.

The patriarchal society which leads to totemism and the incest taboo is supposedly based upon an earlier matriarchal society of which little is known but is nevertheless the origin of the later social system. It is for this underlying social structure that the totem is inherited through the woman (Freud 105). It is important to note here that the wetnurse of Carlinhos' grandfather José Paulino in Lins do Rego's book is an African woman who is looked upon as both the agent which introduces an African mythic tradition to the *engenho* and also a type of mythical mother-figure to whom respect must be paid for the life she has given to the patriarch by nursing him (Lins do Rego 58).

While the origins of the totemic system are explicit in *Menino de engenho*, that of the patriarchal system in O Desconhecido's family are not revealed in the novel and the father laments his forced role as a primal patriarch ruling over four women "Casei-me com a Maria e com uma récuca de tias" (Verissimo 112). A totemic system manifests itself in both novels in the homes of the two protagonists who live in twentieth century Brazil, thus an ancient, mythical world is thrust upon two modern men, Carlinhos and O Desconhecido.

In *Menino de engenho*, after Carlinhos' father kills his mother in a fit of insanity, the child is taken to his grandfather's home, a hacienda or *engenho*. José Paulino, the grandfather, is the patriarch who sends his daughters and sisters away to be married demonstrating that his women must marry outside of their totem. Carlinhos' *engenho* is presented as a type of primitive mythical society in which the white men of the *engenho*, except for the patriarchal grandfather, never have sexual relations with any white women. This is the beginning of the incest taboo within the *engenho* Santa Rosa. The white members of the community are part of the same totem and must seek outside this community

for sexual fulfillment.

When Carlinhos first arrives he must be taken to a swimming hole and bathed in the *engenho's* water because he is from the city, whereupon his uncle, Tio Juca, proclaims: "Agora você já está batizado" (Lins do Rego 11). He has been initiated into the totem which Freud says is a religion in that it is a value system (Freud 104). Further proof of the existence of a totem environment is the fact that a formal religion is basically non-existent at the Santa Rosa. The mystic beliefs brought to Brazil by Galdinha, the patriarch's wetnurse, transformed upon contact with the *engenho*, are more real to Carlinhos than those of the Catholic Church. An outside critique is, in fact, leveled at Jose Paulino, the patriarch, by his cousins: "José Paulino é um herege, e cria essa gente daqui como bichos" (Lins do Rego 93). The patriarch, therefore, is the religious leader and for the reason that he feels secure in his relationship with his God, the members of his totem are considered protected. Their connection to God is manifested through him and symbolized in him. He is a primal father and in that role he prohibits sexual relations between the members of his totem yet he is the beloved center of their spirituality. Santa Rosa is a hybridization of modern and primitive values, whose juxtaposition transforms the *engenho* into a totem community.

Erico Verissimo does not paint a detailed picture of O Desconhecido's childhood. Few facts are given in the text except for the father's rule over his wife Maria, and her sisters, all of whom act as O Desconhecido's mother. Here is the reign of the primal father in miniature and just as the sons are removed from their mothers to avoid incestuous relations, so does he prohibit the aunts from bathing the son when he encounters the three women and the boy in the bathroom (Verissimo 112).

In *Noite*, a psychological novel, much of the totem environment is created in the mind of the protagonist. The son believes that his father will kill his mother, who is a virginal Maria and might therefore be subject to both adulation and sacrifice, and thus exile the child from the presence of his mother in order to ensure that incest not occur. The prohibition of sexual contact with virginal, saintly mothers, which is created in the protagonist's mind, is the basis for the reconstruction of the totem in *Noite*. All "good" women belong to the father's totem, for they are like the mother and the aunts, and therefore if O Desconhecido were to have sex with them he would be breaking the incest taboo. He, like the members of the *engenho*, is prohibited from having sex with the women of his community by the patriarch, who is both hated and is a center of compulsion for the son.

The totem community in *Noite*, however, is real only in the mind of the protagonist, who suffers from a severe estrangement from reality to the point of an emotional breakdown resulting in amnesia. Through an analysis of his neuroses and perversions which will follow, however, his environment can be seen as a totemic one controlled by the extended incest taboo and exogamy.

The second section of this paper will analyze the two protagonists' sexual obsessions, arising from the fact that the object of sexual desire in both cases, a woman belonging to their social class or totem, is a forbidden one. According to Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, the person who is prohibited from having relations with an object of desire searches for either new objects, as substitutions, or new acts which are not yet prohibited. There are, thus, two forces in conflict, the sexual urge and a repressive force which prohibits sexual acts within the totem.

This repressive element is, in *Noite*, incorporated into O

Desconhecido's super-ego. The repressive father is replaced by a repressive force in his own mind. This sort of conflict and the resulting psychological frustration reflect Freud's following hypothesis: "The mutual inhibition of the two conflicting forces produces a need for discharge, for reducing the prevailing tension; and to this may be attributed the reason for the performance of obsessive acts" (Freud 30). These obsessive acts are the sexual compulsions of both Carlinhos and O Desconhecido.

In *Menino de engenho* the perversions of the men of the *engenho* are presented in detail by the author. Carlinhos' uncles take part in various acts which definitely may be considered abnormal or compulsive. Tio Juca vents his sexual urges upon the black prostitutes which live on the *engenho* and brags of his exploits to the young Carlinhos who is approximately eight years old, as well as introducing the child to his lovers. Tio Juca's possessive urges with respect to the replacement objects of his desire are also observed when he chases Carlinhos from his room when the child is caught looking through the uncle's extensive collection of pornographic material (Lins do Rego 83). The child is too young to steal the uncle's women but he is able to obtain pleasure from the pictures, and this explains the uncle's openness with respect to the child and the women and his jealousy with regard to his pornographic collection because in the first case the child poses no threat. Tio Juca has imitated the Primal Father's selfishness but with objects of substitution. His harem consists of prostitutes and pornography.

Carlinhos' cousin Silvino is another of the males of the *engenho* whose perversions are proudly announced and also taught, through example, to the child. He and the other cousins not only observe the mating practices of the animals of the *engenho* but also copy the primal

father and take their own animal harems: "Tinhámos as nossas cabras e as nossas vacas para encontros de lubricidade" (Lins do Rego 35). They release their sexual urges in acts of bestiality after first discovering Silvino "procurando por-se por cima de uma vaca mansinha" (Lins do Rego 35).

The incapacity to have normal sexual relations and the resulting frustration manifested in Carlinhos' sexual obsessions lead him to become a sexual compulsive, one obsessed with abnormal, at least as far as outside society is concerned, sexual acts. At twelve years of age he enters into an exhibitionistic sexual relationship with his African nanny Luisa. It is an obsessive one and he recounts that "So pensava nos meus retiros lubricos com o meu anjo mau, nas masturbações gostosas com a negra Luisa" (Lins do Rego 103). The strange compulsion of the child which leads to his own reduced prostitute harem and a case of gonorrhoea causes him to be considered an adult male among the members of the *engenho* community.

A realized male, therefore, within their repressive society controlled by the primal patriarch and the totem incest taboo, is one who imitates the patriarch and finds a harem outside of the totem community. He has successfully emulated the patriarch yet not crossed the totem boundaries. That he has become a sexual compulsive, however, is undeniable, for Carlinhos laments: "O sexo impunha-me essa escravidão abominavel" (Lins do Rego 104). He and the other males of the *engenho* are the frustrated victims of these obsessions, the result of the manifestation of a primitive totemic value system emergent in a reduced physical environment in the twentieth century.

In *Noite, O Desconhecido* also must search outside his social circle for sexual pleasure, this search leading him, at seventeen years of age,

to a bordello where he finally decides to have sex with the oldest prostitute of the house. His urges for the older woman are obsessive as he states: "Não era mais desejo o que sentia, mas uma especie de febre" (Verissimo 121). His obsession becomes more clear in the words which he repeats through the mouth of the prostitute during one of his flashbacks: "Quantos anos tem? Só? Credo! Ate podia ser meu filho" (Verissimo 121). His obsession is for his mother, but upon this declaration by the prostitute, the relationship being established openly, he flees. The taboo and the totem are established within his own mind and the exogamic prohibition of sex within the totem is enforced by his own super-ego.

This frustrated obsession to have sex with his mother is later replayed in the novel. O Desconhecido's inability to have sex with his wife, although he desperately wants to, is caused by his association of her with his mother. She is even named Maria just as his mother is. Unable to overcome the power of the primal father, which exists in his mind, he, just as did the members of the *engenho*, searches for an outlet for his sexual compulsions outside his totem and has sex only with prostitutes because he becomes sexually impotent with any woman whom he has associated with the totem.

That the primal father and the incest taboo has been incorporated into his psyche, as well as the identification of his wife, a good woman, with his mother and therefore part of his father's harem, is revealed when he does have sex with Maria. He becomes a violent version of his brutal primal father and just as he believes that his father killed his mother in the act of sex, his suffering wife exclaims during violent intercourse: "Assim me matas! Me matas!" (Verissimo 122) Just as the tribal sons can never rid themselves of the image of the cruel father,

neither can O Desconhecido escape his father, who has manifested his reign from within his son's tortured psyche.

The final section of this article is an analysis of the psychological conflict which leads to both Carlinhos' and O Desconhecido's abnormal behavior and emotional suffering. Freud begins his discussion in *Totem and Taboo* by justifying his approach, stating that taboos in primitive cultures are similar to the fears and compulsions of neurotics and for that reason, the study of one would naturally throw light upon the comprehension of the other (Freud 1).

I have already partially discussed O Desconhecido's psychological conflict. If, as Freud believes, a neurosis is an apparently illogical fear or compulsion arising from the conflict between the super-ego and the id (these being the sexual urges of the individual and his conscience), then O Desconhecido's impotence with respect to his wife can be seen as the conflict between his cravings for his mother and his fear of punishment from his father. This fear has become personified in O Desconhecido's prudish super-ego which looks in disdain at the sexual advances of his wife. She must remain an asexual character, only giving in to the fierce sexual brutality that manifests itself when the son relives the father's brutality in the sexual act. It is this conflict that makes O Desconhecido unable to consummate his marriage yet causes him to see her as one of his harem who is coveted by the pack of tribal sons when she interacts socially with men at a party. Unable to understand his own internal conflict, he verbally attacks her: "Cabela indecente!" (Verissimo 12).

The conflict between the totem system within his mind and external reality finally results in his attack of amnesia for he can no longer face his reality or interpret it according to his battling psyche. *Noite* is the tale

of the conflict crescendo, the point of psychological conflict whereupon the victim totally loses contact with reality. It is an escape in order to avoid the conflict between his sexual urges and the cruelty of the primal father who dwells within him.

In *Menino de engenho*, the totem system and the primal father are not interior. Carlinhos' emotional depression and supposed mental instability are caused by the totem environment in which he resides. While he is, throughout the novel, reminded of his father's insanity and references are made to the possibility of him suffering from a similar genetic disorder, his great moment of crisis is when he finds his cousin, Maria Clara, watching the mating of the farm animals. He drags her away insisting that "Aquilo era porcaria para os seus olhos limpinhos" (Lins do Rego 95). He is possessive of her own sexual purity, thus imitating the primal father. He dreams of sex with her but when he does kiss her he promptly flees. He is both a slave to sex with partners who do not belong to his totem, such as animals and prostitutes, and yet fearful of the sexual identity of a woman belonging to his social class. What he wants and what his conscience allows are in conflict, the sexual id and the reprimanding super-ego of the totem taboo are at odds within him.

Carlinhos' depression is later augmented by the departure of his aunt Maria, a mother figure who must leave the *engenho* in order to marry outside of the totem. In this case she is the primal mother who is separated from her son by the cruel primal father. The conflict within him renders him sickly and unstable, a victim to his sexual impulses following the totemic rules and subsequent perversions of the *engenho*. He is viewed as an unstable threat to peace (the stability of the totem system) of the *engenho* and is soon thereafter sent away to school. Upon

leaving the *engenho*, when his value system is about to come into contact with that of the external world, he realizes that he is the “menino perdido, menino de *engenho*” (Lins do Rego 121). He has been perverted by the totem, a primitive value system transplanted and transformed in order to fit and control a very nontraditional twentieth century environment, and he will now be thrown into further conflict by his contact with a world in which exogamy and the extended incest taboo are not only unacceptable, but are, in fact, completely contradictory to the values of society.

There exist points of contact largely ignored between the taboos of Freud’s models of primitive societies and the psychological disorders portrayed in works of literature. The fact that both Freud’s models and these literary creations are based upon imagination strongly suggests the possibility of the use of one to more fully understand the other. Freud’s proposal is, of course, a scientific or social proposal based upon an imaginary framework while literature is often the application of a theory or proposal to create a work of imagination. *Noite* and *Menino de engenho* put into practice the theory of totems and taboos, but in the case of the novels the psychoanalyst is the narrator who searches for the primitive totemic society in the character’s own primitive memory.

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