Significance of Short Story The Prussian Officer for an Understanding of Midgley’s Discussion of Freedom

What, in your view, is the significance of D.H. Lawrence's short story The Prussian Officer for an understanding of Midgley’s discussion of freedom

In this essay, I will begin by giving a summary of D.H. Lawrence's short story, The Prussian Officer. I will then summarise John Stewart Mill’s ‘harm principle’ which Midgley’s critique of which, I believe is vital to understanding her discussion of freedom. Midgley’s critique of this offers the reader insight into the difficulty of the issue as to how much freedom we should be ‘allowed', that is by the law, to have. In order to delve into this issue more acutely, I will then discuss Midgley's two concepts of freedom and how The Prussian Officer can offer us examples of the different ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ freedoms that Midgley speaks of (Midgey, 1999). In reference to these freedoms, Midgley critiques Mill's ideas of what restricts these freedoms and I for the rest of the essay will explore how these criticisms are mirrored in The Prussian Officer.

The Prussian Officer

The Prussian Officer is a short story in which two men express their freedoms in different ways. The ‘Captain’ is seen as an abuser, he has much ‘outer’ freedom and power which he uses to torment the ‘orderly’ that is a member of his regiment. The orderly lives under the command of the Captain until one day, his resentment grows too strong and he expresses his ‘inner freedom’ freedom by killing the Captain.

How useful is Mill’s Harm Principle?

Midgley presents John Stuart Mill’s harm principle (Mill, 1869), as a belief system that people should be free to the extent that they are not infringing on someone else's freedom. The only time that freedom can rightfully be infringed upon is when someone's freedom will cause harm to others. Therefore, the way that someone is judged on their actions should be in the context of society and their interaction with others. Alone, that person can do as they like.

The Prussian Officer can help us assess the quality of Mill’s ‘harm principle’ and help us understand why Midgley does not think it as a sensible way to determine the amount of freedom someone can have (Midgey, 1999). In The Prussian Officer, the orderly’s freedom to see the girl he loves is restricted by the Captain as the Captain ‘kept the young man engaged all evenings long’, and ‘took pleasure in the dark look that came across his face’ (Lawrence, 1914). The orderly is unable to do what he likes without punishment and is abused by the Captain multiple times. According to Mill's harm principle, because the orderly's freedom is being infringed upon by the Captain, the orderly has the right to act in ‘self-protection' of his freedom. This point seems fair enough. However, the only way that the orderly can possibly protect his own freedom is to kill the Captain, thereby ceasing the Captain's freedom altogether. This makes the reader question whose freedom is more important, and who deserves the right

to freedom more than another? The fact that these questions are raised is extremely helpful to make the reader understand the simplicity of the harm principle, and how it cannot be used in complex moral dilemmas since it brings up these questions. This is why Midgley argues that all that the harm principle can offer us is a ‘useful sketchy background theme' (Midgey, 1999, p. 34), which can be used as such, not to provide definite moral answers, but providing a general theme to how we approach complex moral dilemmas. Midgley believes that there should be a value-shift in which we promote the value of having a private sphere in our lives, but where the line between public and private matters is drawn is difficult and will never be able to answer the question of quite why we should promote this private sphere of our lives as a value in itself. The Prussian Officer can show the damage that suppression and lack of private freedom can do as the orderly’s resentment gets the better of him and is expressed in such a damaging way. Yet, The Prussian Officer also shows the damage that no restriction to personal freedom can do, the officer has no restriction to the way that he treats the orderly and thus can bully and abuse him. It is able to clarify Mill's position that a line must be drawn but also to clarify Midgley’s position on the difficulty of drawing this line.

What are the different types of freedom?

The Prussian Officer can help us to clearly understand Midgley’s two definitions of freedom. Without this understanding, it is easy for the reader to become confused with the term ‘freedom’ actually meaning two different things. At the beginning of her discussion about freedom, Midgley makes a distinction between ‘inner’ freedom and ‘outer’ freedom (Midgey, 1999, p. 31). These concepts of freedom have been widely misinterpreted in the past, with Sartre having to explain a ‘misunderstanding’ between historical and political freedom and ‘philosophical freedom’ meaning ‘only the autonomy of choice’ (Sartre, 1943, p. 483). Midgley’s concepts are similar, ‘outer’ freedom being physical and political freedom which is based on individual circumstance, and ‘inner’ freedom being freedom to think, believe and choose. In The Prussian Officer, The Captain has a close relationship between the two aspects of his freedom, he has power and is therefore relatively free from being ‘killed, maimed, imprisoned, tortured, exiled [or] robbed’ (Midgey, 1999, p. 31), thus he has much outer freedom, he also has inner freedom and these two types do not conflict with each other, he is relatively free to believe and do as he pleases. The orderly on the other hand has inner freedom to believe as he likes and we see evidence of this as he loves his girl, despite his outer freedom to see the girl being forbidden by the Captain. Nevertheless, the orderly’s inner freedom eventually takes over with the boy’s desire to kill the Captain, the man who has been restricting his inner freedom. This resentment of suppression of freedom is mirrored in what Midgley says about Mill’s anger towards society and his impression that society is merely a kind of ‘hostile and dreaded censorship’ (Mill, 1869).

How far are these freedoms restricted by society?

Midgley believes that we have a kind of resentment against society as we are under the wrong impression that society is acting as a suppressor of our freedom. She criticizes Mill for advocating this belief that society is actively oppressing us and thus resenting and blaming society. She calls this resentment an ‘oedipal resentment’ (Midgey, 1999, p. 39). She describes this resentment as oedipal because it is similar to that resentment that one may hold towards their parents, there is an ‘ambivalence' on either side of the ‘life-giving element' that the parents offer the child and vice-versa and she argues that ‘to get near people is to collide

with them' (Ibid., p.39). Thus, she believes that society is not an external oppressing force, but rather a necessary, good thing that helps us to grow and form our own moral values. We only have this ‘oedipal resentment' because we, like with our parents, have a dependence on the things that came before us. This is mirrored in The Prussian Officer with the Captain’s resentment of the orderly. The orderly allows the Captain to feel a ‘warm flame’ of youth, yet ‘this irritated the Prussian. He did not choose to be touched into life by his servant.’ (Lawrence, 1914). This is a clear example of the ‘oedipal resentment' that Midgley is describing. The Captain is denying that the boy is supporting him and it can be seen throughout the story that the Officer cannot be without the orderly but hates and bullies him when he is there – ‘the Captain could not regain his neutrality of feeling towards the orderly. Nor could he leave the man alone' (Ibid.,1914). Moreover, the Captain feels resentment towards the boy because he reminds him of his own youth. This opens up questions to the reader about if the Captain is perhaps trying to deny the person that he was when he was young. This would further the reader's understanding of Midgley's position against Mill as you can see that the Captain's resentment is directed towards something that made him who he is; this cannot be denied according to Midgley and should be accepted as of vital importance to further pursuing morality and freedom independently.

Mill believes that the conscience, because it is formed and chiselled by society, can also act as a suppressor of inner freedom and he describes this as the ‘tyranny of custom' (Mill, 1869). This, to Mill, is the idea of mindless conformity to convention and seems almost a sort of determinism in which we are so restricted by those around us and our upbringing that we are simply controlled, almost like robots of conventionalism. Mill argues that under this ‘tyranny of custom', we cannot progress and change for the better as ‘the initiation of all wise and noble things comes and must come from individuals, generally at first from one individual’ (Ibid.,). Midgley criticises Mill’s presentation of society in this way, claiming that society and convention is the foundation for all innovation, seen most prominently in the performing arts. Midgley's argument for this is that meaning can only come out of pre-existing foundations because without these ‘nothing signifies and nothing surprises' (Midgey, 1999, p. 40) and thus The Prussian Officer can aid an understanding of Midgley’s emphasis on the benefit of societal influence over moral issues. In The Prussian Officer, The Captain mistreats his orderly merely because he has no sense, from what we can see, that this is wrong or that it is unfair. Nor, on the other hand, does the boy have much sense that he deserves more freedom that what he is being given. Written in 1914, this was a time in which society and individual freedom were collapsing at the beginning of World War Two; it seems as though Lawrence was predicting situations in the war, where, without these things, people may take advantage of others’ freedoms and this is depicted in The Prussian Officer. Therefore Midgley position that society is not an ‘enemy' which must be changed, but a starting point for further development for human wellbeing whilst providing continuity for those who are more opposed to change, is supported by the dystopian nature of The Prussian Officer in which there is no structure against which to judge the Captain’s actions.

Conclusion

Overall, The Prussian Officer seems to offer valuable insight into Midgley's ideas about freedom. The Prussian Officer can offer examples and reflections to the key aspects of freedom that Midgley discusses. This includes her criticism of Mill's ‘harm principle', with The Prussian Officer highlighting the problems that this method brings about including ideas about freedom

and equality. Moreover, The Prussian Officer offers examples of Midgley’s two different types of freedoms, the Captain containing ‘outer’ freedom which the orderly does not have access to. Furthermore, The Prussian Officer is able to shed light on Midgley’s debate about how far society can actually affect our freedom and how much we should allow society to intervene with individual freedoms. Thus, it seems that The Prussian Officer can only be of use in the understanding of Midgley’s discussion of freedom due to it offering examples through a narrative of the key aspects of her discussion.

Bibliography

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