

Representation of Fear in *Courage the Cowardly Dog***Shatabdi Roy**

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Abstract

The Cartoon Network animated series *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (1999-2002), directed by John R. Dilworth, presents to its viewers an elderly couple and their dog, who live in the middle of nowhere, a place where bizarre events seem to be almost daily occurrences. Having lost his biological parents at a young age, Courage is left alone. Muriel is the mother who rescued him. She is generous and loving and he strives to protect her at all costs. The identity that his mother Muriel gives him becomes a part of him, a name that validates his painful experiences. Feeling threatened at the slightest, that this 'ordinary family life' that he has found, might be snatched away from him once again, Courage reaches within himself for the safety of himself and his family, a result of the development of what Winnicott (1984) describes as the 'false self'. The goal of this paper is to study how the trauma faced by Courage as a baby might have caused him to respond in a way that makes him perceive situations that are perhaps not as dangerous, as potential threats, and how his fear functions through its various manifestations, possibly leading to hallucination and distortion of reality.

Keywords: Trauma, Attachment, Fear, Hallucination, Memory

Who can find a proper grave for the damaged mosaics of the mind, where they may rest in pieces? — L. L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*

As Edward Bond notes in his “Introduction” to *Lear*, every child is born into this world with a set of expectations - that they will be cared for, their vulnerability will be shielded. However, their expectations are not always fulfilled. The protagonist of the American animated horror comedy television series created by John Russell Dilworth, *Courage the Cowardly Dog*, Courage, having lost his parents as a puppy, was left homeless, starving, alone and unprotected, until Muriel found and rescued him from an alleyway. Set in the fictional town of Nowhere, Kansas, Courage not only finds a home, but also a family in the elderly couple, Muriel and Eustace Bagge.

Just as Courage lost his parents, unfortunate events often lead to painful separations of several families. Given into adoption as a baby by his birth mother, and forcefully separated from his aunt, Chris Purnell writes in his essay “Surviving the Care System: A Story of Abandonment and Reconnection”, ‘Throughout these years I sustained myself with the fantasy of an idealized mother who would come and rescue me. She was out there somewhere trying to find me, and one day she would come for me. I built a picture in my mind of what she looked like, and I even dreamed about her’ (35). Muriel is this ideal mother for Courage. She is kind, generous, loving, caring, and even protects him from Eustace. But having lost his birth family, Courage fears separation from his new mother. He now looks within himself for the safety of his family and himself. He has perhaps developed what Donald Winnicott describes as the ‘false self’.

Despite him having found a shelter, a home where he can sleep in the arms of a loving mother, he is unable to feel secure. Paul Lang, in his tripartite model of fear, discusses how fear, as a response, consists of three parts: physiological arousal, or the sensation of anxiety induced by a potential threat, leading to a cognitive component or thoughts that one has regarding their safety, followed by a behavioural response. This behavioural response not only includes active avoidance, flight and fight responses, but also a kind of hypervigilance, where one feels the need to be constantly on guard in order to prevent a possible catastrophe. As a consequence of the sudden loss of security at a tender age, Courage could not allow himself to be dependent upon anyone. Being a dog, he faces a language barrier while trying to express his anxiety about these strangers who come knocking at their door, and in order to depict his desperation for safety, he is shown to shape shift seemingly in an attempt to visually express himself. Relying only upon himself, he protects his loved ones with “courage” from all the dangers in the world that could befall them, as the memory of the past casts a shadow upon his present life.

Once exposed to the event that results in intense personal suffering, the effect lasts for a lifetime. A survivor of the Jewish Holocaust, who had been confined in ghettos as a child, had repetitive flashbacks of trains. Unable to recall or understand why the visions appeared, she felt that she was going insane. However, at a survivors’ meeting, she was informed that from the children’s barracks at Theresienstadt, one could hear the trains. She was relieved to realise that she was, in fact, not suffering from insanity. (Kinsler, 1990) The event returns to the mind as nightmares and flashbacks, vivid, yet accompanied by, paradoxically, an amnesia of the past, whose memories might gradually become more and more distorted. (Krystal, 1990).

While Muriel is the ideal caring mother, Eustace constantly scares Courage with a green mask that seems huge to Courage, for the sake of entertainment, and calls him ‘stupid’. But Eustace’s behaviour stems from his past and how he has experienced life. Living with the guilt that he did not live up to the expectations of his parents like his brother did, he tries to make his mother appreciate him, but she too, seems to prefer a dog over him, just as his wife, Muriel, does. He laments in the episode “The Magic Tree of Nowhere”, ‘I’ve never grown anything. Not even weeds. But that stupid dog can grow trees.’ Like Eustace, the fear of failure and not being able to live up to others’ expectations is also seen through the scarecrow and the giant robot that were unable to complete the only job they were assigned, to scare birds off the fields and to conquer the world of humans, Earth, respectively. The human fear of the unknown and the need to know and control everything can also be seen through episodes where the authorities offer rewards to catch the innocent Bigfoot, and the last of the Star makers.

Eustace’s mother, shares with her son the fear of not being accepted. She is insecure about her baldness, wears wigs to hide the true state of things from her son who incidentally, or maybe genetically, shares the baldness. Both of them make every possible effort to grow their hair again, even if it is at the cost of others. This desperation finds its origin in the society’s insistence on a ‘prescribed’ standard of beauty, that allows seven-year-old Olive’s father Richard, in the movie *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), to tell her that ice cream contains fat in it, which would make her obese, as opposed to “nice and skinny” like the models on Miss America. Like Eustace is insecure about his achievements and his mother about the loss of her hair, Courage too, faces feelings of insecurity and mistrust when strangers come to visit their home and is frantic in fear of further loss.

The episodes follow a cyclical structure with a typical day in the Bagge home, commencing with Courage sleeping nestled on Muriel and Eustace's bed or with him asleep on Muriel's lap in the living room. After things go topsy-turvy and Courage saves the day, the episodes end with him resting on Muriel's lap. All episodes share the common theme of separation anxiety. An outsider comes into their lives, making Courage hypervigilant of possible danger, and the words 'I must save Muriel' returning to his lips almost like a refrain in fear of harm befalling his loved ones and snatching his mother away from him a second time.

As Purnell was unaware of his past, and felt he had 'no history and no idea of who (he) was', until years later when he got the opportunity to reconnect with his birth family, Courage's identity at birth, too, is absent in the story. In the introductory section of the show, a reporter tells the viewers that Courage was 'abandoned as a pup' which does not match with the memory of Courage seen in the second last episode of the show "Remembrance of Courage Past" that tells the audience through flashbacks, how his parents were taken away from him and, Laika-like, sent to space for the sake of experimentation. However, the word 'abandoned' does not quite go with this past. Perhaps Courage has what Dr. Elizabeth Loftus calls the 'false recovered memory', where, he imagines a happier past, possibly to ease the pain of loss. When Muriel finds baby Courage at the alleyway, she says, "I'll call you Courage. We'll have a grand time," thus giving him a home and simultaneously, an identity.

Fear influences how the individual processes an event into memory, leading to negatively biased or preferential recall, maintaining the phobias and other anxiety disorders related to the event. Nightmares and flashbacks that the trauma generates, directs to a particular event, yet, as Freud suggests, it occupies a space to which willed access is denied. Thus, as John and Krystal note, seemingly paradoxically, the image of the event returns to the

mind vividly, accompanied by an amnesia of the past. Moreover, even if the intense personal suffering leads to the pushing away or suppressing of the memory related to the event, avoidance of recalling of the event does not help a person heal as the event insistently returns, and might also have considerable control over their present.

In fear of harm befalling, leading to permanent separation, Courage is reluctant to leave his attachment figure, Muriel. The dangers that Courage begins to see are possibly imaginary, caused by a perception that is perhaps distorted. Although his family does not seem to understand his extreme anxiety about the visitors, no matter how hard he tries to explain through the language barrier, the seemingly imminent danger. After the term “hallucination” was used in its modern sense by Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol in his book *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity* (published in French in 1838, translated into English by Ebenezer Kingsbury Hunt in 1845), the word was used to describe hearing or seeing things which are not there or as “perception without an object” (Falret 1864, quoted in Telles-Correia, Diogo). Hallucination is therefore seen as created perception, that it projected onto the real world, where the hallucinating person is unable to discern that it is a created perception. This idea gradually gave rise to some related concepts, like that of pseudohallucination, which was introduced by Hagen in 1868 in his book *Zur Theorie der Hallucination*, where he defined them as “illusions or sensory errors.” These are the characteristics that can also be perceived in Courage. As Dilworth puts it, “The thing that you most fear doesn’t really exist. Well, not for others. But for you, it exists even greater now.”

In one of the early episodes, “The Shadow of Courage”, the shadow of an old, rich man, who wished to buy the moon, frees itself and goes around menacing. Being a shadow, it only changes its shape to terrify adults and children alike. When Courage asks his computer for advice, it tells him that they can either move out of the house, or get rid of the shadow

through “Pleasant conversation”, implying that by talking about its experiences and feelings, it could begin to recognise realities that are often difficult to locate, yet crucial to face in order to understand the nature of its suffering, perhaps reminding one of *Haunting of Bly Manor*, where a confrontation with the past frees Dani. And as Courage Freud-like sits on an arm chair, listening to it, the shadow finds peace and leaves to become ‘a shadow of the stars’.

In “Remembrance of Courage Past” Courage is made to relive his image of the past events, leading to the loss of his parents, pulling him back to the incident against his will. However, this time he manages to save this family from the evil scientist, living up to his name, despite being scared. This time, the viewers, too, have faith in him. They see in him the courage that Muriel had seen when she found him in the alleyway years ago, all alone.

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