

Rhode Island College

Digital Commons @ RIC

Open Books -- Open Minds: All Submissions

4-1-2021

Tommy Orange's Spider Symbolism as It Connects to Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Jessica Leite

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/obom>

Recommended Citation

Leite, Jessica, "Tommy Orange's Spider Symbolism as It Connects to Lacanian Psychoanalysis" (2021).
Open Books -- Open Minds: All Submissions. 25.
<https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/obom/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Books -- Open Minds: All Submissions by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.

Jessica Leonard Leite

English 327

Dr. Anita Duneer

26 April 2021

Tommy Orange's Spider Symbolism as It Connects to Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Native Americans are well known for their connection and values of nature. Indigenous people had to live and learn from the land and use natural resources to flourish for generations. More specifically, Native Americans viewed animals and creatures alike as a critical part of life and existence. For indigenous peoples, animals not only represent a nature-centered culture but are also used to teach lessons and signify deeper meaning within the surrounding world. Animals can be used to understand and represent aspects of life that are complicated or misunderstood, including understanding the complexities of the internal human. There are ideas found in Native American culture and values in the natural and animal world that coincide with psychoanalytical theories about human nature and the development of the self. This can be seen when applying these psychoanalytical theories to Native American stories and literature. The spider imagery found in Tommy Orange's *There There* is representative of an emergence from a lack of the mirror stage and establishing the self, as proposed by Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, was known for his controversial ideas about human development. Many of his ideas were thought to occur in the subconscious mind, making his ideas appear abstract and difficult to imagine holding validity. One milestone that Lacan viewed as significant to human development was the mirror stage. The mirror stage consists of one's ability to see themselves, particularly in the reflection of a mirror, and be able to

differentiate themselves from other individuals and objects that surround them. Lacan states, “We have only to understand the mirror stage as an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image...” (442). Lacan spent his time with the mirror stage stressing its importance and the effects it could potentially have on individuals who do not complete the mirror stage milestone throughout their development. He claims that the mirror stage,

is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation, and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopedic - and, lastly, to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (444)

This is to say that in individuals who do not experience the mirror stage, there is a likelihood for developmental delays and an internal struggle with acceptance and comfortability with the self. One who misses out on the mirror stage is at the potential risk of only having the ability to see themselves in reference to how they see and perceive others around them and their environment, rather than recognizing themselves to be individuals. This ties into Lacan's ideas of “lack” and how “lack” is the driving force behind human decision-making. When someone experiences this idea of “lack” in terms of the mirror stage, some of their developmental behaviors can be understood as being motivated by the subconscious drive to fill that void.

The literary elements that surround the spiders in Tommy Orange's *There There* significantly connect to Lacan's precautions on “lack” in the mirror stage. Orange discusses the

representation of spiders, and how spider webs can be understood as both homes and traps, in the interlude of his novel. In speaking on the struggles of the “Urban Indian” experience, Orange writes that:

If you were fortunate enough to be born into a family whose ancestors directly benefited from genocide and/or slavery, maybe you think the more you don't know, the more innocent you can stay, which is a good incentive to not find out, to not look too deep, to walk carefully around the sleeping tiger. Look no further than your last name. Follow it back and you might find your line paved with gold or beset with traps. (104)

Orange is suggesting that family history and lineage can either be a push down a path of success or victimization. It is difficult not to become a product of one's environment and fall victim to the struggles and adversities one's family has experienced for generations. This is true of the “urban Indian” experience, as their ancestors faced extreme hardship through generations of colonization trauma that continues to haunt their community. Lacan may suggest that due to a lack of the mirror stage, the “urban Indian” community cannot differentiate themselves from the past of their ancestors. They have only been able to see themselves in light of the generational trauma as a result of the colonization suppressed that continues even today. Orange mentions the significance of the spider and its web to the character's development through Opal and Jacquie's mother. Their mother “never let them kill a spider if they found one in the house, or anywhere for that matter. Her mom said spiders carry miles of web in their bodies, miles of story, miles of potential home and trap. She said that's what we are. Home and trap” (Orange 119). Opal and Jacquie's mother had a sense of awareness of the spider web's ability to be a home and a trap and what that meant for her daughters' development. In teaching her daughters the duality of the representation of the spider web, she means to instill the necessity to be aware of one's heritage

and history but to not fall victim to it. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, it can be thought that their mother was attempting to introduce the mirror stage to Opal and Jacquie, to enable them to see themselves outside of their cultural struggles.

We can see how lack of the mirror stage is equivalent to a lack of self through Jacquie's character and through her continued experience with spider imagery in *There There*. In the midst of battling an alcohol addiction that followed years of horrific experiences, Jacquie is met with a mini fridge stocked with liquor in her hotel room.

Jacquie kneeled in front of the minifridge. In her head she heard her mom say, "The spider's web is a home and a trap." And even though she never really knew what her mom meant by it, she'd been making it make sense over the years, giving it more meaning than her mom probably ever intended. In this case Jacquie was the spider, and the minifridge was the web. Home was to drink. To drink was the trap. Or something like that. The point was *Do not open the fridge*. And she didn't. (Orange 77)

Statistically, native individuals living in America reflect higher rates of substance abuse.

Jacquie's dependency on alcohol is representative of her lack of the mirror stage. She does not have the ability to see herself separated from her "urban Indian" community that is struggling with substance abuse. Within the novel, Jacquie also had to witness her mother turn to drinking as an attempt at relief and release from trauma, suggesting her inability to differentiate herself from her mother as well. However, choosing not to drink from the hotel room mini-fridge, Jacquie is emerging from her lack of mirror stage that has left her to succumb to alcohol abuse as her mother, community, and ancestors did. She is refusing to identify and reduce herself to the identity of others by succumbing to the metaphorical spider trap that is substance abuse, and instead, emanate into her true self.

Opal, Jacquie's little sister, also has an experience with spiders in the novel that is telling of her development of the self. When they were just girls, Opal and Jacquie joined their mother in the occupation of Alcatraz. While living there, Opal is made aware that Jacquie is raped, an event that left them both scarred. Sexual assault became a recurring theme when the sisters were forced to live with a man named Ronald after their mother died. Ronald had his intent set on Jacquie. Opal watched as "One night Ronald went over to the end of her bed.... When she saw Ronald pull at Jacquie's ankles, she didn't even have to think.... Ronald was on his knees about to pull Jacquie up to him. Opal got up as quiet as she could, breathed in slow, then raised the bat up high behind her. She came down as hard as she could on top of Ronald's head" (Orange 122). After she struck Ronald with the bat, Opal and Jacquie ran away from him and his abuse. It is revealed that just before their escape took place, "Opal pulled three spider legs out of her leg the Sunday afternoon before she and Jacquie left the home, the house, the man they'd been left with after their mom... Something was in her that came out, that seemed so creaturely, so grotesque yet magical... But the legs ... ended up meaning so much more" (Orange 121). Opal's bravery to save herself and her older sister signifies her experience of the mirror stage. Opal does not identify with the trauma she shares with her sister. She does not allow herself or Jacquie to become continual victims of sexual assault. The spider legs that Opal pulls from a lump on her leg signify the abilities the mirror stage grants Opal, and the emergence from her trauma. The idea that the spider legs are "grotesque yet magical" speaks to the beauty and pain that comes with facing and combating trauma and allowing the mirror stage to bring forth the self.

Orvil, Jacquie's grandson, is left in the care of Opal. Opal has raised Orvil in the shadows of his indigenous culture, keeping their heritage a secret from him. She believes that by withholding Native American culture and traditions from Orvil would be to protect him from the

long lineage of traumas she, her loved ones, and her ancestors have suffered. However, as children do, Orvil rebels. He plans to perform at the Oakland powwow as a dancer in traditional regalia. Like his great aunt Opal, Orvil too notices a lump on his leg. As the powwow event grew closer, “The lump that’s been in his leg for as long as he can remember, as of late it’s been itching. He hasn’t been able to stop scratching it” (Orange 93). It can be thought that the itchiness of the lump on Orvil’s leg is symbolic of the anticipation of the approaching powwow and what his performance will mean for his self-development as he is met the part of his culture he has longed for. As Orvil continues to scratch at the lump, he is alarmed at the spider legs eventually pulls from it, saying, ““You remember that lump I got? I felt something poking out of it. So I pulled, like, I just pulled one out, put it on some folded-up toilet paper, then went back in and got another one. Then one more after that. I’m pretty sure they’re spider legs”” (Orange 94). Prior to exploring his indigenous heritage, it can be thought that Orvil was experiencing a lack of the mirror stage as he was unable to fully identify with his true self as of Native American descent. He was denied the ability to view himself in ways that allow him to be an individual when he was denied exposure to his culture. The itchiness of the bump and eventual removal of the spider legs as it relates to the approaching of Orvil’s powwow performance suggests it is an emergence from that experience of lack as well as an experience of coming of age.

We can understand that lack of the mirror stage is correlated to a lack of self-identification. Jacques Lacan and his ideas about lack and the mirror stage provide an interesting way of analyzing a text by close reading characters and their behaviors, whether they are overcoming their lack of the mirror stage, or exercising the abilities given to them by the mirror stage. These behaviors that make up the character development may otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood without knowledge of Lacan’s theory. Tommy Orange’s *There There* novel is

packed with characters overcoming trauma and stepping into a new role of the self that can be understood through a Lacanian psychoanalytical lens. Orange's choice to weave the use of nature, animals, and insects into the development of his characters speaks to the authenticity of his writing to the Native American culture. Lacan's ideas of lack and the mirror stage and their perspective connection to Orange's talents in incorporating traditional indigenous ideals in his writing make *There There* an interesting novel to pick apart and analyze the complexities of the story.

Works Cited

"Alcohol Abuse in the Native American Population." *American Addiction Centers*, 2 Apr. 2021, americanaddictioncenters.org/alcoholism-treatment/native-americans.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell, 2004, p. 441-446.

Orange, Tommy. *There There*. Emblem Editions, 2020.