

Positive psychology & English literature hand in hand

¹ Salma Javed, ² Sarah Javed

¹ Research Scholar in English, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Research Scholar in Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychiatry, Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Introduction: Positive psychology is a particular area of psychology which focuses mainly on how to help the humans in leading better, happy and a cheerful life. It is not like the other branches of psychology which deals with abnormal behavior and dysfunctions in humans. As a coin has two sides, we can say positive psychology is the happy side which centers on helping the human beings.

Objectives set for the article were (i) Exploring aspects of positive psychology in Earnest Hemingway's work. (ii) Exploring aspects of positive psychology in Robert Browning's work. (iii) Exploring aspects of positive psychology in John Donne's work. In order to fulfill the objectives detail analysis of John Donne's poem "The Sun Rising", Robert Browning's poem "The Last Ride Together" and Ernest Hemingway's novel, "The Old Man and the Sea", was done.

Conclusion: After going through these three literary pieces by eminent writers we can conclude that love, gratitude, courage and hope are some of the components which have a direct link with the positivity in a human being's life.

Keywords: Gratitude, Hope, Love, Positive, Psychology

Introduction

Almost everyone among us have probably heard the term "Positive Psychology" on television, in some intellectual conversations among well-read people or from people who try to make our lives happy. But have we ever thought what is it all about? How come such a "positive" term took birth when psychology is all about the negative vibes, about sad and bad mental illness? Let us just try to study few things about the very topic.

To begin with the term, we would like to say that when we explore the term positive psychology we find some really interesting facts which a person of the present world, full of miseries and tensions, definitely need to be well acquainted with. Positive psychology is actually a particular area of psychology which focuses mainly on how to help the humans lead better lives, how to live a happy and a cheerful life. It is not at all like the other branches of psychology which deals with abnormal behavior and dysfunctions in humans. Though, when the name psychology comes in our mind we instantly get an image of various people suffering with all kind of weird disorders, some very painful ways of treating the mental diseases and of course an asylum full of patients, doing all sorts of abnormal activities. Positive psychology in fact, in contrast, is a completely new field that examines how ordinary people can stay happy. It doesn't even touch any heart-breaking fields. It simply talks about the study of being happy. Positive Psychotherapist often do research studies which integrate variables of positive psychology in there therapy in order to elevate various disorders faced by their client (Javed S, 2015). Some of the variables integrated in therapies are: Love, Happiness, Forgiveness, Altruism, Well-Being, Gratitude, etc.

Positive psychology a branch of psychology was founded by Martin E. P. Seligman. Seligman is credited as the father of Positive Psychology and its efforts to scientifically explore

human potential. In Authentic Happiness (2002), he explains that his journey towards this new field in psychology started off in a study on learned helplessness in dogs. During the course of the study, he noticed that, in spite of numerous configurations, some dogs would not quit and did not "learn" helplessness. This intrigued and excited the self-proclaimed pessimist and he drew parallels between dogs and learned helplessness with depression in humans (Seligman, 2002) [6]. This shaped his work and he has since become one of the most often-cited psychologists not only in positive psychology but psychology in general.

Though this branch is relatively new branch of psychology but some traces of this particular stream, are reflected in various English Literature works, written back ages ago. We can see the reflection of positive psychology in certain poems, for e.g. some romantic poems written by John Donne in 1630's (Bald, 1970) [1], The Last Ride Together from Men and Women, a collection of fifty-one poems written by Robert Browning in the year 1855 (Eliot, 1969) [2], the Old Man and the Sea, a novel written by Ernest Hemingway in 1951 [3] and published in 1952 (Hemingway, 1995) [3]. Number of studies has been done highlighting the importance of positive psychology in various field but till yet no study has focused on reflection of positive psychology variables in English Literature variables. This paper tries to explore variables of Positive psychology in works of three English Literature authors: John Donne, Earnest Hemingway and Robert Browning. Keeping this purpose of the paper three objectives were formed for the study.

Objective

- (i) To Explore aspects of positive psychology in pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical poet, John Donne's work
- (ii) To explore aspects of positive psychology in the Nobel

Prize winner, Ernest Hemingway's work.

(iii) To Explore aspects of positive psychology in Victorian poet Robert Browning's work.

Detailed analysis of specific piece of works done by three famous writers of English Literature was done in order to answer the objectives formed. Secondary data was used for this study. Three authors and their specific pieces of work were taken into consideration were: John Donne's Poem "The Sun Rising", Ernest Hemingway's short novel "The Old Man and the Sea" and Robert Browning's poem "The Last Ride Together".

Thorough analysis of 'The Sun Rising', 'The Old Man and the Sea' and 'The Last Ride Together' was done and the following results indicating aspects of positive psychology in their beautiful piece of work was found.

Results

Work of John Donne: the sun rising

There are various types of poetry based on specific qualities that put them in different groups. One such group of poems is called as Metaphysical poetry which is a bit different from other groups. The poems which come under this group share certain common characteristics: they are highly intellectual, use a lot of strange imagery, use of frequent paradox is also seen and thoughts contained are extremely complicated. The term "metaphysical poetry" is coined by Samuel Johnson, a literary critic and poet; in his book "Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets". According to him:

"The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and, to show their learning was their whole endeavor; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and, very often, such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables... The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased." (Johnson, 1779) ^[5].

John Donne is regarded as one of the best representative of the metaphysical poets. When we read his poems, we will come to know that love, which is the most felt and discussed emotion of human mind, is a very prominent character in his poems. Though the treatment of love has been different from writers to writers and also varies from poet to poet. But John Donne has used it as the main theme of his poems. And the theme is used in such a way that it encourages the human being to think good out of a very bad thing. It makes us believe that the poems hold a lot of positive thinking regarding the lover and the beloved. Let us try to analyze his poem, *The Sun Rising*, a romantic poem in which the author is talking about a situation and tells how positively the lover deals with it. We often find the morning sun quite irritating when the rays fall right on our face early in the morning. Similarly, in the poem the speaker is lying in bed with his beloved and is angry at the sun as he feels quite disturbed by the way it is shining brightly. In the opening lines of this poem the speaker personifies the sun as a "busy old fool" and is asking why the sun is disturbing the two lovers. The sun shining brightly is trying to indicate that

the time for the two lovers to stay together, has come to an end. It's time to leave their beloved's company and engage in other worldly affairs. According to the speaker, love is not subjected to season or to time. He tells the sun that if it is trying to inform that as it has come out so they cannot spend more time together, then it is mistaken. As love is not some slave to the sun's movement or to any change in the seasons even. Next he says, the sun can do his job of waking others, it can go and bother schoolboys and sour apprentices, it can go and tell the court huntsmen that the King will hunt today and it can also wake up the country ants. The poet next says that the sun should not feel so strong and important about itself. Its strong beams are nothing when compared to the power and glory of the love the lovers hold for each other. He makes fun of the sun by saying he "could eclipse and cloud them (the sunbeams) with a wink." He adds on to this that though he can just shut his eyes and make such a bright star disappear but he won't do this because he doesn't want to lose sight of his beloved even for a second. The speaker mocks about the sun that it is because of the beloved that he is allowing the sun in because by it he can see his beloved's beauty and not because sun is a strong star. Next the lover says that his beloved's eyes are so bright that even the shining sun will be blinded by her shining eyes. After this he lists some exotic places like India for their spices and precious metal, and says that his lover is all those wonderful things. He says to the sun that he can find all the beautiful and supreme things of the world in his bed itself because his lover is there. The speaker ends the poem by making it feel small and by saying that he just made the sun's job quite easy. As the whole world is in his bed, it is there in his room, so the sun doesn't have to travel poles apart: "This bed thy centre is, these walls thy sphere."

This is for sure a very bold comparison where the speaker is comparing his beloved with the sun. Here a normal human being is compared to one of the greatest creation by God, the sun. The sun, which burns so brightly, the human being cannot even imagine going near it, is being compared to a tiny little human. Here the speaker mocks the sun by making it realize that his beloved can do the job which he is doing all the year round. This is a positive approach towards life which brings such a thought in the lover's mind. The thing which is encouraging the lover to think like this is none other than the feeling of love. It is because of the love, because of this emotion that the speaker builds a positive psychology of thinking that he can eclipse the sun simply by closing his eye. Here the speaker thinks he is not a slave of the natural processes, he holds a positive psychology and therefore thinks so. He doesn't feel that his beloved being a woman is weak and fragile; instead he states that his beloved is the whole world. His beloved's eyes are brighter than the sun's rays.

Work of Robert Browning: the last ride together

Next I will discuss another romantic poem, *The Last Ride Together* written by Robert Browning who is known as a major English poet of the Victorian age. His works are loved because of his mastery on dramatic monologue and psychological portraiture. *The Last Ride Together* is a monologue where the speaker is shown as a rejected lover. The poem tries to explore the end of a love affair and tells us what the lover feels about the relationship coming to an end. As the title suggests, the poem is about the last ride that the lover has spent with his love. Throughout the poem, the poet

wants to convey through the lover that though it is a sad moment, he should feel sad but he is happy for the precious time they were together. Rather than feeling sad and gloomy, the lover is actually happy for the love that he underwent and which will remain embedded in his mind and heart forever.

The first stanza of the poem talks about self-consolation. The speaker knows that the failure is inevitable but he holds a positive thinking towards life so he is making an attempt to reduce his pain by curtailing his desires. The words he makes use of, convey the message that he accepts his defeat in the field of love and is ready to give a polite resignation. According to him, his beloved's love is the most important thing in his life and after he has lost her love, his life is meaningless now. Though he has accepted the rejection but feels proud that he had the opportunity to love her and enjoy her company for a long time. He is thankful to the God for the beautiful moments he has spent with his beloved. Though the lover has no good hopes of being with the love of her life, he requests her for two wishes. The first request he makes to his beloved is that he should be allowed to cherish the beautiful memories of his love and happiness during the courting period. Next, he wants to go on a last ride with her if she doesn't think this to be indecent.

The next stanza talks about the lady who is a bit confused about the lovers request, she is in a dilemma and cannot decide what she should say, whether she should reject the request or accept it. One can see pride along with pity in the lady's eyes as described in the poem. She is not able to reply back and her silence becomes torturous for the lover. For the lover, this situation is more like the matter of life and death for him. The lady's acceptance would be like a dream come true, it would mean a beautiful life where as if he hears a refusal regarding his wish it would mean nothing other than a painful death. Finally, the request is accepted by the lady. The lover's happiness has no boundaries; he describes this as if the circulation of blood in his body has been regenerated. Before hearing a "yes" for the ride the lover was standing absolutely lifeless but now his lifeless body is full of energy and all the activities of his life have been restored back to normal just because of a single yes. Now the lover is at peace because he will enjoy the company of his beloved for one more day. He wishes that the time stops anyhow, he hopes the world comes to an end the very night so that this moment, when they are together, becomes eternal. In this way, they will be together forever and there will be no need of despair.

In the next stanza of the poem, we read the description of the heavenly bliss which the lover experiences when his beloved lies on his chest. This stanza deals with the wonderful feeling that follows the lover after being with his beloved. It is the feeling of being on top of the world, achieving all the joys and successes. The last ride, finally starts in the fourth stanza. The lover leaves behind all past regrets and experiences a terrific present which gives his soul a blissful enjoyment:

*Past hopes already lay behind.
What need to strive with a life awry?
Had I said that, had I done this,
So might I gain, so might I miss* (Eliot, 1969) ^[6].

The lover keeps on talking about his feelings in the next stanzas. He says that when the lady had rejected his love proposal, his soul had wrinkled up like a paper. But after his request being fulfilled, the wrinkles have vanished away and

the paper has started fluttering in the wind like a bird. He thinks positively and feels that regretting about the past is of no use. He even thinks that now if he will again approach her, the lady may feel offended and might hate him for this. He is happy that at least now she does not hate him. At least, he is fortunate enough to have the last ride together with her.

The fifth stanza tells us how the lover holds positivity within himself. The lover thinks about the sad state of the world. He is happy that he is not the single person to fail and suffer in life; he consoles himself that it is not necessary that everyone succeed in life. He realizes that though all human beings work hard but not everyone achieves their desired goals. He is not from that lot of men who have complaints with life. He will not sit at home in a melancholic mood and go in depression as he is rejected by the love of his life. Instead, he is happy and enjoys the ride to the fullest as he is accompanied by his beloved.

The lover then starts talking about different men from the society, with whom he compares himself, how they make plans to achieve success in life but do not end up finding one necessarily. He tells about the statesman who works hard all his life but he just ends up merely being only published in a book or as an obituary in newspapers. Next he speaks about a soldier who dies fighting for his country and as a reward he is buried in the Westminster Abbey. Next he compares himself with a poet, whose reward, according to him, is too small as compared to his composing skills. Throughout his life, a poet is busy composing poems, writing sweet lyrics and some thoughts that men should achieve great things in life. But what exactly a poet gets in return? He gets very little on the name of reward, just a death in poverty and nothing at all. He also compares himself with the sculptor and the musician and considers himself to be luckier than them. He states that a sculptor devotes many years to create beautiful statues but what they get in return is too less. The lover then discusses the life of a musician. According to him the musician also comes under the same category in which the sculptor comes. Like the sculptor, the musician also devotes all his life to the music industry. But in return he doesn't get what he deserves, he gets praised only by his family and friends and tunes which are once popular are often taken over by some other tunes. People forgot the music once a new music comes in the market. The lover is happy because in a way, he is much happier and successful than all these professional men because he can at least enjoy the last ride with his beloved.

In the concluding part of the poem, we are informed to a greater level of the lover's positive mind set. He says that if he would have got the love of his beloved, he would have reached the supreme bliss in this world and then what about the future? Nothing would have been left for the near future. Now, when he will die, he will have a desire of meeting his beloved in the heaven. If all the desires and wishes of the human being will be fulfilled in this world, the heaven will no more be attracted to anyone. Thus he wishes to continue enjoying a blissful life by uniting with his beloved in the heaven. In the end, the lover thinks that his beloved is nothing less than the heaven for him on the planet earth. Thus he hopes that the ride never comes to an end and he could continue enjoying this blissful journey forever.

This beautiful poem was written in the year 1885, when the topic of positive psychology was nowhere. But we can very well see that how the lover, though being a failure, is all set to

find happiness in just a simple last ride with his beloved. We have often seen, in fact almost 90% cases who have failed in their love life end up in depression or end their lives by committing suicides. But as you go through this beautiful poem you will realize that it is not always the same case. We have certain positive thinkers too who try to find happiness in every possible thing.

Work of Ernest Hemingway: The old man and the sea

It is not only the English poetry section which reflects positive psychology. Instead, there are certain works of fiction also which hold this as one of its major components. One of them is, *The Old Man and the Sea* (Hemingway, 1955)^[3] written by an American author, Ernest Hemingway in the year 1951. It is a novel which has a story about an old fisherman, Santiago whose struggles with the greatest catch of his life, a marlin. When the story begins, the old man has not caught a fish in 84 days. He daily goes for fishing but returns back home empty handed. A young boy, Manolin lives with him but the boy's parents have asked to leave the old man and find some real fisherman who actually catches fish. Manolin is a sweet little boy who takes care of almost all the things related to Santiago whether it is about his food or about the latest developments in American baseball. Though it has been a long period of 84 days, but Santiago is confident that soon he will also catch a good fish. His unproductive streak will finally end and he will also catch a marlin and for this he promises himself to sail even further in the sea.

Santiago keeps his promise to himself and on the eighty-fifth day of his hunt he sails his skiff far beyond the shallow coastal waters and rove into the Gulf Stream. He soon prepares his fishing line and drops them in the sea. Finally at the noon time, a huge fish, a marlin, takes the bait that Santiago has placed a hundred fathoms deep in the sea. The old man, being an expert, finds the fish perfect but is not able to pull it. Instead of Santiago pulling the fish, the fish begins to pull the boat. The fish is too heavy so Santiago is not able to tie the line fast to the boat as he fears that the fish would snap a taut line. So he bears the heavy strain of the line on his shoulders, back and hands. The fish keeps on pulling the boat all through the day, through the night, through another day and through another night. The fish swims steadily northwest until at last it gets tired and swims east with the water current. Throughout the session, when the fish was continuously pulling the line, Santiago bared the constant pain from the fishing line. From the last two days and nights, whenever the fish leaps or tries to run for freedom, the cords of the fishing line used to cut Santiago badly. Though the poor old man is wounded badly, still he is concerned about the marlin. He feels deep empathy and admiration and thinks the fish as his own brother who is suffering in pain, still is not losing the strength to resolve back like him.

On the next day when the fish is extremely tired, Santiago who has spent sleepless nights, is in severe pain and restlessness finally manages to pull the marlin close enough to kill it with a blow of harpoon. Santiago has finally managed to catch the largest fish which lay dead beside the skiff. He fastens it to his boat, sets the small mast and is all set to sail back home happy. Though he is excited about the handsome price he will get in the market for this marlin but he is more concerned about the people who will eat it. He thinks they are not worthy of eating such a great catch.

When he is sailing back to his home, the marlin's blood leaves a trail in the water which unfortunately attracts the sharks. First he is attacked by a great shark which Santiago succeed to slay with the harpoon but in this struggle, he loses control of the harpoon and the valuable rope which exposes him to other shark attacks. For the next few moments Santiago keeps fighting the shark by stabbing them with a crude spear which he makes out of his oar and a knife. Though he keeps on fighting and killing the shark but more and more happen to appear and by the time the night comes, the fight proves to be useless. All the sharks have gobbled the marlin's precious meat and Santiago is left with only the skeleton, head and tail. Santiago reprimands himself for going to further in the sea. If he would have not gone too far the marlin would have not become a prey to the sharks, he finds that he has sacrificed his great and worthy opponent. He reaches back home and the tired, sleep-deprived nearly delirious Santiago, sleeps very deeply.

The next morning, many amazed fishermen and tourists gather around the huge skeleton of the fish which is still lashed to the boat and assume it to be a shark. They have absolutely no idea about the struggle which the old man had to go through days. Manolin is full of tears in his eyes when he sees Santiago sleeping peacefully in his bed. As soon as the old man gets up, he makes plan with the young boy to fish as partners.

From the very beginning of the novel, we see the old man as someone who is continuously struggling against defeat. Even the sails of his skiff resemble "*the flag of permanent defeat*" but his nature and attitude is not at all like that. He always refuses defeat at every turn and looks beyond the reach of other fishermen. This story is of a man who is placed between the harms the nature can cause a human being but the old man continuous to face all of them bravely. He doesn't loses hope, continues to fight till the end for his marlin and even when he doesn't achieve success he is not heart-broken. Instead he goes back home, sleeps peacefully and when wakes up he plans for another such adventure. His defeat is not the thing which can make him sit back and feel sad about it. Rather, it is that one encouraging point that keeps him all geared up for another risky adventure. He is not concerned about his life even; he doesn't think that the sharks could actually kill him. He just thinks that he will once again catch the best fish (The Editors, 25 August 1952).

Conclusion

The paper entitled "Positive Psychology and English Literature Hand in Hand" has tried to explore the term positive psychology, which is an umbrella term under which several aspects fall. For instance, John Donne's poem "The Rising Sun" reflects love as a supreme factor. According to his poetry, love is not subjected to season or to time. It's a feeling that cannot be overshadowed by the strongest creation of God. The positive psychology phenomena i.e. love is reflected throughout the poem indicating that if one possess the feeling of "love" he can face any severe difficulty in his life. Likewise, Robert Browning in his poem "The Last Ride Together" has specified various components of positive psychology, like self-consolation, thankfulness or gratitude. These components are visible in this poem which the lover is shows towards himself and his beloved. In the third literary piece, "The Old Man and the Sea" Ernest Hemingway writes about an old man whose courage takes him through various

adventures in sea. It is his hope to find a huge fish which carries his fragile body through a tremendous storm and a fierce whale attack. Thus hope and courage are the two variables of positive psychology in this story.

Thus I would like to state in the end of my paper that though positive psychology is one of the new branches of psychology, yet it can be traced in English literature works too. As we go through the above mentioned texts, we will realize that the English authors have characters in their works too who hold a positive way of living their lives. Though the term was introduced years later, but it was very well present among the great writers of English Literature.

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