

“A Gentle Spirit”: A Case Study of ‘Neurotic’ Aspects in the Light of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Alima Khatun

English, Presidency University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.130200191>

Received: 10 March 2026; Accepted: 13 March 2026; Published: 20 March 2026

ABSTRACT

Russian writer Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky’s (1821-1881) amazing and insightful short story “A Gentle Spirit” (1876), is a piece comes with the subtitle of “A Fantastic Sorry”, demonstrates the narrator's self-defence and sharing his thoughts in profound manner and showing that he was guiltless in his wife’s sudden committing of suicide. Throughout the course of the story the narrator gives every possible details of the course of their relationship. Like his other writings Dostoevsky here deals with psychology of the characters covertly if not overtly. Jacques Lacan (1901- 1981), a French psychoanalyst provides lucid ideas about human being’s mental condition. According to Lacan a person can be either a neurotic, or a psychotic or a pervert and he gives the symptoms of these three types of problems. The narrotor of the short story shows neurotic tendencies (According to Lacanian psychoanalysis), though obsessional neurosis to be particular. His wife shows hysterical tendencies which is also a part of ‘neurosis’ . The narrator’s constant breakdown, questioning himself, his awareness of his present condition and his repression of desires lead one to diagnose him nothing but an ‘obsessional neurotic’. His wife also shows tendencies of hysteria, though the narrator addresses her repeatedly as a hysteric but a reader can also perceive that through her characteristics. If not then why she suddenly takes the path of suicide which is a typical neurotic tendency.

In discussing my argument I would be indebted to Bruce Fink, whose seminal work A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis (1999) gives a very lucid picture of what Lacan actually conveys in his seminars. Other Lacanian psychoanalysts help a lot in developing my paper. I will divide my paper into two parts, in the first part I will discuss about obsessional neurosis and in the second about hysteria.

The story begins with the narrator’s (a pawnbroker) wife’s suicide and the narrator recalls whatever happens in the past. It is more like an interior monologue where reader only can see the narrator’s depiction of the whole situation of the past. The narrator here fantasizes everything which he thinks to be right , as Zizek points out “ Fantasy constructs a scene in which jouissance we are deprived of is concentrated in the stole from us “ (32) and Lacan says Fantasy provides the pleasure peculiar to desire (Ecrits 773). The narrator of the story repeatedly shows a state of uncertainty which is typical to a neurotic, as Bruce Fink points confirms, ‘neurosis ...a certain degree of uncertainty about what it is that turns one on , considerable difficulty pursuing it even one does know, the refusal to be the cause of other’s jouissance, and so on”(112)

She could quickly see that we were different and that I was -an enigma And being an enigma was what I made a point most of all! Why. it was Just for the sake of being an enigma; perhaps-that I been guilty of all this stupidity (Dostoevsky, “A Gentle Spirit”)

The narrator recalls the event of the past not involving his emotion or feeling in it: “The obsessive recalls the event but not his reaction or emotion at the time. Repression operates in cases essentially by breaking the link between the thought and the affect originally associated with it” (Fink 114). The obsessive refuses the existence of the other according to Lacan, similarly the narrator did not give any importance to the existence of his wife , he rather refused his existence. Like an obsessive neurotic the narrator often questions:

We went in silence and in silence we returned why why from the very beginning, do we take to being silent? ...what could she have understood of my justification , of my suffering? (“A Gentle Spirit “).

The narrator cannot fulfill his desire for the circumstances and her eventually represses it, Professor Mahitosh Mondal points out in his book Jacques Lacan: From Clinic To Culture (2018) :

The neurotic, on the other hand is marked by having undergone the process of primal affirmation, negation and repression. The unconscious and formations of the repressed and the return of the repressed and the return of the repressed together constitute the psychical register of neurotic. The unconscious qua the repressed is what forms the symbolic order for the neurotic, since repression is linked to courage (Mondal).

“Obsessional neurosis is characterized as a state of mental disorder in which the outstanding symptom is a feeling of subjective compulsion- which must be resisted to carry out some action, to dwell on an idea, to recall all experiences, or ruminate an abstract topic . Unwanted thoughts which include the insistency of words or ideas, rumination or trains of thought are perceived by the patient to be inappropriate or non-sensical” (Su 4). Though Hamlet shows the very obvious and intense tendencies of obsessional neurosis , the pawnbrokers (the narrator) here is not showing his neurotic state to the world but only to the reader. As Colleen McQuillen points out in her article , “Animating Dostoevsky’s ‘A Gentle Spirit’ :Piotr Dumala's Kinesthetic Palimpsest” , “the monologue is periodically interrupted by exclamations of emotional torment . The narrator’s troubled psychology , a veritable feedback loop continues dialogic exchange with memory , is carved with deep grooves of experience” (50).

Lacan's teaching in symptom change radically in his lifetime . As Tilley points out , “the teaching of Lacan in symptom move from concept of speech , language and logic to topology” (Tilley 33), Lacan has regarded the symptom is formulated from language as a representation of ideas which is articulated in something other than speech (Su 6). Like other neurotic he is suffering from sudden anxiety or excitement

I could not sleep. And how should I ? There is pulse throbbing in my head One longs to master it all, all the degradation . Oh! The degradation! Oh what degradation I dragged her out of them ! Of course , she must have realized that, she must have appreciated my action ! I was pleased too, by various thoughts for instance , the reflection that I was forty-one and was only sixteen , that fascinated me, that feeling of inequality was very sweet “ (“A Gentle Spirit “).

He is negating the existence of the other which is typical to neurotics : ‘I have always been proud, I always wanted all or nothing ! You see it was just because I am not one who will accept half a happiness , but always wanted all that I was forced to act like that then” (A Gentle Spirit”).citing Freud , Cyril Su affirms: The predilection felt by obsessional neurotics for uncertainty and doubt leads them to turn their thoughts by preference to those subjects upon which all mankind are uncertain and upon which our knowledge and judgments must remain open to doubt. The chief subjects of this kind are paternity , length of life , life after death and memory- in the best of which we are all in habit of believing, without having the slightest guarantee of its trustworthiness (23).

In Hamlet a deep disgust towards the world is evident in the behavior of Hamlet:

“O that this too too solid flesh would melt

Thaw , and resolve itself into a dew ,

Or that the everlasting had not fixed

His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter . O God , God ,

How weary , stale , flat and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of the world !” (Act One, Scene 2).

The narrator of the short story is aware of his problem and question himself : “Was I a villain? Did not she see how I acted ? Did I extort too much ?” . He also confesses that it is only because of his character his wife does

not love him, “perhaps because of my absurd character”. Though the narrator is aware that he cannot overcome his situation, neither he characterizes himself as a neurotic but sometimes he is disgusted by his own characteristics, perhaps his neurotic nature leads her wife to be hysterical or even leads her to commit suicide. The narrator’s becoming more obsessive and more neurotic makes the situation more complicated and unhealthy. Though unlike the other obsessional neurotics the narrator did not show any suicidal tendencies but leads other person to commit this fatal thing..

The wife of the narrator who continually tries to escape the situation of earthly pains, shows some hysterical tendencies and is repeatedly addressed as ‘hysteric’ by the narrator. She thinks herself as the object of narrator’s desire, as Fink rightly said, “the hysteric constitutes herself as the object that makes the desire, since as long as the other desires, her position as object is answered: a space is guaranteed for her within the other “(120). Fink further elaborates upon this by saying :

The hysteric, on the other hand emphasizes the partner or Other, making herself into the object of the Other’s desire as to master it. The other is the desiring subject in the hysteric’s fantasy -usually a partner (love or spouse) who desires when and how the hysteric as object sees fit. Indeed, the hysteric orchestrates things in such a way as to ensure that the other’s desire remains unjustified, leaving the hysteric a permanent role as object. The other as desiring subject as puppet :it is the other whose desire is kept unsatisfied by the hysteric in order for the hysteric to be able to maintain her role as desired object, as desire's lack(123).

Narrator’s wife also similarly thinks herself as the object of narrator’s desire and hands herself over to the narrator by being married to him. It is worth remembering that Lacan sees hysterics as invariably correct in their assessment that the other’s lacking. Yet all hysterics presume that there must be at least one truly enjoys (Lukes 347). The wife shows melancholy which narrator notices:

A month ago I noticed a strange melancholy in her, not simply silence, but melancholy. That, too, I noticed suddenly she was at her work, her bent over her sewing, and she did not see that I was looking at her, And it suddenly struck me that she had grown so dedicate-looking, so thin, that her face was pale, her lips were white. All this, together with her melancholy struck me all at once. (“The Gentle Spirit”).

The narrator eventually sees her hysterical tendencies and tells that she breaks into sobs and trembles all over, a terrible fit of ‘hysterics’ followed. The protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” who becomes hysteric and she contemplates jumping out of a window but the bars prevent that, the wife here also jumps out of the window and dies. The hysteria in French literature is discovered first in Madame Bovari. Professor Santanu Biswas rightly gives the information that “An American take on all this would tend to be more historical and would point out, for example, to the links between Madame Bovari (1857; here 2002)..The invention of hysteria in French medicine that culminated with Jean-Martin Charcot's discovery”(Biswas 55).

Suddenly the symptoms of mental condition of a hysteric changes and she ‘finds a way, just when it seems her husband is most satisfied, to provoke and desire in him something else, or even for someone else., so to speak, in other cases, however the hysteric seems deliberately (though generally it is not consciously intentional) to seek out another woman with whom she can involve or ensnare her partner in a triangular circuit of desire (Fink 127). The wife here perhaps creates a triangular relationship by involving her maid Luckerya might in between them and thinks that Luckerya might be in a relationship with her husband. Lacan cites a case study of Jeane who has also conjugal problem and this culminates in her involving in an extramarital affair, similarly the wife here involved herself in an affair with Efimovitch that is why she began to go out of house in morning and returns at night, began not to talk to the narrator and separates his bed from her. She suddenly shows nervous breakdown like the protagonist of the “Yellow Wallpaper”:

She seemed to shudder all over, was murmuring again that I exaggerated, but suddenly her whole face darkened, she hit it in her hands and broke into sobs ... Then I could not restrain myself: again I fell at her feet, again I began kissing her feet, and again it ended in a fit of hysterics, just as on Tuesday (“The Gentle Spirit”).

Justin Arbuckle in his research paper “Hysteria and Speech” highlights that “consider hysteria as a discourse, according to Lacan, as if we were the data stream itself. I surrender to the other. My validity is my tendency

to be told who I am .In the enunciation, the grounding of my material signification, that which produced me to the other and in doing so interpose myself as between the prior chains of signification in the set of discourse I now enter and those in the set contracted by the manager . My ability to enable an ‘ahha’ or ‘how can I go on...’ is an accident. My identity is accidental. How else could I anything other than hysterical?” (Arbuckle 3). The wife refuses to the cause of her partner’s sexual satisfaction and she ignores sexual intercourse with her husband that is why she got separated from him. As Fink comments ‘the hysteric refuses to be the cause of her male-partner’s sexual satisfaction preferring to keep his desire unsatisfied, and imagines that some woman other than herself on the bed” (Fink 127). The narrator regrets and laments that “ It is true my comrades did not love me because of my difficult character, though often happens that what is exalted , precious and of value to one , for some reason amuses herd of one’s companions”. The hysteria of the wife of narrator culminates in his committing of suicide which perhaps the utmost stage of hysteria or radical hysteria. The husband’s neurotic condition perhaps leads the wife to be hysteric , or perhaps that she is hysteric from earlier which the narrator could not perceive.

To conclude , the narrator shows neurotic tendencies whereas the wife shows hysteric. A neurotic and a hysteric live together then something disastrous must be inevitable. The dissatisfaction and disillusionment of feminine heart , the unfulfillment of desires and expectations from both sides (both the narrator and his wife). The story of a pawnbroker inching closer edge of craziness by an innocent revealing herself to be more worldly than he imagined has fueled the imagination of many film maker . The short story by Dostoevsky deals with psychology of two protagonists but not in an open manner, though Dostoevsky is familiar with dealing with psychology like Raskolnikov, Pralinsky or Porfiry Petrovitz etc. Unlike other writers like Thomas Harrison or James Joyce he does not have open analysis but a sheer reader of Dostoevsky must find his intention behind the normal events. The narrator here narrates everything and by his narration he is actually defending himself , a crime is committed that is normal but his effort to write and give every possible details lead a reader to psychoanalyze the reason behind every crime rather the psychic problems behind every crime like Hamlet’s murdering of Claudius. If Hamlet would be a normal person he could not have done so. The world is full of traumatized people and if searched every criminal, and every so called bad person in society is suffering from psychological problems (be it neurotic, psychotic or pervert).

Works Cited:

1. Arbuckle, Justin. “Hysteria and Speed”. ACADEMIA, 4th May 2022, www.academia.edu/resource/work/27209627.
2. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. “A Gentle Creature”. The Best Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky, edited by Magarshack David , The Modern Library, 2005, pp.11-26.
3. Fink, Bruce. A Clinical Introduction To Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory And Technique. Harvard University Press, 1997.
4. Gilman , Charlotte Perkins, “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories. edited by Paul Negri , Dover Publications, 1997, pp.17-96.
5. Lacan, Jacques. Ecrits. Translated by Bruce Fink, WW Norton, 2007.
6. Mondal, Mahitosh . Jacques Lacan: From Clinic To Culture. Edited by Sumit Chakrabarti, Orient Blackswan , 2018.
7. McQuillen, Colleen. “Animating Dostoevsky’s ‘Gentle Spirit’: Piotr Dumala's Kinesthetic Palimpsest” . ACADEMIA, 2nd May 2022, www.academia.edu/resource/work/17222502.
8. Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Edited by G.R. Hibbard, Oxford UP, 2008.
9. Su, Cyril. “The Philosophy of Clinical Psychoanalysis – A Study of Psychological Structure of Obsessional Neurosis”. ACADEMIA, 1st May 2022, www.academia.edu/resource/work/8653287.
10. The Literary Lacan: From Literature to Litterature and Beyond. Edited by Santanu Biswas, Seagull Books, 2012.
11. Zizek, Slavoj. The Plague of Fantasies. Verso Books, 2009.