Critical Approaches to Investigate Sylvia Plath's Poem Daddy: Biographical and Psychological Approaches

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ABSTRACT

The study of literature, nowadays, has shifted the focus, from the element terms to the criticism. That is, the study of literary works is no longer only focused on the analysis of plot, setting, character, or symbolism but has been broader to the area of criticism. Many critics had taken the critical approaches such as: Objective Approach, Subjective Approach, Historical Approach, Biographical Approach, Psychological Approach, and Feminist Approach to interpret, evaluate, and understand an author's life and works to study literature. Many critics have mainly concerned themselves with issues such as the themes and references that Sylvia has used in her poem, Daddy.

Introduction

The poetry and writings of Sylvia Plath occupy a special position in American poetry due to its nature, topics, treatment and imagery. Her life and bitter experiences have affected her poetry and the presentation of her materials. She is widely recognized as one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. Sylvia Plath's Daddy is perhaps her best-known poem since it has elicited a variety of distinct reactions, from feminist praise towards male dominance. Her writings depict the anguish of an unresolved and contradictory attachment with her father. Sylvia Plath became a rich and attractive target for critics through the analysis of her own life and literary works. In fact, her tragic suicide added more suspense, provocation and motivation to writing more about Sylvia Plath, her life, and literary works. Plath suffered from depression throughout her life that led her committing suicide in 1963. Plath, in her poem Daddy has provided information that relating to her own life and experience, and used many references that express her suffering and pain in a precise picture. The aim of this paper is to explore the importance of the literary criticism and the usefulness of both the biographical and psychological approaches that critics had taken to study and interpret Plath's Daddy poem as well as getting an overall picture of the author's life.

Critical Approaches

Biographical Approach

The term refers to the full account of a person' life, including an effort to set the temperament, and environment as well as the factors of the subject and experience (Abrams, 1985). Biographical criticism starts with a central insight that literature is written by actual people and by reading an author's life readers will have more complete idea in order to understand the work. In fact, reading the biography of a writer will help the reader to see how much an author's experience shapes both directly and indirectly her/his art. In addition, the biographical approach focuses on interpreting a literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life (Kennedy and Gioia, 2012). Daddy has already received a good deal of

critical attention which focused on its autobiographical elements. However, the poem should not be taken as objectively 'true', as if it bore a precise relationship to the facts of the poet's life. In fact, this poem contains the strongest feeling which runs through Plath's later poetry that the distress she suffered was in some way connected with her memories of her dead father. However, the poem cannot be historically true since Otto Plath, who was born in 1885 and came to America at the age of fifteen, died when his daughter was nine and definitely could not have been the active German Nazi officer of the poem (Aird, 1973). Plath described the poem in dramatic terms that did not include any hint that the situation described was her own: "The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part-Jewish. In the daughter the two strains married and paralyzed each other" (Perloff, 1990). Plath dramatized the hate and love that a young woman feels for her father. She traced in Daddy her ancestors back to Germany and Poland and how she was brought up by parents for whom English was a second language. Also, Sylvia Plath expressed in her poem the extent of her suffering especially when she relates it to the suffering of the Jews in WWI. Crofts (1998) claims that Sylvia Plath used in her poem, Daddy the Holocaust reference as a metaphor to show her suffering and pain in an accurate overall picture. Beside, Crofts emphasizes the fact that Plath recognized the weight of cultural and historical facts that bound her, as well as the surrounding human community. The experience of her father's death signified for Sylvia a traumatic disturbance of her childhood existence, and was a source of both pain and inspiration. Sylvia Plath claimed in Daddy that she has killed one man, then that she has in fact killed two, her father and her husband, Ted Hughes. She realized that her life was marked by pain caused by all men; therefore it became even more obvious in the writing of the poem that she viewed men as people who betray her and eventually leave her alone. First, as a nine year old, her dad left her. Next at twenty, her first love and model of her father's appearance betrayed her by sleeping with another girl before he and Sylvia were engaged. Lastly, Ted Hughes, her husband with the "Meinkampflooks" of her father, pushed her to the limit with his extra-marital affairs, ending their seven year marriage which she refers to as a vampire who drank her blood for seven years (Phillips, 1972).

Psychological Approach

Abrams (1985.p 263) states that this approach emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century as "part of the romantic replacement of earlier mimetic and pragmatic views by an expressive view of the nature of literature". The psychological approach refers to an author's feelings, mental and emotional features, and then it mainly deals with the work of literature as well as the state of mind and the structure of personality. Abrams (1985) points out that during the romantic period three variants of critical procedure were based on the assumption that the work of literature is interrelated with the author's distinctive mental and emotional properties: first, as a reference to the author's personality in order to interpret the literary work of the author; second, as reference to literary works in order to establish the personality of the author; third, as a way of reading a literary work that also allows to a deeper way of experiencing the distinctive consciousness of its author. The psychological approach according to Kennedy and Gioia (2012) is "a diverse category" that often involves three approaches. First, it tries to examine the creative process of a work of art as well as the nature of the unusual mental ability of the author. Such approach may also take into account literature's effects on the reader. Second, it includes the psychological study of a particular writer in order to understand her/his motivation and behavior. Third, it proposes the analysis of the fictional characters or poetic personas. Since the 1920s the term psychological approach has changed into what is referred to as psychoanalytic criticism. Freud defined the psychoanalytical approach as "a means of therapy for neuroses", but he then developed it to include the history of civilization and religion as well as literature and others arts.

According to Kennedy and Gioia (2012) the psychological approach had a huge effect on literature. In fact, the psychoanalytical theories of Freud changed our belief of human behavior by exploring new areas such as wish, fulfillment, unconscious and repression. He analyzed the language in the form of jokes and conversational slips of the tongue to reveal how language reflects the speaker's unconscious fear and desires. Moreover, he examined the symbols in arts and dreams to study how the unconscious mind revealed itself in coded form. His theory of human cognitive asserts that the majority of what we really forget is actually stored in the subconscious mind, including painful memories from childhood that have been repressed. Sylvia Plath's poems and works are known for their savage imagery and themes of self-destruction and for the violent protest of a feminist persona generalizing males as the agents of all sorts of oppression upon women and humanity. Sylvia Plath's father had died when she was only eight years old. She remembered him throughout her life as he was the dominating man who left her a destitute, poor, and exposed to extreme suffering and pain. Aird (1973) points out that the poem exploits Freudian psychology which proves that the child is, at the stage of development, 'in love' with the parent as Plath herself states, the poem's persona displays a clear Electra complex. The girl reacts with hate for the father who has made her suffer by dying at such a point in her development. The reference to the father as 'marbleheavy' and a 'ghastly statue' reveals her ambivalent attitude for him given the association of his person with the beauty of the sea. The image of

the father as a statue implies that the statue is of huge and awesome in proportion. The discrepancy between the feelings of fear and love have remained with the daughter as an obsession which restricts her own life, and in an attempt to rid herself of her father she must destroy the memory of the father. Plath was going through deep depression and extreme suffering when she wrote Daddy, following her separation from Ted Hughes, to whom she had been married for seven years. According to Ross (1992) anger is a part of the grieving process: first denial, then shock, anger, and arguing, and finally, depression and acceptance. Both the emotions and the progress made trying to overcome these emotions are natural. Plath was stuck in anger. This anger had a way of working itself in her life.

Sylvia Plath suffered in her life bouts of depression due to overwork and beneath the surface of her seemingly perfection were some grave discontinuities, some which probably were caused by the death of her father when she only a child. During the summer after her junior year in college, Sylvia had attempted to commit suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills, but was discovered and hospitalized for several months at the psychiatric clinic in Belmont, Massachusetts. In Daddy, Plath revealed the extent of the speaker's possession by what, in psychoanalytic terms, is the imago of the father, "a childhood version of the father which persists into adulthood". This imago is "an amalgamation of real experience and archetypal memories wherein the speaker's own psychic oppression is represented in the more general symbol of the Nazi oppression of the Jews" (Nance and Jones, 1978). Sylvia Plath was afraid of the German language as obscene and vague. The fact that she tried to learn German but consistently failed was cause of distress and frustration. She referred to the concentration camps like Dachan, Auswitz and Belsen where thousands of Jew were tortured and killed. Sylvia felt she was a descendant of a gypsy ancestress. She was afraid of the neat moustache like that of Hitler, and the Aryan eye. The image of the boot in the face comes to her troubled mind. In addition, she thinks her daddy had a brutish, black heart. She remembered the image of a strict teacher near the blackboard, which is also her father's image. Sylvia was only nine years when her father died. But she wanted to kill him again, and throw him out of her mind. She also tried to die herself but they prevented her. Then she made a model of him, her husband who she then metaphorically killed as a vampire that drank her blood for seven years (Nance and Jones, 1978).

Shulman (1998) explained Plath's problems as due to her father's death, her living outside of the United States, her country, and stress from overwork. Plath's husband was sometimes violent, and they were separated more than once. When she taught at Smith College, Plath was well liked by students but not accepted by her colleagues. Shulman revealed that "Plath had medical problems (e.g., illness, appendicitis) and apparently had mixed feelings about her mother". She moved out of the United States at age 27 but did not get along with her in-laws". Moreover, Plath was in a car crash, and her son was left with a deformity of the eye. There was pressure on her to act like a traditional homemaker, and arguments with her husband about chores at home, manners, and who was the more successful. Saldivar (1992) described Plath's fear of her imaginative power as "a solvent that might be more destructive than transforming" (p. 117). Sylvia Plath was a creative writer; she carried out a very high-level of performance. That seems to imply that Plath herself showed fear in response to her work creative efforts. This led her having tried again to commit suicide occasionally, and she finally succeeded at the age of 32. Sylvia Plath was afraid of the German language as obscene and vague. The fact that she tried to learn German but consistently failed was cause of distress and frustration. She referred to the concentration camps like Dachan, Auswitz and Belsen where thousands of Jew were tortured and killed. Sylvia felt she was a descendant of a She did this by turning on the gas, and suffocating herself. Plath's children were upstairs, and they were fortunate that friends came over before the gas found a spark.

Conclusion
Daddy, Plath's poem is an amazingly powerful albeit not entirely autobiographical poem. In view of the various autobiographical details referring to her childhood and adulthood in the poem, many literary critics have engaged in the biographical and psychological approaches in order to interpret and understand Plath's poetry. These approaches were instrumental in unveiling the intricate pattern of diction, imagery, and figurative language the poet resorts to in order to translate her own experience into art. Undoubtedly, more research is needed in areas such as New Criticism, (New) Historicism, Feminist Criticism, and Structuralism. Hopefully, this research paper will inspire fellow students to extend the study to other critical approaches used Plath's poems and investigate further into the field of Gender Studies.

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