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THE CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD IN SYLVIA PLATH'S WRITINGS: A LACANIAN APPROACH

Haider Jabr Mihsin

Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of Kufa, Iraq

Hayderj.mohsin@uokufa.edu.iq

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath's works have been the subject of analysis by so many critics with different approaches. What is common in almost all these studies is this American writer's inclination with such themes as distress, isolation and anxiety. This article is going to analyze a number of her poems and *The Bell Jar* as Plath's only novel in order to probe into the concept of childhood and how it was treated by her. As a matter of fact, the current study intends to prove that her childhood, motherhood, her parents and what happened in her marital life had a great influence on all her works and chased her up to the very end of her life. To achieve this goal, the writer will have a concise analysis of some poems which have been chosen randomly and her only novel through Lacan's theory of childhood. In other words, this paper is going to investigate Plath's preoccupation with childhood as displayed in her poetry. Through her unconcealed presentation of this fascination in many of her applauded poems, she tried to provide a touching and convincing study representing Lacan's theory.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath was a famous American poet, novelist, and short story writer who was born in 1932. When she was just eight years old, her father, Otto Emil Plath died of diabetes, causing her to think of his death as a sort of unfaithfulness. She once remarked, a clear blue day in Winthrop. Went to my father's grave, a very depressing sight .Three graveyards separated by streets, all made within the last fifty years or so, ugly crude block stones, headstones together, as if the dead were sleeping head to head in a poorhouse. In the third yard, on a flat grassy area looking across a sallow barren stretch to rows of wooden tenements. I found the flat stone. "Otto E. Plath: 1885-1940." right beside the path, where it would be walked over. Felt cheated. My temptation to dig him Lip. To prove he existed and really was dead. How far gone would he be? No trees, no peace, his headstone jammed up against the body on the other side. Left shortly. It is good to have the place in mind. (Plath, 1991, p. 298)

Sylvia who was the eldest child in the family was so shocked that she no longer believed in God and started writing as a way to get relieved. It is stated that it was at the age of eight that she wrote and published her first poetic piece in the children's section of Boston Herald. This American poet was also one of the pioneers of the genre of confessional poetry. This genre first appeared in the United States during the 1950s. Its focus was mainly on individual experience, the essence of human beings, and personal suffering, like taboo topics, mental illness, sexuality, and suicide (Ousby, 1995, p. 99).

Review of Relevant Literature

This part will summarize a number of works regarding the analysis of Plath's works. One of the most helpful papers belongs to Hiu-wing's *The Representation of Feminine Fear in Sylvia Plath's Poetry* (2001) in which the writer has had a thorough analysis of Sylvia Plath's poetry, with random biographical allusions. Plath's desire to portray female involvement in her works has been a crucial part that has made Plath's literature have a prevalent prosperity.

The other article belongs to Feirstein's "A Psychoanalytic Study of Sylvia Plath" (2016). The writer has said that in most of her poems, such as "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Edge," Plath's health has overpowered her "pathology". In others her pathology rules. In *Ariel* Plath has tried and prospered in depicting herself into a disastrous, allegorical heroine, ultimately drowning herself in a gas oven as in the ocean that was a key metaphor for her mother.

The next work will be Christo doulides's *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work* (2005) which discusses the idea of motherhood in Sylvia Plath's work. By using Julia Kristeva's theory of subject formation, this book has probed into

Plath's baby poems in which mother figures are perceived as "subjects-in-process" hesitating between verification and non-verification in their role as a mother.

"The separative self in Sylvia Plath's *the bell jar*" by Bonds (1990) has also investigated the way *The Bell Jar* embellished the consent between a separative self and the cultural factors that were to be blamed for women's subjugation. This research has concluded that the unescapable images of mutilation in this novel show the estrangement and self-isolation that led Esther Greenwood to committing suicide.

In addition, Bloom's *Native American Women Writers, 1900-1960* (1998) has provided the writer of this study with useful information. The next paper to be mentioned is *A Poet of the Personal: A Study of the Theme of Death in Sylvia Plath's Ariel* by Jóhannudóttir (2017). The writer will focus on the theme of death in selected poems including *Ariel* by examining its symbols with the goal of discovering its twofold spirit.

Problem Statement

Sylvia Plath was one of the most effective writers whose writings have resulted into drastic changes in literature. Her poetry and novel would involve such specific themes as death and depression. She could become one of the most iconic female poets in America whose works provide the readers with the hard struggle to split her individual life from her literary work. Researchers have also recurrently challenged to solve this problem because her work has principally been analyzed as an investigation of her private life and experience.

What is going to be done in the present study is to probe into the concept of childhood as an important feature in Plath's poetry and novels. Actually, this American literary figure was highly under the influence of what happened in her childhood or her life with her children and husband and could not help reflecting upon those events in her works.

Research Questions and Methodology

As mentioned already, this study intends to examine the concept of childhood in a number of Plath's works in order to prove that she was constantly chased by the events of her own childhood and life in general and could not help reflecting upon them through some themes like loneliness, depression, and terror. Thus, it can be stated that the main goal of the present study is to answer the following questions through Lacan's theory:

1. How did Plath's childhood memories affect her in coming up with her novel and poetry?
2. Did her motherhood also influence her?

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) as the theorist of the present study was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who has been entitled as "the most controversial psycho-analyst since Freud" (Macey, 1994, p. xiv). He was mainly known due to his development of the mirror stage as a concept in the psychoanalytic system. The mirror stage is chiefly based on the idea that children identify themselves in a mirror or other devices from the age of about six months. The "mirror stage" that is a child's identification with his own image leads to the formation of "Ideal-I" or "Ideal ego". This issue also brings about the child's isolation.

The writings of Plath show that her mind was always obsessed with concerns, terror, uncertainties, and qualms. It can be claimed that her writings are regarded as a clear manifestation of her depression; for example, "My mind is, to use a disgustingly obvious simile, like a wastebasket full of wastepaper, bits of hair, and rotting apple cores" (Plath, 1991, p. 19), or "Then I look at the hell I am wallowing in, nerves paralyzed, action nullified-fear, envy, hate: all the corrosive emotions of insecurity biting away at my sensitive guts" (Ibid, p. 60).

It can be assumed that the reason why most of her poetry was filled with such themes as grief and guilt is due to her feelings of sorrow, guiltiness, and fury that troubled her for life after her father's death. Actually, the death of her father when she was eight was an influential event throughout her entire life because it was what made her commit suicide. In the poem, "Daddy" she refers to this issue and says,
 I was ten when they buried you.
 At twenty I tried to die
 and get back, back, back to you. (p. 224)

Lacan (1977) claimed that the feeling of absence influences the unconscious to a great extent. Lacan explained that, "The sense of absence can take the form of mere "lack" or "need" which force the psyche to make demands; or it can take the highest form of desire" (p. 121). As a matter of fact and as Roudinesco and Bray (1997) pointed out, Sylvia Plath is characterized as a Lacanian postmodernist who used the cultural models, "to bring plague, subversion and disorder" (p. xv) to her mental declarations.

Lacan's theory is based upon his concentration on language; he established his theory based on the fact that the child becomes a human being just when it moves out of the imaginary into the symbolic order, the system of language and culture, also called the law of the father. In Lacan's classification, the child's connection with mother is disturbed by the father who prohibits the child from connecting to the mother and the mother's body. Nevertheless, Angela Leighton (1989) has remarked, it is only by this break with the other that the child can enter the other order of language and civilization. The mother must be repressed or deserted in order that speech, writing and culture can be acquired. (p. 110)

As a matter of fact, Plath reflected upon her childhood in most of her poetry and this is why her poems are autobiographical. According to Hiu-wing (2001, p. 6), in the poems that Plath wrote about her father, she had a fanatical trend to depict him as a controlling and ruling man. She would always picture him as an overwhelming "statue" with a great deal of bodily and rational power. Also, Charles Newman (1970) indicated in *The Art of Sylvia Plath* that "the loss of father" was one of "her central occupations" in Plath's works (p. 23).

Analysis

The Concept of Childhood in Plath's *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar (1963) is the name of Sylvia Plath's appalling, lifelike, and penetratingly expressive novel. This novel that is her only novel narrates the story of a girl named Esther Greenwood who is very clever, good-looking, extremely brilliant, and popular. However,

she goes through a number of highly nervous collapses, causing her to get insane. The book is considered as a semibiographical novel because of the parallels between Esther's protagonist's mental illness and Plath's own experiences.

This novel revolves around the brawls of Esther Greenwood as the narrator of the book, and also the attempts of a woman who is trying to cope with her mental disease. Esther as the novel's protagonist is a student who was not allowed to go into a short story class. Thus, due to misery, she committed suicide by taking some sleeping pills and hiding in her parent's basement. However, she is found by others and is transferred to a hospital's mental section. The same thing also happened to Plath when she used sleeping pills to kill herself.

In her diaries, Plath once wrote: "It hurts Father, it hurts, oh, Father I have never known, a father, even, they took from me..." (quoted in Shulman, 1998, p. 602). It was before stated that Plath's fascination with her father and her misery due to his death can be traced in Esther's character because Esther also speaks of her father several times through the novel. For instance, he's mentioned for the very first time when she thinks of her German father, and she mentions how he died when she was only nine-years-old (Plath, 1963, p. 18). Plath was almost the same age when she lost her father.

Just like Plath's own father who was highly preoccupied with such insects as bees, Esther's father was also interested in studying them (Ibid, p. 87). Furthermore, Esther then mentions her cheeriest reminiscences which were with her father on the beach, and then comprehends, "...how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" (Ibid, p. 39). The other common point between Sylvia and Esther is related to their not being allowed to take part in their father's funeral (Ibid, p. 87).

Thus, through Esther, Plath intended to tell her story and passion for her father, and how his early loss constantly troubled her. In the novel, Esther cries at the grave. The day Plath's father died, Plath declined to stay home and went to school in spite of knowing about her father's death (quoted in Shulman, 1998, p. 601). This childhood shock and ordeal left Plath with continuous feelings of sorrow. Actually, this agony by her father's death can be noticed not only in *The Bell Jar* but also throughout her other writings.

Not only her father's death, but her marriage which fell apart some years later influenced her so much. According to Firestone and Catlett "Plath believed that a woman's role was to subordinate herself to a man, but she resented the idea of trading her independence for the security of marriage" (Firestone & Catlett, 1998, p. 673). When she got married, she wrote "Me, I never knew the love of a father, the love of a steady blood-related man after the age of eight.... I hated men because they didn't stay around and love me like a father" (quoted in Hughes & McCullough, 1982, pp. 266-267). It means that she always expected her husband to treat her as kindly as her father. One of the reasons which caused Plath to employ confessional method as a way to compose her poetry goes back to her father's death and unsuccessful marriage:

Following Lowell's example, Plath now wanted her poetry to deal with matters close to the bone . . . issues of the self. Previously, she had chosen topics that presented her with little challenge. Now she hoped to tackle difficult subjects: her husband, her dead father . . . and herself. (Gupta & Sharma, 2014, p. 114)

In 1960 she gave birth to Frida as her daughter. Then, in 1961, her second pregnancy resulted in miscarriage; this issue influenced her so much that several of her poems, including "Parliament Hill Fields" addressed this event (Kirk, 2004, p. 85). Also, in a letter to her psychoanalyst, Plath wrote that Hughes beat her two days before the miscarriage.

An important character of *The Bell Jar* is Mrs. Greenwood as Esther's mother. Although she seems to be a minor character, the analysis of the novel shows her great influence upon Esther and her nervous breakdown. She is a conservative woman and sends Esther an article about the prominence of not losing her virginity, and while she inspires Esther to follow her desire to write, she also tells her to learn shorthand in order to be able to work as a secretary.

Esther is nervous because she thinks her wish to be a poet or a professor will be in conflict with her role as a wife and a mother, but her mother hopes that her wishes will not restrict her home responsibilities. Although it is evident that Mrs. Greenwood loves her daughter, Esther blames her for what has caused her to stay at hospital. When Esther is hospitalized, she tells Doctor Nolan that she does not like her mother. Thus, her doctor decides that Esther should stay in the hospital waiting for the winter term at college because it is better than going home.

Esther's depression is misinterpreted by her mother because she says that, "I knew my baby wasn't like that...I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (Plath, 1963, p. 145). It is also remarked that Plath's mother tried to "block" the novel (McCullough, 2005, p. xii) because Plath believed,

What I've done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color—it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown.... I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar. (Kirk, 2004, p. 88)

Plath herself had a cold relationship with her mother and would say,

My mother turned from a foggy log into a slumbering, middle-aged woman, her mouth slightly open and a snore raveling from her throat. The piggish noise irritated me and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands. (Plath, 1991, pp. 137-138)

This is in agreement with what Lacan has stated that in the 'mirror-stage', the child's images in a mirror gives him/her a completely discrete identity. But this image causes one to be the owner of the body that the infant has not yet accurately attained.

The Concept of Childhood in Plath's Poetry

Lacan (1977) pointed out that "the mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the

mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image" (p. 125).

As stated already, Plath's childhood had a great influence on her poetic career. According to Lacan, father plays an important role in the development of a child's essence, because when the child passes through Lacan's mirror stage, s/he separates her/himself from the mother. This is why the father is so important to the child. This is the reason Plath mentioned her father's influence represented in her fears: "How far he is now, his actions" (Plath, 1965, p. 33).

Schwartz (2011) believed that Plath's poetry, novel and journal writings disclose the intricacies of her relationship with her father, its unconscious aspects and limits (p. 55). As a good example, one can refer to her poem "Daddy" (1962) which is claimed to be one of her most provocative poems. It is in fact a weird and hurting metaphor that revolves around a female character who is trying to free and detach herself from her father. Plath believed that:

Here is a poem 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 Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.(quoted in Rosenthal, 1967, pp. 81-82)

As mentioned, in this poem Plath's father has been admired and compared to God. Though, later on, he is compared to a "swastika". Plath referred to her father as a Nazi soldier and compared herself to a Jewish prisoner. This metaphor signified her relationship with her father and fear. This poem has been interpreted from different viewpoints. For example, Robert Phillips (1972) has claimed,

Finally the one way [Plath] was to achieve relief, to become an independent Self, was to kill her father's memory, which, in "Daddy," she does by a metaphorical murder. Making him a Nazi and herself a Jew, she dramatizes the war in her soul. . . From its opening image onward, that of the father as an "old shoe" in which the daughter has lived for thirty years—an explicitly phallic image, according to the writings of Freud—the sexual pull and tug is manifest, as is the degree of Plath's mental suffering, supported by references to Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen.

In this poem, the reader can notice Plath's fear of her father's nonattendance and presence as well. In fact, her poem shows her fear because of her growing up in a masculine society, and thus the role that her father played signified his God-like authority. However, she also showed her revulsion due to his absence as a powerful person and the center of meaning and identity for her (Karimabad,2012, pp. 377-378).

As well, *Ariel* opens with "Morning Song." This monologue includes six stanzas, and is about the relationship between a mother and her child. "Morning Song" was actually written when Frieda as Plath's first child was eight months old and tells the story of the close relationship between a mother and a child. *Morning Song* actually is an assessment of

Plath's uncertainty towards motherhood and her rising passion for her child. In this poetic piece Plath mentioned that her baby daughter was no lamb or dove; it also addressed the baby as an intelligent entity. Also, her mental breakdown made her be scared of being demolished by her psychological situation:

Yet. I have a fear, too, of bearing a deformed child, a cretin, growing dark and ugly in my belly, like that old corruption I always feared would break out from behind the bubbles of my eyes. I imagine ... my growing big with his child ... I will believe in you and make you invincible on this earth. Yes, I have that power. (Plath, 1991, p. 200)

In stanzas five and six, Plath provided the readers with an image through which the mother became closer with the child as she "stumble[s] from bed" because she cares more for the baby. Another poem in which the concepts of childhood and motherhood seems evident is *Three Women* (1962). This poem is about three pregnant women who are in a hospital. As well, Plath adored her mother so much that she wrote her *Letters Home* to her "Dearest, darling mother". However, she also wanted not to be too dependent on her mother. This desire can be noticed in *Medusa* (1962).

Plath used the Medusa imagery in order to talk about the effect that her mother had on her characteristic. Several days before writing *Medusa*, Plath wrote "Daddy", in which she detached herself from her dead father's impact, what she sought to do in "Medusa," but with her mother, Aurelia. In this poem, the daughter echoes her annoyance with being close to her mother. In Plath's poem, the "Atlantic cable seems in a state of miraculous repair," apparently powerless to be detached in spite of the daughter's effort to "escape". In fact, the mother is "always there" (Plath, 1981, p. 225). As a matter of fact, while she loved her parents so much, in some poems, she used some particular sets of imagery in order to establish a new identity for herself.

"Child" as another poem by Plath pictures a mother who is talking to her child. In the first stanza, the mother is obsessed with her child's "clear eye" that is the most beautiful thing in the world. She desires to fill the eye with colors, ducks, and "the zoo of the new." Then, in the second stanza, she speaks about two sweet, white flowers. And in the third stanza, she ponders upon her child's faultlessness. In this poem, Plath repeatedly refers to this 'mirrorphase' in the child's evolution,

The point at which it perceives, in the mirror of the mother's eyes, and then in its own internalized mirror, the sexually specific identity it is expected to assume. Before this point, all is decentered and dispersed, a welter of images and options without a cohering focus. When Plath's poetry returns to the image of the mirror it returns too to the frontier of a realm where images spawn and proliferate and the unitary ego dissolves. (Smith, 2007, p. 221)

As seen in the following lines, the poet shows her enthusiasm in the first two stanzas and depicts a happy childhood:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks (lines 1-2)

When she says that the child's clear eye "is the one absolutely beautiful thing" (line 1), she intends to suggest that the other aspects of her life are gloomy. This is assured by the last stanza:

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star. (lines 10-12)

Concluding Remarks

Childhood has always been inspiring for so many poets and writers. The same is also true about Sylvia Plath. This study was an attempt to investigate the notion of childhood in Plath's literary works and find the relationship with her real life experiences through the theory of the mirror stage by Lacan. After her father's death, Plath felt a great deal of sorrow and no one could help her relieve. In fact, she was so emotionally distressed that she could not even take part in her father's funeral. However, Plath continued to mourn her father's loss throughout her whole life. In one passage of her journals, she writes, "I went to psychiatrist this morning... Wanted to burst out in tears and say Father, Father comfort me..." .As seen, Both Plath's poetry and novel are preoccupied with such themes as depression and anxiety, the root of which can be traced back to her childhood or motherhood. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that Plath's poetry showed that she was unable to reclaim the self that she knew from the other. Hence, disintegration of the self in Plath's work is presented as a woman in a "hall of mirrors when the self is distorted, disguised or shattered into silvers of reflection".

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