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Analyzing the language of personification in Sylvia Plath's poem *sheep in fog*

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze the language of personification in Sylvia Plath's poem *Sheep in Fog* that conveys her sense of obscurity, pessimism, desolation, uncertainty and isolation. The writer has dealt with words, phrases and verse lines that hint at the use of personification in the poem. They are considered as the bases for analyzing the language of personification. The things that are employed as personification in this poem are strikingly pertinent to the situation in which the poetic persona has survived. This article is important to those who are interested in studying and teaching poetry.

Keywords: Figure of speech, personification, poetry, sheep in fog, Sylvia Plath

Introduction

Poetry has been taught to the students in their compulsory and optional subjects at the school and the college levels for a long time. Yet, it remains as a difficult subject for most of the students. A poem is essentially a word game which we value because of its emotive, expressive, musical and playful qualities. It is a special language game with some artificial rules with the use of divergent rhetorical devices or figures of speech. If the readers understand the use of such devices or figures, they will be able to enjoy and analyze it precisely. Personification is one of the figures of speech that is amply noticed in a poem. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was a distinguished American poet, novelist, and short-story writer. She is best known for two of her published collections *The Colossus* and *Other Poems and Ariel*. Moreover, she is credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry in the literary field of America. In 1982, she won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for *The Collected Poems*. Her only novel *The Bell Jar* stands as a great piece of her writing. It is a semi-autobiographical novel published shortly before her death. The depressive Plath committed suicide in 1963.

Sheep in Fog which was written in 1962, but substantially revised in 1963 is a poem which reflects her impulse towards despondency and death. The title of the poem reflects her feeling regarding the world. She feels herself like a lost sheep wandering in a gloomy and futile world. She feels like continually disappointing people around her due to lack of sharing emotions and experiences. She sees the world blackening without any sheer light of hopefulness and warmth. The feminist attitude and general female condition in a male chauvinistic society is exposed through the situation of sheep lost in the fog. The fog is a big metaphor in the poem.

It is a difficult poem to summarize and analyze. It is as difficult as to probe the psyche of a person whose feelings lie in the propinquity of death. Based on her interview to BBC regarding the poem in 1963, the article writer has tried to summarize it. The speaker of this poem is a woman whose horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of Macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is the month of December, therefore it is foggy. She notices the sheep in the fog though that is not very clear to her. She starts off by saying that the hills have been covered with fog and have turned white. But such whiteness hinders the visibility. She considers that people and stars are similar to her, because she is not able to share her feelings and bitter experiences of the world with them. She believes that people or stars look at her sadly. Might be she disappoints them. In the next stanza she brings in a train whose smoke is compared to breath and then she describes a rust colored horse which is moving very slowly.

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So, the hooves make a low sound; when the horse moves slowly, the bell on the horse also gives out a melancholic sound. The morning which should be bright is becoming black. She again thinks that she is like a lone flower that is left out. It is her sense of loneliness and separation. There is stillness in her bones. In all these images of depression, there is one good scene. She remembers far away fields that touched her heart and melted her. Those fields which melted her in the past are threatening to send her to a heaven which has dark water. The heaven she assumes will be without stars and fathers. She reveals her pessimism. Even after death, she will be deserted and isolated in the heaven.

Theoretical Literature Review

Poetry

Poetry is a genre of literature. It has been used as a powerful means of expressing the poets' emotions, feelings, experiences and opinions. Hudson defines poetry as "an interpretation of life through imagination and feelings" (80). Poetry has the propensity of expressing things in an implicit manner. Frost affirms that poetry provides "the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another" (v). Plath has been able to reflect her condition of isolation through the use of 'sheep' in her poem.

Figures of Speech

Literature is an artistic use of language. Lazar asserts that literature is "the use of language to evoke a personal response in the reader or listener" (1). Similarly, Hudson views literature as fundamentally "an expression of life through the medium of language" (10). Literature, especially poetry is rich in the employment of figures of speech. Figures of speech turn a simple language into a literary language through comparison, contrast and deviation in structure. Wren and Martin define figure of speech as "a departure from the ordinary form of expression or the ordinary course of ideas in order to produce a greater effect" (488). Corbett holds the view that figures of speech are "a form of speech artfully varied from common usage" (424). Personification is one of the most frequently used figures of speech in poetry.

Personification

Personification which is also known as prosopopoeia is a figure of speech that gives human qualities to abstract ideas, animals and inanimate objects. Personification is more powerful than animation in poetry. In personification, the poet treats an abstract idea or an animal or an object as a person having consciousness, will power, desire, thought, emotion, action and so on. Personification can make an expression more compressed, intense and effective. Like animation, it can make satires more biting and ideas more acute. Wales defines personification as "a figure of speech or trope in which an inanimate object, animate non-human or abstract quality is given human attributes" (294). Harmon considers that "a figure that endows animals, ideas, abstractions, and inanimate object with human form" (389). Cuddon agrees with the concept of Wales and Harmon and maintains that "personification is the impersonification or embodiment of some quality or abstraction; the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects" (661). Plath has expressed her melancholic, lonely and deserted condition with the condition of the sheep in fog.

Contents of Plath's Poetry

Most of the contents of her poetry are tinted with her experiences such as familial discord, separation, melancholic situation, poverty, war, dominations of males, desire for death, escapism from life, pessimism and desolation.

Writing a poem for her is a way of consoling herself. Lata remarks that "Plath insists on the validity of her own way of seeing, she turns inward. It seems that she is uncomfortably aware of her own non-conforming trenchant voice and writes in other poets' voices in order to keep her turbulence at bay" (550). Micarakis highlights on the death as a recurrent thematic aspect of Plath's poem and asserts "death as trope was throughout her poetry the one thing she never ceased to explore and write about" (27).

We can also notice the issue of identity and feminism in her poetry. Parkash assumes that "she expressed her deep feelings about death, nature, identity, feminist sensibility" (204). Plath wrote confessional poems to express her life. Jahan points out that "by writing confessional poems she exposes herself and her life to the reader" (9). She expressed every sort of emotion caused by family dispute and collision through her poetry. Debata maintains "Plath's life is the domestic collision with the artistic creation, where no emotion left unexplored" (2). Her poetry is a mirror where we can see her life.

Personification in *Sheep in Fog*

Sylvia Plath employs a rhetorical device personification to express her feelings in this poem.

Sheep in Fog (Title of the poem)

The word "Sheep" is personified as a woman who is in search of her bright future. She needs support and guidance for that because she is alone to struggle and suffer in her life as a lonely sheep which is lost in fog. No doubt, a sheep is an animal that lives in the flock. It represents cowardice and innocence. It can hurt no animal, but it can be hurt by others. A woman cannot hurt anybody in general, but she is hurt by her father, males or even her whole society. The word "Fog" in a literary sense may stand for the situation of uncertainty, invisibility and disappearance and abandonment.

The hills step off into whiteness (Line: 1)

"Hills" are inanimate objects which are incapable of stepping off or having desires of stepping off themselves, but in this poem they are personified as persons with their own desires, power, ambitions etc. with the action of stepping off into whiteness. Hills are the persons who have seen many ups and downs in life or who bear happy moments as well as tribulations. "Step off into whiteness" presents us a sense of movement or progression. "Whiteness" implies two aspects: brightness and the uncertain situation in her life because the whiteness of fog suggests a sense of uncertainty. Her experience of life is like that of persons who move ahead, but they are uncertain of the path and destination.

People or stars (Line: 2)

Stars are inanimate heavenly bodies which regard her sadly. Only persons can evaluate, think, regard, believe, imagine, comment etc. In the poem, the stars behave as if they have

human consciousness, will power, thought etc. This is an excellent example of personification.

Regard me sadly, I disappoint them (Line: 3)

The coordinating conjunction "or" places "people" and "stars" at the same level. Stars are far in the sky and people are far on the earth. She cannot share her feelings, sorrows and pleasures with them because of her mental problem. They consider her to be sad and unresponsive. Her situation makes them sad.

The train leaves a line of breath (Line: 4)

This poetic line conveys an idea of isolation and speed. "Train" is an inanimate object or vehicle which moves ahead without its own wish or desire. It is made to do so. The word "breath" shows that breathing is an action performed by living beings. The train, the lifeless object, which she views as a living interactive being "Leave a line of breath". "Train" is personified as a young girl (poetess) with her childhood that has left her behind very fast, but she has the memories.

O slow, (Line: 5)

She becomes so meditative and emotional that her maturity is passing slowly. It is human psychology that when we are happy, times passes too fast. When we are sad, we perceive that time is passing very slowly. Moreover, she is surprised with the situations of life.

Horse the colour of rust. (Line: 6)

Horse is an animate being which she compares with a train. The speed of the train is higher than that of the horse. It seems that she personifies the horse as a matured woman (herself) her speed or progress is so slow that she develops a sense of pessimism in life. "The colour of rust" poses an image of ugliness and oddness in life.

Hooves, dolorous bells-(Line: 7)

The word "hooves" gives the reader a sense of motion or a journey. "Dolorous bells" implies that a sorrowful event or situation is about to begin. Nothing good will come out of this journey. It is indicative of death or an unpleasing event.

All morning the (Line: 8)

This poetic line is odd in its structure. It might be that her life is also odd. Morning is a new beginning. Even the new beginning is not perfect or complete like this line.

Morning has been blackening. (Line: 9)

The morning is indicative of a new life or new day. We expect a bright day after the morning. But, Plath tells us that morning is blackening. The word "blackening" gives a pessimistic view of life. She is uncertain how her life ends. "Blackening" may also indicate uncertainty of action and pace of life.

A flower left out. (Line: 10)

"A flower" stands for beauty and innocence that are ignored or neglected. It may be that the "Flower" is personified as an innocent and beautiful woman who feels lonely and sad in life because of isolation and lack of support and guidance from male dominated society. "A Flower left out" emphasizes a sense of neglect and isolation. The male dominated society is unkind to the woman who is unable to

share her sufferings and pleasures with the males. She is like a flower left alone to suffer a lot in life.

My bones hold a stillness, the far (Line: 11)

When the speaker is in the far fields, she feels still and peaceful deeply. The far field reminds her of her childhood days that were pleasant.

The assertion "My bones hold stillness" implies her deeper peacefulness or stillness.

Fields melt my heart. (Line: 12)

The speaker personifies "fields" as generous persons who melt others' hearts with their sympathy, support, kindness and great deeds.

They threaten (Line: 13)

It is a very bitter reality that those fields which melted her heart in her life in the past now threaten her. They turn to be hostile and unfriendly.

To send her to a heaven which is like dark water. The heaven she assumed would be without stars and fathers. She revealed her pessimism. Even after death, she will be deserted and isolated in the heaven.

To let me through to a heaven (Line: 14)

The fields threaten to send her to a heaven, but it is not traditional heaven where peace, satisfaction, pleasure and light exist. It is the heaven where darkness, cruelty and terror rules.

Starless and fatherless, a dark water. (Line: 15)

A star is supposed to be a messenger of God. Father is assumed as a protector and guide, but she is forced to go to a starless and fatherless heaven where darkness rules; where dark water flows and where no god dwells. It may also be that the speaker is depressed and she feels alone and helpless in her life. She has the negative attitude towards heaven which will be a dark and unkind place for her after her death. She will not find there anyone to share her sorrows. The heaven she assumed would be without stars and fathers. She will not be able to drink the water there to quench her thirst because the water is dark. She expresses her pessimistic vision that even after death, she will be deserted and isolated.

Poem: Sheep in Fog

Sylvia Plath

The hills step off into whiteness.

People or stars

Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The train leaves a line of breath.

O slow

Horse the colour of rust,

Hooves, dolorous bells-

All morning the

Morning has been blackening,

A flower left out.

My bones hold a stillness, the far

Fields melt my heart.

They threaten

To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

Conclusion

Sheep in Fog is a complex poem because of its cryptic nature and irregular verse line feature. It employs an ample use of personification despite its succinctness. In each stanza, we feel the language of personification. The exploitation of "the hills", "stars", "the train", "horse", "a flower", "fields", "heaven" and "a dark water" have been personified. Here, "the hills" have been assigned with the quality of men walking slowly. It might indicate her slow pace or slow progress in life to an uncertain destination. The "stars" are personified as persons who regard her sadly. They are perceived from the perspective of holding human emotions. She cannot share her feelings and emotions with them, and "the train" has been personified with the quality of 'leaving a line of breath'. "The train" refers to the speed of her childhood days that were spent very fast. "Horse" is the state of a person whose speed is slow in comparison to the speed of the train. It might be her maturity that is passing slowly in a sad condition. Similarly, "a flower", has been personified as the beauty and innocence of a woman. She considers herself as being left behind in a male dominated society. People do not value or embrace such virtues in the modern era. It is a sense of isolation in life. The "fields" are personified as persons who can console and give pleasures to others. But, it is a great irony in her life the same persons who gifted her with peace and pleasure at one time threaten to send her to heaven without any light and guidance. The word "heaven" is personified as the inner cosmos of human being wherein no light of kindness, fairness and compassion dwells. It is not like the traditional concept of heaven of gods, angles and pleasures. The phrase "dark water" is personified as a person with ugly heart where dirty feelings flow. The people with such feelings cannot behave or judge others fairly and sensibly. These are the explorations of bitter experiences of her life.

Although this is a very tough poem for most of the readers to discern themes, it can be one of the representative poems that can be explained and analyzed in multiple ways. The things which are personified in this poem are apt and genuine. They exhibit her feelings of isolation, helplessness, depression, pessimism, desertion and uncertainty in life and she assumes to exist such things with her even after her death. It can be concluded that Plath has used a strong language of personification in this poem

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