

The Controversy of Holocaust Metaphor in Sylvia Plath's Daddy

There is much criticism on Sylvia Plath's exaggerated use of Holocaust imagery and metaphor in Sylvia Plath's Daddy. In the poem, Plath translates her feeling of victimization and emotional confliction from her father's premature death through the use of Nazi Germany and Holocaust images. Yet she touches upon a sensitive subject, the Jewish genocide, one of the most atrocious acts against humanity and civilization itself. This drew criticism from other writers as Plath was never a victim of the concentration camps. They argue that Plath did not have any sort of warrant to use the experience of the Holocaust victims as a way of articulating her personal emotions. In comparing her own psychological turbulence to the Jewish victims, she dwarfed the gravity of the subject, using the shock value to draw the spotlight upon herself. The use of these imageries and metaphors may strike the readers as shocking, but I believe that there is a different perspective in which it can be made appropriate.

From a historical point of view, history is an accumulation of human happenings which can be open to human judgments. However brutal and inhuman the Holocaust was, we shouldn't detach ourselves from the events. History provides an important reference and we are free to draw upon it because of the bond of the human experience, unrestricted by time and space. When Plath identifies herself with the Holocaust victims, she creates an association that transcends time. Plath's raw use of the Holocaust raises its awareness and also coincides with her belief that personal experiences should be made relevant. Her lack of association with the horrors of the Holocaust in fact gives her the ability to see it realistically and imaginatively at the same time, perhaps even making the sufferings relatable to contemporary readers. She turns her private pain, the feeling of the oppressed and victimized, into a public image that concerns the modern victim.

Next, from a poetic perspective, Plath's exaggeration is not a fault but rather a quality of the poet. Poetry is often constructed upon the observation and emotional intensity of the poet. It is not an outcome of something fully ordered and rational. A poet expresses his/her sensitive emotions through words and imagination and Sylvia Plath is no exception. By using the Nazis and the Holocaust as metaphor, Plath's torments are made more apparent. In the face of oppression she "could hardly speak", she was one without liberty, who was being "chuffed off like a Jew". The Nazi becomes her oppressor, her sole authority and a God-like being that holds her fate. To anyone familiar with the history of the Holocaust, the mention of "Auschwitz" and "Meinkampf" immediately brings to mind the cruelty, evil and feeling of fear that can be comprehended without association to one's identity.

Plath's transfiguration into a Nazi victim is seen by critics as dramatizing her personal plight. But how are we to know whether or not her personal struggle and psychological feelings of victimization was not as great as the victims of the Holocaust? Critics assert

Yu-tung Yeh 葉侯佟

that Plath undermines the Jewish torment by elevating her struggles to the same level. Yet Plath's suicide attempts and her final death seem to affirm the scope of her inner conflict and the devastating truth of her intolerable hurt. Her gas-oven suicide even seems to mirror with the gas chambers of the concentration camps. The trademark themes of her poetry – looming death, grotesque emotions, imprisonment and anger all seems to be a reflection of her life-long trouble. Finally, a question arises from such criticism: Why are personal problems subordinated to historical ones and the individual struggle trivial in comparison?

Lastly, poetry can be an expression of a poet's character that brings insight for the reader into his/her experience. Most important is the availability of the reader to be enlightened and find relevance in some way. Therefore, there is no absolute interpretation of a poem and no correct way of writing poetry.