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Daddy's Girl: Sylvia Plath, Freud, and the Uncanny.

Erin Lynch

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Literature and Psychoanalysis

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Daddy's Girl: Sylvia Plath, Freud, and the Uncanny

Freud's conception of the uncanny, as it applies to experiences expressed both in life and more specifically in literature, encompasses a large number of definitions. To experience the uncanny is to delve into the various layers of human perception as it connects and reacts to events of an unusual and/or frightening nature. The uncanny cannot be encapsulated solely by the experience of fright; rather, it is the psychological effect of bringing forth previously repressed notions through the vehicles of fear and unease, which can be triggered by themes in a work.

Freud explains that the uncanny is necessarily conveyed through a number of themes, such as doubling, repetition, reintroduction of repressed personal issues, animism, castration anxiety, man's cognition of death, "omnipotence of thought," and magic. Many of these themes are what Freud defines as infantile ideas, or ideas which were formed and entertained during childhood that have been surmounted or repressed in adult years, due to age and an increase in cognitive awareness. The introduction of things that are uncanny can catalyze the uncovering and reawakening of an individual's repressed infantile ideas.

American-born poet Sylvia Plath, the complex and talented writer of a number of well-known poems during the 1960s, has managed to capture many of these repressed infantile themes in her disturbing poem entitled, "Daddy." Aspects of the uncanny such as doubling, repetition, and death pervade this work; knowledge of the various dimensions related to the uncanny (as identified by Freud) help to decode Plath's eerily disturbing confessional-style

Professor Balazs

Literature and Psychoanalysis

2001

poem.

"Daddy" is written using apostrophe, the literary technique of addressing the dead. This sets the tone of the poem, giving it a spooky and strange feel. Plath explores the narrator's emotional feelings towards her father while explaining, through the course of the poem, the inner struggles and personal pain caused by her father's death when she was ten. Plath's decision to address the father as "Daddy" despite the fact that the narrator is thirty years old at the start of the poem, instantly triggers a connection to childhood conceptualization of father figures and automatically lends itself to the remembrance of infantile feelings. Use of the word "Daddy" also suggests stunted mental growth with regard to the narrator's mental conception of her father as an adult. This poem brings to light one of Freud's most well-known theories, the Oedipal Complex. This theory holds that children form deep erotic connections to the opposite sex parent and then are forced, with age, to repress these internal desires because they are not socially acceptable and because of the fear of castration/punishment (castration anxiety).

The narrator's erotic Oedipal feelings toward her father are illustrated in a number of different places throughout the poem. Lines such as, "Every woman adores a Fascist" (48), "At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you/ I thought even the bones would do" (58-60), and "I used to pray to recover you" (14), and "I made a model of you" (64) all demonstrate that the narrator's life has been characterized by her psychological desires for the father she lost at age ten. She reveals that she became romantically involved with a man

Professor Balazs

Literature and Psychoanalysis

2001

simply because she was searching for someone who reminded her of her father. Behavior and feelings such as these are all indicative of a woman in deep inner conflict about her repressed desire for her father. Plath's relationship with her own father (who died when she was eight of complications from diabetes) has been described by some literary researchers as unusually close and Oedipal. The narrator's previously repressed Oedipal feelings are uncovered during her characterization of "Daddy," which in turn, gives one the feeling of the uncanny. As Freud states, the uncovering of something familiar that was once repressed will bring about such feelings.

Doubling, which Freud describes as the process of identifying oneself with another person to the point where that other person's self can be interchanged with one's own sense of self, can be seen in Plath's narrator (Freud 234). She has, by means of repression, incorporated her father into her sense of self. The narrator actually describes her suicide attempt at age twenty as an attempt to "get back to [her father]" through death (59). Her endeavor to kill that evil part of herself did not work because someone saved her, so she was left to figure out a new way of coping with her repressed feelings toward her father. She states, "I knew what to do/I made a model of you/ A man in black with a Meinkampf look" (63-65). In meeting her husband and using him as a representative of her father, she engages in a different form of doubling.

The uncovering process of the narrator's repressed Oedipal feelings has been triggered by the destruction of her relationship with her husband. The second part of Freud's definition

Professor Balazs

Literature and Psychoanalysis

2001

of doubling also includes the process wherein a character attributes the characteristics of one individual to another. Therefore, in the narrator's case, by shifting the image of her father onto her lover, she is saving the ego of the father from being destroyed in her mind. The narrator's perception of her father as an immense and powerful being whose presence was large, luminous, and expansive ("Big as a Frisco seal/ And a head in the freakish Atlantic (10-11)) reveals her childlike perception of men. Her father was God-like and scary-perceptions which Freud identifies as an essential to the Oedipal Complex and reflective of the infantile wish to be with one's parent in a sexual manner. He cites that women see their father's masculinity and sexuality as threateningly powerful and yet erotic within this power. The end of her relationship with her lover causes her repressed feelings of love, Oedipal longing, and inability to act on such desires to resurface. They are, however, masked in hatred and aversion, as these are more socially appropriate responses and because she feels anger and aggression as a result of her frustration concerning men.

Freud's claims that repetition of themes and images also produce an uncanny effect because the compulsion to repeat is inherently tied to the instinctual impulses of the human mind and can be related to daemonic themes (Freud 234). Plath uses repetition to convey her feelings about her father. She uses the imagery of feet, toes and boots as a way to illustrate her negative perception of men. The line "A cleft in your chin instead of your foot/But no less a devil for that" (53-54) is a direct reference to the mental connection between her father and the Devil, who is said to have a cleft in his foot. She also makes the association between

Professor Balazs

Literature and Psychoanalysis

2001

her father and her lover as vampires, which is particularly striking. She says of her lover: "

[he] Drank my blood for a year/ Seven years, if you want to know" (73-74) and later declares to her father, "There's a stake in your fat black heart/ and the villagers never liked you" (76-77).

Plath also uses repetitive images of war as a symbol of the inner conflict that exists within her and also of repression in general. War has such negative and destructive connotations that it provides a perfect symbol for oppression. Just as Jewish people and other minorities were victims of oppression, so too was the narrator. Lines such as, "I could never talk to you/ The tongue stuck in my jaw" (25) and "Not God but a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through"(46-47) reflect the bindingly oppressed feelings of the narrator. She was left oppressed by her own intense repressed feelings.

Freud also introduces the idea that death, in and of itself, is a large part of our infantile ideas. He suggests that although adults seem to have surmounted the belief in ghosts or spirits and have come to accept the inevitability of death, they have only repressed their fears concerning death and that their true infantile ideas will resurface when provoked. Death is an ominous presence in people's lives because it lies in the realm of the unknown. Humans fear death because it is something completely out of human control (Freud 242). People's innate fear of the unknown as well as of death in its seeming finality causes them to turn to repression and fantasy (or belief in comforting things such as the afterlife and religion) to quiet their fears. Yet what has been repressed has not been erased. Rather, it lingers, below

Professor Balazs

Literature and Psychoanalysis

2001

the skin and with provocation easily manifests itself.

Plath has filled "Daddy" with a pervasive sense of death through the technique of apostrophe, the acknowledgement of attempted suicide, images of war, and references to murder. Once the narrator's repressed feelings have surfaced, she is able to confront the evil part of herself, which is represented by her father, and in confrontation she attempts to destroy that evil part of herself without actually killing herself. The third instance of doubling occurs here. The narrator's statement: "There's a stake in your fat black heart/ And the villagers never liked you/ They are dancing and stamping on you" (76-78) shows that she has now taken on the figurative role of the villagers, who are able, through confrontation, to kill the father and surmount the resentment felt towards him. The fact that the poem is written as an apostrophe suggests that the narrator is able now to face her adversary and kill/conquer her father, who is essentially that evil aspect of herself. The final line, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (80), is a declaration of the narrator's ability to free herself from that part of herself that had been repressed for so long, therefore, making the process of facing one's repressed ideas a relatively "positive" experience for the narrator.

Freud's definition of the themes used to convey a feeling of the uncanny undoubtedly assist in the analysis and understanding of Sylvia Plath's poem. The psychological forces behind the narrator's claims can be better understood through Freud's idea of the uncanny as can the reader's psychological and emotional responses to encountering this theme. Freud's

Professor Balazs

Literature and Psychoanalysis

2001

conceptualization of the uncanny unlocks the doors of "Daddy" to reveal the inner workings of one woman's psychology and our response as readers to those thoughts.