

Reading Poetry: Singularity and Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

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Abstract: To fully comprehend poetry, readers want objective instruments for attentive reading. This paper offers a close reading of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," a poem written three months before her self-destruction and regarded as Plath's masterpiece. In a discussion that takes its cue from Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*, I endeavor to analyze the singularity of Plath's "daddy" mainly from three aspects, including the distinctive combination, singular words and phrases, and the usage of metaphor. More broadly, focusing on the singularity of poems like "daddy," we can see the importance of literary aesthetics and the author's unique imagination and experience.

Keywords: singularity; Sylvia Plath; Derek Attridge; *The Singularity of Literature*

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Introduction

In a small survey on whether you like poetry in Central Concepts and Competencies seminar, more than half of the students expressed their dislike for poetry. They argue that poetry is an intensely subjective message that needs to be encoded, and its content is unhelpfully opaque (Rowland 70). Literary works, as Derek Attridge points out in *The Singularity of Literature*, are precisely incapable of meeting "our habitual needs in processing language" (Attridge 120). In order to better understand poetry, readers need the objective tool of close reading. Attridge describes a way of reading poetry in *The Singularity of Literature* that is based on but also differs somewhat from traditional close reading. His approach is centered on the singular "event" of poetry's utterance and performance, and how poetry - and literature more generally - are read at different times and in varied ways that should remain focused on the materiality of the work (Rowland 70). This paper advances this critical position by exploring the interaction between Attridge's theories in literature and the specific case of Sylvia Plath's poetry.

1. Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*

In the past few decades, cultural criticism has mediated in literary criticism. Scholars have read literary texts as historical or cultural texts, thus expanding the critical perspective of literary texts. At the same time, Derrida's Deconstructivism still strongly influences academic studies. Literature has lost its merely aesthetic significance as a result of the growth of diverse theoretical ideas. Literary critics gradually extended the definition of literary works to the cultural realm. Their interpretation of literary works is more focused on their roles of enlightening the public and expressing political views and ideologies. As a result, many literary critics have bemoaned the disappearance of literary aesthetics and readers' aesthetic experiences. Fortunately, a few scholars such as Attridge, Peter Widdowson, and Miller remain. Attridge defines literary text as an emotional, physical, and intellectual event (Attridge 19). He argues that the alteration of tradition, the enlightenment of readers' perceptions, and the giving of aesthetic experience are the distinguishing elements of a literary text.

Attridge's theory of singularity attempts to explain the elusive pleasures and "the potency we experience in reading [literature]," and criticizes the "pragmatic use" of texts in instrumentalist criticism (Rowland 71). His book echoes a reading philosophy that avoids literary critique and is heightened when encountering shorter literary genres like poems. When critics narrate literary texts, they usually employ the present tense, which obscures the fact that they may have different reactions to the same text at different times. In the case of poetry, readers may savor different combinations of, for example, memorable phrases, grammatical echoes, and rhythmic effects (Rowland 71). Such diversity should draw the critic's attention to how literature is represented in subsequent readings, what Attridge calls "the linguistic event comprehended in its eventness" (Attridge 95).

Attridge uses William Blake's poem "The Sick Rose" as an example to outline the singularity of literature. He claims that "the Sick Rose" is unique, regardless of its channel of transmission, the way it is reproduced, or its

handwriting. Appreciation of the poem requires a certain amount of literary knowledge and cultural background, an understanding of syntax, rhyme, rhythmic variation, as well as folk songs and folkloric songs (Attridge 66).

2.The singularity of “Daddy”

In a radio program, Plath admitted that the poem “Daddy” was written in the voice of a young girl with an Electra Complex. The little girl is arguably Plath herself, and the image of the father in the poem is likewise based on Plath’s father. In “Daddy,” Plath constantly changes her role in the usual monologue of confessional poetry, from daughter to wife to woman, exposing her complicated sentiments of love and evil for her father without control; simultaneously, she also assigns multiple roles to her father, from father to husband to man, in contrast to the role portrayed by Plath. Although the images and roles are constantly misplaced and changed, the poet still portrays a character who is “a father but not a father” with his skillful artistry; at the same time, the emotions expressed by the narrator “daughter” are also intriguing and colorful. The poem employs the rhyme, nursery rhyme rhythm, and monosyllabic phrases in a single rhyme to emphasize the psychological immaturity of the girl in the poem and her subordinate position in the father-daughter relationship.

How can I read this poem that emphasizes its singularity? A sense of the singularity of this poem, as a poem rather than simply a verbal arrangement, depends upon the appreciation of its originality and the broader cultural context, for instance, the distinctive combination. The poem consists of 16 stanzas, each of which consists of five lines. Of the 80 lines in this poem, 37 lines are end-stopped. The sole exception is stanza 11, which inserts the next strophe without pause. Unlike the image mode, the image mode continues to increase from one form of demonization to another; 15 stanzas remain stable, with five lines apiece (Platzky 105). When people read this poem quickly, without enough attention to its unexpected pauses, it is actually like a runaway train, speeding through one psychological nightmare after another, until the speaker pulled the emergency line in the last line, which irrevocably separated himself from the other torturer: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through”(Plath and Hughes 224).

The singularity of this poem arises in part from the combined experience that draws me in as the single unit unfolds, of movements of enclosure and movements of opening. The poem shows me a series of words and phrases that transcend their original meaning (Attridge 97). For instance, In stanza five, Plath writes: “ I never could talk to you. The tongue stuck in my jaw” (Plath and Hughes 223). The “tongue” is not just a real tongue, but a language - German. She compares her father to Nazi and even Hitler, comparing herself to persecuted Jews, and she could not speak German with her father because it was the language of the hated Nazi. The protagonist is unable to act due to the tyrannical male behavior and the male-centered society. Besides, “ich,” which means I in German, does not just means “ I ” in this poem. Plath uses “ich” to express her independence, “Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich” uses repetition to indicate stuttering. It also represents the anger and resistance to authority in the protagonist’s tone. More subtly (in the first line of the second part of the poem, line 41), Plath designed “you” from “I have always scaled of you” (Plath and Hughes 223) in italics. At this time, the meaning of the word “you” changed from father to husband, but this does not mean that husband is the only focus of the second half of the poem. In fact, the images of father and husband have been intertwined since the italics of “you” in line 41.

From Aristotle to Jakobson in modern times, metaphor has been valued as one of the most attractive rhetorical patterns in rhetoric. Aristotle states: “It is also a sign of talent to use metaphors well, for to make a good metaphor one must first see the similarities between things that can be used metaphorically” (Halliwell and Aristotle 158). Therefore, the use of metaphors requires the writers to discover a relationship between the subject and the metaphor that does not exist, to find similarities or connections between them, and to create a strong impression or feeling of the subject through the metaphor. Thus, metaphor is a rhetorical technique that contains the speaker’s (author’s) creativity and singularity. In the poem “daddy,” Plath repeatedly uses metaphor as a form of language expression to make the poem singular and direct to the depth of feelings. It is evident that daddy is depicted as a fascist, while she is portrayed as a persecuted Jew. The relationship between the two is strength and weakness, oppression and

resistance. On the one hand, this image expresses the contradictory relationship between love and evil. On the other hand, it implies that the poet's young spirit has surely been scarred by the repressive Nazi struggle in history.

I would like to concentrated on the embodiment of other metaphors in the poem. In the poem's climax, stanza 14, Plath wrote, "The black telephone's off at the root, The voices just can't worm through" (Plath and Hughes 224). The metaphor "black phone" represents the end of my relationship with my father and my connection with the past. The first eight stanzas of the poem mainly describe "father", then gradual shift from "father" to "husband" in the last eight stanzas. From the narration of "I," we know that the father has died forever and the living person who owns his image is a "vampire." The image of "vampire" in the 1960s when Plath wrote the poem represents a monster attached to the body of a dead person. The replacement and transformation of the entire image of "vampire" are intertwined with the love and hate for father and husband. The climax of the whole poem comes at the time of killing the vampire, where Plath finally distinguishes the image of "father" and "husband." "I" said in lines 72-74 that "And drank my blood for a year, Seven years, if you want to know" (Plath and Hughes 224). "One year" corresponds to the breakdown of Plath's marriage, and "seven years" refers to the poet's marriage lasting seven years. According to Plath, her father abandoned her. She regarded the image of "husband" as the continuation of "father," but she was abandoned again to her disappointment. "If I've killed one man, I've killed two-" (Plath and Hughes 224). The poet solemnly declares that she will cut off the relationship with them from herself. This is not only the end of her Electra Complex but also the complete abandonment of love and marriage. Analyzing this poem from the perspective of the vampire metaphor, we can see how the author denounces his father literally and accuses his husband.

3.Conclusion

As Attridge mentions, the singularity of poetry, although it depends on the perception of its originality, and hence with properties of poetry, is not to be equated with them. The singularity of a literary work is not limited to the fact that it is the only one to use these words in this order, or to follow a syllabic pattern in this stanza-poem. Focusing solely on these can devalue a literary work's originality (Attridge 95). Literature is the art of language. There is no difference between superior and mediocre in terms of aesthetics, regardless of literary language style. The essential is that the language of the work can deeply and carefully convey the writer's emotional thoughts or feelings, so as to constantly stimulate readers' imagination, arouse readers' emotion and call readers' intervention. Just like Attridge says, "singularity exits, or rather occurs, in the experience of readers" (Attridge 95).

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