

Understanding Sylvia Plath's "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"

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Abstract: For the past century, literary individuals have been investigating short stories according to their structural and textual identities. However, few are scrutinized based on the author-to-text connectivity and Sigmund Freud's concept of psychoanalysis. To address the fewness of expressive and psychoanalytical analysis of short story, an investigation is conducted on the representative masterpiece. Sylvia Plath's "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" is the center of investigation. This study uses qualitative method of discourse analysis. The investigation focuses on two aspects: the author's presence in the text and the psychological viewpoints of the character and the author. This paper further uses historical-biographical theory and psychoanalytical theory to buttress the study's objective. The investigation on the author's presence in the text is supported by historical-biographical theory while the interpretation on the psychological viewpoints of the character and the author is underpinned by psychoanalytic theory. The study gathers two focal results: this literary piece portrays author's narration of self in the text, and shows behavioral perspectives of the character and the author. Based on the thorough investigation and findings of the study, it is concluded that Plath's short story reveals binary significations which are anchored on the selected theories of literature.

Keyword: Sylvia Plath, short story, psychoanalytic theory, historical-biographical theory, binary signification, literature, criticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many critics and lexicographers endeavour to define literature. In general sense, it refers to the written works of those published and unpublished authors. However, not all written works are considered literature. Only those author's highly artistic, expressive, and thoughtful masterpieces are regarded literature [1]. Hence, literature is not a technical writing which concentrates on the business-related transaction. In most case, literature delves into those essential conceptual thinking such as affection, faith, characterization, and the like [2]. During pre-civilized epoch, people have already cherished literature as a form of entertainment. Stories that are shared by their ancestors are their typical way of expressing and indulging themselves.

Furthermore, literature allows individual to acquire learning based on experience and observation. People further cultivate prevailing knowledge concerning culture and society through literature. Pointing some historical insight, Golban and Ciobanu write that literature is classified according to trends, influences, movements, and periods [3]. Criticism, as one of the approaches to literature, adheres on the contextual and textual investigation of certain masterpiece [3]. Literary criticism commences as an evaluation of a certain poetic text by the poet himself in order to plan for artistic outcomes vis-à-vis thematic concepts, audience influences, and forerunner's oral literature manifestations [4]. From scrutinizing a poetic masterpiece, critics initiate in criticizing other genres in literature.

One of the genres in literature is short story. This is a short work of fiction which deals with few characters and related events. From studying the form and other related structural discourse, critics further analyse short story according to the author's presence in the text, and to the character's behavioural standpoints.

One of the eminent short story writer is Sylvia Plath. She is a ground-breaking writer who leaves a legacy of literary fervour. More so, she is a writer who produces numerous literary masterpieces which include poetry, novel, and metrical play [5]. Her works are widely read by many scholars, and are highly studied by many researchers. She is, in fact, the writer of “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams”. This short story recounts the tragic story of the unnamed character who works in the psychological faculty as secretary, and who is obsessed with Johnny Panic. Out of the main character’s foolish admiration to Johnny, he begins jotting down those patient’s dream in the notebook which she calls “Bible of Dreams.” The story concludes with the character’s refusal of undergoing into therapeutic treatment [6].

The prominence of the author is the reason why this study is conceived. To give a noteworthy contribution to literature is another reason why this study is regarded. This study argues that Plath's “Jonny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” reveals binary significations which are based on the selected theories of literature. Historical-biographical theory and psychoanalytic theory are utilized to buttress the study’s objective. In connection with the said claim, discourse analysis is used in analysing the overall signification of the text. Significantly, the result of this in-depth investigation will help literary researchers, critics, enthusiasts, educators, and literature major students in comprehending Plath's short story.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative method of discourse analysis. Qualitative method’s emphasis is not on the elucidation of the numerical data but on the holistic interpretation of the text [7]. One of the sub-categories of qualitative method is discourse analysis. In discourse analysis, there is concatenation of structure and language in order to point out contextual and rhetorical arguments [8]. In this study, text is analysed in accordance with the selected theories of literature. Historical-biographical theory is used in order to provide author-to-text interpretation. More so, psychoanalytical theory is utilized in order to extract behavioural assertions in the text.

III. DISCUSSION

A. Historical-Biographical Theory

Historical-biographical theory commences out of the conception that a particular masterpiece is authored by actual person. In fact, this theory arises as an approach combining author's history and biography. A historical-biographical critics make a serious attempt on determining related instance in a short story that connects to the personal life of the author. Clarke [9] states that by making a critical evaluation of someone's life, and history is what comprised a biographical research. He further proclaims that the researcher’s way of designating meaning is by seeking individual's practical knowledge through observation [9]. The authors may not be always present in text. Notwithstanding, some individuals believe that the authors sometimes express their own conceptions and deep attachments on their own writings [10]. Judilla asserts that this theory deals not only on the authors’ biography, but also on their psychology [11]. Critics using this theory are fascinated in the writer’s behavioural viewpoint in relation to the text. The easiest way of using this theory in decoding the text is by reading the writer’s masterpiece, by understanding writer’s biography, and by connecting instances in a piece to the writer's personal life. Thus, the author-to-text connectivity becomes the principal conception and adherence of this theory.

The author-to-text connectivity is shown in some instances in Plath's short story. Dobson [12] declares that this masterpiece is crafted according to the confessional style of the author. Plath, however, is tormented by her depression. In fact, her spiteful depression is reflected numerous times in the story. The story further mirrors the moment when the author is under medication. This masterpiece is told in the first person point of view. The usage of “I” as pronoun is evident in the text: “Every day from nine to five I sit at my desk facing the door of the office and type up other people’s dreams” [6]. This situation reveals the author’s passion in writing. The “dream” signifies the ideology of other people. However, some scholarly journals claim that the “dream” in the story is the thought of a psycho patient in the psychiatric ward of a clinic whence the main character work as secretary. The main character remains unnamed until the end of the story. Nevertheless, historical-biographical critics infer that the main character is a woman. The gender of the main character therefore adds biographical aspects of the piece.

The main character’s job is to record the patient’s vague and arduous complain. Nuwer avows that Plath has compelling motivation in her duty as a writer, and life as a whole [13]. She is an excellent, yet melancholic writer. Her depression makes her an odd person. This mirrors when the main character compares herself to other people in her workplace and admits that she is indoctrinated herself of becoming a distinctive person [6].

In the succeeding happenings in the story, the main character goes on confessing that she is not fascinated in mathematical discourse. During her stay in State of Massachusetts, she admits that her mind breaks apart when there are numerous of dreams come in which she could hardly endure [6]. There is a huge space in her head of those imaginative meditations. She, however, becomes vigorous only when she finds a number of thought to work and to imagine.

The main character's imaginary thought ushers the foundation of Johnny Panic's "good and evil" side. Her relationship with the god-like Johnny grows progressively. On a related note, Dobson affirms that Johnny Panic is the depiction of the author's psychiatric conflict [12].

The "lake" is specified in the story. It is viewed as one of those creations that constitutes a horrible dimension, and is deemed as stygian formation that is filled with gruesome organism. Plath mentions these following morbid creatures and things: serpent, lifeless body, and human embryo that hovers around the imaginative lake [6]. This instance becomes a reflection of the author's negative thought. In "Sylvia Plath Biography" [14], Plath is eighth years old when her father died, and is afflicted by that happenings. Perhaps, this becomes another contributor of her dejection. She is, in fact, hospitalized due to her depression. The psychiatric ward in the clinic is mentioned in the story as treatment facility who does not give medical prescription [6]. This instance reminisces author's time during her stay in the clinic. Another situation that reflects the life of the author is when the main character ventures on her way to the nerve clinic and hears those insane individuals chanting and babbling foreign languages [6]. The situation shows that the author is conscious of the moments when a co-patient loses control during her actual medication.

Moreover, the perfectionist-achiever demeanour of the author is shown in the middle part of the story. Plath is an excellent student in Winthrop Massachusetts public school system who is admired by her instructor for her skills in writing [14]. She, however, endeavours to make herself perfect to hide the darkness which distorts her psyche. The deformation of her psyche is evident in those times when the character greatly adores Johnny Panic. Johnny is described as "genius" or almost "perfect" individual who possess a "good-devil" attitude. Good-evil, perhaps, because he inspires other people at the same time makes them ridiculous due to their profuse admiration.

The story concludes when the main character becomes one of the psycho patients due to her deep adoration to Johnny Panic and to her troublesome of completing her "Bible" or "record of dreams" as stated in the instances of the story: "The white cot is ready. With a terrible gentleness Miss Milleravage takes the watch from my wrist, the rings from my fingers, the hairpins from my hair" [6]. In fact, the author commits suicide [5]. Nevertheless, critics venture to say that she is a gentle mother. This manifests when she leaves two mugs of milk and a plate of buttered bread for her children before she finally kills herself by asphyxiation with cooking gas [14].

B. Psychoanalytical Theory

Psychoanalytic theory typically deals with the human mind and behavior. The person's wish, desire, motivation, and repression are the generic components of psychoanalysis [15]. This theory is postulated by Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst. Further, under the classification of levels of mind, Freud mentions the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious. Freud asserts that the unconscious mind is the source of someone's behavior. The unconscious mind therefore becomes the storehouse of personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings [16]. Specifically, Bondi goes on elaborating that the suppressed motivation, want, and spiteful happening of someone will be segregated and buried in the unconscious sphere [17]. The preconscious mind, in addition, is the awaiting venue for mental consciousness, while the conscious mind is the spot for individual's psychological awareness.

Freud further proposes a more constructed parts of mind. The parts are as follows: the Id, the ego, and the superego. The Id adheres on motivations and wishes. This is also the source of someone's aggressive demeanor. It, in fact, urges individual to do things which are not virtuous. Moreover, the superego is in contrary to the focal point of the Id. Its main focus is on human personality about what is considered morally right or wrong. The ego acts as the mediator of the two; it acclimates on the real happenings [18]. The ego only adapts to the real world but does not cease impulses.

Furthermore, psychoanalysis deals on the character's argumentative domain like sexuality and wish-fulfillment. The presence of Oedipus complex and Electra complex is also featured in Freud's concept of sexuality. The Oedipus complex refers to the son-to-mother relationship. The son acquires sexual fascination towards his mother and commences on hating his father [19]. According to Fatima [20], Electra complex is another concept of psychoanalytical theory which centers on the daughter-to-father relationship. The daughter develops sensual attraction towards her father and initiates hating her mother. This theory not only clings on the character's bearing but also on the author's behavioral outlooks.

The story can be decoded on numerous aspects which range from the character's behavior all the way through the author's psychology. Khan and Haider write that there are some Electra complex perspectives in the personal life of the author; however it is dubious in some point because it is not mentioned that Plath finds rival to her mother [21]. Nevertheless, the absence of paternal love is one facet for the occurrence of Electra complex [20]. The death of her father and her longing justify the Electra complex viewpoints of her life. She even deems her spouse as substitute to her father, and sees them as one man.

The story further reflects on the author's unconscious dimension. The author is tormented by her depression after her husband abandons her for another woman, and after she finds out that she is not accepted in a summer writing class [5]. Her sorrows are repressed. Critics affirm that the writer's emotions are buried in her unconscious mind. In other words, she acts in certain way due to the unconscious mind where her repressed emotions are concealed.

Furthermore, the main character in the story experiences behavioral struggles. The main character is conscious of her endeavor of keeping a journal. The character, however, is unconscious of her adoration to Johnny Panic. Her progressive admiration, in fact, makes her an eccentric character at the latter part of the story.

The main character wants to fulfill her wish to keep track of the records of all the patients in the hospital and keep it as a journal. Her desire upshots to psychological trouble. Critics believe that the "Id" is responsible for her crave of fulfillment and admiration. She is very determined of achieving and completing her account, and thus her "superego" loses capacity of controlling her impulses. She, however, becomes conscious when she is caught by her superior searching the patients' archaic records in the cabinet [6].

The "lake" is described numerous times in the story. According to Burris, the lake's water is usually associated to "death wish" [22]. As mentioned, the author of this work takes her own life. The desire for death is therefore evident. Her negative thoughts and psychological struggles are reflected in the story out of mentioning those gruesome things [6]. Water has numerous psychological representations. It has both adverse and advantageous signification. Eom concludes that water represents destruction and dishevelment [23]. The lake's water is associated to the behavioral destruction of the main character. She views the lake as something bloody and gruesome place (Plath).

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the researcher's exhaustive investigation, Sylvia Plath's short story shows twofold meanings that are supported by the selected theories of literature. This masterpiece reveals the author's narration of self in the text concerning passion in writing, wish-fulfillment, numerical thought, pessimistic thought, and moment in the clinic during her medication. More so, this short story portrays psychological standpoints vis-à-vis the main character and the author regarding Electra complex, unconscious mind, structured parts of mind, and wish-fulfillment.

The study's findings are beneficial to researchers, critics, enthusiasts, educators, and literature major students. Educators will benefit on this for this will serve as a reference in their literary discussion. Students, in addition, will benefit on this study for this will serve as their guide in using literary theories in their critical analysis. Further, critics and researchers will find this study beneficial for this can be a supplement information for them in criticizing and evaluating Plath's short story. Lastly, enthusiasts will find this study essential for this will help them in reviving their love into analysis of short stories of those eminent writers.

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