

Analysis of the Death in Ariel from the Perspective of Pastiche

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Abstract: As the posthumous work of Sylvia Plath, the American confessional poetess, *Ariel* plays an important role in the study of Plath's poetry creation, and death, as the most common theme in Plath's poetry, has been criticized and studied by many scholars. Yet people focus more on what caused Plath to write about the subject. Few studies have explored how Plath wrote about death. Based on Jameson's theory of pastiche, this paper discusses Plath's use of pastiche, the contribution pastiche made to the description of the theme of death and Plath's view of death. Pastiche breaks the limits of time, space and ideology in a retro way enabling Plath to construct "facts" from her vague memories and allowed her to express more freely her views on death, namely art, self-defense and redemption. Hope this paper could enrich people's understanding of pastiche theory and of the role pastiche plays in the postmodern theories.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Death, Pastiche, *Ariel*.

1. Introduction

Ariel is the posthumous work of Sylvia Plath, an American postmodern confessional poetess, in which forty poems are collected. The poem collection begins with spring and ends with love through which a large number of death images were shown. In *Ariel*, Plath used pastiche, a unique technique of postmodernism, to describe these images of death and desire. The theory of pastiche was proposed by Fredrick Jameson in his work *The Culture Turn* that he believes that pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, or speech in a dead language [1].

More attention has focused on the provision of what caused Plath to write these death images. Analysis of Plath's psychological status and her sufferings as the daughter who lost her father as a teenager and the wife of a husband who committed domestic violence was of general concern. But how Plath wrote these images were rarely mentioned by scholars. By using pastiche, Plath liberated her concept of death from the anxiety and negativity of modernism, thus innovating the concept of death. In the poet's work, death no longer only means despair or just a tool of heightening the tragic atmosphere to appeal for the return of humanity, but a pursuit of freedom and the defense of herself. This paper intends to survey these death images based on the theory of pastiche to argue that pastiche enables Plath to border the concept of death to a wider range.

To explore how Plath adapted pastiche as a technique to convey her death images in her poems, *Ariel* and *Daddy*, this paper is mainly illustrated in two sections. The first is how Plath uses pastiche.

In this section, we will discuss the role that pastiche played in the postmodern text, and what is the difference between pastiche and other techniques and rhetoric that poets used. The second section is about how pastiche distinguished Plath's death image from the dark and desperate connotations of modernist works. By analyzing the function of pastiche and the pursuit of the poet, one could find Plath's real thoughts on death and the enrichment and transformation of the connotation of death.

2. The Use of Pastiche

This section will introduce the theory of pastiche thoroughly from its definition, features and functions and analyze how Plath used this technique.

2.1 Definition of Pastiche

Sylvia Plath, one of the most talented poets among the Avant-garde poets of the mid-twentieth century was a member of the Confessional School where mental condition, depression, and self-examination were the common themes. From her works, a mass of expressions of death can be very distinct that almost in every single poem. Death seemed not to be distant for her since she had suffered adversity during her short life. She lost her father when she was ten and married a man who abused her very deeply. Her poems metaphorically reflected her life, and the use of pastiche is very open to being seen in her poems.

The term “pastiche” was originally a jargon that appeared in French art fields at the end of the seventeenth century and it was borrowed from the Italian “pasticcio” which means “a hodgepodge of meat, vegetables, eggs, and a host of other variable additions[2].”¹ After the Italian Renaissance, pasticcio became a low-level style of painting in art circles, referring to a painter who made a patchwork of paintings without a unified style and whose work was a mess.

In the postmodern context, pastiche infiltrates every field of cultural creation and becomes a distinctive feature of postmodernism. As Fredrick Jameson believed, “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic[3].” from which the implications have changed, and pastiche is no longer a byword for chaos and bad, but an emotionless, objective way of constructing a text. Jameson believes that postmodernism is late capitalism because its social nature has not changed, and the means to create cultural production based on an economic base remain the same. To produce new work, people have to adapt what is old and collage things together.

2.2 Distinction Between Parody and Pastiche

It is an inevitable truth that sometimes people cannot distinguish between parody and pastiche because they both can be treated as a kind of imitation. Parody is an imitation of the uniqueness of styles and seizes on their eccentricities to mock the original. Whether people are intentionally satirizing or mocking or not, the emotion injected in the text whether it could be sympathy or hate cannot be hidden. Even bad actors are trying to step into their characters, there must be felt in the back of parody. And people should think a lot regarding strict historical and social context. Pastiche, however, is approached as a “neutral parody”. For Jameson pastiche isn't a detailed imitation that has rigorous logic and necessary argument that parody historically engaged in. It is messy, illogical, emotionless, and just a form of exterior referencing of the texts. The transition from parody to pastiche gave pastiche a new meaning and mission in conveying texts making it one of the most striking features or practices in postmodernism today.

2.3 Functions of Pastiche

Pastiche was considered to be multi-functional in analyzing texts. It served as a connector between different texts that presents the voice of predecessors and brings their essence to new works that could create new metaphors and double vision for these two authors cannot share perfectly consistent aims and styles. Meanwhile, pastiche revitalizes the style of the past directly or indirectly and functioned in culture to reinforce the necessity of retelling and repetition. When the values keep being mentioned, people are easy to accept and internalize them. What's more, pastiche breaks the imitation of aesthetics and ideology. Pastiche, as the neutral practice of such mimicry, has no emotion that saves the texts and styles it imitates from certain bound of background. What is noteworthy is that pastiche can also be an efficient method of creating a certain truth. Although pastiche is a reproduction of the fact, the difference between the reconstructed fact and the fact lies in that the former tends to have the perspective of the pasticheur and is the reality of the pasticheur himself [4].

2.4 Pastiche in Sylvia Plath's Work

In the poem *Daddy*, Plath adapted pastiche to create a certain reality to recall her time with her father and put forward her interpretation of death in a unique way.

*You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo* [5].

In the first line of the poem, the narrator mimics Dickinson's typical frank voice by directly confessing the fact of her father's absence and implying his death. Meanwhile, the narrator showed a very simple rhyme with "oo" and mixed childish words like "achoo" to imitate the style of nursery rhymes in the fifth stanza. For Plath, it was a reconstruction of her childhood, a personal reality only belongs to herself because her father no longer lived, and her recollection was a blur. The pastiche distinguishes this reappearance from reality, and in these stanzas, readers can see both the innocence of nursery rhymes and Dickinson's frankness and the shadow cast over Plath's childhood. Although everything looks like a normal childhood memory, the emotional mix brought by the pastiche reveals her lingering feelings for her father.

*In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common* [6].

This time, the narrator becomes a witness of the war, a true victim of the Nazi's holocaust. Plath's father was a German and "German tongue" in the first stanza of this section stands for her father's appearance by using pastiche, Plath recounted her childhood trauma by her father, a representation of patriarchy and even lifetime suffering in a Polish town that was razed to the ground by Nazi. Plath was crazy, for connecting the most intolerable misery, the crime fascists made to her own experience. This major historical event evoked the public memory through personal memories which made readers better understand what happened to the poet, even the whole female group. However, the tone of the pastiche is cold, all Plath did were an emotionless restatement. In the end, it was the poet who turned the violence against herself and swallowed all the fear and pain without yelling out [7].

*An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.*

I think I may well be a Jew [8].

BRITZOLAKIS believes that Plath's conception of memory as a theatre within which a repressed Oedipal drama is revived is self-reflexive and densely intertextual; a pastiche of autobiography, and literary appropriations (such as the Oresteia), and Freudian psychoanalysis [9].” In this section, readers follow the lead of the narrator by putting themselves into a big engine of Nazi and imagining themselves as a Jew. Plath made a vague connection between the Nazis and her father, and the German language served as an engine that took her and the people to the camps. They were caught and were thrown to strange places without knowing either the accurate direction or their destiny. Plath superimposed the reality of abuse and murder of Jewish people on top of the fact that she was controlled and hurt by males. Two unrelated facts come together to express cruelty beyond reality. Being as a Jew, readers at the moment we're not themselves. They couldn't make their own choices because they were deprived of their subjectivity and were marginalized and forced to die. And it all started with her father's absence and her husband's abuse. What pastiche can do is sort of erase the ideology of the Holocaust, to make the event itself use of poetry, to make the overwhelming pain impersonal and universal to everyone that man's dominance is just like what Nazis have done to Jews and death is what ends up with.

3. Plath's Interpretation of Death

This section will explain Plath's understanding of death and how pastiche helped her present it.

3.1 Change Made by Plath

The original meaning of death is the interruption or end of the living form. But since human beings have consciousness, death is transferred into a phenomenological realm unified by spirituality and materiality [10]. In the period of modernism, creators attach great importance to individual values against tradition, which is inseparable from the prevailing philosophical view at that time. Heidegger's ontology shines brightly in this period. In his view, existence is always being close to death. "Where Existence is terminated without really dying, as Existence can simply not be wasted, we understand this phenomenon as death(demise). However, death(dying) is a way in which Existence is assigned to his death. Thus, we must say that Existence can never be wasted, but Existence dies just as long as it can die [11]." During this period, people turned to reality and face death. Many works reveal fear and hesitation and boldly show bloody truth. Readers can observe the tragedy and absurdity in the works and reflect on their real lives. It is an important function of modern works to appeal to the masses to repent and be kind by depicting the loss and pain of death. However, Plath's interpretation of death is more personal, and she does not consciously require her works to demonstrate social responsibility. Death is an art, a positive choice, and a self-salvation and defense for her. Using pastiche, Plath embodied these pursuits.

3.2 Death is an Art

This point was shown obviously in Plath's *Lady Lazarus*, and she clarified her view through the narrator.

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well [12].

Poetry may be a literary genre that comes closest to art. Perhaps Plath has established psychological trust with her poems. Even death, the most horrible topic can be turned into unique works of art through grinding, and pastiche is one of the ways Plath makes it into art.

In *Daddy*, Plath took people back to the days of Jews and concentration camps by using pastiche.

She sculpted carefully, piecing together one image after another in a seemingly chaotic way, pulling the memory out of the long record. History, experienced or only remembered, is presented in isolation, like a standing building, to be visited and talked about. War and the holocaust themselves may not be called art. The ruthless sensibility of pastiche turns the real death of war into a relatively indifferent and universal death. And this kind of death bears the corresponding aesthetic value in poetry.

3.3 Death as Self-defense and Self-redemption

Sylvia Plath did not skimp on her description of death, and the images of death are often fearless and aggressive. In the poem *Ariel, the dew that flies/ Suicidal, at one with the drive/ Into the red* [13]. In *elm* this is more direct: *Now I break up into pieces that fly about like clubs* [14]. It seems that Plath was rushing to death, and death has become a positive symbol which is different from people's view that death is depression and darkness in the previous period.

Plath once mentioned in a conversation that death is the killing of the false self and the rebirth of the hidden true self. She has also expressed her attraction to self-destruction, like "a moth to an electric light bulb [15]." Sylvia Plath's life ran certainly not smooth and happy, she could not tolerate the violence of patriarchy trampling her life, this was out of anger and the reality of inaction naturally made her resistant. Perhaps it is because these vast contradictions are inextricable, or perhaps because Plath was not constrained by real life and would not be caged by physical existence. She chose a seemingly radical, but gentle and firm approach to the problem, and that is death.

In *Daddy*, pastiche, as a dead language, is a stack of unconstrained images and a mechanical reproduction of reality. This repetition serves the poet's purpose by squeezing out the emotions attached to the facts. Plath adapted pastiche to talk about facts that should be cruel in a paralyzing tone. This apathy laid the artistic foundation for her suicidal impulse and longing for death in the poem and also provides a piece of evidence for her self-defense to obtain salvation. She reappeared in the reality of Jewish people, and in an indifferent way she inserted the narrator into the Jewish body, wiping the possibility of acting as an individual. What happened to the poet was as terrible and cruel as the Jews who were slaughtered. Pastiche made cruelty a background rather than an outcome, a means to call on readers to examine themselves and build moral walls. That provided a cause for expressing her wish to die and to say: *And a love of the rack and the screw. /And I said I do, I do. /So daddy, I'm finally through* [16].

4. Conclusion

Based on Jameson's theory of pastiche, this paper discusses the theme of death in Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* and her concept of death. The use of pastiche follows Plath's expression of these poems with death image, enabling Plath to more smoothly show her interpretation of death: art, self-defense and redemption.

The first part of this paper introduces Jameson's pastiche theory and discusses its particularity as an indispensable part of postmodern theory from the perspective of definition, function and the difference between parody and pastiche. At the same time, the pastiche in Plath's poem *Daddy* is also analyzed. Plath created a new, medley reality from objective historical facts by using pastiche technique that cut across ideological constraints. This description can give readers a certain reference to understand Plath's situation, her trauma and patriarchal society's persecution of women. The second part of the paper introduces Plath's interpretation of death and the contribution of pastiche to these interpretations. The paper explores Plath's understanding of death as art, self-defense and redemption. It started with discussing death in modernist works that despair and darkness were the major connotation and Plath successfully enriched it. The use of pastiche technique made death in Plath's writing break away from the constraints of moral standards and become a positive choice and pursuit.

Living under violence and oppression, Plath did not complain, but chose to bear all the pain herself. It seems that she did not really care about the physical existence of the body but pursued spiritual liberation. Even when it comes to death, an event that many people consider terrible, Plath maintained a true and unique understanding of it. This paper intends to discuss death, a popular topic in Plath's poetry, and the transformation of the meaning of death from the perspective of different academic studies. It also shows the role of pastiche theory in postmodern literature and artistic creation.

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