



Echoes of Mental Health Issues in Literature: An Exploration of Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Literature serves as a mirror to our own experiences, validating our emotions and thoughts. This research paper aims to delve into the fascinating intersection of literature and mental health, unravelling the profound impact of psychological state on individuals through literature. By examining relevant concepts, incorporating insightful perspectives, and drawing upon existing literature, this paper embarks on a multidimensional journey to explore the potential of literature as a therapeutic tool in the realm of mental health. The researchers will analyse two poems, by Sylvia Plath, "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" through the lens of psychoanalysis. To explain the situation of the speaker of the poems, a few of Sigmund Freud's concepts will be applied to the poems. This paper explores the complexities of mental health issues through Sylvia Plath's poems.

Sylvia Plath is a renowned American poet who is well-known for her depiction of mental health issues through her works. She uses poetry as a medium to explore her state of mind, her perspectives, and her resentment of society by using symbolism, which gives literary context to her mental health. Her poetry often explores the complexities of living with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, trauma, drawing from her own experiences with mental illness. In her poems, Plath creates vivid and powerful imagery that brings to life the internal struggles of those who are affected by mental health problems. In this research project, the researcher is analyzing two poems by Sylvia Plath, which showcase her struggles with mental illness and the need to address them in modern society. Through her poems, she delves into the experiences of a young woman struggling with mental health issues and feeling trapped by societal expectations. The honest and realistic depiction of mental health problems has helped her to bring greater awareness and understanding of these issues.

Plath tries to break the stereotypes of mental health problems and explicitly portrays how this is not a disease but a state of mind, which will be recognised and normalised in society. Throughout her work, Plath offers an eloquent portrayal of the complicated and often painful experience of living with mental illness. Her confessional poetry brings to life the internal struggles of those who are affected by mental illness, exploring themes of anger, resentment, self-harm, trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and suicide.

Keywords: Mental Health, Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Confessional Poetry, Imagery, Symbolism

Introduction

At the onset, it is crucial to get a thorough grasp of mental health to lay the groundwork for this paper. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is "a state of well-being in which every individual realises their potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to their community" (World Health Organisation, 2021). With an emphasis on the value of emotional well-being, personal development, resilience, and social connectivity, this definition highlights the comprehensive character of mental health.

Helen Keller writes that her books are her friends and "talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness" (Keller, *The Story of My Life*, Ch.21). Here she captures the special ability of literature to cross boundaries and comfort those going through hardship. In addition to providing a secure environment where people may interact with fictional characters and tales to find comfort and empathy, it emphasises literature's function as a tool for connection and understanding. Literature offers a refuge from the struggles of everyday life, enabling people to go on transformational journeys, momentarily abandoning their reality, and submerging themselves in other worlds, viewpoints, and experiences.

Literature as a Therapeutic Tool

Numerous researchers have looked at the potential therapeutic advantages of reading. The word "bibliotherapy" was developed by researchers to refer to the deliberate application of literature to psychological healing and personal development. Meeting people's emotional and psychological needs entails choosing and reading texts, which promote self-reflection, empathy, and resilience.

Literature promotes identification, catharsis, and the development of empathy in the field of mental health. People can acquire an understanding of their own experiences, have their feelings validated, and feel a sense of belonging by connecting with characters who are going through similar problems. Literature

also serves as a catalyst for introspection, inspiring readers to contemplate, face their inner demons, and set out on personal growth journeys.

Mental health refers to the overall psychological well-being of an individual. It encompasses our emotional, social, and cognitive functioning and affects the way one thinks, feels, and behaves. Good mental health allows people to cope-up with the challenges and pressures of daily life, maintain healthy relationships, and fulfil their potential. Mental health is influenced by various factors such as surroundings, genes, and brutal and painful life experiences. Mental health disorders can manifest in different ways, including anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder (BPD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma, stress, and eating disorder. It is critical to realise that maintaining good mental health should be treated with the same priority as maintaining good physical health. Seeking professional help and support, practicing self-care and healthy habits, and addressing mental health concerns can lead to an improved standard of life and overall well-being of a person.

Mental health issues have been on the rise in contemporary times, with many people experiencing difficulties related to their mental health. Here are some common mental health issues that people face in the present day as anxiety disorders: Among the most common mental health problems impacting people today are anxiety disorders including generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and particular phobias. Symptoms include excessive worry, panic attacks, and avoidance behaviours. The most prevalent mental health condition, depression, is experienced by millions of individuals worldwide. Symptoms include sorrow, a sense of helplessness, and a lack of interest in once-pleasurable pursuits. Eating Disorders: Many people, particularly women, are impacted by eating disorders, which include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. These disorders can have severe physical and psychological consequences and can be challenging to overcome. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): PTSD is a mental health issue that typically appears after going through or seeing a stressful incident. Flashbacks, nightmares, and the perception of triggers connected to the event are symptoms. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): Both children and adults can suffer from

ADHD, a widespread mental health condition. Focusing issues, impulsivity, and hyperactivity are among the symptoms that may be present. It is essential to seek help and support when experiencing any of these mental health issues. A mental health professional can provide a proper diagnosis, offer treatment options, and provide guidance on how to manage and cope with mental health challenges.

Literature and Psychology

Psychology has been a topic of interest in literature for centuries, as writers have sought to explore the complexities of human behaviour and emotions. However, the study of psychology as a distinct scientific discipline emerged in the late 19th century, and its influence on literature can be seen in various ways. One way in which psychology has influenced literature is through the development of characters. Authors have used their understanding of human psychology to create complex and nuanced characters that feel like real people, with their own fears, desires, and motivations. For example, the characters in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels are known for their psychological depth and complexity, as he sought to explore the darker aspects of human nature.

Another way in which psychology has influenced literature is through the exploration of mental illness and the human psyche. Writers such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath used their own experiences with mental illness to create powerful and insightful works of literature that shed light on the human condition. Psychology has also influenced literature in terms of narrative structure and style. Writers have experimented with different narrative techniques, such as stream of consciousness, to convey the inner thoughts and emotions of their characters. This has led to a greater emphasis on the subjective experience of the individual, as opposed to a more objective and external view of the world. Overall, psychology has had a profound influence on literature, as writers have used their understanding of human behaviour and emotions to create works of art that speak to the human experience in powerful and meaningful ways.

As authors have long aimed to investigate the complexity of mental illness and its effects on people as well as society, the representation of mental health in literature has been a subject of study. Literature can provide a unique perspective

on mental health by allowing readers to enter the minds of characters and experience their struggles first-hand.

In literature, mental illness is often portrayed with a great deal of sensitivity and compassion. Writers strive to portray their characters in a way that is respectful and non-judgmental and accurately represent the experiences of those living with mental health issues. Through their writing, authors can shed light on the stigma and misunderstanding surrounding mental illness, and help to promote greater understanding and empathy.

The fight to preserve a feeling of identity and control amid disease is one of the most frequently occurring topics in writing on mental health. Mentally ill characters frequently exhibit feelings of alienation and disconnection from their surroundings as well as a struggle to find meaning and purpose in their life. However, literature can also be a source of hope and inspiration, as characters find ways to cope with their illness and reclaim their sense of self.

Overall, the portrayal of mental health in literature can help to raise awareness about mental illness and its impact on individuals and society. Literature may serve to foster more understanding, empathy, and compassion as well as inspire meaningful conversation on mental health by providing a window into the perspectives of individuals who are dealing with mental health difficulties.

Psychology and literature are two fields that have been closely intertwined for centuries. Here are some key elements of psychology that are commonly found in literature in various genres and Plath's poems.

Character development: Psychology has greatly influenced the way writers develop their characters. Through their understanding of human behaviour and motivation, writers are able to create characters that feel like real people, with their own fears, desires, and motivations. Inner dialogue: Literature often employs the use of inner dialogue or stream-of-consciousness writing to provide readers with a glimpse into a character's thoughts and emotions. This allows readers to experience a character's inner world more intimately and authentically. In the poem 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', the speakers of the respective poems presented their mental states, which are realistic in every manner.

Mental illness: Literature has been a powerful tool for exploring mental illness, with writers drawing on their knowledge of psychology to create nuanced portrayals of characters living with mental health issues. This has helped to increase the understanding of mental health issues, which as a result reduces the stigma surrounding them.

Trauma and memory: Psychology has also influenced the way literature explores trauma and memory. Writers often use techniques such as flashbacks and foreshadowing to convey the impact of past experiences on a character's psyche.

Symbolism: Symbolism is often used in literature to represent complex psychological concepts, such as the subconscious or the shadow self. This allows writers to convey psychological themes and ideas in a more abstract and symbolic way.

Perception and cognition: Literature often explores how people perceive and process information, and how this affects their behaviour and emotions. In order to examine the subjectivity of vision, writers may employ strategies like shaky narration.

Social influence: Literature may also examine how social influence affects people's views and behaviour. Authors may look at how social pressure, group dynamics, and social standards might affect how we think and behave. Overall, the elements of psychology in literature offer a powerful means of exploring the complexities of the human mind and the human experience and can help to promote greater understanding, empathy, and compassion. The two poems by Plath, which are taken for study reflected all the characteristics and connect not only the speakers of the poems to the readers but speak on behalf of all those who are dealing with such conditions.

Positioning Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932 and raised in a household that valued education and success highly. She is known for her vivid and often intense depictions of mental illness in her poetry. Plath's own struggles with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts heavily influenced her work, and she often used

her poetry as a way to process and explore these difficult experiences. Two of her famous poems, "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" deals with the depiction of mental illness and suicide. The poem "Lady Lazarus" uses powerful imagery which explores the themes of death and rebirth, with the speaker who is declaring that she has done it again, Plath, and survived another suicide attempt.

Overall, her poetry is often seen as a portrayal of the complex and disturbing experience of living with mental illness. While her work can be difficult and intense, it has also helped to bring greater understanding and awareness to issues of mental health and the struggles faced by those who are affected by mental illness. Most of her poems are known to be Confessional Poetry.

Traumatic experiences in the poem "Daddy"

Trauma is a psychological and emotional reaction to a very upsetting or unpleasant event or experience. It can be brought on by a variety of circumstances, such as physical or mental abuse, war, accidents, natural disasters, or other traumatic or life-threatening situations.

Trauma may cause the mind and body to react in a number of different ways, such as with emotions of dread, worry, sadness, helplessness, and a sensation of being out of control. Trauma symptoms might include nightmares, flashbacks, avoiding things that remind them of the trauma, being overly vigilant, and having trouble with relationships and trust. It may have long-term consequences for a person's mental health and well-being, which may affect their capacity to carry out everyday activities.

"Daddy" is one of Sylvia Plath's most well-known and divisive poems. The poem passionately and in-depth explores the poet's connection with her father, Otto Plath, who passed away when she was just eight years old. In this project, the poem will be examined through the prism of psychological factors, and the themes and motifs that give it such a potent literary impact will be explored.

Plath's famous poem, "Daddy," is often seen as a powerful expression of her anger and resentment towards her father. The poem also contains many allusions to

mental illness, such as the lines "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." (Plath 48-50) Here, Plath seems to be suggesting that her father's authoritarian and abusive behaviour contributed to her own struggles with mental illness. The poem also explores themes of self-harm and suicide, with the speaker declaring that she has "if I've killed one man, / I've killed two," (Plath 71) referring to her own attempted suicides.

"Daddy" is a confessional poem that delves deep into the poet's psyche, exploring her feelings of anger, guilt, and sorrow toward her father. The poem is structured into sixteen stanzas, each with five lines, and follows a loose rhyme scheme that adds to the poem's musicality.

The first stanza begins with the iconic line, "You do not do, you do not do / Anymore, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo." (Plath 1-5) This opening sets the tone for the poem, as Plath portrays her father as a dominant figure who has controlled her life for thirty years. The metaphor of the shoe emphasizes the suffocating nature of their relationship, as she has been trapped within his shadow for her entire life.

Throughout the poem, Plath uses powerful imagery to describe her father, painting him as a Nazi and a vampire, among other things. She describes him as "the brute heart of a brute like you," (Plath 50) a "fascist," and a "Panzer-man." These images evoke the terror and violence of the Holocaust and suggest that Plath's father may have been complicit in the atrocities committed by the Nazis. "Daddy," there is a prominent mention of Nazis and the Holocaust. Plath compares her father to a Nazi and herself to a Jew, using the Holocaust as a metaphor for the emotional abuse she suffered at her father's hands.

Plath's use of Nazi imagery in "Daddy" is a powerful way of conveying the extent of her trauma and the long-lasting effects of emotional abuse. The comparison between her father and the Nazis also emphasizes the universal nature of trauma and the ways in which it can be linked to wider historical events.

The use of Nazi imagery in the poem is significant as it reflects the horror and trauma of the Holocaust, which Plath saw as a symbol of the ultimate evil. By

drawing this comparison between her father and the Nazis, Plath is emphasizing the intensity of her emotional pain and the oppressive nature of her relationship with her father. She is also using this imagery to suggest that her father's abuse was not just personal, but had wider implications for the world.

The most controversial aspect of the poem is its portrayal of Plath's relationship with her father as abusive in nature. She describes him as a "ghastly statue with one Gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal" (Plath 9-10) and suggests that he may have molested her as a child. This imagery is disturbing and difficult to interpret, but it underscores the intensity of Plath's feelings toward her father and the trauma that she suffered as a result of their relationship.

The final stanza of the poem is a powerful declaration of independence, as Plath proclaims, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." (Plath 80) This line suggests that she has finally come to terms with her father's death and has found a way to move beyond the shadow of his influence. The poem ends with the line, "And the language obscene / 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." (Plath 31-35) This final stanza is difficult to interpret, but it suggests that Plath has found a new identity and a new voice through her writing.

Throughout the poem, the speaker portrays her father as a larger-than-life figure who looms over her even in death. She describes him as a "black shoe" and a "ghastly statue" that she can never escape. The speaker also expresses anger towards her father, referring to him as a "bastard" and a "vampire."

However, the speaker's feelings towards her father are also tinged with a sense of longing and desire. She describes herself as "a little girl" who wants to be "daddy's girl." This desire for closeness with her father is complicated by his absence and the feelings of betrayal and abandonment that the speaker experiences.

One of the main aspects which should be looked upon after reading and analysing "Daddy" is her complex relationship with her father, and his anger towards her leading to Plath's lifelong suffering of trauma. At a very fragile age of just eight Plath had gone through so much that even when she turned 30, her trauma didn't leave her side and it had now turned into a post-traumatic disorder.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, series of events, or set of circumstances. An individual may experience this as emotionally or physically harmful or life-threatening and may affect mental, physical, social, and/or spiritual well-being. Examples include natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, war/combat, rape/sexual assault, historical trauma, intimate partner violence, and bullying. People with PTSD have intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings related to their experience that last long after the traumatic event has ended.

A stressful experience can lead to the development of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental health disease. PTSD can develop as a result of a range of experiences, including vehicle accidents, sexual or physical abuse, natural catastrophes, or military engagement.

Flashbacks or disturbing recollections of the traumatic incident, nightmares, avoiding stimuli connected to the trauma, hypervigilance, and depressing mood or cognitive shifts can all be symptoms of PTSD.

In the last line of stanza five, Plath again mentions herself as a Jew she writes that "I think I am a Jew" which supports the statement that her suffering had been going on for years just like the Jew suffered. Even at the age of thirty she could remember and feel the terror of her father. And his abusive behaviour had left heavy marks of lifelong trauma.

Sigmund Freud's theories on the psyche, particularly the concept of the unconscious, can be applied to Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" in several ways. The poem can be interpreted as a representation of the speaker's unconscious desires and conflicts, particularly with regard to her relationship with her father.

In Freud's theory, the unconscious is a part of the psyche that contains repressed thoughts, memories, and desires that the individual is not aware of. These unconscious thoughts and desires can manifest in dreams, fantasies, and other forms of creative expression.

In "Daddy," the speaker describes her relationship with her father in complex and often contradictory ways. She speaks of his death and how she has attempted to replace him with other men, but there are also hints of sexual attraction and tension in the poem, particularly in lines like "I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look" (Plath 64-65) and "If I've killed one man, I've killed two— / The vampire who said he was you." (Plath 71-72)

These lines suggest that the speaker may have repressed sexual desires toward her father and that her feelings toward him are conflicted. The use of violent language and imagery in the poem can also be seen as a manifestation of the speaker's unconscious desires and conflicts.

Overall, Freud's theory of the unconscious can be applied to "Daddy" as a way of understanding the complex and often conflicting relationship between the speaker and her father. The poem can be interpreted as an expression of the speaker's unconscious desires and conflicts, particularly with regard to her sexuality and her relationship with her father.

In conclusion, Daddy is a powerful and controversial poem that explores the complex relationship between Sylvia Plath and her father. The poem uses powerful imagery and metaphor to convey the suffocating nature of their relationship and the trauma that Plath suffered as a result of it. While the poem's portrayal of a sexual relationship between father and daughter has sparked controversy, its final stanza suggests that Plath has found a way to move beyond her father's influence and find a new identity through her writing. 'Daddy' is a seminal work of confessional poetry and a testament to Sylvia Plath's enduring legacy as a writer.

A Struggle between Thanatos and Eros in the poem "Lady Lazarus"

"Lady Lazarus" is a poem written by Sylvia Plath, published posthumously in 1965. The poem is often interpreted as an expression of Plath's own struggle with mental illness and suicidal ideation. In this psychological analysis, the examination of the themes and imagery in the poem attempts to shed light on the possible psychological motivations behind Plath's words.

Firstly, the title of the poem itself is significant. Lazarus was a figure from the Bible who was raised from the dead by Jesus, and Plath's use of this name suggests a desire for resurrection or rebirth. However, the term "Lady" implies a certain level of detachment or irony, as if Plath is aware of the futility of such a wish.

Throughout the poem, Plath uses powerful and often violent imagery to describe the speaker's own body and experiences. For example, she describes herself as a "walking miracle" and a "sort of fish," and refers to her own body as a "grave." These images suggest a deep sense of self-loathing and a desire to escape from one's own physical existence.

Plath also uses a number of holocaust references in the poem, such as the line "Auschwitz, Dachau, Belsen," which further emphasizes the theme of death and destruction. This could be seen as a reflection of Plath's own personal struggles with depression and suicide, as well as her awareness of the wider cultural trauma of the 20th century.

Another key theme in the poem is the idea of performance or spectacle. The speaker describes herself as a "living doll" and a "Frigid, rigid priestess" who is "dying is an art." This suggests a desire to be seen and acknowledged, even in the midst of intense emotional pain.

The poem tells the story of a lazy man named Lazarus who has died and been buried. However, he refuses to leave his grave and return to the world of the living, preferring to stay in his comfortable coffin. The poem's narrator, who is presumably a friend or family member of Lazarus, tries to convince him to come back to life but is ultimately unsuccessful.

While suicide is not directly referenced in the poem, the idea of choosing death over life is present in the character of Lazarus. His refusal to leave his grave and rejoin the living world can be seen as a metaphor for someone who is so depressed or despairing that they have given up on life. Additionally, Plath herself struggled with depression throughout her life, and her personal experiences with mental illness likely influenced her writing. One of the major themes is the resurrection which is present in Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" as the narrator

tries to convince the character of Lazarus to come back to life and rejoin the living world.

However, the idea of resurrection is also complicated in the poem. While Lazarus ultimately decides to stay in his grave, he is described as being happy and content in his death. This can be seen as a critique of the idea of resurrection and the belief that life after death is always better than life in the here and now. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, believed that human beings have a natural fear of death, which he referred to as "Thanatos." According to Freud, Thanatos is an inherent drive towards self-destruction and death, which is countered by the life instinct, or "eros."

In Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus," one sees a connection to Freud's theory of death. The poem is about a woman who has attempted suicide several times and is seemingly reborn each time. The speaker of the poem, Lady Lazarus, talks about her near-death experiences and her desire to die. Freud would argue that Lady Lazarus is driven by her Thanatos or her desire for self-destruction. She is unable to fully embrace life and instead seeks to escape it. However, Freud also believed that this drive towards death could be overcome by the life instinct. In the poem, Lady Lazarus seems to be fighting against her desire for death, stating that she is a "walking miracle" and that she has "eaten men like air."

The poem can be interpreted as a struggle between Thanatos and Eros. Lady Lazarus is constantly battling her desire for death with her desire to live. However, she is unable to fully overcome her desire for self-destruction, as evidenced by her repeated attempts at suicide. The connection between Freud's theory of death and "Lady Lazarus" highlights the human struggle with mortality and the desire for self-destruction. The poem is a powerful expression of this struggle and the complexities of the human psyche.

Overall, the psychological analysis of "Lady Lazarus" suggests that the poem is a deeply personal expression of Plath's own struggles with mental illness and suicidal ideation. The use of powerful and often violent imagery, as well as references to the Holocaust and themes of performance and spectacle, suggest a complex and multifaceted psychological landscape. Through her writing, Plath

was able to explore and give voice to her innermost thoughts and emotions, even as she struggled to find a way to live with them.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath has contributed to a wider awareness and understanding of the complexity of mental health through her vivid and frank portrayals of the inner difficulties of those living with mental illness. Her poetry, which explores issues of mental illness, and suicide, has had a profound influence on current writing and continues to inspire people all over the world.

Literature can provide a unique perspective on mental health by allowing readers to enter the minds of characters and experience their struggles first-hand. It can also help to raise awareness and encourage meaningful dialogue about mental health. Psychology has been used in literature to explore trauma and memory, perception and cognition, social influence, and group dynamics, social norms, and social pressure.

"Daddy" is a powerful expression of Sylvia Plath's anger and resentment towards her father, and contains allusions to mental illness. Plath's use of Nazi imagery in "Daddy" is a powerful way of conveying the extent of her trauma and the long-lasting effects of emotional abuse, which left her with life-long Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"Lady Lazarus" is an expression of her struggle with mental illness and suicidal ideation, using powerful imagery and holocaust references to emphasize the theme of death and destruction. It also suggests a desire to be seen and acknowledged, even in the midst of intense emotional pain. Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" is a critique of the idea of resurrection and the belief that life after death is better than life in the here and now. Lady Lazarus is a powerful expression of Plath's own struggles with mental illness and suicidal ideation, highlighting the human struggle with mortality and the desire for self-destruction.

In conclusion, after reading and connecting literature with the field of psychology, it is seen that when a writer expresses their struggles through the art of writing,

the outcome not only becomes a piece of writing but helps to inspire a lot of people who go through similar situations. While analysing Plath's poems, it was seen she suffered from depression, suicidal thoughts, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which later led to her death when she was just thirty years old by suicide. Her poems show the plight and predicament of an individual struggling with mental health issues, and she also tried to cover the gap between mental health patients and society.

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