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The Emotional Theme of Loss Throughout Poetry

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Abstract

This paper sheds light over the notion of expressing 'loss' and grievances in poetry. It also argues how important is poetry as an essential literary genre. By choosing one poet, argue for the ability of his or her poetry to help us view the world anew. How does his/her work offer us new ways of using language to heighten and refine our thought and experience.

This study concentrates on the pervasive theme of loss in poetry and how it is conveyed through the works of Anne Sexton, William Stafford, and Robert Lowell. By exploring the emotional depth and the linguistic nuances in their poems, it is an attempt to highlight how poetry becomes a powerful medium for expressing grief, loneliness, and sorrow. The focus is on Sexton's "The Truth the Dead Know," Stafford's "Travelling Through the Dark," and Lowell's "To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage." Each poem uniquely portrays loss: Sexton's confessional style delves into personal grief over the death of her parents, Stafford's understated yet poignant narrative contemplates the death of a deer and its unborn fawn, and Lowell's dramatic monologue captures the disintegration of a marriage. This analysis argues that these poets use language innovatively to evoke deep emotional responses, enabling readers to perceive loss from new perspectives. By delving into the intimate, often painful experiences depicted in these poems, readers gain insights into the human condition and the universality of loss. The paper underscores the significance of poetry as a literary genre that not only articulates personal anguish but also fosters a shared understanding of collective human experiences.

Introduction

There are many reasons as to why poetry is written and why poets are inspired to write the poetry they do. Poetry is a form of written expression usually taking on an emotional tone in order to portray an event, an emotion, a character or a thought that the poet has encountered. Poems are a way in which the audience and the poet can connect deeply on an emotional level. (Schneberg, Adler, ٢٠١١), pg. ١٦-١٧). The following poems, I believe, have been written by the poets to represent a deep and underlying emotion through the subject of loss. The chosen poems express themes which have been employed that position myself as the reader to empathise with the characters within the poems or with the poets themselves. All poems portray an event of loss through situations that cause loneliness, grief, regret, remorse or sadness. The poems that have portrayed the theme of loss are; 'The Truth The Dead Know' by Anne Sexton, 'Travelling Through the Dark' by William Stafford, and 'To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage' by Robert Lowell.

The first poem under analysis in terms of the poetic content that makes this poem an empathising poem is

- **Anne Sexton: 'The Truth Dead Know'**

Anne Sexton is a confessional poet known for her highly personal and confessional verse and her engagement with controversial and taboo subjects (Poetry Foundation, ٢٠١٤ & Hedley, ٢٠٠٩, pp. ١, ٢٠). Many of her poems expressed her battle with depression and mental illness. Anne Sexton first began writing poetry when her therapist suggested writing how she felt as a coping mechanism (Poetry Foundation. ٢٠١٢).

'The Truth the Dead Know' is a poem by Anne Sexton that she wrote following the passing of her parents. This poem is dedicated to her mother and father who died three months apart. Underneath the title of the poem it has her mothers and fathers passing date written as: "For my mother, born March ١٩٠٢, died March ١٩٥٩ and my father, born February ١٩٠٠, died June ١٩٥٩." Critic Hemly (٢٠٠٦, p. ١٦٥) raves about this poem and states that "*The sure attack, the fine use of sound, make it clear from the start that Mrs. Sexton is a lyricist of power*".

Throughout this poem it can be seen that Anne Sexton shared a close relationship with her parents and deeply felt their loss. The first we are known of their loss, other than the first few sentences dedicating the poem to their death, is

when Anne speaks of the funeral. Lines one, two and three give a clear indication of the setting of their funeral. In line four Anne gives the first indication of how she feels in "I am tired of being brave". Suggesting physical exhaustion to describe the loss of her parents enhances the sadness and loss that is major theme throughout the poem. Anne also uses words such as "stone", "iron gate", and "dead" to set a certain tone of heaviness and sadness throughout her poem.

A feature of Anne's poetry writing is her fixture on human intimacy, both as a theme and at the centre of her writing (Ostriker, ١٩٨٨). With her use of this intimacy it can be discovered that she was close with her parents and deeply misses them. An example of the intimacy she is known to express is with the word "touch". A word that she uses twice within this poem. Firstly in line ٨, "we touch", and then secondly in line ١١ "we touch entirely". I believe she is using this word to express her love for her parents as if she longs to touch them again. The transition from "touch" to "touch entirely" could indicate her growing sense of loss that establishes itself over time. The expression of intimacy that Anne Sexton has used within this poem adds to the theme of grief and sympathy.

The sadness that Anne Sexton has represented within her poem is one of loss and disconnection between her and her parents. Within this poem Anne has used words and phrases to emphasise her sadness in order for her to portray her feelings of loss.

- ***William Stafford: 'Traveling Through the dark'***

William Stafford's "Travelling Through the Dark" also exhibits an element of sadness within it, stemming from a loss of life.

William Stafford is considered to have a style of poetry that, at first glance, appears simple. Although after consideration and looking closer at his poems it can be seen that his work is highly complex and intricate. His persona of speech is considered gentle, mystical and deeply personal through his documents of his daydreams of the Western United States (Academy of American Poets, ٢٠١٤). In an interview conducted by William Young in ١٩٨٩, William Stafford portrayed a modest, humbled and gentle persona. He engaged in thoughtful conversation with the interviewer on his own personal beliefs of his writing. It was mentioned by the interviewer that a critic had stated that Stafford could write about amazing topics within his poems without raising his voice, as if he were murmuring. This review has said a lot about Stafford's work and his style of writing (Young (Interviewer), & Stafford (Interviewee), ١٩٨٩).

"Travelling through the dark" is a poem that talks about the poet's finding of a deer that had passed on, and was left lying in the middle of the road. Throughout the poem it becomes evident the poet has a decision to make, a decision which he is torn on. Within the first stanza of the poem, the poet introduces this passed on deer and how it may affect other people who travel along that road. It would be better to roll the deer over into the canyon to avoid any car accidents of people who travel along the narrow road. Within the second and third stanza's the poet's further examination of the deer leads to his emotional hesitation on what was originally an easy decision to make. The deer was "*large in the belly*" and "*her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting*". This indicates the deer was pregnant and her young was still alive. The peak moment of sadness would be when the poet talks about the state of the fawn realising that the fawn was alive, but never to be born. Throughout the poem the poet second-guesses his previous decision to push the deer over into the canyon, which was previously the safest thing to do.

William Stafford does not use extensive emotive language within this poem, unlike Anne Sexton. The only real evidence that is given on the emotion the author feels is in the last line of stanza three "*beside that mountain road I hesitated*". The poet was thinking of his decision. He was considering changing his mind after he discovered the unborn fawn which indicates he was emotionally stricken by his discovery, as if there was a chance to save the unborn deer. All other emotion we interpret from this poem is based upon the reader's empathy and understanding of the situation. Although the poet did not express his grief as openly as Anne Sexton did in her poem, there is still an evident theme of grief and sadness within this poem. First from the loss of the animal's life in itself, and secondly from the situation of the unborn fawn.

- **Robert Lowell: 'To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage'**

'To speak of Woe that is in Marriage' is a poem written by Robert Lowell that also has a character been placed in the midst of turmoil. 'To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage' follows a certain pattern of grief and loneliness from the perspective of a woman although the poet was a man, Robert Lowell. Robert Lowell was considered to have a fairly bleak and horrible family life and aspects of this came through within his writing. He reflects on his life with revealing autobiographical poems that formed the basis of his poetic identity and contributed towards his notable achievement and fame. Throughout his educational years he was known for his anti-social behaviour and outsider persona. Allen Tate, also a poet, was

Lowell's main inspiration and his first poetic mentor and friend. Robert Lowell's life and his bad family experiences greatly contributed to his time as a poetic writer (Axlerod, ٢٠٠٠).

'To speak of Woe that is in Marriage' is a poem that follows the story of a marriage and loss of intimacy within the marriage. The husband in the marriage is unfaithful to his wife and she knows of this. The beginning lines of this poem are taking on a positive tone which contrasts in content with the rest of the poem. This difference in emotional tone between the beginning two lines and the following lines may have been included as if to say, all was once well in the marriage. This further increases the element of loss and loneliness that the audience is undertaken to feel within this poem. Throughout the poem the depth of the troubles unfolds. The husband cruises for prostitutes at all hours of the night and appears to be an alcoholic. The heightened drama of the relationship is with the line "*The screwball might kill his wife*". Although the original theme of sadness and loneliness is present within this poem, the poet adds the line; "*What makes him tick? Each night now I tie ten dollars and his car key to my thigh...*". This sentence is what causes empathy of the wife character within the poem and the element of loss of intimacy first surfaces within the poem. It is believed the woman ties his car key to her thigh as if to woo him into bed with her. This may be her way of keeping the marriage alive and keeping her husband at home. This element of loneliness is what causes the poem to take on a sad undertone. Previously throughout the poem the poet had used angry, emotive language to portray the theme of the failed marriage. Such as "*screwball might kill his wife*", "*monotonous meanness of his lust*" and "*he is so unjust*". This poem has focused on the theme of loss of relationship and intimacy using emotive language which is similar to that of Anne Sexton's poem about her parents.

Conclusion

These three poems were looked at all express an underlying theme of sadness and loss. 'The Truth the Dead Know' by Anne Sexton was an openly sad poem within the theme itself, loss of life, but also with her use of heavy words and emotive language. 'Travelling Through the Dark' by William Stafford also represented an element of loss of life. The further realisation of the still alive unborn fawn causes the poem to take on a bleak undertone with the added situation of a second life lost. 'To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage' is a poem that is almost a sequencing story that becomes more lonely as it trails on. The opening two sentences paint us a positive picture which contrasts with the rest of the poem to make it appear

sadder than it might actually be. The main theme of loss within this poem is one of loss of marriage. All these poems display themes of sadness, grief, loneliness within the topic of loss.

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