Sylvia Plath’s Mourning and Creativity

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Abstract

In this article, I concentrate on the connection between mourning and creativity in Sylvia Plath’s work. Melanie Klein postulates that the pain of mourning and the reparation experienced in the depressive position is the basis of creative activity. Through creative activity, one can restore lost internal and external objects and lost happiness. I argue that Plath’s work is an example of Klein’s idea that artists’ creative products represent the process of mourning. For Plath, art -- in her case, writing -- was a compensation for loss, especially the loss of her father. She seems to have continued writing as her exercise in mourning and reparation trying to regain not only her bereaved father but also her internal good object which was lost when her father died. Through her writing, Plath attempted to enrich her ego with the father-object.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Melanie Klein, mourning, creativity, reparation

In her paper, “Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” Melanie Klein claims that the work of mourning is a reliving of the early depressive position. I would like to quote Klein’s account:

My experience leads me to conclude that, while it is true that the characteristic feature of normal mourning is the individual's setting up the lost loved object inside himself, he is not doing so for the first time but, through the work of mourning, is reinstating that object as well as all his loved internal objects which he feels he has lost. He is therefore recovering what he had already attained in childhood. (Klein, 1988a, p. 362)

According to Klein’s hypothesis, the loss of the present object in the external world brings with it the mourner's unconscious phantasies of having lost one's internal good objects as well. One is afflicted by the pain of the inner loss in addition to the outer loss. Every time grief arises, it “undermines the feeling of secure possession
of the loved internal objects” (Klein, 1988b, p. 77). If one reinstates the external loved object successfully, at the same time one can regain the loved internal objects. On the other hand, in mourning, one reinstates not only the actual lost objects but also one's original objects, the parental imagos, which make up one's inner world. When the actual person has died, one feels in danger of losing one's original parents as well. The mourner attempts to reinstate the good objects, and to reconstitute the parental imagos. I would like to quote another account of Klein's:

“It is by reinstating inside himself the good parents as well as the recently lost person, and by rebuilding his inner world, which was disintegrated and in danger, that he overcomes his grief, regains security, and achieves true harmony and peace. (Klein, 1988a, p. 368)

“The attempts to save the love object,” writes Klein in “A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States,” “to repair and restore it, attempts which in the state of depression are coupled with despair, since the ego doubts its capacity to achieve this restoration, are determining factors for all sublimations and the whole of the ego development” (Klein, 1988a, p. 270).

Next, I will move to a consideration of the connection between mourning and creativity. Klein explored the basic conception of aesthetics and creativity first in her paper, “Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse” (Klein, 1988a, pp. 210-8). Klein comments on the sources of the creative impulse and the creative process in this paper, in which she describes it in relation to a destructive attack on or by persecutors in phantasy in the depressive position. The creative effort is a subsequent attempt to restore the damage to external and internal objects. For Klein, creativity is regarded as a manifestation of reparation. Further, in “Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,”
Klein connects creativity with mourning:

We know that painful experiences of all kinds sometimes stimulate sublimations, or even bring out quite new gifts in some people, who may take to painting, writing or other productive activities under the stress of frustrations and hardships. [. . .] Such enrichment is in my view gained through processes similar to those steps in mourning. [. . .] That is to say, any pain caused by unhappy experiences, whatever their nature, has something in common with mourning. It reactivates the infantile depressive position; the encountering and overcoming of adversity of any kind entails mental work similar to mourning. (Klein, 1988a, p. 360)

Through painful experiences of all kinds which are similar to mourning, creativity is stimulated. This idea has been developed and revised by Klein's followers, among whom the best known theorist is Hanna Segal, who transformed Klein's insights into systematic aesthetic principles. Her most famous paper on this theme is “A Psycho-Analytic Approach to Aesthetics.” Developing Klein's conception, Segal explains the process through which an artist produces a work of art. In the paper, Segal remarks that the work of art is an artist's way of reassembling the inner world, felt to have been destroyed by aggressive phantasies arising out of the depressive position and of recreating something that is felt to be a whole new world.

Segal refers to Marcel Proust as her instance of an artist who describes the creative process. According to Segal, Proust depicts how the process of mourning leads to an artist's wish to recover the lost world. The dead people represent his internal objects, and their loss reactivates the original loss of his parents. Segal comments: “Through the many volumes of his work the past is being recaptured; all his lost, destroyed and loved objects are being brought back to life: his parents, his grandmother, his beloved Albertine” (Segal, 1952, p. 198). Segal quotes Proust's words:
And indeed it was not only Albertine, not only my grandmother, but many others still from whom I might well have assimilated a gesture or a word, but whom I could not even remember as distinct persons. A book is a vast graveyard where on most of the tombstones one can read no more the faded names. (p. 198)

As a result of this, we can regard the characters of his novel as symbols of his own inner characters, and, collectively, as an image of his whole internal world. Segal points out that Proust insists that the lost past and the lost or dead object can be made into a work of art. He acknowledges his loss, mourns it and finally reinstates its object internally. And according to Segal, “on realizing the destruction of a whole world that had been his, he decides to write, to sacrifice himself to the recreation of the dying and the dead” (p. 199).” Segal observes that Proust could fully experience “depressive” mourning:

This gave him the possibility of insight into himself, and with it a sense of internal and external reality. Further, this reality sense enabled him to have and to maintain a relationship with other people through the medium of his art (p. 203).”

In the novels of Virginia Woolf as well, as Maud Ellmann claims, “the invasive presence of the dead weighs on the living” (Ellmann, 1994, p. 146). Segal also comments as follows on the case of creating a tragedy:

In creating a tragedy I suggest the success of the artist depends on his being able fully to acknowledge and express his depressive phantasies and anxieties. In expressing them he does work similar to the work of mourning in that he internally re-creates a harmonious world which is projected into his work of art. (Segal, 1952, pp. 204-5)

Segal concludes that creative activity is achieved through a process of mourning which is a reliving of the depressive position in which one realizes that the early lost objects are damaged. This gives rise to intense feelings of loss and guilt, and attempts to restore and recreate them outside and within the self.
Subsequently, a creative work lets the reader experience the writer's depression in which s/he has lost those whom s/he loves, and the writer's joy in which s/he has re-created and reinstated her/ his loved objects to her/ his internal world that seems to be whole and complete.

For Sylvia Plath, the grief from the loss of her father was profound. Whenever the mourning of the lost father was revived, every loss was experienced. It seems that the mourning of her father gave her a chance to move to the depressive position. According to Klein, the early mourning in the depressive position is “revived whenever grief is experienced later in life” (Klein, 1988a, p. 344). We can recognize that Plath must have felt that what had been lost in her father's death was not only the person but some parts of her own self. It left a “hole” in her inner world (Plath, 1976, p. 289). The fact gives us some clues to why she was so absorbed in writing. Since she acknowledged the loss, in her literary texts she had struggled to reinstate her father and her internal good objects in her inner world. It was to fill in the “hole,” to close the wounds. Writing poetry was for her like the work of mourning. Reparation arising from the mourning of the loss was a constituent of the creative process. Plath thought of writing poetry as reparation not only for the loss of her beloved father but for her lost past with her father. Plath writes in her journal: “I rail and rage against the taking of my father, [. . .]. My villanelle was to my father; and the best one. I lust for the knowing of him” (Plath, 2000, p. 129). She attempted to restore the lost loved object by writing poetry. For Plath, it was a means of reinstating the lost loved object as well as the lost internal good objects. Thus, writing about her father not only enabled her to make contact with and reincorporate her lost father, but also to rebuild her shattered inner world.
Therefore, her internalization and reinstatement of her lost father was the source of her creativity -- for her, he was “the buried male muse” (Plath, 2000, p. 222). Her father leads her on to full participation in poetic life. To capture him, to give him permanent life, she must write poetry. By virtue of her art, she could give her father an eternal life in her literary texts.

Plath experienced a traumatic loss again when she was deserted by her husband, Ted Hughes, who served as father-figure displacement -- her father “risen” from his grave “to be my mate” (Plath, 2000, p. 222). As a result, after that occasion, she produced a host of poems during a short period which later are called “October Poems,” which many of her most famous and important poems were included: “Daddy,” “Medusa,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Ariel,” for example. According to her letters to her mother and brother, Plath wrote “like mad” (Plath, 1976, p. 466) and “the release” in her energy was “enormous” (p. 467) during that period.

We can regard Plath's father as one of her muses. In particular, for her, her father was the “sea-god muse” (Plath, 2000, p. 244). Then why did Plath connect her father with the sea? We can find one of the clues in one of the episodes in her autobiographical sketch, “Ocean 1212-W” where she writes a memoir about her early childhood: the episode in which the heroine listens to her mother's reciting of the poem, Matthew Arnold's “The Forsaken Merman,” in which Plath's discovery of poetry's power is shown. In this poem, the merman laments because his mortal wife deserted him for the land and does not come back to the undersea world. Even though he calls for her return, she ignores him. One day, the merman goes to the land in order to search for his lost wife. At the end of the poem, the merman sings
sadly:

There dwells a lov'd one,
But cruel is she.
She left lonely for ever
The kings of the sea.
(Arnold, 1979, p. 105)

Plath depicts her reaction to listening to her mother's recitation:

I saw the gooseflesh on my skin. I didn't know what made it. I was not cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill. I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new way of being happy. (Plath, 1979, p. 118)

After this occasion, Plath began to write poems, hiding them in her mother's dinner napkin or beneath her butter plate. Arnold's poem made her both find where her lost father -- for her, a husband-like figure -- dwelt, and discovered the power of the poetry. This seems to be one of the reasons why Plath called the sea her "poetic heritage" (Plath, 1976, p. 345). Through that experience, she seems to have realized that writing poetry is the process of mourning, rebuilding and internalizing good parts of her lost father in her self, and the means of reunion with him. For Plath, the sea is "a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious" (Plath, 1979, p. 222). She discovered how to transform her loss into artistic work. Since she acknowledged her loss and experienced the mourning for her father, she reinstated him internally through her art.

Moreover, at the end of "Ocean 1212-W," Plath writes:

And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle -- beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth. (Plath, 1979, p. 124)

Plath spent her early years close by the ocean, and this childhood place was
marvelous to her partly because she could enjoy time with her father. The brief statement “My father died, we moved inland” is worth noting. Her vision of a seaside childhood congealed when her father died. Her early years were cut off from her life and enclosed “like a ship in a bottle.” Clearly the sea change was caused by her father's death. I think that that is another reason why the memory of her father's death is strongly connected with the sea. Her fascination with death had sprung from her recognition that the source of her inspiration was her father.

Next I will deal with Plath’s “The Colossus” (Plath, 1981, pp. 129-30), which is related to the drowned-father theme like “Full Fathom Five” and “Electra on the Azalea Path.” The statue of the Colossus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. In this poem, the speaker imagines her dead father as the Greek sun-god, and she struggles to repair the broken pieces of the huge statue of the Colossus who is now a floating drowned man. His fragments “are littered/. . ./ In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.” The daughter wants to bring her father's statue back to life. However, it is so huge that she as an “ant” cannot recover its original form. The speaker has worked to rebuild a grandiose but shattered Colossus for “thirty years.” Frustrated, she is still in mourning. It is also an attempt for the speaker to reinstate her shattered internalized father. The speaker attempts to rebuild her destroyed inner world at the same time. She hopes that the fragments of her beloved father will be reassembled within her self. In the Kleinian point of view, putting the dispersed pieces of the father's body back together again is a process of reparation. By restoring the external object, the inner world of the subject is correspondingly restored at the same time and it can possess the good object. In the poem, the speaker is attempting to “glue” not only the fragments of ruins of the vast
disintegrating statue but also her shattered self together, hoping that they will return to life. However, since she cannot reinstate the external loved object successfully, she also cannot regain the loved internal object. The process of reparation is not successful. In Kleinian terminology, the scene is a dramatization of manic defence in manic-depressive states in unsuccessful mourning. Manic defence occurs because reparation is so slow and laborious a process. This defence is an in-between phenomenon, including elements of the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. It is a defence against depressive anxiety, but once more employs mechanisms that are seen in the paranoid-schizoid position such as splitting, idealization, and projective identification. Hanna Segal explains Klein's ideas:

To protect itself from total despair the ego must have recourse to violent defence mechanisms. Those defence mechanisms which protect it from the feelings arising out of the loss of the good object form a system of manic defences. The essential features of manic defences are denial of psychic reality, omnipotent control and a partial regression to the paranoid position and its defences: splitting, idealization, denial, projective identification, etc. This regression strengthens the fear of persecution and that in turn leads to the strengthening of omnipotent control. (Segal, 1952, p. 197)

The unsuccessful state of mourning -- the manic defence state of mourning -- makes the speaker feel ambivalently towards her dead father. The feeling is divided into two aspects: praise and contempt for him. Klein writes about the manifestation of this ambivalence seen in the manic defence: “Idealization is an essential part of the manic position and is bound up with another important element of that position, namely denial” (Klein, 1988a, p. 349).

The speaker has to continue the endless, fruitless work of mourning:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.  
It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,  
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.  
Thirty years now I have labored  
To dredge the silt from your throat.  
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol  
I crawl like an ant in mourning  
Over the weedy acres of your brow  
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear  
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia  
Arches above us.

This poem tells the story of the speaker's Electra complex. She regards her father as the hero of the Oresteia. The law of the father dominates the daughter: "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue." Like the speaker in the poem, "Electra on the Azalea Path," the speaker's psyche is made by a patriarchal culture. She devotes herself to the patriarch. For her, the father is "pithy and historical as the Roman Forum."

The image of the "colossus" in the sea is first seen in Sylvia Plath's early poem called "Letter to a Purist" (Plath, 1981, pp. 36-7). (1) The "grandiose colossus" "Stood astride/ The envious assaults of sea." In this poem as well, the speaker who mocks her father has an ambivalent feeling towards him. A figure in "Man in Black" (Plath, 1981, pp. 119-20) is also related to death and the sea. In this poem, an enigmatic death-figure walks towards the end of land. (2) This man is shown as a "vortex." This means that he sucks in surrounding things. He draws everything towards him, including the speaker. She cannot turn away from him. (3) In her journals, Plath writes: ""Man In Black", the only "love" poem in my book" (Plath,
The image of the father as a “colossus” recurs in other works. In one of Plath's short stories, “Among the Bumblebees,” Alice Denway's father has been “a giant of a man” (Plath, 1979, p. 259); “a king, high on a throne” (p. 261): “When he laughed, it sounded as if all the waves of the ocean were breaking and roaring up the beach together. Alice worshipped her father because he was so powerful, and everybody did what he commanded because he knew best and never gave mistaken judgment” (p. 259). In “Sunday at the Mintons,” Elizabeth Minton's brother is “a colossus astride the roaring sea” (p. 158). In both stories, colossus-like fathers are also related to the sea.

For Sylvia Plath as well, it seemed difficult to complete the work of mourning towards her father like the speaker in “The Colossus.” She might have been in the process of reinstating her shattered internalized father and rebuilding her destroyed inner world, but her early death probably made it impossible for her to achieve that.

Notes

1. This poem suggests Sylvia Plath's own father with the line, “With one foot” -- her father's leg was amputated during his illness.
2. The father figure walks towards the sea in the first section of “Berck-Plage” (Plath, 1981, pp. 196-201):

   The lines of the eye, scalded by these bald surfaces,

   Boomerang like anchored elastics, hurting the owner.
   Is it any wonder he puts on dark glasses?

   It is any wonder he affects a black cassock?
   Here he comes now, among the mackerel gatherers.

3. In “Man in Black,” his “dead/ Black coat, black shoes” and black hair imply Plath's father. Plath writes: “The ‘dead black’ in my poem may be a
transference from the visit to my father's grave a month earlier” (Plath, 2000, p. 300).

Works Cited


