**THE WOUND AND THE BOW EFFECT IN SELECTED POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY**

*SYLVİA PLATH’IN SEÇİLİ ŞİİRLERİNDE YARA VE YAY ETKİSİ: PSİKANALİTİK BİR ÇALIŞMA*

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**Abstract**

The present article aims at examining a number of Sylvia Plath’s poems in the light of Edmund Wilson’s theory “*The Wound and the Bow*”. According to Wilson, the literary text that the reader reads and enjoys is the product of a painful process that the artist goes through to purify his\ her soul of guilt and pain. In presenting his thoughts, Wilson depends on Freud’s theory of dreams in which Freud asserts that dreams are loaded with symbols driven from personal traumas. Likewise, according to Wilson, poetry is loaded with symbols inspired by the artist’s personal suffering. Thus, Wilson’s theory could be easily applied to Plath’s poetry that is a direct production of her childhood trauma and adulthood suffering.

***Key Words*:** *Psychoanalysis, Wilson, Plath, Wounded Artist*

**Öz**

Yirminci yüzyılın başlangıcı, Freud'un teorileri ve araştırmalarının etkisinden dolayı, Psikanaliz alanında artan bir ilgiye tanık oldu. “Düşlerin Yorumu”nun yayınlanmasından sonra Freud, acıları, ızdırapları ve karanlık arzuları ortaya çıkarmada, insanların gözlerini rüyaların ve kâbusların önemine açtı.

Yıllar sonra, birçok eleştirmen Freud’un teorilerini devam ettirdi ve farklı edebi eserlere uygulamak için onları daha üst seviyelere çıkardı. Bu eleştirmenlerden birisi olan Edmund Wilson, dikkate değer “Yara ve Yay” teorisi ile ortaya çıktı. Wilson bu teorisinde, kişisel acının ve ıstırabın sanatsal yazıların ayrılmaz unsurları olduğuna inanmaktadır. Wilson teorisini kanıtlamak için, David Copperfield gibi tanınmış edebi eserlere teorisini uyguladı.

Wilson’ın teorisinin ışığında, bu araştırma Sylvia Plath'in şiirindeki teoriyi kanıtlamaya çalışmaktadır. Göze çarpan itiraf edici şairlerden biri olan Plath, şiirinde çeşitli acı dolu kişisel deneyimleri yansıtmaktadır. Babasının erken ölümü ve daha sonra kocasının ihanetinden dolayı sarsıntıya uğrayan Plath'ın şiiri, kendi ızdıraplarının ve kâbuslarının nadir görülen bir aynasıdır. Bu yüzden, Wilson'ın teorisi Plath'ın şiirlerinden okuduğumuz her satırla hayat bulmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Psikanaliz, Wilson, Plath, Yaralı Sanatçı

**INTRODUCTION**

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a growing interest in the field of Psychoanalysis due to the effect of Freud’s theories and researches. After the publication of the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud opened people’s eyes to the importance of dreams and nightmares in revealing the pains, agonies and dark desires.

Years later, many critics carried on Freud’s theories and took them to higher levels to apply them to different literary works. One of these critics is Edmund Wilson who came up with his notable *The Wound and the Bow* theory. In his theory, Wilson believes that personal pain and agony are inseparable factors of artistic writings. To prove his theory, Wilson applied his theory to well-known literary works like ***David Copperfield***.

In the light of Wilson’s theory, this paper attempts to testify the theory on Sylvia Plath’s poetry. As one of the outstanding confessional poets, Plath reflects various painful personal experiences in her poetry. Traumatized by her father’s early death, and later by her husband’s infidelity, Plath’s poetry is a rare mirror of her own agonies and nightmares. Hence, Wilson’s theory comes to life with every line we read from Plath’s poems.

**Significance of the Article**

This paper highlights one of the important issues concerning literary theory which is the role of psychoanalysis in understanding literary works. As different schools try to analyze literary works, psychoanalyses delve into the personality of the writer behind these works. In this respect, this paper pays attention to Wilson’s theories concerning artistic creation, and how these theories can be applied to Plath’s poetry.

**Problem Statement**

The issue that this article tries to explore is whether Plath’s poetry is a reflection of the pain that she had experienced due to the premature death of her father and/or the betrayal of her husband.

**Purpose of the Article**

This article aims at examining the poems of Sylvia Plath in the light of Wilson’s theories to show the extent to which Plath’s poetry can be said to be a platform of her wounded heart.

**Scope of the Article**

The article will be limited to studying two of Plath’s poems: *Full Fathom Five* and *Stings.*

**Research Methodology**

The article conducts a psychoanalytic approach. Wilson’s theories of the “Wounded Artist” are used as primary sources to analyze the poems of Sylvia Plath.

Edmund Wilson, a world famous literary critic, has continuously related literature to other topics like economics, politics and, more importantly, psychology. In his well-known book, ***To the Finland Station***, he traces the development of the Marxist theory and its relation to literature.1 This complex relationship becomes a recurrent theme in Wilson’s work, thus his criticism focuses on the historicity of the literary works. Besides, what distinguished Wilson from his other contemporary critics is his objective treatment of literary works, as opposite to some critics who judged literature impulsively.2

Wilson’s views on literature are demonstrated in his critical book: ***The Triple Thinkers***. In an essay entitled “The Historical Interpretation of Literature”, Wilson tracts the origins of this approach of criticism from Samuel Johnson to Taine till Carl Marx. Its aim, as Wilson sees it, is the study of the origins of works in historical terms, and he concludes: “Another *element of a different order had, however, since Marx’s time been added… I mean the psychoanalysis of Freud*”.3 According to Wilson then, psychoanalysis is a part of the historical method and it helps to shed light on the depth of literary works*.* Therefore, Stanley Hyman affirms that Wilson’s method *“has embraced both sociological and psychological factors, with greater emphasis on the sociological in his early criticism and the proportion gradually shifting in favour of the psychological as he developed*.”4

The main outlines of Wilson’s theory occur in “*Philoctetes: The Wound and the Bow*”. In this essay Wilson states that artistic ability is necessarily linked to illness. He draws his theory from the myth of the Greek artist Philoctetes who, according to the myth, is convinced that he must put his rage behind him and place his bow at the service of those who exiled him. Wilson, on the other hand, relates the myth to literature as thus:

*I should interpret the fable of Philoctetes as follows. The victim of a malodorous disease which renders him abhorrent to society and periodically degrade him and makes him helpless is the master of a superhuman art which everybody to respect and which the normal man finds he needs*.5

Consequently, the artist becomes an outcast who possesses the power to transform himself to a model. Besides, the artist serves the society and cures his inner wounds at the same time. Wilson’s theory, hence, collides with Freud’s view of art. Freud states:

*The artist is originally a man who turns away from reality because he cannot come to terms with the demand for the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction as it is first made, and who then in fantasy life allows full play to his erotic and ambitious wishes*”.6

Thus, the artist creates a world that mirrors reality as a substitute for the normal world that men live in. And though the artist may try to break his connection with humanity, he ends up strengthening such connections. Such abilities are facilitated by the poetic sensitivity that the artist possesses and the ordinary man lacks. Actually, Wilson’s aim at forming a psychoanalytical theory was mainly incidental. The idea germinated in the essay he wrote on Dickens and Kipling, in which he tries to figure out a link between the works of these two writers and the psychic traumas they faced.7 Dickens, for example, hated the humiliation he faced as a child in working in a shoe-blacking factory instead of going to school.8 This experience resulted in a “wound” that is clearly shown in the absence of a responsible and loving father-figure in most of his novels. The best example is found in Dickens’s autobiographical novel ***David Copperfield***, in which Dickens presents a faithful picture of his sad and dreadful childhood.

Wilson believes that a single traumatic event, combined with its consequences, is the sole motif behind a writer’s choice of subject and theme. In ***Axel’s Castle***, in an essay on Proust he asserts: “*The real elements, of course, of any work of fiction, are the elements of the author’s personality: his imagination embodies in the images of characters, situations and scenes the fundamental conflicts of his nature or the circle through which it habitually passes*.”9 Hence, Wilson adapts the concept that art acts as a medium that releases the psyche’s tension inside the artist. Though this kind of remedy is only momentary, it proves to be effective.

Wilson’s synthesis is directly drawn from Freud’s theory of dreams. Wilson believes that the language of dreams is “*characteristic of dream poetry… that it never means as much as it seems to*.”10 Wilson believes that dreams are full of symbols that only artists succeed in translating and decoding. Hence, Wilson suggests that poetry should use a dream-like expression because he believes that: “*old kind of lyric feeling, which used to embrace the world” is being sacrificed for the: “deliberate formulas and attitudes derived from the study of external reality which the younger poets are trying to impose upon their poetry have a way of yielding nothing but rhetoric*.”11 This conviction leads to his affirmation that the inner side of the artist is highly connected to his\her works. Wilson’s theory of the wounded artist combined with his affirmation of the importance of the artist’s subjectivity can be, thus, easily applied to confessional poetry that is the outcome of the poets suffering and wounded personality. Sylvia Plath, being a major confessional poet, will be dealt with in this paper in the light of Wilson’s theory.

Since her early childhood, Plath faced the trauma of her father, Otto Plath’s, death.12 Being so attached to her father, Plath never recovered the loss of a much beloved father and that wound remained inside of her till her tragic death. The inner wound resulted in various attempts of committing suicide on the part of Plath till she succeeded in doing so at the age of thirty. Therefore, themes of death and depression are to be used continually in her poetry. The only outlet to Plath’s misery was poetry. Through her poems, that are highly subjective, Plath could partially find a voice to express her agony and her fears, and to expose her wound in the hope of finding satisfactory remedies for them. Failing to do so, Plath separated herself from reality and started to live in an imaginary world that contains the dead father figure. Two of Plath’s poems will be examined in this paper, since most of her poems contain the same dilemma and themes.

“*Full Fathom Five*” (1958) is an early poem that deals with Plath’s suffering of the domination of her father’s memory over her life. The father-figure is presented as a powerful sea god:

*Old man, you surface seldom*

*Then you come in with the tide's coming*

*When seas wash cold, foam-*

*Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,*

*A dragnet, rising, falling, as wave*

*Crest and trough. Miles long*.13

Plath uses the sea to indicate the huge effect of her father’s image. Her father is as large and deep as the sea which its surface is unfathomable. The father’s symbolic strength is connoted by words like “tides” and “waves”, and the whiteness of his hair and beard stand for the long years in which she has been a prisoner of his memory and in which she has been separated from reality. Next, Plath links her father to an ice mountain:

*The old myth of origins*

*Unimaginable. You float near*

*As kneeled ice-mountains*

*Of the north, to be steered clear*

*Of, not fathomed. All obscurity*

*Stars with a danger:*

*Your dangers are many. I*

*Cannot look much but your form suffers*

*Some strange injury*. (10-18)

Plath compares her father’s memory to an ice mountain: both are huge and dominant. Both are dangerous and hurtful, and she lives under their shadow. Plath’s self is as shattered by the impact of this cold image of the father that she: “*seems to die*.” Here, death is a wish that is unattainable because every time she tries to end her life she fails. The only result she gets is the many wound that haunt her emotionally and physically. This desperate life-style is caused by the ghost of her father and the trauma of his death that refuses to let her live in peace:

*The muddy rumors*

*Of your burial move me*

*To half-believe: your reappearance*

*Proves rumors shallow*, (21-24)

She mocks her father’s death because it proves false. He is dead bodily, but present spiritually dominating and dictating his daughter’s existence. Thus, Plath’s poems could be seen as an outlet or as a therapy offering her some freedom from her misery. Nonetheless, this illusion of freedom is not strong enough to defy her father’s dominion, as Plath herself explains:

*You defy questions;*

*You defy godhood.*

*I walk dry on your kingdom’s border*

*Exiled to no good…*

*Father this thick air is murderous.*

*I would breath water*. (40-45)

Plath is convinced that her father’s ghost defies time and defies her attempts to move on in real life. She regards herself as a victim of a merciless father who chooses to abandon her all alone. Her attempt to overcome her wound is faced by the cruelty of her father’s shocking death. Therefore, the poem concludes with the image of Plath surrendering to the father’s power and suffocating in the ocean of oblivion. Here the theory of the wound and the bow reaches a full play. Plath in this poem, and in the subsequent poem, creates a mythology of her own. Her inner wound pushes her to share with her reader the pain of her father’s loss and writing about it helps her to release her fears. This theme of the release of the repressed can be easily traced in her next poem “*Stings*.”

Plath wrote a number of poems about a specific experience that she and her father shared, namely, bee-keeping.14 “*Stings*” is one of them. The major theme that this poem embodies is one of Plath’s favourites which is death and resurrection. As mentioned above, Plath was obsessed by the idea of resurrection, because she believed that she became a new self after each failed suicide attempt. Thus, Plath compares herself to the old bee queen that has to leave so that the new queen can take her place:

*Is there any queen at all in it?*

*If there is, she is old,*

*Her wings torn shawls, her long body*

*Rubbed of its plush------*

*Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful*. 15

The old queen that personifies the old self is symbolically replaced by the new queen, i.e. the new self. Nevertheless, the new self is not perfect and satisfying:

*They thought death was worth it, but I*

*Have a self to recover, a queen.*

*Is she dead, is she sleeping ?*

*Where has she been,*

*With her lion-red body, her wings of glass* *?* (51-55)

The wings made of glass suggest the frailty of the new self. A weakness intensified by the separation from reality. She is imprisoned in the fancy world of memories and day dreaming that even resurrection is not really useful in her case:

*He and I*

*Have a thousand clean cells between us,*

*Eight combs of yellow cups*, (5-7)

The distance between them is fatal. It is a distance of death and life, a distance of two totally different worlds that can never be reconciled to each other. Consequently, the new self, the new queen is not a pleasant object to behold. She is strong but fearful at the same time:

*Now she is flying*

*More terrible than she ever was, red*

*Scar in the sky, red comet*

*Over the engine that killed her*

*The mausoleum, the wax house*. (56-60)

The new self is still not free, she is haunted by old memories of the past and by death. The sweet memory of her father is mutilated and lost into nothingness:

*Now he is gone*

*In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.*

*Here is his slipper, here is another,*

*And here the square of white linen*

*He wore instead of a hat.*

*He was sweet,*

*The sweat of his efforts a rain*

*Tugging the world to fruit.*

*The bees found him out,*

*Molding onto his lips like lies,*

*Complicating his features*. (34-45)

The memory of the father and the new self are both distorted. What is left is a deep pain that cuts like a knife into the soul and leads the speaker into profound despair and surrender. Ultimately, the repressed wish of death returns and pushes the speaker into incessant restlessness. This is indicated by the previous description of the new queen which is weak and powerless.

**NOTES**

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