

Antagonism in 'the rival'



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Antagonistic relationships are as human as harmonious relationships, perhaps even more so. 'The Rival', a powerful poem by acclaimed American poet Sylvia Plath, centers around a universal theme of rivalry and conflict, masterfully depicting the complexity of the state of being against someone. Literally, the poem describes the similarities between a so identified 'rival' and the moon, while figuratively, it portrays this same rival as something more than human. The form of the poem follows a stanzaic structure consisting of four stanzas whose lines vary in length and ending. Throughout these four stanzas, Sylvia Plath utilizes a collection of paradoxes with the purposes of exploring a theme of antagonism and the conflicting feelings one might experience towards a superior adversary. The contrasting ideas that appear all through 'The Rival' serve to highlight the natural animosity that characterizes rivalry and portray the less talked about involuntary admiration for the greater individual.

Structurally, the poem is not significant, while the narrative voice is, as the speaker's contrasting tone towards the rival, spiteful yet awed, resembles the conflicting emotional response an individual may experience when confronted by a superior adversary. The poem's structure is stanzaic, consisting of four stanzas, the first three of which are made up of five lines, while the last one only has two lines. The narration, a much more interesting aspect of this particular poem, is admirable in the fluctuating tone of the speaker, who takes on the persona of someone who was wronged by a so called 'rival'. The contrasting characterization of this rival between lines 1 to 3 of the first stanza, and lines 1 and 2 of the second stanza, perfectly illustrates this variance in tone. In the first stanza, particularly in line 3,

where Plath writes, “ Of something beautiful, but annihilating.” she attributes negative qualities to the rival, however these are second to its admirable features. In lines 1 and 2 of the second stanza, on the other hand, Plath writes that the moon, like the rival, “ abuses her subjects”, thus ascribing a malevolent quality to it, and furthers the unfavorable characterization by stating that, again in comparison to the rival, the moon, when day comes, “ is ridiculous”. In this divergent characterization, the rival is first described as an attractive individual, even when its destructiveness is recognized. Later on, in contrast, the rival is depicted as an abusive force, which is “ in the daytime”, possibly signifying when clearly seen, absurd and laughable. This is significant, as it creates a tone of admiration towards the rival on the first stanza, and a dissimilar tone of resentment and critique in the second stanza. The effect of this changing, contrasting tone on the theme of antagonism is important, as it reinforces the idea of a contradictory, complex response to a rival, which is further developed in the poem’s literal and figurative meaning.

The poem’s literal meaning suggests that a rival has similar qualities to the moon, while the poem’s figurative meaning, a much more important feature, elevates this same rival to a supernatural being. On a literal level, the poem is focused on the resemblances between the rival and the moon. On a more profound, figurative level, the poem depicts the rival as something more than human, whose almost ethereal characteristics are both admired and rejected. In the fourth line of the first stanza, for instance, Plath compares the rival to the moon with the words “ Both of you are great light borrowers”. Through her choice of diction in the use of the word “ both”, Plath attributes

the same quality of “light borrower” as the moon to the rival. This is significant, as the power to borrow light goes beyond any human capacity, which places the rival on a supernatural plane. Moreover, as it implicitly suggests the power to create darkness, it brings to mind a quality of evil and wickedness. Plath’s diction is also relevant in this line in the use of the word ‘borrow’. Borrowing implies a certain connection between individuals, as well as an assumption by the lending party that the borrowing party will take care of whatever has been shared. Possibly, Plath chooses this word instead of a more traditional ‘taker’ to hint at the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the rival, suggesting that they were close prior to being enemies, which makes their confrontation even worse. Likewise, Plath’s employment of the word “light” is noteworthy, as it could provide insight into what or who has been borrowed. Connotatively, the term light brings to mind a sense of joy and contentment, or something or someone who provides guidance and direction. This could mean that the rival has taken the speaker’s happiness and comfort, likely in the form of a person. Arguably, Plath’s intention in utilizing these two words is to develop the figurative meaning of the poem by subtly representing the relationship the speaker and the rival used to have, and touching on the quality and importance of that which the rival took. The effect of giving the same status to the rival and the moon, suggesting that the rival, like the moon, can be a great light borrower, has a dual impact on the audience’s perception of the rival; the reader is both awed by the rival’s supernatural abilities, and horrified at its mysterious and likely evil power. Similarly, the effect of the diction utilized to describe this capability on the reader’s understanding of the conflict between the speaker and the rival is remarkable, as it hints at a

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possible cause for its initiation and provides a feasible explanation to one of the reasons why the speaker might have such a contrasting view of the rival.

Another instance in which Plath depicts the rival as a supernatural being through the figurative meaning of the poem is in the first line of the second stanza, where she writes that the rival's first gift is "making stone out of everything". Through this clear allusion to Medusa, a monster in Greek mythology who possesses the power to turn those who gaze into her eyes to stone, the author gives the rival a fantastical, eerie quality. This is of considerable importance, as it reinforces the speaker's perception of the rival as a powerful being with admirable yet detestable attributes. The audience can infer that the speaker admires the rival's power based on Plath's use of the word "gift" to introduce this capability, as it suggests that it is something to be desired or craved. At the same time, readers can deduce that the speaker rejects this ability as "making stone out of everything" is indicative of death and destruction. The effect of this allusion on the characterization of the rival is profound, as it aids in Plath's portrayal of the speaker's antagonist as an adversary whose superiority is both awe-inspiring and loathsome. This contradictory image of the rival, and the impact this has upon the audience's understanding of it and the idea of conflict, is further constructed through a number of literary devices, the most relevant of which are paradoxes.

Plath employs paradox throughout the poem to develop a theme of antagonism and explore the complex dual reaction one might experience towards a rival. An example of this can be found in the first stanza, where Plath begins the rival's characterization through a metaphorical comparison

of the rival and the moon. In line three, Plath describes the impression the rival has upon the speaker with the words, “ Of something beautiful, but annihilating”. The diction she employs is significant in her choice of adjectives, as their connotative meanings construct a seemingly irreconcilable image. The word ‘ beautiful’ connotatively suggests that the rival is fair, kind and virtuous, while the term ‘ annihilating’ has contradictory connotations of malevolence and evil. This is remarkable as in making the speaker address both the positive and negative attributes of its rival, Plath emphasizes the intricacy of antagonistic relationships where opponents cannot be completely dismissed as flat, one dimensional, cruel characters with no laudable qualities. This has an effect on the theme of antagonism, as by depicting the speaker’s contrary perception of the rival, Plath explores the idea that antagonistic relationships are made harder to bear by one’s inability to disregard the positive attributes of the opposing party. This, in accordance to the possible interpretation of the ability to ‘ borrow light’, where the diction is indicative of a certain level of acquaintance and a loss of something or someone valuable, could arguably be a consequence of the speaker’s previous amiable or even close relationship with the rival.

Sylvia Plath’s “ The Rival”, is an admirable poem that discusses one of the most impactful human relationships, rivalry. Through a masterful employment of literary elements, notably the use of paradoxes to present a contradictory image of the rival, the poet explores a theme of antagonism, centering on the complexities of an individual’s response to a superior adversary. The narration, specifically the fluctuating tone of the speaker towards the rival, is also of critical importance in developing this theme, as it

portrays how the speaker, who arguably represents all those who have been wronged, perceives its rival, who likewise embodies all adversaries. Similarly, the figurative meaning of the poem highlights this theme by further characterizing the rival as a complex being who the speaker, although aware of its detestable attributes, cannot help but admire. Arguably, this theme is connected to Plath's life experiences, and could refer to the relationship she had with her husband's mistress. If so, it is possible that they were close before being rivals, which would explain the speaker's conflicting feelings. Regardless, "The Rival" is a masterful exploration of antagonism and should be held in high regard because of the honest depiction of how individuals are affected when in conflict with others.