

Poetry

Literature



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Talia Weinberg Marotta English 165W Paper Stanley Kunitz's "The Portrait"

With nearly each and every poem, there are elements of analysis that oftentimes go unnoticed. Accordingly, this particular analysis will focus upon Stanley Kunitz's poem entitled, "The Portrait", with a special level of emphasis on persona, structure, the utilization of words and phrases, imagery, and metaphor. Through such an examination, I will be able to more effectively understand the poem and realize the nuances of exactly what the poet was attempting to accomplish.

First, in terms of persona, this particular aspect of the poem in question is quite clear. The speaker quickly identifies himself as the son of a couple whose father committed suicide at some undisclosed time in the past. The rationale for relating this information and in such a way is relatively clear; in that it must have been something that evoked a deeply emotional set of memories within the mind of the speaker. The persona born at this time is one of a person reviewing the past and sadly providing a commentary on how these events have defined the course of an entire life. Likewise, the turn of the phrase, waiting to be born, illicitly the understanding that the action that is about to take place is something that has almost been predefined.

In terms of structure, the meaning of the poem is deeply tied to the arrangement of lines and their overall length. Although it is true that stanzas as are not represented within this brief poem, the beginning of the poem represents longer and more fluid descriptions of what took place in the past and how it impacted upon the situation. Yet, as the speaker goes on to describe the emotional state of the mother, after the father's suicide, the lines become short, choppy, and almost terse. This is not done without a significant purpose in mind. Instead, the speaker, in this case the author,

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seeks to engage the reader with an understanding of the fact that the emotional pain hardship that the mother was going through was so intense and difficult that even uttering a few syllables or words with reference to it brought about significant mental anguish. The strength of the lines and their ebb and flow is accurately denoted within the following lines from the beginning of the poem as compared to lines towards the emotional climax: "My mother never forgave my father...especially at such an awkward time"... "She ripped it into shreds/without a single word". The terseness of the language illustrates the mental hardship and rage that was experienced; at least as compared to the detail oriented approach that is less emotionally charged – represented towards the beginning of the poem.

Similarly, specific words and specific lines within the poem are utilized as a means of creating effect and pointing the reader's attention to broader understandings. For instance, the last four lines of the poem indicate the way in which memory and physicality are combined in a visceral response that the mother takes to the child's representation of the photo. Says the speaker, " she ripped it into shreds/without a single word/and slapped me hard. /In my sixty-fourth year/I can feel my cheek/still burning" (Kunitz).

Within these lines, the act of carrying out the photo is of course synonymous with the means by which the mother had torn up the memories of the father and attempted not to mention his name or discuss any aspect of his life since this suicide. The slap and the heart's pain of his mother's actions are not only contingent upon the discipline he received or the hush around the house that existed with regard to the memory of his father; instead, the pain is also reflected in the fact that he was raised by a single parent that held deep emotional scares – many of which she evidently projected upon the

speaker within the poem.

Further, it is true that the poem is also inclusive of a great deal of imagery. For instance, the speaker finds it necessary to relate to the reader that the photo in question was “ pastel” and that the father had a “ brave mustache” (Kunitz). The impact and layers of description that are given to the physicality of the photo as well as the appearance of the father are all indicators of the emotional relevance that these have towards understanding. Whereas this information may seem as extraneous, it is in fact of vital to the way in which the reality of the situation is portrayed and the understanding of the fact that a great deal of time has passed since this event had taken place. . The inclusion of these details paints a more vivid emotional and vivid analysis of what the photo and the memory of the father truly mean to the speaker.

Additionally, metaphor is used within the poem to describe the process of grief that the mother engaged. The speaker indicates that his mother “ locked away his memory” and that this was placed within “ the deepest cabinet” (Kunitz). Metaphor is being used as a means of comparing the way in which the death tore at the heart of the mother and the child as well as physically tore the photo. Obviously, as the photo itself was found within the attic, this particular metaphor is not directly related to describing the situation as it unfolded. Instead, it expresses the mental process by which seclusion and refusal to discuss the situation was represented within the life of the mother. Says the poet, “ She locked his name in her deepest cabinet and would not let him out”.

Although short, the poem is both effective and extraordinarily insightful with respect to the way in which grief is engaged and different individuals deal

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with loss in their own way. Furthermore, the speaker illustrates the fact that the pain of this particular occurrence is not only focused or concentric upon his mother. Instead, the pain of the slap and the “ sting” is felt for decades after it took place. This is quite obviously a reference to the fact that even though the speaker was obviously slapped in his childhood, the hardship of having lost his father and the delicacy of this issue with respect to the way in which grief was discussed and dealt with in a household remains an ongoing trauma for him and brings back painful memories. Lastly, the father committed suicide prior to the development of all the emotional harm and anguish that is seemingly represented within the poem; leading the reader to question what motivations the father might have had for the act and how these motivations continue to impact upon the mother and the child.