The clinical viewpoint and the psychological dynamics: through literary analysis

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Abstract

In this study, I aim to show the significance of paradoxical viewpoint to pay attention to what clients do not speak through analyzing one literary work as an example. I analyze one poem titled “Poppies in October” (1962) written by an American poet Sylvia Plath. Through the analysis I explore the psychic-experience of a poet which is not directly written on the text. This viewpoint will help to make psychotherapy sessions wide-ranging.

Keywords: psychotherapy; dream analysis; Sylvia Plath; Poppies in October; poetry analysis.

1. Introduction

In clinical sessions therapists and counselors are expected to listen to what clients narrate. Needless to say, sympathizing, understanding and accepting what they say are essential elements for a psychotherapist. However in this study, I would like to present the paradoxical viewpoint to focus on “what clients do not speak”. Khan (1989), a psychoanalyst points out that “the analytic process actualizes through interpretation and deals with the hidden meaning (Freud), the absent meaning (Green) and the potential meaning (Khan) of the patient’s communications.” As Khan suggests, paying attention to “what clients do not speak” can open the potential of the session. In this study, I aim to show the significance of this viewpoint through analyzing one literary work as an example.

2. Method

To present the significance of the paradoxical viewpoint to see “what is not spoken” (“unspoken contents”), I would like to analyze one poem titled “Poppies in October” (1962) written by an American poet, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). I find that the poet condenses her strong emotion into this short poem and expresses her inner experience with coherent analogies. Therefore, I select this work as an analyzing material.

Now I would like to define my analyzing approach in detail. As the psychological exploration, I take an approach to the dream analysis for studying this poem. It is possible to say that I treat this poem as the poet’s dream and...
regard the words on the text as client’s speaking words in a session. With reading the text like hearing the client’s words, at the same time I pay attention to what the poet (client) does not directly speak.

Some may wonder why I adopt dream analysis to interpret the poem. Yet, the similarity of the creative processes of poetry and dreams in the human mind is already pointed out. The founder of psychoanalysis, Freud, has mentioned in his “The Interpretation of Dreams” (1900) that poetry and dreams follow a similar creative process. Therefore I can say that it is possible to analyze a poem in the way of dream analysis. In this approach, I can find the new interpretation of this poem.

3. Background study

The poem we will consider, "Poppies in October", was written on the poet’s 30th birthday, October 27th 1962, while she was living in the English countryside. About three months later after the completion of this work, on February 11th 1963, she committed suicide.

At first glance the poet describes the late blooming of poppies. Although usually poppies bloom at the beginning of the summer, she describes poppies blooming in the late season, October.

Stevenson (1990) regards this poem as a “mystical question”, and Kroll (2007) presents that this work expresses the poet’s “state of being” of her true self. While these studies are authoritative, they seem to focus on only the surface of the written text itself. Therefore they miss the contents which is not directly written but expressed under the surface of the words. With this issue of problem, I will explore the depth of this poem.

4. Paraphrase the poem

As a matter of the copyright, I avoid citing this whole work; instead I paraphrase the poem to describe the scene in it.

This poem begins at “Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts” (Plath, 1992). Likewise the sun which cannot manage skirts, the woman in the ambulance also cannot manage skirts. This woman’s red heart is blooming amazingly. Then the poet says that she has received a gift of love from a sky suddenly and unexpectedly. This gift is palely flaming and stopped under bowlers. The poet astounds “O my Got, what am I!” (Plath, 1992) Such astounding late mouths are crying and opening in the frosty forest, when it is dawn.

5. Visualizing the poem

At first glance, this work may look like a lovely short poem which does not tell its special meaning. Readers may also think that the descriptions of the poem seem to be various and incoherent. However when I visualize this work, as if it is the dream of the poet, we can find coherent expressions.

The poem begins at the description of the morning, when the red sun is behind the white clouds. Like the sun behind the white clouds, the red heart of the woman is inside the white ambulance. Normally people cannot see the redness of the sun, when it is behind the clouds. Likewise, we cannot see the color of heart when it is in the woman’s body which is in the ambulance. However, as the poet says that the sun and the woman cannot manage skirts, the redness which indirectly stands for the petals of red poppies coming out of the buds, cannot help blooming and appearing itself.

This appearing of the redness is described as the gift of love from the heaven. She feels the gift flammable and extremely hot. This heated gift stops under the bowler. The bowler is the black traditional hat in England. Therefore, I think that the heated gift is sent to her in spite of the thick brim of the hat. (It may be also possible to understand the word “bowler” as the pitcher of cricket. Because traditionally the uniform of cricket is white and the ball is red, I find the red-white analogy again, in that the red ball is thrown by the white-uniformed pitcher.) Finally, this gift is given to her suddenly and unexpectedly. When this igniting gift stopped by her eyes under the bowler hat, she should be surprised at the gift. What she sees is the blooming poppies in unusual season, in October. This late blooming of poppies is described as late mouths. Therefore, the redness of the sun and the heart appearing through white disturbance like the clouds and ambulance signifies the blooming of red poppies breaking the white frost in October at the daybreak.
6. Interpretation of the Poem

As the title of this work is “Poppies in October”, the poet describes the late blooming of poppies by using marvelous color analogies. Here, I would like to summarize her color analogies.

Plath expresses repeatedly the unmanageable blooming of red poppies through white frosty disturbance, using the sun-the clouds, the heart- the ambulance, ( the bowler- the ball) and the poppies- frost. Overlooking her analogies, it is possible to suppose that “white” stands for “coldness” and “lifeless” and “red” stands for “heat” and “being alive”.

This unusual phenomenon to see red poppies is unexpected gift from God to her. Additionally she feels this gift is sent to her lately and out of the season.

I interpret this poem as follows: she describes the late blooming despite the hardship like the frost, and this blooming can be the unusual and unexpected gift for her.

However, I would like to sharpen my interpretation more and explore the potential in this poem. The title of this poem “Poppies in October” can be understood as the poet’s self-description. Then I can regard that Plath says that “I am like ‘Poppies in October’ ”.

When she wrote this poem, she was in the hardest time in her life after her husband cheated on her. At that time she lived separately to her husband. However in this sad period, she wrote outstanding works one after another. Therefore when she wrote this poem, it was the most creative period in her life. Then soon after this creative period ended, she killed herself.

Considering my interpretation with her biography, I can say “red” and “blooming” stand for her burst of creativity, “white” or “disturbance” stands for her hard life situation which made her feel “cold” or “unlived”.

In addition to that, under such a difficult situation she feels that she received this gift making her extremely creative as it is in the poem described as pale igniting high fever which even the brim of the bowler hat goes through. This unstoppable, strong, inevitable, unexpected and sudden gift makes even herself surprised. She has no idea what happened on her but feels the dramatic inner change of herself, because she cannot stop her creativity.

Relating to her biography and her burst of creativity, I can say that it is already suggested in this poem that her creation is mortal. In the work, she describes blooming of red heart of a woman in the ambulance. The blooming the heart inevitably causes the death. Then I can find that she describes her deadly blooming of creativity.

To see this in a different light, I can lead the same interpretation, mentioning the characters of poppies. Poppies are very fragile flowers. After they bloom, the petals fall easily and in a very short while. These poppy flowers signify how her true creation, namely blooming is. Just as poppies fall soon after their blooming, she killed herself after her creative period.

7. Findings

Through the poetry analysis from clinical psychological standpoint focusing on what is not directly spoken, I can find the dynamic inner movement of the poet. Although at first glance the poet describes the blooming of poppies, this poem expresses the poet’s inner dynamism that her creativity springs up unstoppably, unexpectedly and inevitably and, like the poppies blooming out of season, under circumstances that are difficult and abnormal – i.e. the dissolution of her marriage.

8. Conclusion

As I have been already discussed above, even the poet narrates about poppies, under the surface of the verbalized text, I can find her dynamic inner movement. Likewise, under the surface of the narration of the clients, there is possibility which expresses their vital inner movement, even if clients unaware of it. Finally, through this study, I would like to suggest that therapists endeavor not only to listen to client’s narration but also to listen to unspoken contents. With this attitude of a therapist the psychological session will be more creative.

References


