



In his book *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida writes: ‘Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, is *presented* as the irreducible stratum of the signified’. Discuss the relationship between figurative language and signification in the poems ‘Daddy’ by Sylvia Plath and ‘The Hollow Men’ by T.S. Eliot

Daniel Lyons

When discussing the social function of poetry, T.S. Eliot states that good poetry should involve the ‘communication of some new experience’, ‘some fresh understanding of the familiar’ to enlarge and refine our ‘consciousness’ and ‘sensibility.’¹ Poets, therefore, adopt techniques of figurative language and manipulate poetic form in order to convey meaning; to express an idea by way of a separate idea which subsequently enriches comprehension. By extension, this attempt to create meaning can be understood through the Poststructuralist framework of Jacques Derrida. While poets can use metaphor as a form of expression, according to Derrida there can never be a ‘transcendental’ or ‘absolute’ signified meaning; there is always a space between the metaphor itself and its cognition, the signifier and signified.² Written nearly forty years apart and in living memory of two World Wars, Eliot’s poem ‘The Hollow Men’ and Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’ utilise this metaphorical distance within the figurative language of their poems to varying effect. While Eliot uses abstract nouns and open metaphorical mappings to imitate the passivity and non-action of “the hollow men” themselves, Plath utilises more specific semantic fields and hyperbolic metaphors in order to replicate the voice of an immature speaker. The gap between signifier and signified, therefore, is often far wider for Eliot; he deliberately uses more abstract vocabulary where Plath is purposefully direct. Moreover, there has been considerable controversy surrounding Plath’s use of the Holocaust as a metaphor for expressing her familial issues, Leon Wieseltier simply referring to it as ‘inappropriate’.³ It can be argued, however, that much of the controversy surrounding ‘Daddy’ is due to the lack of distance between what Plath signifies and the meaning she constructs. While not definitive, her language and metaphors are grounded in specific references and ideas. Plath’s intentions are more transparent, and therefore shocking, because of how direct and seemingly callous she is when referencing the Holocaust. However, as Mowbray Allan argues, Eliot responded to the world not through an ‘artificial’ construction yet not by a grounded ‘realism’ either.⁴ Eliot’s poetry is thus separated from direct interaction, allowing for a more speculative, less controversial form of poetry. While both poets use figurative language, their approach to direct or indirect representation varies considerably; both poets utilise the space between signifier and signified, but depending on where they fall in this space alters the difficulty and ambiguity of their works.

In ‘The Hollow Men’, Eliot uses a conglomeration of abstract nouns to create ambiguity and reflect the directionless and passive nature of the hollow men themselves. As Derrida argues, ‘the formal essence of the signified is *presence*’, suggesting that, by nature, abstract

¹ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Social Function of Poetry’, in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 18.

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 21.

³ Leon Wieseltier, ‘In a Universe of Ghosts’, *New York Review of Books* (25 November, 1976), pp. 20-23 (p. 20).

⁴ Mowbray Allan, *T.S. Eliot’s Impersonal Theory of Poetry* (New Jersey, NJ: Associated University Press, 1974), p. 37.

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lexis is more difficult for cognition due to the lack of reference to concrete imagery.⁵ From the opening section of the poem, Eliot uses nouns such as ‘form’, ‘force’ and ‘motion’ that are not only abstract in themselves, but are referenced in conjunction with other abstract nouns such as ‘shape’ or ‘gesture’.⁶ Additionally, these abstract nouns are characterised by the preposition ‘without’, meaning they are abstract to the extent of lacking a description from another abstract noun; the ‘voices’ of the hollow men are thus ‘meaningless’ to the point of emptiness, existing within an abyss. There is a distinct absence of concrete imagery or clarification provided in this opening section, implying a sense of stagnation. The notion of non-action is pertinent to the poem’s final section as the hollow men are ‘between the idea/And the reality’ and ‘the motion/And the act’. This indicates an inability to take definitive action, existing in limbo where nothing is accomplished. While it can be argued that Eliot’s use of abstract nouns increases the ambiguity of the poem, Stan Smith diverges from this view. Smith proposes that Eliot often finds ‘introspective power’ in ‘the abdication of the agent, the contemplative abstraction of the subject’.⁷ In slight contrast to Derrida’s argument that “presence” is essential for signification, Smith implies that Eliot’s meaning is derived from the fundamental *absence* of direct or concrete imagery. The images of the hollow men are defined by what they lack, similar to notions of positive absence or lacuna. By detaching his lexis from the physical world, Eliot’s poem imagines a ‘dream kingdom’ in which the delusional ‘hollow men’ reside; an empty, ‘dead land’. ‘The Hollow Men’ does not occupy a specific semantic field that weaves all the abstract threads together. Instead, the poem implies a lack of direction and a sense of passivity, only emphasised by the free verse with no set rhyme scheme. Therefore, the relationship between the signifier and signified in ‘The Hollow Men’ is distant, but to the effect of characterising the hollow men themselves as intangible and passive voices.

Conversely, Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’ is constructed with an abundance of proper nouns, which allow for little ambiguity and contribute to the overarching metaphors of the poem. ‘Daddy’ has garnered a fair amount of criticism for its use of the Holocaust and Nazism as a metaphor for the speakers’ relationship with a paternal figure. As critic Roger Scruton states, Plath’s ‘verse is brutal’, using ‘only a cluster of images fathered into plain and ugly words’.⁸ Indeed, Plath’s use of proper nouns coincides with Scruton’s argument in order to create simple yet unpleasant imagery. The poem references ‘Dachau, Auschwitz’ and ‘Belsen’ in conjunction with the speaker describing themselves as a ‘Jew’.⁹ The imagery becomes shocking because of the direct use of language and its connotations of tragedy. As the poem progresses there is continued use of proper nouns with ‘Luftwaffe’, ‘Aryan eye’ and ‘Meinkampf look’, all adding to the specificity of the references. More pertinent, however, is that Plath turns some of these proper nouns into adjectives to describe the features of the father figure. The nouns, such as ‘Aryan’ and ‘Meinkampf’, have a fixed meaning associated with a specific semantic field of Nazism. Due to this use of grounded imagery, the distance between the signifier and signified is far closer than in Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’. While Eliot uses abstract nouns to create a lack of meaning, Plath’s language is concrete to the extent of using proper nouns or fixed descriptors to detail and enrich her images. Despite critic Marjorie Perloff stating that the poem uses ‘cheap shots’ and ‘topical trappings’ in order to ‘camouflage’

⁵ Derrida, p. 19.

⁶ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Hollow Men’, in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 67.

⁷ Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982), p. 97.

⁸ Roger Scruton, ‘Sylvia Plath and the Savage God’, *The Spectator*, 227 (18 December, 1971), p. 890.

⁹ Sylvia Plath, ‘Daddy’, in *Sylvia Plath: Selected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 53.

meaning, she perhaps inadvertently offers a useful criticism for the poem.¹⁰ It is the “topical trappings” of a tight and limited thematic semantic field of the Holocaust that add to the sense of discomfort and claustrophobia. As Jacqueline Rose concurs, the critical issue surrounding the poem is not about its ‘slippage of meaning, but its *fixing*’.¹¹ Along with the enjambed lines that quicken the pace of the poem and an irregular rhyme scheme that fails to transcend a childish /u:/ phoneme, the fixed lexis of ‘Daddy’ culminates in a tone of oppressive confinement. With the use of proper nouns and concrete imagery, Plath’s poem forces the reader to confront a distinct unambiguity; in which the close relationship between the signifier and signified enforces a feeling of suffocation, similar to the experience of the speaker themselves.

Both poets use the figurative technique of metonymy to reduce an image to represent a larger whole, through the effects of this are divergent. As Rose argues, Plath’s speaker ‘accumulate[s]’ images that ‘cover up the sky’ of the poem as she predominantly uses metonymy to provide a symbol and give no further explanation.¹² For example, when Plath’s speaker states ‘with your Luftwaffe’, the proper noun specifically represents the Nazi military air-force but also has connotations of war, destruction and fear. Not only is Plath referencing something concrete, but with the specific use of metonymy as a method of figurative reduction, the speaker also minimises the force of the Luftwaffe. As one cannot literally have a “Luftwaffe”, the poem metaphorically presents the destructive air-force as subordinate to the paternal figure; he is placed in ownership of the Luftwaffe and is thus considered more oppressive than the Nazi regime in the speaker’s eyes. By belittling the features of Nazism, the speaker not only equates their familial experience to the Holocaust, but indicates that their experience is somewhat worse. Concurring with Rose’s argument of “covering the sky”, Plath uses metonymy to equate the impact of Nazism with the speaker’s personal trauma, thus limiting the narrative perspective beyond that of childish immaturity; their emotions are of greater importance than that of historical tragedy. In contrast, Eliot uses metonymy in ‘The Hollow Men’ to reduce the impact of the hollow men themselves while simultaneously intensifying their ineffectuality. Hugh Kenner argues that Eliot’s poem is a reaction to ‘upper-middleclass twentieth-century’ gentility, a place ‘where one does not think of protesting too much [...] no one speaks loudly’, unlikely to ‘disturb the silence.’¹³ Indeed, this is depicted through the gradual breakdown of language throughout the poem, resulting in ‘For Thine is/ Life is/ For Thine is the’; the hollow men become alienated and abstracted to the point where they cannot function practically and complete their sentences. In the last stanza, however, Eliot uses metonymy to emphasise this breakdown of language while also reducing and trivialising the hollow men further. In the poem’s last lines the speaker proclaims: ‘*This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper.*’ As Eliot suggests, a ‘work of art should always be self-consistent’ and, within the context of the poem, the “whimper” functions as an image that represents a larger whole of intangibility, passivity and cowardice.¹⁴ Not only does this further imply the hollow men’s lack of practical linguistic capability, but the use of the metonym as a technique of reduction thus lessens their impact. The hollow men are alienated so far as they do not represent themselves, but are grouped together as a whole, minimised and portrayed by an image that itself is a reduction. As metonyms represent a whole entity through a small part, they are closer to the signified meaning and potentially less ambiguous. As such, it can be argued that Plath and Eliot use it to directly downplay political institutions. Although both are direct, Plath’s metonym is still closer to a signified meaning as it puts the Luftwaffe, a concrete image, in the ownership of the father figure and thus places it under

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, ‘The Two Ariels: The (Re)making of The Sylvia Plath Canon’, *The American Poetry Review*, 13:6 (1984), pp. 10-18 (p. 14-15).

¹¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 2nd edn. (London: Virago, 1996), p. 207.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹³ Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 159, 161-2.

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Elizabethan Dramatists’, in *Selected Essays*, 2nd edn. (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960), p. 93.

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poetic control; whereas Eliot’s hollow men are presented as incapable of actively controlling and representing themselves.

Conceptual mappings of metaphors and similes is another way in which the relationship between signifier and signified can be explored in ‘The Hollow Men’ and ‘Daddy’; a way of deconstructing the poem’s language to illuminate its nuances. These ideas of metaphoric mappings can be linked to George Lakoff’s ‘Invariance Hypothesis’ in which he explains ‘mappings preserve the cognitive topology of the source domain’, that is, source and target domains of a metaphor have to have similar features in order to translate to the reader.¹⁵ This hypothesis can be applied to ‘The Hollow Men’ when the poem uses the metaphor ‘eyes are/ Sunlight on a broken column’. The metaphor is highly ambiguous as it refers to non-specific and indefinite things; the “eyes” remain anonymous and the “broken column” is not elaborated on in the proceeding line. While it could refer to casting light on a faded power, also highlighted in the image of ‘a fading star’, it is an open mapping due to the distinct lack of embodied features. More in line with the Invariance Hypothesis, however, is the signified difference between the domains of the metaphor itself. The relation between “the eyes”, the target domain, and “sunlight on a broken column”, the source domain, is palpably remote. The reader is invited to reconcile the two disparate images, increasing the potential for multiple interpretations or, as Fauconnier and Turner phrase it, conceptual blending; the cognitive space between inputs.¹⁶ Not only are the metaphoric mappings in ‘The Hollow Men’ open, but the images it attempts to convey have little relevance to one another outside the metaphor. This could add to the sense of the hollow men’s alienation from a real or tangible world. By increasing its distance from a concrete signified meaning, the poem embodies the form of the hollow men through its linguistic construction, as it shifts further away from a physical reality and into a ‘dream kingdom’.

Furthermore, the figurative language in ‘Daddy’ is also subject to open mappings but uses them to the opposite effect of Eliot and, in turn, provides more palpable meaning. Although ‘Daddy’ has an unambiguous and dominant overarching metaphor of linking paternal problems to the Holocaust, the poem itself has many open mappings. For example, in the simile ‘an engine/ Chuffing me off like a Jew’ all of the the domains are not inherently linked within their individual meanings. Additionally, Croft and Cruse have noted how similes present the two domains ‘as separate’; ‘we are certainly invited to consider the two domains together, but they are presented as distinct.’¹⁷ Whereas a metaphor states an image *is* another image, a simile functions on the likeness of the two images and is, therefore, potentially further away from signification. In ‘Daddy’, however, the simile feels restricted due to the confined semantic field of the whole poem; in spite of its open mapping. As Rose states, ‘the Holocaust can only represent itself’ due to its historical ‘singularity’.¹⁸ Therefore, despite any individual open mappings of the poem, ‘Daddy’ is still restricted and closed due to the very specific reference it uses to form its figurative language. Although the linguistic structures of Plath’s images are theoretically less ambiguous than Eliot’s, the use of physical and historical reference ensures that the distance between signifier and signified can never stray too far. Additionally, the open mappings simultaneously contribute toward overall theme of childish or immature perspectives that permeate throughout the poem. With the title being ‘Daddy’ and the listing of symbols that

¹⁵ George Lakoff, ‘The Invariance Hypothesis’, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 1:1 (1990), pp. 39-74 (p. 54).

¹⁶ Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

¹⁷ William Croft and D. Alan Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 213.

¹⁸ Rose, p. 215.

point towards Nazism and the Holocaust that are never elaborated upon, the entire poem is emotionally exaggerated to the extent of irrationality. The speaker never particularly provides a reason for the anger toward their father but is resentful nonetheless. Due to the pervading concrete historical imagery and the immaturity of the speaker, 'Daddy', in spite of its openly mapped metaphors, is confined to hyperbole and close signification.

Ultimately, the poetic techniques surrounding utilisation of figurative language and metaphor are closely tied to specific lexical choice; whether the language used is based upon ideas and concepts, or physical and memorable references. While not always the case, ambiguity in Plath's 'Daddy' and Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' predominantly relies on the specificity of their language; it is thus easier to convey intentions behind an expression, or a signifier, if the language itself refers to something non-metaphysical. Once the language transcends tangibility it becomes harder to process, and the distance between signifier and signified increases. As Derrida notes, ambiguity 'requires the logic of presence'; words that refer to something immediate and non-abstract are often less equivocal.¹⁹ This is not a universal statement, however. Judith Butler argues that the importance of Derrida's project was to 'account for what permits articulation', to separate oneself from what is considered 'binary', natural and unifying – to deconstruct supposedly innate and predetermined language structures and explore the space in between.²⁰ Derrida's framework is thus useful for exploring why figurative language can appear difficult or ambiguous, abstract or concrete. Both Eliot and Plath are highly metaphorical poets, employing metaphors, simile, metonymy and open mappings: the key difference, however, is in the specificity of which their figurative technique is constructed. Where 'The Hollow Men' refers to meta-physical concepts and abstractions to suggest the hollow men themselves are of passive quality, 'Daddy' uses precise and fixed images that connote the Holocaust and Nazism to elevate the both the speaker's suffering and irrationality. Eliot and Plath both critique institutions, but the way in which this is enacted varies considerably through their language. Plath uses similar figurative techniques to Eliot, some even less direct such as simile instead of metaphor, yet she garners more criticism partly due to the singular extremity of the metaphor she uses. In the case of Eliot and Plath, meaning is therefore derived from the precision of images and their connotations, whether more abstraction is at play and how it effects ambiguity; the gulf between what is tangible or conceptual, the distance between the signifier and signified.

¹⁹ Derrida, p. 76-77.

²⁰ Judith Butler, 'Introduction', in *Of Grammatology*, p. xi.

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