Being distinct and readable almost all the time, John Berryman’s poetry is the only means by which his life could be deciphered and understood. The personal background of the author was complicated with family drama that cast a shadow over his literary path: father’s suicide imprinted on each and every line of his poems. To draw parallels between Berryman’s personal life and his poetry, it is essential to analyze the afore-mentioned situation in greater detail.

The topic of suicide plays a major role in John Berryman’s biography. Having turned twelve, Berryman lost his father, whose image haunted the writer for the rest of his life. Another point to be made is that Berryman’s personal opinion about his father’s passing veers from poem to poem. According to Denis Donoghue, Irish literary critic, ‘Sometimes his words are loss and sometimes spitting range, though Berryman confesses bewilderment mainly’ (Donoghue, 1982). To understand what D. Donoghue meant by spitting range, the poem ‘Dream Song 143’ has been chosen for a thorough linguostylistic analysis.

The prevailing topic of death is predominant in Berryman’s artistic creation. It is noteworthy that he had no intention to reveal the feelings of his own in poetry (Wikipedia, 2020). For this reason, the lyric hero Mr. Bones equates the author in every single thought and emotion. Moreover, the name of the main character highly correlates with the theme of the poem. As J. Berryman followed his father’s steps, “Mr. Bones’ might be the real bones he identifies his father with as the only thing that is left after the suicide. The other assumption can be based on the author’s prediction of his own death and what would be left of him.

Having smoothly transferred to the narrative voice and lyrical persona in the poem, the fact of parting with Mr. Bones as a lyrical hero is evident. Although Mr. Bones was the main narrator in the cycle of ‘Dream Songs’ for a long time, in this very case J. Berryman showed his own self and dispossessed himself by signing a song to Mr. Bones, ‘I’ll sing you now a song // the like of which may bring your heart to break.’ The first-person narrative presents author’s readiness to open his heart to the reader and raise the curtain on his deep emotions (Oxford Reference). The reader plays the role of a so-called psychologist who analyzes a complicated situation of his patient suffering from a split personality.

On the other hand, the reader might be considered as a close friend and/or a trustworthy person who can lend J. Berryman an ear in the matters of the heart. The reason for this is a familiar word choice, specific punctuation, and spelling. When it
comes to the lexical constituent, such a vocative as ‘pal’ and a colloquial ‘forevers’ make the author-reader relationship more intimate. Also, a symbol ‘&’ and the use of phrasal verbs ‘take out’, ‘take along’ only reinforce the point made previously.

In addition to the aforementioned vocabulary peculiarities, it is essential to single out stylistic devices and expressive means used in the poem. Metaphors and epithets are remarkable in this case since they constitute the vast majority of all expressive means. For instance, such an epithet as ‘gross fears’ intensifies the effect of his father’s death chasing J. Berryman ‘along the beaches’ (simply put during his lifespan). Moreover, the metaphor ‘gross fears accompany us’ adds the air of horror and panic. In addition to it, the use of the idiom ‘scared to death’ highlights the terror that occupied the author’s heart and mind. Speaking of the metaphors, ‘mad drive wiped out my childhood’ demonstrates that the author’s life is complicated with various pitfalls and obstacles from a very young age, and this process is irreversible. The use of hyperbole is to the point in the poem because it shows to what extent J. Berryman loved his father and how intense the level of their son-father relationship was, ‘He was going to swim out, with me, forevers’ or ‘I love him until I fall into coma.’ Although the last phrase may not be directly considered as hyperbole as such providing that the author had second thoughts on taking his own life.

In the same way as the word choice augments the emotional background, lower-case letters play their own role in the poem. Against all the standard rules of commencing each line with a capital letter, J. Berryman starts only the beginning of each new sentence with it, not the line. Ryan Foo’s thoughts on this issue are that ‘all lower-case is therapeutic because it liberates you from the chore of deciding so you can focus on the content you deliver.’ Furthermore, his point is that we ramble in the world of poetry, and, consequently, our language becomes more colloquial (Foo, 2018). To a reader, it may look like he is out of breath trying to ‘sing a song’ as quickly as he possibly can. Moreover, another option might be that he is simply delirious.

To summarize the above, it has been proven that J. Berryman’s poetry tends to be sincere with the reader closer to the end of the ‘Dream Songs’ cycle. The leading theme of death was uncovered through several linguistic aspects: lower-case sentences, colloquial word choice, and stylistic devices and expressive means (epithet and metaphor mostly). Of equal importance is the first-person narration which helps the author stay connected with the reader on a psychological level.

References:


