

# Seminar 9 – Place a poppy in my hair: literature, love and war

\* this lecture dealt with the Holocaust, trauma, grief, heartbreak and war, which can be considered heavy and triggering topics.

## Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy' & Taylor Swift, 'The Great War'

### Questions for the discussion

1. Read through both texts aloud: especially in Plath's poem, the sound is important
2. What is each text 'about'?
3. What similarities can you find between the two texts?

### Applications to both texts

- War is used as a metaphor for personal issues and trauma
  - Either as an aggressive and/or oppressive act in 'Daddy'
  - Or a fight between two parties in 'The Great War'
- Both texts use imagery from The Second World War and the Holocaust to handle this metaphor. The question is why and what is it doing there?

### Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy'

\*Whereas the poem is mostly biographical, some details don't correspond to Plath's life. For example, "I was ten when they buried you" (v.57), while Plath was actually eight when her father died. That is why it remains important to make the distinction between the speaking persona and the author (see also seminar 3, in which we talked about the death of the author and, specifically, this distinction between author and narrator)

- Explicit references to the Holocaust
- The trauma of speaking persona's dad impacted the father-daughter relationship, leading to the daughter's suicide attempt → "I was ten when they buried you" (v. 58)
- The comparison between the father and a nazi in the poem can be applied to men in general. In this way, the poem invites a reflection on the power dynamics involved in abuse.
  - Taking a look at Plath's life, her husband (Ted Hughes) cheated on her → "the vampire who said he was you" (v.72)
  - The poem's central topic is the speaking persona's father
  - There are also implicit references to Hitler, which could invite a historical context of abuse as a repeated cycle → "And your neat mustache" (v.43)
- However, this comparison also needs to be handled carefully
  - It has only come to light recently that Plath's own dad had possibly nazi sympathies.
  - Yet, this does NOT mean he was a nazi or that the poem is delineating him as such. Again, we need to take into consideration the distinction between the author and the speaking persona (see comment above).
- There is an appropriation of the iconography and imagery of the Holocaust in the poem.
  - This doesn't correspond to Plath's own heritage: she wasn't Jewish → "I think I may well be a Jew" (v.35)
  - This leads to the question: what is the function of that imagery and language in the poem?


## Taylor Swift, 'The Great War'

- Heartbreak is compared to a war
- Moreover, there are two ways to handle this war discussed in the song
  - On the one hand, closing yourself off → "I drew curtains closed" (1:08)
  - On the other hand, reaching out to the other person → "you drew up some good faith treaties" (1:02)
- There are references to both the First and the Second World War in the song
  - First World War: "place a poppy in my hair" (3:01)
  - Second World War: "drank my poison all alone" (1:09), considering that Hitler's wife poisoned herself

## Trauma Studies

The lens of trauma studies was used to talk about both texts more in-depth. Below you can find some scholarly viewpoints on the slides from the seminar, as well as some additional notes.

# Trauma studies



- **Trauma**: from the Greek word for wound: 'a wound from an external cause' (first used in English 1693)
- First developed in the 1990s, drawing on Freudian theory. Trauma is an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether. In this model of trauma, suffering is **unrepresentable**.
- 'Trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation' (Richard Crownshaw)
- 'Trauma is both highly resistant to articulation and wildly generative of narratives that seek to explicate the "unclaimed" originary experience' (Lucy Bond & Stef Craps)

# Trauma studies

- 'The critical emphasis on trauma's unspeakability rests on the claim that extreme experience fractures both language and consciousness, causing lasting damage and demanding unique narrative expressions. The event is absent in normal consciousness but preserved just beyond the limits of understanding in a timeless, wordless state and continues to inflict pain on the psyche [...] strange absence yet ghostlike presence in consciousness' (Nasrullah Mambrol)
- Trauma 'also appears worryingly transmissible: it leaks between mental and physical symptoms, between patients... between patients and doctors via the mysterious process of transference or suggestion, and between victims and their listeners or viewers' (Roger Luckhurst)
- 'Trauma, then, is slippery: blurring the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence. It traverses the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the collective' (Bond & Craps)



- Applied to our 'Daddy' and 'The Great War', the trauma talked about here is either familial in the former or stemming from a relationship in the latter.
- Importantly, trauma is a paradoxical phenomenon
  - It stems from a meaningless act that causes unrepresentable suffering. However, trauma is present in a lot of narratives, in which one tries to represent it and attribute meaning in that way.
  - Moreover, it is a haunting presence that is somehow always there (even though it can be repressed in Freudian theory), yet it is impossible to articulate. In other words, we try to talk about its omnipresence, but we can't.
  - It is both mental and physical because there are some physical consequences attached to it. Think about shaking from anxiety.
- We discussed some metaphors in class to talk about trauma
  - Trauma is a liquid presence that is contagious to others (Roger Luckhurst, Bond & Craps). The latter can be linked to second-hand trauma or intergenerational trauma.
  - Trauma as a rupture

## How do Plath & Swift use language in innovative ways to represent trauma?

Consider in relation to one or more of the scholarly viewpoints expressed on the slides pictured above.

### Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy'

- The "German tongue" (v.16) to try to talk about trauma
  - This refers back to the unspeakability of trauma. It seems as if the poem needs more than one language to represent trauma.
- The poem also explicitly refers to the unspeakability of trauma. Yet, the poem as an object defies this unspeakability, because it is speaking about it in the form of a poem.
  - ➔ "I could hardly speak" (v.28)
  - ➔ "the tongue stuck in my jaw / it stuck in a barb wire snare" (v.25-26)
- Repetition as a way to speak trauma into existence and manifest it in language

- ➔ "Ich, ich, ich, ich," (v.27)
- ➔ "And I said I do, I do" (v.67)
- The poem's sound qualities and rhyme also refer to a nursery rhyme and infantile language
- Metaphors
  - Opposition between the father as a nazi and the daughter as a Jew
- Death imagery renders the mental trauma physical and, additionally, compares it to something external such as a demon or a "vampire" (v.72)
  - ➔ "there's a stake in your fat black heart" (v. 76)
  - ➔ "I was ten when they buried you" (v.57)

### Taylor Swift, 'The Great War'

- Language that makes from something beautiful, such as flowers, something tainted by the colours of war
  - ➔ "My knuckles were bruised like violets" (0:02)
  - ➔ "All that bloodshed, crimson clover" (0:40)
- Change of scale is used in the comparison between a war and a relationship.
  - Instead of talking about an entire war, which is an extensive topic, the song focuses on the small details of it → for example, "tears on the letter" (0:55)
  - See also seminar 6, in which we talked about change of scale in relation to nature writing
- Metaphors
  - Colour as a visual element that represents internal trauma externally

## We can plant a memory garden: Trauma, history and literature

Both 'Daddy' and 'The Great War' talk about memory – both collective and individual – and memorisation

### Theodor W. Adorno: 'to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'

Question: What might he have meant by this?

- Romanticising the Holocaust in poetry is barbaric
- An opposition between, on the one hand, the innocent qualities of poetry and, on the other hand, the death involved in the lowest point humanity has ever been in (Holocaust)
- Alternatively, an opposition between poetry as a human product and the inhumane crimes during the Holocaust
- Lastly, it is impossible to express the horror of Auschwitz adequately in poetry. Here, think also about the shifts in literary movements after the First and the Second World War
  - Both modernism (after the First World War) and post-modernism (after the Second World War) created a new language and a new way of expression to discuss the wars respectively
  - Post-modernism, in particular, is characterised by a heightened self-awareness about our own humanity to try to capture in language the Holocaust as such a big turning point in history.
    - There is a sense that the literature before that rupture is no longer adequate to talk about the trauma

Adorno later explained the above quotation further as follows:

'these victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it [...] The aesthetic principle of stylization [...] make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror removed' (Adorno)

- To create art out of someone else's trauma, namely a genocide, creates some kind of aesthetic pleasure for the viewer, which is barbaric.

**The publishing trend in which "'Of Auschwitz' is a form of marketing tool" (Gary Barker on Twitter)**

We considered the following problematic aspects of these novels (for example, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris, *The Librarian of Auschwitz* by Antonio Iturbe)

- A group's trauma is appropriated and then used as a marketing tool and, frankly, to sell something
- The historical accuracy of such novels can't always be guaranteed, as they are works of fiction
- Works of fiction require an implicit structure to give logic to the story (beginning – middle – resolution). This is problematic when we're talking about the Holocaust because the reality is so illogical and often not with a neat resolution at the end.

However, we also discussed the caveat that writing fiction about history of course is not entirely wrong and it is better than never writing about the Holocaust at all.

Moreover, history in itself is a narrative often told by the winners and historical trauma travels through time in the form of intergenerational trauma of a specific group. Consider the quotations of Mambrol below in this context:

- 'History fails to adequately represent traumatic events such as war or genocide, since any representation is a type of fiction' (Mambrol)
- 'Cathy Caruth writes [...] "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we were implicated in each other's traumas," emphasizing a universalist view of trauma that damages the psyche and evokes a shared response across time. This standpoint indicates trauma's inherent transhistorical or intergenerational quality that can be transmitted across time. The infectious potential of trauma is paired with the timelessness of an extreme experience that refuses narrative assimilation into memory. From this perspective trauma's transhistorical potential means that a cultural group's traumatic experience in the historical past can be part of the psychic landscape of the contemporary individual who belongs to the same cultural group.' (Mambrol)

## How does Swift and Plath's use of the Great War/Holocaust make you feel? Why might they have used this iconography and symbolism? Is it justifiable?

We considered the two sides of the arguments, which are summarised below, but didn't have a complete answer to this question as it is a thorny discussion

- There is a difference in the grasp of the audiences between the two texts:
  - Plath's audience in 1965 was much closer to the Holocaust and the Great War than Swift's audience is today
- Swift's song is also used by Swifties to talk about ticketing in relation to her The Eras Tour (as in "I've survived the Great War, I got tickets!"). At that point, it is a double appropriation and used in a joking way in modern language
  - Swift appropriates iconography and symbolism from the Great War to write the song
  - Swifties appropriate the song to talk about ticketing
- However, there is also the question of historical distance and the difference between the First (in Swift's song) and the Second World War (in Plath's poem)
  - The Great War is an era so far removed at this point, whereas the Holocaust is still very close
  - Often in society, the Second World War overshadows the First one, especially in our education system. The First World War is treated as 'the prequel' of the Second One because we have that knowledge from a historical distance
  - The amount of survivors differs between the two World Wars
  - The First World War is also often romanticised, because of this historical distance and the legacy and heritage we still uphold with it on Remembrance Day
    - This is also related to gatekeeping of trauma: not wearing a poppy on Remembrance Day is seen as 'wrong'
    - At what point do these rituals, such as wearing poppies and visiting monuments related to the Wars, become empty repetitions in memorialisation? We compared it during the discussion in class with analphabetic people during the Early-Modern era repeating Scripture in Latin in church, because that was part of the ritual.
    - Think also about dark tourism, in which tourists visit Auschwitz.
- Yet, songs and poems make this history graspable for an audience who hasn't lived during either of the Wars. In this way, history is still returned upon and doesn't stay 'frozen' (see also the text discussed in seminar 1: 'Monuments', from Andrey Bennett & Nicholas Royle, 'An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory').
- 'Daddy' cosplays a repressed group, which can then be put aside again. However, the members of this repressed group cannot simply put aside a part of their identity.
- Maybe the shock value and provocativeness of Plath's poem is the point: the worst and most extreme metaphor is chosen to try to speak about the worst possible trauma

## How to represent the unrepresentable?

### Questions:

1. How would you describe the feeling of a broken heart?
2. Tell us about your favourite art that deals with grief and heartbreak.

**Mentimeter results**

How would you describe the feeling of a broken heart?			
Suffocating	An inconvenience.	Emptiness	Like someone is just hitting you in the heart continuously
Overwhelming	Empty	Empty with joy, full with sadness.	Knives through the heart
Like a sharp stab to the chest, it's hard to breathe, it's hard to speak, it's hard to eat	Cold	loss of trust	pain :-(
Like a vacuum opens up inside of you	Lonely	The world not making sense anymore	the rupture of several organs
an inability to understand how the world just keeps going	like all you want to do is cry, a lot	Not knowing what is next	feeling of drowning, something slowly creeping up, suffocating you
inability to breath	Like broken ribs, but worse	Confusing	Feeling lonely and feeling like you're not good enough. Afraid that you won't feel love ever again like that.
like I'll never bloom again	<i>screams in agony</i>		



## Tell us about your favourite art that deals with grief or heartbreak

Odd one but Russian songs. They grasp the sadness of a breakup really well and of course paintings.

The song sad forever by lauv

"I'm so sick and tired of you people revelling in self-pity instead of doing the healthy thing and pretending anyone who left you never existed in the first place" - Barney

"to truly love another person is to accept that the work of loving them is worth the pain of losing them"

Love doesn't die, People do. So, when all that's left of me is love, Give me away.

comfort food and the dirty table afterwards

(Basic but) music (and if it's a heartbreak taylor swift for sure)

Why does the sun go on shining? Why does the sea rush to shore? Don't they know it's the end of the world? Cause you don't love me any more The End of the World - Skeeter Davis

Anything by Caspar David Friedrich

A painting called 'The Enigma' by Gustave Doré So sad and beautiful

a good old sad spotify playlist

High Hopes from Kodakidz helped me through my depression

Instrumental songs. No words just experiencing the sound in the moment.

The world of Skyrim

Hindenburg Lover - Anson Seabra

Waiting for us by Stray Kids

a year of magical thinking - Didion Letter to You - Springsteen often I will even interpret art that has nothing to do with grief as my own personal grief because my worldview has been so altered

Céline Dion - pour que tu m'aimes encore

Sam Smith - Lay me down

A Monster Calls - novel by Patrick Ness (grief, loss of a mother)

BTS's music: 'The truth untold' 'I NEED YOU' and 'Spring Day' for example

Camille Monet on her deathbed. John McLean's Vincent. Les Misérables.

Purpous is glorious by Natalie Holt (from Loki season 2)

hope there's someone by Antony and the Johnsons

One Day, Stepmom (films)

Amélie Poulain

Julian by Fleur Pierets

Amélie Poulain

Crush by Richard Siken: "Sorry about the blood in your mouth. I wish it was mine." "Sometimes you get so close to someone you end up on the other side of them."

Like Real People Do - song by Hozier

reciting the entire All Too Well lyrics together with hundreds of Swifties in the premiere cinema night was quite a therapeutic experience to be honest

'what is grief if not love persevering' - MCU



Museum of Broken relationships - Zagreb

A song that just came out, but that definitely will be a comfort song when I'm going through heartbreak / loss: The Parting Glass by boygenius

Keaton Henson's songs

Doctor who- the girl in the fireplace

## Language, love & emotion in *Troilus & Criseyde*: close reading

### General impressions of the text

- A lot of bodily metaphors: crying, heartbeat, blushing etc
- A big gap between us, as modern readers with our modern values (such as feminism), and the 14<sup>th</sup> Century text
  - The translation makes the content more mad and crazy because it was translated from Middle English. Moreover, it sometimes breaks the allusion the original language creates (in class, we gave the example of the use of the word "pimp" in the translation).
  - The text is melodramatic and hyperbolic, as were 'Daddy' and 'The Great War'
  - It has a different afterlife than, for example, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*
  - The text doesn't have a lot of psychological realism
- It discusses the extremities between, on the one hand, the Trojan War going on at the same time that, on the other hand, Troilus and Criseyde's love story is happening

### Question

What linguistic methods does Chaucer use to represent the relationship between love, grief, the body, and the word?

Consider also the term (psycho)somatic, in which psychological conditions have physical conditions. Think, for example, of shaking hands when one is really anxious.

### Close reading

\*everyone was given a separate passage to discuss in small groups. Below you can find the slide with all the relevant passages

## Language, love & emotion in *Troilus & Criseyde*: close reading

What linguistic methods does Chaucer use to represent the relationship between love, grief, the body, and the word?

- pp.7-8 from 'Therefore, all you wise' to 'convert people like this!'
- pp.23-4 from beginning of Book Two to 'may you guide him!'
- pp.29-30 from 'Now, dear uncle' to 'blame for his death'
- pp.57-8 from beginning of Book Three to 'clean through his mind!'
- pp.82-3 from 'And Lord, how intently' to 'quickly lost my happiness!'
- pp.94-6 from 'O Lord Juvenal' to 'die in anguish!'
- pp.104-5 from 'Full of piteous sorrow' to 'pass over it'
- pp.121-2 from beginning of Book Five to 'Don't make me die!'
- pp.152-3, from 'Go, little book!' to the end



## What is the relationship between art and trauma?

- The process of making art can comfort the one making the art, while at the same time can also comfort the one looking at the art.
  - The latter would be comforted by the thought that they are not alone in what they are living through.
  - Moreover, it could bring a sense of healing, because they can live vicariously through the artist (see also seminar 5, in which we looked at this comfort from the point of the elegy)
  - Consider also the related concept of catharsis.
- However, we also need to critically reflect on the romanticisation of the torment of the artist, in which art is created in a process of suffering. For example, artists like Van Gogh and Munch. Art has also been made in artists' happy periods, so trauma is not required to make art.
- The aspect of time in the process of creating time can also allow the artist to deal with their trauma gradually, instead of all at once.
- Turning back to the unspeakability of trauma, the viewer of art can also have the sensation that the artist found a way to speak about their trauma, which they haven't thought about themselves.
- Yet, art can also trigger repressed trauma by bringing it to the forefront (see also Freudian theory).
  - Still, this 'unleashing' can also be an opportunity to work through trauma
- Furthermore, art can allow others to experience a certain trauma they might not have lived through. For example, in the form of horror movies.
- Lastly, unwritten art can represent trauma that is unrepresentable in words (see above).