



The Representation of Sexual Abuse in Contemporary Poetry: A Psychotherapist's Composition

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Abstract: It is well established that poetry has a healing effect on any type of childhood traumas because the reading of poems may generate the idea that the suffering is not limited to a single individual rather to a group of people. In addition, the painful experience is something that is shared by others, therefore common, as the written words may likely express the discomfort of many individuals. In this paper, the author discusses the representation of traumatic experiences in his personal composition which was inspired by the account of a patient during the last session of psychotherapy. The patient's narration refers to the memories of the sexual abuse perpetrated by his mother and sister during his childhood. Figurative language and adverbs of time are the main literary devices used in the poem to represent the trauma, the discomfort and the suffering of this individual.

Keywords: sexual abuse, traumatic experiences, creative writing, contemporary poetry

1. INTRODUCTION

My idea of writing poetry is to tell and give voice to the stories of people I know personally, or I meet during my clinical practice. It is not just a matter of describing facts rather the representation of feelings, emotions, thoughts, fears, behaviour, attitudes, manners and personal experiences. For example, in the poem *Nailed to you*, I depicted the suffering of one of my patients who was abused by his mother and sister during infancy. I tried to express in words the account this man provided about his sexual abuse and, moreover, to represent the negative emotions that are related to this traumatic experience, specifically anger and helplessness. It is well established that poetry has a healing effect on this type of childhood traumas (Sax, 2019; Hoffman, 2018) because the reading of these poems may generate the idea that the suffering is not limited to a single individual rather to a group of people. The painful experience is something that is shared by others, therefore common, and the written text may likely express the discomfort and suffering of many other individuals. In addition, the poem discussed here was composed by the therapist as a way not only to relate about facts or personal experiences but also to explain to an audience how distressing this kind of suffering can be. The ability of a professional to conceptualize the emotional impact of traumatic events of patients is part of an interactive process that is called empathy (Coleman, 2012). As a matter of fact, the reading and writing of poetry for doctors and therapists can be useful for a better understanding of people's suffering and, additionally, there is a relaxing effect since the patient's pain may be very intense and overwhelming for anybody to bear.

2. DISCUSSION

The use of poetry to tell people's stories is indeed a creative art (Maharaj, 2022). Poetry is a great instrument for storytelling since it makes possible the representation of emotions, ideas, and experiences. The techniques used for this purpose are imagery, metaphors and symbolism, language choice and form, tone, rhythm and sound devices. Therefore, storytelling with poetry can be considered as the art of sharing emotions, experiences, and ideas, thus favouring a sense of connection and understanding between the poet and the reader. In this regard, the creative flow described by Csikszentmihalyi (2013) is important to mention here because it allows the writer to unleash his/her potential. Creativity is not an activity related to the single individual or composer rather to the encounter between the poet's mind and the social context. Therefore, *Nailed to you* can be considered

as the product of the interaction between the poet/therapist and the society/patient and it is thanks to this encounter that the creative process can find its expression. In her article on poetry and psychodynamics, Punzi (2022) highlights the relationship between the therapeutic process and the narration of personal experiences. The importance is on what the patient tells, elaborates and communicates with his own words, symbolic language and accounts of past events and its emotional impact.

Nailed to you

You touched me viciously

For your own delight

When I was just a tiny angel

With wings not strong enough

To fly, to take off, to stand up.

Too young to be caressed

stroked and rubbed so wildly.

You thought I was your pastime

Your personal toy to enjoy

Every time you desired

And I had no command

As you were the governess.

You nailed me to you

and left a stain

That cannot be cancelled

Not today

Not tomorrow

Never.

I was your flawless prey

You the lurking knave

The beast that torments me

Still.

In my dreams I see

Sharp viscid canines

That haunt me

I scream effortlessly

But my thoughts are mute

No soul to hear me.

You made me a smut

Aloof and emotionless

A filthy carrion.

Now that you're gone

I can't get rid of you

*The souvenir you left
Kept always in my self
I can't stay away from it
Because it's still appealing.
Even now I wonder why
You nailed me to you
For my whole life
Today
Tomorrow
Forever.*

There are many poems written by survivors of sexual abuse (allpoetry.com) as well as by authors who try to give voice to the victims' experiences (Flock, 2017). In all these poems, memory seems to be of central importance as it leads back to those terrible life experiences. These situations are commonly represented in the compositions by words mindfully chosen (i.e., scars, touch, bastard, monster), by figurative language (i.e., innocence, twisting thoughts, silky fur, flower petals), and often by using free verse which lacks a regular rhyming pattern thus creating an effect of disharmony and uneasiness. In her poem *Bone*, Yrsa Daley-Ward is giving a message to the world about facts that really occurred and might be unnoticed if not properly published on paper. I share the same idea of this poet because when I wrote my poem, I thought of myself as a kind of witness of a crime although the facts I discuss occurred in a far past. As a matter of fact, the victim was a child at the time ('tiny angel'), defenceless ('no command'), played and abused ('toy'), stigmatised ('stain'), traumatised ('carrion'), impressed in the mind ('my dreams', 'the souvenir') and most importantly bound to the oppressor ('nailed to you'), an expression that has also a sexual connotation and clearly refers to the intercourse. I concluded the poem with the adverb 'forever' to emphasise the idea of long-lasting or enduring, a device which is also used by other poets. For example, Mary Oliver's poem *Rage* (Colburn, 2019) employs a strong expression: 'And forever those nights snarl', which gives a clear idea of endlessness. Lastly, the absence of a rhyme pattern, the direct expression and the inconsistent metre are typical features of a contemporary poetic composition,

3. CONCLUSION

The poem discussed in this paper clearly reflects the complex and challenging interaction between a therapist and a client and, on a large scale, the creative encounter between a poet and society. From a psychodynamic perspective, a parallelism can be made between the healing process of psychotherapy and the benefits that can result from the interaction between literature and reader (Mazza, 2022). In both situations, what happens is the release of emotions (catharsis), the comprehension of personal behavioural patterns (insight) and the association of aspects of oneself with others (identification). The final result is the amelioration of a psychological condition, the understanding of individual situations that are shareable in society and the enrichment of people's creativity.

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