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Literary Research Paper

A POSTMODERNIST READING OF RON PADGETT'S POEM 'NOTHING IN THAT DRAWER'

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Abstract

The current study is a critical reading and in-depth understanding of the poem 'Nothing in That Drawer' from the postmodernist viewpoint. This thematic poem is composed by Ron Padgett. The authors used textual and thematic analysis to interpret the poem from various literary perspectives to generate significant literary criticism on the Padgett's poem. The paper depicts different tones of the poet in the poem that communicate shock, panic, hysterical calls, comprehension, acceptance, and resentment. However, the poet's emotion is almost in vain as the poem's meaning relates to how meaningless life may be while pursuing things that are not there.

Keywords: Unsuccessful Search, Pessimism, Nothingness of Life, Poetic Qualities

1. Introduction

Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.
Nothing in that drawer.

('Nothing in that Drawer' by Ron Padgett)

The above poem 'Nothing in That Drawer' is a thought-provoking, surprising and innovative literary piece composed in 1942 by the renowned modern poet, editor, and translator Ron Padgett. It is a strange poem of 14 same sentences with a fervent stimulation of abstract meaning. Even though there is a very close, uncanny resemblance between this poem and the sonnets of Shakespeare's and others, in reality, it is nothing but just an illusion. This is because besides the possession of fourteen

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lines, which is very similar to the structure of a sonnet, "Nothing in That Drawer" bears no other similarity with the sonnets. Padgett may have intentionally done this to capture our attention and mock the sonnets, which are always so well-structured. In this sense, this poem is very different from other poems, including the postmodern poems written by Padgett's fellow poets and writers. This is also very apparent from the fact that this poem possesses unique qualities, like it rejects the modernist idea that the words or lines of a poem have to mean something. So, there is no definite meaning to the lines of this poem. It is totally up to the readers to interpret and decide its purpose. This makes this a fascinating and thoughts provoking poem. However, this study aims to discuss the poem's themes and motifs from postmodern perspectives.

2. Conceptual Framework

The authors used the features of postmodernism from the fourth chapter of Peter Barry's book *Beginning Theory* (2017). The authors applied a postmodernist lens to different themes and motifs of the poem and the poet, respectively. The poetry implicates an unsuccessful search. The search is also abstract. Repetition of the same sentence signifies an ongoing and sometimes frenetic expedition. The search continues because the target has not yet been located. Though the narrator did not find anything in the drawer, the readers find postmodernist views and elements in the poem with a sign of emptiness, voidness, craziness, and intangible ideas that represent the postmodern times. The phrase "that drawer" denotes decision and effort in drawer selection (IvyPanda, 2021). Rather than describing a search, the poem portrays an investigation that creates a thrill in the readers' minds, which is also a postmodern feature.

3. Methodology

The authors have had a close reading and analysis of Ron Padgett's poem "Nothing in That Drawer" through the lens of postmodernism. The study takes a qualitative method and focuses on exploring the poem's postmodern themes, techniques, and style. The researcher looks at the text in a systematic way, analyzing its broken structure, intertextual references, and the way it breaks down traditional poetic norms. A thorough analysis of the poem is used to get first-hand information, with a focus on linguistic play, irony, and self-reflection.

Scholarly works on postmodernism, literary criticism, and the works of Ron Padgett were used as secondary sources to build a theoretical basis and understand the context. By looking at the poem through a postmodernist lens, this study hopes to find the many layers of meaning, question common ideas about authorship and meaning-making, and add to the conversation about postmodern literature and poetry as a whole.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Absence of Poetic Features of the Poem 'Nothing in That Drawer': An Exception

A poem should combine sounds, images, different lines, and words. It should have a visual graphic that is supposed to be satisfying. It should be like when we read a poem, all the five senses of our body, the visual, the auditory, the olfactory, and all other senses, should come together and fine-tune the whole idea that we are reading a poem. Besides these, a poem should also have a certain rhythm, meaning, etc. This is what a poem is supposed to be like and should be like, according to modernist ideas. But this poem 'Nothing in That Drawer' is nothing like that. All that it talks about is a drawer, and even this drawer contains nothing. But this does not make this poem a lousy poem or even a product of failure. On the contrary, it makes this poem all the more innovative and exciting. It gives the poem many other edges and possibilities that other poems can never imagine gaining. Like, this poem has so many voice modulations, so many levels of reactions, and so many meanings and interpretations. All of these are up to the readers to decide.

The readers' voices, feelings, and moods when they read the poem determine their reaction levels and the meaning and interpretation they will arrive at. In this way, this poem dismantles the conventional idea of what a poem is supposed to be.

4.2. Ironical Leitmotif

Postmodern critics usually foreground irony (Barry, 2017). The use of irony suggests a gap between what is said and what is intended. In the poem, the gap is clear. All readers can easily understand that it is ironic to search the same drawer frequently, even after knowing that the drawer is empty. Padgett tries to decipher some vision into a somber reality with the poem. The character concurrently discovers that they are empty. Repetition indicates several drawers were searched but nothing was found. The final clause summarizes or concludes that the drawer is empty. The poet understands in this soliloquy that the drawer is empty (IvyPanda, 2021). So, it is kind of irony of fate as the character tries several times, but nothing is found. It seems that the destiny of the narrator mocks at him offering nothing from his intense searches. This matches the analysis of Yau (2019) that Padgett's poems can be simultaneously amiable and wistful, or self-mocking.

4.3. Different Perspectives for the Reading of 'Nothing in That Drawer'

This poem 'Nothing in That Drawer' could be interpreted differently. Like, one of the ways this poem could be solved is that one could have kept something fundamental to them in the drawer. It could be the pictures of their dead parents or relatives. Or it could be something else like official documents, wills etc. too. They remember keeping the object in that drawer. But when they open the drawer in their moment of need to get it, they notice it is not there. So, a sense of mixed loss and fear arise within them. They become anxious, worried that they might have lost the item. Their voices rise and they begin to mechanically chant, "Nothing in that drawer, nothing in that drawer." This could be one interpretation of this poem. Just like we had previously discussed, as it is totally up to the readers to decide what this poem's meaning is, this could very well possibly be one of the interpretations of this poem.

Another way to look into or interpret this poem is that someone may have gotten hold of and hidden something illegal like guns or drugs. When the police heard this news, they checked if it was true. They went to the suspect's house and started checking everything. When they came upon a particular drawer, the suspect began to become nervous and repeatedly said in a fearful tone, "Nothing in that drawer, nothing in that drawer." He acted in such a way that he might have hidden something like illegal substances in that drawer. Or it might even be that the suspect is truly innocent and has no idea what the police are suspecting him for. He has not committed any illegal activity, and nothing is in that drawer. It is just an empty drawer. Depending on the reader's mood and feeling, he could have interpreted and reached either of these conclusions. As this poem is totally different from other types of poems and gives its readers total freedom to imagine and interpret whatever appears logical to them, this could be another form of interpretation.

Another way to look at or interpret this poem is that a child may have hidden something precious to him like toys, pokemon cards in the drawer. When his parents or elders try to open the drawer, he says, "Nothing in that drawer, nothing in that drawer." Not grasping or understanding the fact that this silly act of his raises a lot of suspicions. The parents open the drawer and act like there is nothing in it even though they have found the object hidden by the child. We all have a few precious childhood memories like this. Now that we look back and think about it, it was so silly and sweet of us. This was also probably why our parents might not have told us that they had found out what we had been hiding. So, we see that even this could be another possible interpretation of this poem. If a reader reads this poem and becomes nostalgic about his childhood, he may come upon this interpretation.

Besides these, there are also many other ways to look at this poem. For example, emphasizing each word of each separate sentence can be comprehended in another way. Like, in the sentence "Nothing in that drawer," here if we emphasize the word 'nothing', then what may be understood is that there is nothing in the drawer. But when we emphasize the word 'that', the meaning completely changes. It means there are other drawers, but nothing is in that drawer. So, like this, another new type of meaning can be interpreted just by giving stress or emphasis on a particular word of this poem. So, this poem is fascinating and innovative.

5. Thematically Similar to the Absurdity of Waiting for Godot

Waiting for Godot is a worldwide popular absurd drama by Samuel Beckett where nothing happens, and no plot development is found except depicting the absurdity of human life (Waliullah, 2020). Likewise, the poem 'Nothing in That Drawer' reflects an aimless finding of something extremely absurd. Only the two major characters Vladimir and Estragon are found waiting throughout the play for Godot. It is not Godot, but waiting—a universal human experience—is the play's focus. Similarly, the narrator of 'Nothing in That Drawer' also expects or might wait for something that can please his eyes or soothe his heart.

6. Conclusion

From all of this, Ron Padgett's 'Nothing in That Drawer' is truly a remarkable poem. Even though the same line is repeated 14 times in this poem, it does not lessen its quality in any possible way. On the contrary, it gives the poem freedom that other poems can never gain. Depending on their individual feeling, circumstance, mood, and voice, the readers of this poem perceive and interpret it differently. Even the same reader may interpret this poem in a completely different way when reading it once again. So, this poem differs from the poems we usually read and is exceptionally very interesting.

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