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Applying New Criticism to “forgiving my father”

To apply New Criticism, the reader must first locate tensions and ambiguities in the poem. Obviously, in Lucille Clifton’s “forgiving my father,” the troubled relationship between a daughter and her father is the central tension of the poem. The daughter, the poem’s narrator, seems to blame her father for the hardships endured by the both the narrator and her mother. As a result, the tone of the poem is accusing and angry. With this in mind, however, the poem’s title is ambiguous – the poem does not seem especially “forgiving” of the father. However, New Criticism assumes that the parts of a poem are unified; thus, the content of the poem must be reconciled with its seemingly ironic title.

Upon first reading the poem, the narrator seems to chastise – not forgive – her father. The narrator refers to her father as “old liar” (10), “old lecher” (9), “old pauper” (20), and “old prisoner” (20). She also implies that her father frequently disappointed the family: “you were the pocket that would open/ and come up empty any friday” (17-18). The narrator also implies that he may even have been responsible for the mother’s death: “my mother’s hand opens in her early grave” (6). Meanwhile, the word “forgiving” does not appear in the poem nor does the narrator attempt to move beyond the sins of her father. How then is she forgiving her father?

Two ambiguous statements help resolve the contradiction between the poem’s title and the actual poem. First, in the opening stanza, the narrator states, “it is payday” (5). Second, in the last stanza, she says, “What am I doing here collecting?…no accounting will open them up” (21-23). The first statement hints at the narrator’s intention for writing the poem: she wants compensation for the father’s wrong doings. However, given that her father is an “old pauper” who has neither the means nor the inclination to compensate his daughter monetarily, this “payday” seems highly unlikely (5). After all, the father, who is the “only son of a needy father” (12), gave his wife “nothing” (15). Compensation could come in a different form, however. For example, the father could apologize for the ills he has inflicted upon the family. This seems equally unlikely, however, since the narrator hints that her father is deceased, referring to him as an “old dead man” (20). The second statement, however, signals a change in the narrator’s intentions and a resolution to the apparent contradiction at the heart of the poem. She realizes that nothing will change the past; thus, instead of seeking any form of compensation – whether it is monetary or emotional – she seems to come to peace with the idea that she cannot change what has happened. If “no accounting will open them up,” then she must leave her father’s sins behind if she is to move forward in her own life. This, in itself, is a sort of “forgiving.” Having come to terms with her past, she is ready to move on, a liberation she has achieved through the act of writing the poem.