Bleeding Poetry

For an individual who has never experienced the mental traps of an abusive relationship, it is difficult to fully understand the emotional and physical pain involved. It may even be difficult for a person who has been through an abusive relationship to describe those feelings and pains. In the poem “Bleeding,” by May Swenson, the reader is exposed to the theme of abusive relationships. By reading the poem, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the relationship between an abuser and victim through symbolism found in physical elements, form, and personification.

Within the poem “Bleeding,” three physical elements introduce the theme of abuse: the knife, the cut, and the blood. The symbolism behind the knife is established in its physical description and function. The knife is sharp, dangerous, and it’s used for cutting and tearing down. It is a tool used to cause pain, separation, and destruction. The knife is also a cold, unfeeling tool. Because of these qualities, the knife is a perfect symbol to represent an abuser, as they often possess many of these same qualities. For example, when a knife is used for cutting, it is cold and unfeeling. Similarly, the offensive actions of an abuser create an image that causes them to appear cold and unfeeling. In addition, an abuser’s actions may also be associated with being dangerous, causing pain, tearing down, and inflicting destruction.

Within the poem, the knife creates a cut, which is the next physical element that depicts the theme of abuse. Again, the symbolism of the cut is found in its physical description. The cut or wound is weak and vulnerable. Even after the initial incident, a deep and vulnerable cut can easily be reopened. Because of this weakness, the cut is an
ideal element to symbolize an abuse victim when paired with a knife. The knife creates the cut, and the cut remains always susceptible to the knife’s destructive ways.

A cut will always bleed, so the third physical element that creates the theme of abuse is blood. The presence of blood rarely suggests a positive circumstance. It denotes trouble, pain, and a life-threatening situation. An image involving a great deal of blood, as produced by the text, creates an image of horror and pain. This is because a lot of blood is associated with a lot of pain, and when blood and pain combine it suggests that something dangerous has occurred. Because of this association, the blood in the poem creates a setting that feels dangerous and can easily be affiliated with the life-threatening situations often found in abusive relationships. A physically abusive relationship in particular creates the same feeling of pain and danger. Fear of death may even be present if the victim is unsure of how far the abuser will go. The images and feelings connected with blood create an atmosphere of abuse within the poem that deepens the reader’s understanding of the terror and suffering existent in an abusive relationship.

After examining the blood as a physical element of abuse within the poem, an analysis of the verb “bleeding” reveals that it acts as the catalyst for the knife’s anger: “I can’t stand bleeding said the knife and sank in farther” (18). In this line, the knife expresses its hatred for bleeding, yet continues to be the cause of the bleeding. This hypocritical action is synonymous with actions of an abuser. An abuser often transfers its anger on its victim by placing the blame for their actions on the victim. An example of the knife transferring blame to the cut can be seen in line eight of the poem: “If only you didn’t bleed said the knife I wouldn’t have to do this.” A cut cannot help but produce blood when it is being cut. It is ironic that bleeding is the reason the knife initially cuts
and continues to cut, though if the knife would stop, there would be no more bleeding to
anger it. Bleeding is therefore an excuse or an illogical reasoning for the knife’s actions.
Much like the bleeding of a wound, an abuser’s actions are often caused by something the
victim cannot control or change, like bleeding.

Bleeding not only symbolizes a catalyst for the knife’s anger and abusive actions,
it also symbolizes the link that binds a victim to an abuser. This link is seen in two
intertwined aspects: passion and existence. Bleeding creates a powerful image of red.
Red is indicative of passion and so symbolizes the passion and love that often exists
between an abuser and victim, which binds them together and prevents the relationship
from being dissolved. This bond is reinforced by the idea that a cut cannot exist without
an object to create it: “Why must you bleed in the first place said the knife. / For the
reason maybe that you must do what you must do said the cut” (16-17). Though the cut
lives a painful existence, it cannot survive without the knife. Within an abusive
relationship, it is often the case that though the victim is hurt by the relationship, they
may feel they have no existence without it. Therefore, through this symbolism, the
reader’s understanding of the victim’s bond with an abuser is deepened.

Aside from the physical elements found in “Bleeding,” the theme of abuse can be
seen without actually reading a word: one can find evidence of abuse by simply
examining the form and structure of the poem. When looking at the poem, the intentional
spaces, which cut the poem in two, cannot be missed. Within the poem itself, sentences
are broken apart, causing confusion and replacing order with dysfunction. Likewise, the
cut is also jagged and unclean, emphasizing the disorder. The way in which these words
are arranged on the page creates a feeling of separation or distance. The intentional
separations between the words on each line of the poem symbolize the distance that is often found in an abusive relationship.

Another aspect to be considered is the lack of order in the length of each line. Some lines are long and some are short. There is no standard length, nor is there a predictable pattern. The lines of the poem differentiate in length creating a jagged, unbalanced appearance. This lack of order and structure represents the chaotic nature of an abusive relationship. Turning the poem on its side illustrates another way the jagged outline of the poem creates a symbolic image of abuse. The unequal lines flow from the jagged cut, creating the appearance of a bleeding wound and giving its title, “Bleeding,” a more significant meaning. This poem is not just about symbolic suffering through bleeding; the form of the poem is bleeding, suggesting that the poem itself is in pain. The image created here enhances the reader’s understanding of the dysfunction and pain that drench abusive relationships.

The form of the poem is unique and symbolic on its own, but the personification of the knife and the cut, demonstrated in the dialogue of the poem, is also reflective of an abusive relationship. The poem is made up entirely of a conversation between two inanimate objects. As stated before, the knife is symbolic of an abuser because of its sharp, destructive nature. The dialogue produced by the knife reinforces this idea. The knife does many things that coincide with the actions of an abuser, including being demanding, displacing blame, making threats, and inflicting harm on the victim (the cut). The knife shows its demanding behavior throughout the poem as it insists the cut stop bleeding: “Stop or I will sink in farther said the knife” (5). After establishing its desire for the cut to stop bleeding, the knife reminds the cut of its demands by saying things
such as, “You’re bleeding again,” (24) and “Aren’t you bleeding a little” (29). These demanding reminders come after the cut makes a remark that is aimed at reminding the knife of the frailty of the cut: “I bleed too easily I hate that I can’t help / it I wish I were a knife like you and didn’t have to bleed” (9-10). Like the knife’s sharp edge, these comments penetrate the knife by reminding it that its actions are responsible for the bleeding.

As mentioned before, an abuser’s actions are often motivated by a displacement of blame to the abuse victim. This point is further supported by the demands within the knife’s dialogue. The lines, “Stop bleeding you make me messy with this blood,” (3) and “Too many cuts around said the knife they’re messy I don’t know / How they stand themselves,” (21-22), suggest that the knife blames the cut for bleeding, though in reality, it is the knife that is causing the bleeding. This reinforcement of displacement, as a motive for abuse, stresses the significance of this aspect of an abusive relationship. It emphasizes that in order to understand the relationship between an abuser and victim, one must understand that there is an illogical motivation behind the abuser.

The dialogue from the cut matches the weak and vulnerable nature of an abuse victim, which is shown by a passive, submissive tone. For example, when demanded to stop bleeding, the cut’s response is, “I would if I could” (2). This statement is a submission of will. One of the most powerful examples of submission is found in the second to last line of the poem. The knife stops cutting and asks if the cut feels better. The cut replies, “I feel I have to bleed to feel I think.” The cut is dependent on the knife’s cutting, or their relationship, and it has come to believe that in order to feel it
must be cut, or abused, much like an abuse victim is often dependent on their abusers mistreatment to feel loved.

The conversation in this poem creates a powerful image of the relationship between an abuser and victim. This dialogue, coupled with the unique form and physical elements, creates an atmosphere where the emotions associated with abuse are vibrant, and where the reader is able to experience them along with the cut. Because this experience is so realistic and believable, the reader can and does gain a greater understanding of the relationship between an abuser and its victim.
Works Cited