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The Meanest Thing He Ever Did: A Theoretical Analysis of “A Boy Named Sue”

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Abstract

This paper examines the attachment style between two characters, Sue and his father in the song *A Boy Named Sue*. Shel Silverstein originally wrote the song and then it was later performed at San Quentin Prison by Country Hall of Fame singer Johnny Cash, in 1969. By analyzing Sue’s narration of his life, the listener comes to contextualize Sue’s perception of the world based on his attachment style to his father.

Keywords

attachment style, *A Boy Named Sue*, Shel Silverstein, Johnny Cash, San Quentin, country music, family dynamics, attachment theory, secure attachment, anxious-avoidant attachment, anxious-ambivalent attachment, family identity, symbolic interactionism, semantic communication, reconciliation

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Introduction

Originally written by American poet and songwriter Shel Silverstein, Johnny Cash's performance of *Boy Named Sue* at San Quentin State Prison in 1969 solidified the song's place in country music history (Cash & Silverstein, 1969). Cash's *Boy Named Sue* is a story of a young boy who was abandoned by his father at a young age. To toughen up his son and expose him to the cruel realities of the world, Sue's father gave him an unconventional name to attract unwanted attention. The enduring popularity of *Boy Named Sue* highlights its resonance with many audiences. For the inmates at San Quentin, the song likely served as a cathartic release of emotion or a distraction from their current situation as prisoners. Other listeners may simply enjoy the humor and the tune. Outside of the song's musical value, *Boy Named Sue* provides insight into dysfunctional family systems and attachment styles. By applying the theoretical lens of Attachment Theory, and analyzing Sue's experience based on his family's identity, Sue's resentment towards his father is contextualized.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory seeks to explain how children's relationships and proximity with their parents influence their behavior (Segrin & Flora, 2018, p. 38). The theory was originally developed by John Bowlby, who spent hours observing children separated from their parents during World War II (Segrin & Flora, 2018, p. 38). Bowlby observed that humans work to remain proximal to their caregivers at a young age when social and emotional development begins to occur. Bowlby explained that the desire to remain proximal to one's parents can be explained biologically. Animals who remain near their caregivers have a greater likelihood of survival and therefore have a higher chance of passing on their genes to a new generation.

There are three attachment styles for infants: secure, anxious-avoidant, and, anxious-ambivalent (Hazan & Shaver 1987, p. 39). Secure attachment styles are denoted by caregivers who are responsive and present to the needs of the child. Anxious-avoidant attachment styles involve caregivers who are present but neglect the needs of the child. Lastly, anxious-ambivalent attachment styles occur when caregivers are absent and or abusive to the child. Children with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style may act in a highly emotional manner when compared with children who display secure and anxious-avoidant attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1980, p. 69). Upon separation from their parents, children will display extreme emotional distress, but when reunited with their parents the child will lash out in a violent rage. Sue's experience as a child and his behavior when he reunites with his father points to an anxious-ambivalent attachment style.

In the first stanza of *Boy Named Sue*, Cash proclaims that Sue's father abandoned him and his mother when Sue was just three years old, leaving nothing but "a guitar and an empty bottle of booze." Before Sue's father left, he named his son "Sue", which condemned Sue to a life of torment from his peers. Without any male role model in his life to guide behavior or deal with torment, Sue "grew up mean." He resorted to violence to deal with bullies and not pursue romantic interests out of fear of being ridiculed (Cash & Silverstein, 1969). Sue's highly emotional reaction of immediate anger response in all situations marks his anxious-ambivalent attachment style. As Bowlby explained in his Attachment Theory, in the animal kingdom, the presence of a caregiver increases the offspring's chance to reproduce by providing safety. When applied to human interpersonal relationships, secure attachment styles provide children with a safe environment to develop their emotional intelligence. Sue's father was absent; he did not have a male role model or caregiver to teach him how to navigate his youth intelligently. Sue

resorted to violence, a survival behavior, out of necessity because he lacked the security of a paternal relationship which would provide him with much-needed insight into how to cultivate his interpersonal tact.

Later in the song, Sue finds his father at a bar and the years of resentment towards his father culminate in a violent outburst with the two “kicking and a-gouging in the mud and the blood and the beer” (Cash & Silverstein, 1969). Sue had gone his entire life living in an anxious-ambivalent attachment style, so his first reaction was to “hit him [his father] hard right between the eyes” (Cash & Silverstein, 1969). Sue resorted to the only form of relational interaction he knew by establishing physical dominance. Engaging his father in conversation and eventually asking his father why he abandoned him and his mother, or why he decided to name him Sue would require a higher level of interpersonal skills diminished in people with insecure attachment styles. Sue is a product of his circumstance (fatherless upbringing) and environment (constant ridicule from peer group). His violent behavior, orientation towards his peers, and interactions with his father exemplify the lingering behavioral implications of children with anxious-ambivalent attachment styles.

Family Identity

Social interactions between members of a family influence the identity of individuals within the organic family system. It is often assumed that a “normal” family includes two heterosexual parents and children who look like their parents (Segrin & Flora, 2018, p. 48). When compared against the criteria of a normal family outlined by Segrin and Flora, Sue’s family is not normal. Sue’s absent and seemingly malicious father continues to impact his life long after abandoning the family. Forced to navigate most of his life alone, Sue is constantly tormented for having an abnormal name. Researchers Galvin and Braithwaite explain that

through semantics people create new meanings to internalize and process the dysfunction that may be present in their organic family system (Galvin and Braithwaite, 2014, p. 110). Through communication, familial relationships can be dissolved or restructured to reflect the perceived status of a relationship. Sue uses semantics to emotionally and relationally detach his father from his life and family system for the majority of the song, referring to his father as “that man” or “that snake” (Cash & Silverstein, 1969). Sue uses symbols in the form of verbal language to convey how his father is more deserving of an impersonal or crass title. His decision to refer to his father as a “snake” or “that man” convey the absence of relational connection between Sue and his father (Cash & Silverstein, 1969).

Later in the song Sue and his father fight in the street. Sue gains the advantage and pulls a gun on his father. When faced with the reality of his demise, Sue’s father breaks down the barrier that had accumulated through years of absence and resentment. He explains that he chose the name Sue to strengthen his son. Sue’s father knew he would not be present to raise Sue and guide him through the challenges of childhood and early adult life. He chose an unconventional name to draw negative attention to Sue, hoping that his son would become resilient to the harsh realities of the evil inherent to human nature. Upon hearing his father’s explanation for giving Sue his name, Sue’s barrier of hatred and resentment towards his father dissolves immediately. Cash sings, “Well, I got all choked up and I threw down my gun. I called him my pa, and he called me his son” (Cash & Silverstein, 1969). It is in this instance where the use of semantics reframes Sue’s relationship with his father. He refers to his father as “pa” validating his father’s apology and affirming his relationship as his son.

Through the application of symbolic interactionism in the context of family identity; Sue’s reunion with his father exemplifies the theoretical perspective of pragmatic

communication scholars John Dewey and William James (Segrin & Flora, 2018, p. 49). Dewey and James assert that a family's relational dynamics are fluid and constantly changing (Segrin & Flora, 2018, p. 49). Sue went through most of his life insecurely attached, hating and resenting his father, only to forgive him and reestablish a relationship during a single brief interaction. According to the principle of symbolic interactionism, participants in a communicative process jointly contribute to constructing social reality through semantics. Through this process, participants can redefine social relationships through the creation of shared meaning. When Sue refers to his father as “pa” and his father refers to him as “son”, a new social relationship has been created through the use of semantics. The words “pa” and “son” signify the creation of a new relational dynamic that has been created through social interaction. Up until this point in the song, Sue had no relational connection with his father, but both parties exchanged a few words and an entirely new relationship was formed. This brief interaction takes place at the end of the song. It highlights the importance of symbolic interactionism in the context of family identities as it relates to the creation of new relationships.

Conclusion

Johnny Cash’s performance of *A Boy Named Sue* is on the surface a comedic song that comes full circle and provides the listener with a satisfying and uplifting ending. When analyzing *Boy Named Sue* through the theoretical lens of Attachment Theory and Sue’s family identity, the complex and constantly evolving nature of family systems is realized. Analyzing Sue’s experience without his father through the lens of Attachment Theory serves to explain his behavior and perception of his father up until their reunion. Examining Sue’s family identity through symbolic interactionism highlights the pivotal role semantics play in relationship creation and evolution. The theoretical insight into Sue’s experience provides an entirely new

layer of depth to the song. Regardless of whether *Boy Named Sue* is analyzed through a theoretical framework or enjoyed in a state penitentiary, the song will forever remain a timeless classic.

Appendix A:

Lyrics of a *Boy Named Sue*

Well, my daddy left home when I was three
Didn't leave very much to my mom and me
Except this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze
Now I don't blame him 'cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that my daddy ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me Sue

Well, he must've thought that it was quite a joke
And I got a lot of laughs from a lots of folk
Seems I had to fight my whole life through
Some gal would giggle and I'd turn red
And some guy'd laugh and I'd bust his head
I tell you, life ain't easy for a boy named Sue

But I grew up quick and I grew up mean
My fist got hard and my wits got keener
Roam from town to town to hide my shame
But I made me a vow to the moon and stars
I'd search the honky tonks and bars
And kill that man that gave me that awful name

Well, it was Gatlinburg in mid-July
And I just hit town and my throat was dry

Thought I'd stop and have myself a brew
At an old saloon on a street of mud
There at a table, dealing stud
Sat the dirty, mangy dog that named me Sue

Well, I knew that snake was my own sweet dad
From a worn out picture that my mother had
Knew that scar on his cheek and his evil eye
He was big and bent and gray and old
And I looked at him and my blood ran cold
And I said, "My name is Sue, how do you do?
Now you gonna die", that's what I told him

Well, I hit him hard right between the eyes
And he went down, but to my surprise
He come up with a knife and cut off a piece of my ear
Then I busted a chair right across his teeth
And we crashed through the walls and into the street

Kicking and a-gouging in the mud and the blood and the beer

Well, I tell you, I've fought tougher men
But I really can't remember when
He kicked like a mule and he bit like a crocodile
Well, I heard him laugh and then I heard him cuss
And he reached for his gun but I pulled mine first

He stood there lookin' at me and I saw him smile

And he said, "Son, this world is rough

And if a man's gonna make it, he's gotta be tough

I knew I wouldn't be there to help you along

So I give you that name, and I said goodbye

And I knew you'd have to get tough or die

It's that name that helped to make you strong"

He said, "Now you just fought one heck of a fight

And I know you hate me, and you got the right to kill me now

And I wouldn't blame you if you do

But you ought to thank me, before I die

For the gravel in ya gut and the spit in ya eye

'Cause I'm the son of a bitch that named you Sue"

What could I do?

Well, I got all choked up and I threw down my gun

I called him my pa, and he called me his son

Come away with a different point of view

And I think about him, now and then

Every time I try and every time I win, and if I ever have a-

Well, if I ever have a boy, I'll name him

Frank or George or Bill or Tom, anything but Sue

I don't want him go around, man call him Sue all his life

That's a horrible thing to do to a boy trying to get a hold in the world

Named a boy a Sue

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