

Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*: The Intersection of the Personal and the Historical

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Awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1982 for her *Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath's "Daddy", written in 1962, which appears in this collection, is perhaps her best known poem. It has elicited a variety of critical reactions, from feminist praise for its unadulterated rage towards male dominance, to wariness in its usage of Holocaust imagery. It has been reviewed and criticized by scores of scholars, and is upheld as one of the best examples of confessional poetry. Written a few months before her suicide, "Daddy" gives a voyeuristic view of Plath's life as she skillfully combines the personal and the private with the historical to mount a brutal and venomous attack on her father Otto Plath and, indirectly on her husband, Ted Hughes.

As Sylvia Plath is acknowledged to be a major confessional poet it follows that "Daddy" has autobiographical elements in it. It is therefore essential to know something about her father and the over-powering influence he had on her. Otto Plath immigrated to America from Grabow, a town in the Polish Corridor. He was a Professor of Biology in the University of Boston and died of diabetes when Sylvia Plath was nine. Sylvia, who hero-worshipped her father, never wholly recovered from this emotional loss. For this supposed act of desertion and betrayal she attacked him in several poems. While in her earlier poems her rage was turned inwards resulting in bitter self-reproach, in her later ones she directly attacked her father since her love for him was mingled with sadomasochistic feelings:

... He was an autocrat... I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him. (Ramazani 1143 – 1144).

This father-fixation continued to dog her for the rest of her short life and when she met Ted Hughes, a hulking Yorkshire man and an upcoming British poet. She married him because she felt she had found her father in him. However, she was shattered when she learned of his infidelity. This resulted in her intensely passionate, vitriolic outpouring in “Daddy” a few months before her suicide.

It is an oft reiterated point that the blending of the personal with the Holocaust has given this poem the reputation of being the ‘Guernica’ of modern poetry and why Plath does so needs to be understood. When Plath was a student, the Holocaust was a topic of intense discussion in both high school and college, and her college professors encouraged the reasoned linking of Nazism with current political concerns. Erich Fromm’s *The Fear of Freedom (1941)* too had a central, lasting influence on her. In his book Fromm maintained that America’s conformism stemmed from the same fear of freedom as the more extreme authoritarian horrors of Nazism. Fromm’s skilful combination of psychology and history in his book to further his arguments had a great impact on Plath, who also combined the two in her later poetry. Moreover, with the Cold War at its height in the late 1950s, and the threat of a potential nuclear genocide, the concerns about the Holocaust became immediately relevant. Also, during the time Plath was in England in 1962, she watched the highly publicized Eichmann trial and her association with Gerry and Jillian Becker, who were Jews, made her veer round to the view that she and the world at large were victimized by modern life as the Jews and Japanese had been victimized by specific events in modern life.

All these personal and social influences mentioned above went into the making of “Daddy”. Baldly stated, this poem is written by a girl with an “Electra complex”, as Plath so famously said in her BBC interview. It is about her ambivalent love and hostility towards her father, and her desire to annihilate and exorcise him in order to be free of him. Ironically, in gaining her freedom, she also annihilates herself. There are several poems in the Plathian oeuvre written between 1958 and 1962 that deal with “the

persistent, doomed effort to reconstruct her father. To deny the vacant space left by his death [which forms] a central theme in [her] work” (Schwartz and Bollas 155). They are “Full Fathom Five”, “Electra on Azalea Path”, “The Colossus”, “Little Fugue”, and her final verbal onslaught in “Daddy” where the “Electra complex” has not been used to mute guilt over patricidal anger as was the case in her previous poems. Instead, here he is variously described as a “Fascist”, a “devil”, a “vampire” and a “bastard” who needs to be exterminated.

Understanding the twin feelings of love and hostility and prolonged sadomasochistic mourning is difficult to grasp but not surprising for Plath had read Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, which aptly described her feelings and her reasons for committing suicide. As Ramazani explains:

... Although Freud allows that ambivalence inheres in all love relationships and in all mourning, he argues that a disproportion of negative feelings results in “melancholic” or “pathological” mourning, characterized by “self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of that loved object, i.e., that he has willed it”. The mourner’s self-reproach is therefore secondary, deriving from the primary anger towards the deceased. In melancholia, feelings of “sadism and hate” for the dead person “have been turned round upon the subject’s own self”, so that the mourner takes revenge “by the circuitous path of self-punishment” (Ramazani 1144).

While this helps in gaining an insight into Plath’s protracted, life-long mourning, how she takes revenge on her father for his supposed oppression by combining the confessional elements in her poem with actual historical events without inflicting any punishment on herself needs to be analyzed. In the confessional strain, “Daddy” has been read as Plath’s vindictive assault on Otto Plath and Ted Hughes, but this is also the poem in which she evokes the Holocaust and identifies with the Jews. The opening lines of the poem begin with a situation that is irksome to the poet:

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

These lines, evocative of a little girl using nursery rhymes and childlike repetition, convey an “unresolved oedipal position” (Ramazani 1150). However, in the very next line the subject makes it clear that this poem does not deal with love, desertion and betrayal. It is about authoritarianism, dominance and oppression. The opening stanza assimilates more than one form of oppression: between daughter and father; rich and poor. Nevertheless, it is patriarchal oppression which is the main concern in the poem when she says that she has “lived like a foot” in a “black shoe”, “barely daring to breathe or Achoo”. There is an unstated desire for emancipation and a hint of triumph as she sets out to overthrow this patriarchal oppression. But, suddenly there is a shift in psychic time when the subject says:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
 You died before I had time –

Here there is an admission of a murder which has taken place after the fact. Her father died much before she imaginatively kills him. She admits that she had murdered him in a childhood fantasy, and now she must murder him again to save herself from annihilation. Though she “used to pray to recover [him]” in her earlier poems, here she does not do so for this father whom she had elevated to the status of God: “bag full of God”: is an oppressor and she the oppressed.

It is through the father that the subject discovers her own history and finds parallels with actual historical events that took place. The origin of the father, who left his Polish home town for America, is lost both physically and in language. Wars have devastated the town and its name forgotten:

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
 Scraped flat by the roller
 Of wars, wars, wars.
 But the name of the town is common.
 My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
 So I never could tell where you
 Put your foot, your root,

These lines wipe out the origins of the father as the subject fails to recall the name of the town. This forgetting is essential for the mind resorts to this amnesia in order to survive.

If this poem is about the death of the father, it is also about the death of language. The father's oppression makes the subject inarticulate, for she cannot communicate with him and can only repeat endlessly in a destroyed, obscene language, "Ich, ich, ich, ich". It is like a word "stuck in a barb wire snare" that surrounded concentration camps. She fails to find her father anywhere but, ironically, she finds him in every German in a language she can hardly speak in. This representation of the father leads to the first reference to the Holocaust and engenders and forces her identification with the Jew:

An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew.

It is worth noting that the speaker finds herself in the debased place of the Jew and that the pull towards identification and identity is dehumanizing. However, Plath's identification with the Jew is "partial, hesitant, and speculative... The trope of identification is not substitution but displacement, with all that it implies by way of instability in any identity thereby produced" (Rose 228). For this speaker, Jewishness, like that of

the gypsies, is the position of one without history or roots, who have been subjected to “weird luck”. By inserting her own history into that of the Holocaust she is trying to claim a relationship to an event in which she did not participate. Plath does this because she felt that patriarchal violence found its ultimate brutal expression in the Nazi concentration camps and that she too is a victim of a similar violence. Also, the patriarchal figure of the father and his language in the poem “occupies the place of the Lacanian Name of the Father, agency of prohibition and primer of the law, language and culture” (Bentley 33). Her father has bright blue Aryan eyes and is “Not God but a swastika / So black no sky [can] squeak through”. He is the ultimate symbol of oppression and she is forced to admit that:

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, and your gobbledygoo.

The word “gobbledygoo” signals childish incomprehension as well as the difficulty in integrating the symbolic order of accepting the paternalistic universe. This linguistic breakdown, suggested by “ich” and “gobbledygoo”, is presented as “part of a crisis of language and identity” (Rose 228).

Nevertheless, despite the personal crisis the subject is facing, and her desire to rebel against patriarchal suppression she states:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

Stangeways (371-373) has pointed out that these controversial lines find their root in Erich Fromm’s *The Fear of Freedom* (1941) which Plath read avidly. He maintained that the sadistic authoritarian Nazi figure is equated to a strong, father figure on whom people depended on and looked upto. In so doing, people abdicated their individuality and depended on him for security. Throughout the poem the speaker and “daddy”, masochistic and sadistic figures, are dependent upon each other. Similarly,

both the figures' connection to Nazism, as Jew and Fascist, are linked by their dependence on each other to Fromm's theorization. Here Plath makes the point that the archetypal, sadistic male figure in the poem prevents the individuality of the daughter from flowering. The female figure's adoration of the Fascist is a reaction to the feelings of aloneness associated with freedom, through masochistic strivings. Freedom for the speaker in the poem would mean freedom from the authoritarian father figure and Plath uses the situation depicted in the poem to explore the dynamics of her attitude towards individualism. Interestingly, Anthony Burke too makes a similar point in *Poetry Outside Security* wherein he maintains that the security modern nation-states offer is "malevolent, vampiric, indeed *parental* power that ought to be as much a source of revulsion and struggle as of comfort" (308); that the price of security, territorial integrity, prosperity as well as the vaunted democratic way of life comes at the cost of drowning one's individuality; that Plath's struggle against her father is the conflict between submitting to authority or retaining one's individuality. "So, Plath's struggle, as ours, might be both against the figure of the father and her own psychic status of daughter; against her own historic investment of identity in the father, her abject binds of love and anger and submission, against her social, cultural, and familial structure of *being*" (308).

How does the speaker stage her revolt against this authoritarianism and lack of individuation? Her father, whom she has so consistently mourned, has now been transformed into the devil with "a cleft in [his] chin instead of [his] foot". As Plath had mentioned in her BBC radio comment, his death in this poem is the result less of love than of her need to defend herself against his violence:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. The father died while she thought he was God... she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it (Quoted in Perloff, *Two Ariels*, 14).

After demonizing him, she retaliates with equal and opposite violence for he "bit [her] pretty red heart in two". She now strikes back by driving

a stake in his “fat black heart”. She recalls all her debasing acts like elevating him to the status of God; trying to commit suicide; and in making a “model” of him by marrying “a man in black with a Meinkampf look”. This is an obvious reference to Ted Hughes and both the original and the copy have to be destroyed. She recounts the humiliations she has faced in her seven year marriage to Ted Hughes. The most humiliating was the discovery of his infidelity which she accidentally overheard while he was conversing with his lover over the telephone. She triumphantly announces:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.
 Daddy, you can lie back now

She has killed both father and father-substitute, because the inner need to re-compose her father that was an obsession with her is now no more. It is worth noting that, “psychologically, she depends on the very image she would murder for the means of murder itself; she drives the stake in the vampire’s heart. Her aggression, in its verbal and phallic form, is inseparable from the fantasized aggression of the father” (Schwartz and Bollas 157), who has been transformed into a Nazi. However, her aggression in driving a stake in the vampire’s heart is unsettling and bewildering and one wonders why the victim suddenly becomes the aggressor. The answer to this lies in the 1985 Hamburg Congress of the International Association of Psycho-Analysis that dealt with the children of survivors or Nazis during the Holocaust. The Congress found:

...Over and over again these patients found themselves in fantasy occupying either side of the victim / aggressor divide... For being a victim does not stop you from identifying with the aggressor; being an aggressor does not stop you

from identifying with the victim... the perpetrators experience themselves as victims in order both to deny and to legitimate

their role (to be a perpetrator you *have* first to ‘be’ a victim); the victim identifies with the aggressor out of retaliation in a situation where not only psychic but concrete survival is at stake (Rose 209-210).

These partial and transferable identities reveal a great deal about the workings of fantasy itself. Having killed her father in fantasy she now chooses sadistic vengeance over libidinal redirection or solace as the speaker’s survival is at stake. To free herself from her father-substitute, she tears out the telephone from the line so that “the voices just can’t worm through”. By doing so she can literally no longer overhear any conversations between Hughes and his lady love and, symbolically, from her dead father. The villagers dance and stamp over father’s dead body, not out of love but out of vengeance. The ritual exorcism has succeeded and Plath finally declares:

Daddy, daddy you bastard, I’m through.

She has spilled his blood to free herself of him with the violence she once directed at herself in her earlier poems. “Now she would rather get back *at* him than get back *to* him, rather renounce him than renew him” (Ramazani 1152). However, for all her vehemence and her vituperative outburst against her father, the conclusion remains ambivalent. The word “through” is ambiguous. Has she exorcized herself of her father’s memory through imaginative murder? Or has she finally made a connection with him and has got through to him? If the latter holds true then she will finally be united with him through suicide. In other words, her impending suicide is hinted at. In short, for all its triumphant overtones in exorcizing Daddy, the end of the poem remains ambiguous.

As Plath’s verbal blast drove the stake in her father’s heart, her morbid love-hatred towards her father and father-substitute made intellectual London sit up with unease over this strange and terrible poem written during the last months of her life. In this poem the mourning is not redemptive nor does it have a healing touch. Moreover, a lot of controversy

has been generated over her use of Nazi imagery and in her attributing Nazi characteristics to her father who was not one. Contemporary theorists like Adorno maintained that “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Quoted in Bentley 34) because Auschwitz poses problems for literary representation and defies it. The proper language to represent it cannot be found as something of the horror is removed from it. It follows that there is a loss of metaphor and language and there is a crisis of representation, the repercussions of which “Daddy” traces. Whatever emerges from such art is merely voyeuristic as people have become complacent.

Plath is also accused of trivializing the horrors of the Holocaust and maintaining that the Jews with whom she identified only faced “weird luck” when in fact they were victims of an unspeakable horror and fate. There are others who feel Plath was unfit to write about the Holocaust for she did not experience it. Only people who experienced the hellish subject could write about it for familiarity had to be earned not presupposed. To counter this criticism George Steiner, Plath’s staunchest supporter, praises “Daddy” as the “*Guernica of modern poetry*” and adds, “Perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who *can* focus on them rationally and imaginatively” (Quoted in Rose 214). What is also important to know is that Plath perceived such historical events in mythic terms. However, the traditional myth through which poetry works was devalued as it was unable to make sense of the Holocaust. In trying to represent the inconceivably mythic horror of the Holocaust the poem becomes flat. Nevertheless, “Daddy” tries to induce a sense of complicity by combining the events with an intimate tone and material which generates unease in the readers who are meant to feel uncomfortable. This is viewed as the poem’s success for “such poems are culturally valuable *because* the appearance of the Holocaust in them is like a “boot in the face” – certainly, few readers leave them feeling “complacent instead of concerned or disturbed” (Strangeways 385).

What Strangeways says has some merit, for in inserting the Holocaust into her poem Plath makes us aware of the crisis of thought, speech and representation which is applicable to all wars rocking the world today. It is imperative to understand this for somewhere down the line people fail to react to such crises because they have become mentally fatigued due to an over-exposure to all the bloodshed and atrocities taking place. In other words, people have become inured to this pornography of violence. Moreover, though this poem has succeeded fairly well in shaking us out of our complacency, the fact remains that Plath uses the Holocaust to aggrandize her own personal difficulties. “Indeed, both the Nazi allegory and the Freudian drama of trying to die so as to “get back, back, back to you” can now be seen as devices designed to camouflage what is perhaps the deepest thrust of this poem which is, like “Purdah”, a cry of outrage against the deceiving husband” (Perloff, *Two Ariels* 15). To counter this charge she has a staunch supporter in Rose who says, “Who can say that these were not difficulties which she experienced in her very person” (229) and very weakly maintains that castigating her for comparing herself to the Jews is beside the point.

It must also be admitted that Plath is not concerned with the nature of her experience as she does not reveal much about herself, the psychological workings of her mind, or come to any self-understanding about her situation. In this, the last word rests with Uroff who says that the pace of this lacerating poem “reveals its speaker as one driven by a hysterical need for complete control, a need that stems from the fear that without such control she will be destroyed. Her simple, incantatory monologue is the perfect vehicle of expression for the orderly disordered mind” (Uroff 114).

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