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Sins of the Father Revisited: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

Abstract: This article analyzes Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" from a Freudian perspective, suggesting that the traumatic loss of paternal figure left Plath with unresolved issues. The focus will be on the traumatic symptoms, the exploration of her relationship with her father, its consequences and the way her trauma is represented in the poem. This article proposes that the poem "Daddy" is a cathartic text or a translation of Plath's feelings in the sense that it reveals her unhealthy relationship with her father, the severe impact of his death, her feelings of abandonment and the attempt to regain power and control through purgation of her undesired feelings. In psychoanalytic terms, the direct confrontation with trauma or reliving childhood worst fears and memories is considered to be curative.

Key words: psychoanalytic; Freudian perspective; traumatic loss; fear; memory.

During the first half of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis and Freudian theories revolutionized human beings' perception of themselves, and influenced literati to the point that not only writers and poets began to base their creative works on the psychoanalytical theories and assumptions (especially the confessional poets tried to explore their psyches in their poetry to drive home their desire for self-expression and self-revelation), but also critics began to write critical evaluations based on what Freud had suggested. Sylvia Plath is undoubtedly considered as one of the most controversial poets for her stark confessional poetry. Her willingness to embrace mental illness and her exploration of familial and sexual relationships renders her poetry a certain quality that makes it most suitable for psychoanalytic reading. In fact, she applied what she had learned from personal experiences with depression and psychiatric institutions and her knowledge of psychoanalytical theories collected from her vast reading of Freud to her poetry (Nervaux). This article will analyze Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" from a Freudian perspective, and suggests that the traumatic loss of paternal figure left Plath with unresolved issues that she tries to get over by using her poetry as a talking cure method toward the purgation of her anger. The focus will be on the traumatic symptoms, the exploration of her relationship with her father, its present consequences and the way her trauma is represented in the poem. Furthermore, the famous narrative of psychoanalysis, the Electra complex, will be focused

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on as Plath herself brought forth this explanation in an introduction she had prepared for the BBC:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other--she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (qtd. in Young 123)

Plath mostly uses the father / daughter relation as a smaller model to show the relation between man and woman and, in a wider scope, the position of the woman as an artist in a patriarchal system. In her more developed poem "Daddy," Plath obviously "makes a transfer from father to husband... in this poem the speaker turns away, as rudely as possible, from the powerful male force that had dominated her life" (Wagner 129).

"Daddy" expresses Plath's anger and bitterness at the domineering male power in an exceptionally high pitch of intensity. Its shocking tone and style express the vehemence of the speaker's denunciations of male authority. "Daddy" has been considered by many critics to belong to confessional poems drawing on Plath's own hatred of and love for her father. These biographical elements and too much emphasis on them, as Aird maintains, endanger Plath's artistic authenticity: "The danger of such criticism lies in its assumption that the poem is objectively 'true', that it bears a precise relationship to the facts of the poet's life. ...but the poem cannot be literary or historically true" (66). The creative force of Plath's poetry is an indication of her power to make great, universal drama out of private and domestic events.

In other words, this article suggests that the poem "Daddy" is a cathartic text or a translation of Plath's feelings in the sense that it reveals her unhealthy relationship with her father, the severe impact of his death, her feelings of abandonment and the attempt to regain power and control through purgation of her undesired feelings. In "Daddy" she regresses to her childhood memories and confronts them in an attempt at exorcism of the haunting image of her father. She has to purge herself from the image and the psychological hold of her father in order to find peace in her life again.

Freud in his XVIIIth lecture entitled "Fixation to Traumas - The Unconscious" suggests that some of his patients gave the impression that they were fixated on a "particular portion of their past" (273). He continues to explain that their "traumatic illness" came about due to an "inability to deal with an experience whose affective colouring was excessively powerful" (275). However, he suggests that "not every fixation leads to neurosis", an issue that he later on explores in another lecture of his entitled "Mourning and Melancholia" in which he makes a distinction between the two notions (276). In this lecture, Freud suggests that "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on" (243). Where mourning has been described as a normal reaction to a loss, melancholia is considered to be a pathological disposition which can interfere negatively in a patient's life.

Otto Plath, Sylvia Plath's father, emerges as a "central figure" in her poetry, especially her final poems in which he is associated with her cheating husband-poet, Ted Hughes (Macgowan 148). Her frustration and anger towards men heightened by the failure of her

marriage “burst forth in a series of strange, terrifying poems” like “Daddy” a few months before she committed suicide (Burns 26). Otto Plath died of diabetes when Sylvia was only eight years old, and this incident proved to be one of the major factors that shaped her as an adult and continued to haunt her for the rest of her life.

Clearly, in the case of Sylvia Plath, the death of her father can be accounted for as the loss of the loved object/person or the traumatic event happened in her past that she had been fixated on without having the ability to cope with it. In fact, she never worked through the pain of the loss of her father, and this incident haunted her throughout her adult life. Her fixation to recover and relive the memory of her father was caused by this early experience of the loss of a powerful, paternal figure in her life. In the poem she refers to this incident, addressing the father, with a slight change: “I was ten when they buried you” (57).

Plath relates to her own painful experience in the form of a dramatic monologue using a persona who is struggling with the (non-existent) relationship with her father, and later, her husband. The oppressive presence of her father is strongly felt in the sense that she cannot escape from his influence although he is not physically present in her life any more. The memory of the lost father works as an entrapment for the persona as, in the first stanza, there is the mention of the “black shoe” in which she has “lived like a foot for thirty years” (2-4). The persona shows her dissatisfaction with her situation by claiming to be “poor and white” (4). In other words, she is trying to emphasize the fact that the father figure has ruined her life. Furthermore, Robert Philips explains that the black shoe is “an explicitly phallic image” based on the writings of Freud in which the “sexual pull and tug” is emphasized.

Plath in “Daddy”, as Britzolakis puts it, tends to “fragment or displace linear sequence, replacing it with repetitive temporality of trauma”. In other words, “narrative links are usurped by series of enigmatic, hallucinatory images, which refract a collective history through privatized rituals of mourning” (118). The stark, surrealistic and sometimes paradoxical images of the father that are presented in the poem explain a lot about the nature of the father / daughter relationship.

As Guinevara Nance and Judith Jones suggest, the first twelve stanzas of the poem deal with the persona’s “childhood version of the father which has persisted into adulthood” which, in psychoanalytic terms, is referred to as the imago. First, as a little child, she was fascinated with her father and he seemed like a god to her as she mentions in the poem that daddy was “marble-heavy, a bag full of god” (8). Later, this image changes into more ominous ones which prominently represent the feelings of a child who thinks her parent has abandoned her.

The images of victimization are very much abundant in the poem. The mentions of Nazis, swastikas, devils, vampires and so on are so imposing that the poem is more like a “runaway train” which barrels through “one psychic nightmare after the other” (Platzky). These images are a combination of what the daughter had actually experienced and some archetypal memories of the oppressive history of Jews. Plath uses multiple metaphors to describe the father. Her use of Holocaust imagery is the most prominent one in which the personal traumatic loss, which resulted in an ever-lasting psychological turmoil within the speaker’s psyche, is juxtaposed with the historical persecution of Jews in order to overemphasize and magnify the state of her mental suffering. In other words, the speaker tries to establish the fact that the impact her father has had on her life is similar to that of Germans on Jews. George Steiner has labeled it as “the Guernica of modern poetry”

suggesting that “it achieves the classic art of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all”. Obviously, these lines describe a “wider victimization rather than only that of the poet” (Macgowan 233). However, this inflation is important in the sense that it shows the speaker is trying to assert that in this relationship, she is a victim:

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. (36-40)

As a victim, she is not able to escape the psychological hold that her father has on her. Metaphorically likening her father to a Nazi and herself to a Jew in a concentration camp reinforces the oppressor / oppressed dynamic of their relationship which has been haunting the daughter for many years.

In his essay entitled “Beyond Pleasure Principle” Freud puts forth the idea that the inability to clarify the past leads to “compulsion to repeat” (20). In the case of the persona of the poem, the repetition is not only witnessed in “repeating a masochistic relationship” with her husband as the reincarnation or a double for the father, but also in the repetition of the language (Bundtzen 39). Sacks believes that mourning poems like “Daddy” frequently repeat sounds or stanzaic patterns in “symbolic replication of Freud’s theory about child’s ‘fort-da’ game” in which the child, who has been separated from his parent, throws a wooden reel attached to a piece of string and then pulls it back to himself repeatedly in an unconscious attempt to deal with his anxiety due to the absence of the parent figure (23). Also, the repetitions like the repetition of the sound /oo/ can be considered as a “verbal tic” which is a sign “of a disordered psyche and poetic incontinence” (Dyne 48).

“Daddy” is undoubtedly “an attempt to do away altogether with idealized father” (Rosenblatt 125). The persona achieves relief through killing the memory of her father, and she does that by means of a “metaphorical murder” (Philips). She destroys and kills Daddy and his representative “by means of a figurative rape” (Lant): “There’s a stake in your fat black heart” (76). All this obviously happens in the haunted psyche of the persona. Plath uses what Freud would call after-effect. She kills her father who is already dead in her psyche in order to accept and find peace with his actual death (Rose 239).

Of course, the closing line of the poem is very ambiguous. The speaker declares “I’m through” (80). This could mean that the barriers to communication have finally been eliminated, and the persona can have a dialogue with her father, or that she is declaring a final state of despair (Gill 63). In other words, either she has been successful in achieving some sort of liberation from the undesirable elements that dominated her life by reliving her worst memories, or she is completely done with life itself and plans to end it.

Sue Vice believes that the *Ariel* poems, the collection which includes the poem “Daddy”, present us with the archetypal stages of female biography. “Daddy” is thought to include the stages of “acquisition of language” and the “Oedipal - or as Plath has it, Electral -

rivalry" (500). The latter has been highlighted by Plath herself. She explains that the persona of her poem is suffering from the Electra complex. The Electra complex is the feminized version of the Oedipus complex in which the love of the daughter for the father is explored. Sharon Heller explains:

If the greatest conflict in a boy's life is the Oedipus complex, the comparable conflict for the little girl, thought Freud, is the Electra complex. For the boy, the Oedipus complex was dissolved by the real or fantasized threat of castration. The girl, in contrast, already feels castrated ... She turns to her father to obtain that which is rightfully hers and wishes her father to give her a baby. (94-95)

As a girl who is suffering from the Electra complex, she tries in her adult life to marry a man who looks like her deceased father in order to find a replacement for him: "I made a model of you . . . and I said I do I do" (64-67). She describes her husband as "A man in black with a Meinkampf look" that brings to mind the German or Nazi background of the real father as described by the persona (65). The whole logic behind the father's metamorphosis is that the daughter is trying to fill the void that was caused by her father in her life. The daughter's decision to make and marry a model of Daddy suggests, as Susan Gubar puts it, "how difficult it may be for a consciousness captivated by inimical source which shaped it to escape the self-destructive forms of thralldom". Later on, she compares the husband to a blood-sucking vampire who almost tricked her into marrying him on the basis of his resemblance to her father:

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. (71-75)

In fact, the persona has redirected her love for her father to the husband who looks like him. Her unhealthy relationship with her father proves to have a decisive impact not only on her life and her battle with depression, but also on her choice of spouse. In other words, she finds and marries a surrogate father in order to have a replica that could enact the father's role and fulfill her desires and wishes that were not met and resolved in her relationship with her real father. Ironically, the husband is so similar to the dead father that he betrays and leaves her alone in the same way that the real father had abandoned her. Consequently, her involvement in a relationship as such only puts her in a more vulnerable position that would ultimately subject her to more abuse and disappointment. It is noteworthy that the speaker is now fully aware of the destructive and masochistic nature of her relationship with the constructed surrogate as she explains that her husband has "a love of the rack and the screw" (67). There is no doubt that in Plath's personal life Ted Hughes is pictured as the "arch-villain", both in her poems and the accounts of her life in her journals (Crosbie).

To recapitulate, Plath's inability as a traumatized child to work through the sudden paternal loss ultimately results in her being entrapped by her past which repeatedly returns

to haunt her throughout her adult life. In fact, Otto Plath was the first man in his daughter's life and he proved to be the last one (Caldwell). The intolerable loss of the father-figure leads her to find a replacement for him by marrying a man who looks like him. Also, the reason for this doomed marriage can be traced back to third stage of child development in psychology known as the Oedipus / Electra Complex. In psychoanalytic terms, the direct confrontation with trauma or reliving childhood worst fears and memories is considered to be curative. Plath's purpose in writing "Daddy" could be summarized in the idea that she was trying to free herself from the clutches of the memory of her deceased father and her past which proved to be the cause of her dysfunctional adult life and marriage.

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