

Feminist self in the poem of Sylvia Plath's *daddy*: A postmodern reading

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Abstract

The paper attempts to foreground feminist self in the context of Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*. The paper examines the personal revelation and experiences of Sylvia Plath in the poem. The paper also attempts to explore the father-daughter relationship in the poem. It will also highlight some attributes of modernist poetry like Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*. It is characterized by the radical break with the traditions of literary subjects, forms, concepts and styles. They have been blank verse poems, pictorial poems, remixed rhythms, and so on. The metrical systems, rhyme-schemes, and traditional symbols and metaphors are no longer dominating. Each poet makes his own rules. The multiplicity of styles is the characteristic of modernist poetry. The paper critically analyzes the poem in the context of postmodernism.

Keywords: feminism, postmodernism, feminist self, identity, electra complex

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath was one of the most potent and admired poets of the 20th century. In the ensuing years, her work attracted the attention of a multitude of readers, who saw in her singular verse an attempt to catalogue despair, violent emotion, and *idée fixation* on death. In the New York Times Book Review, Joyce Carol Oates described Plath as "one of the most celebrated and controversial postwar poets writing in English. Intensely autobiographical, Plath's poems explore her own mental anguish, her troubled marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes, her unresolved conflicts with her parents and her own vision of herself".

Feminists delineated Plath as a woman driven to frenzy because of a tyrannizing father, a treacherous husband, and the demands that motherhood made on her genius. Some critics extolled her as a confessional poet whose work "spoke the hectic, uncontrolled things our conscience needed or thought it needed," to quote Denis Donoghue. Sylvia Plath became one of the best known female American poets of the 20th century, largely on the strength of her poem "Ariel"

As Sylvia Plath had been imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp, writing about it she used history "to explain herself", she said "I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant, to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on." Newman explained that "in absorbing, personalizing the socio-political catastrophes of the century, [Plath] reminds us that they are ultimately metaphors of the terrifying human mind." In a nutshell, Newman holds, Plath "evolved in poetic voice from the precocious girl, to the disturbed modern woman, to the vengeful magician, to Ariel-God's lioness".

"Daddy" is one of the greatest poems of Sylvia Plath which belongs to the final phase of Plath's poetic career, expressing openly and her intransigent attitude towards her father. Of course, Plath's poem *Daddy* is the most extended

Treatment of the father symbol. It is an autopsy of emotional, psychological, and historical attitude. It opens with a reference to the father's black shoe, in which the daughter has lived like a foot, which suggests her subservience and entanglement. The poem then rolls to a scoffing commentary on the apotheosized image of the father like:

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller of wars, wars wars. (49)

For the first time here the daughter admits that she was afraid of his father. Plath describes it in her note: "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 possible part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other-she has to act out the awful little allegory once before she is free of it."

The plot of the poem is almost completely invented. Plath's real father was not a Nazi neither her mother was a Jewish. They are metaphors depicting largely a psychic state of her. However, the historical reference, allow her to equate and elevate her fearful suffering to the universal level in general and heighten her rebellion against the oppressive father in particular. When Plath uses the Nazi metaphor to identify her personal tragedy with the external horror, it assumes a universal dimension and in doing so "Daddy" becomes the "Guernica" of modern poetry, for here Plath writes "one of the very few poems...in any language to come near the last horror"(Steiner 218). "Daddy" is obviously an attempt to do away altogether with the idealized father but simultaneously it also makes clear how onerous it is. Apart from this, it is also a reaction to the perfidy by the poet's husband. When the father dies, she tries to "get back" to him, through successive suicide attempts, but she fails. Then she marries a model of him with "a love of rack and screw". Eventually she has to relinquish with him, once for all, so she kills not

Only the father but also his living counterparts, her husband:

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. (224)

The tormentor lover is finally killed by putting a stake through his cruel heart and the daughter heaves a long reassurance:

They always knew it was you.
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I 'm through (224).

The starting point is the asymmetric relationships between the male and the female on which the phallogocentric society survives almost in all feminist critical whirls. It allocates the framework for the feminist investigations, of the gender-role stereotyping of the 70s by theorists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millet and Elizabeth Janeway, as well as for the philosophical and psycho-analytical research associated with French Feminists Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray who examine woman's position as the other in the binary oppositions produced by the phallogocentric culture. It is the division which is at the core of feminist concept like "gender" and "sexual politics", and the concepts of "oppressed woman", all of which propound head-to-head the appearance of the victim and the victimizer.

Sylvia Plath turns to her mother and a host of other women who are hell after doing away with fears, agonizes, torments, and deterrent foisted by married life and after an aggressive attack on husband and father. The poems like "The Rival", "Medusa", "The Other" and "Lesbos" are all dramatic monologues attacking women who imperil the speaker's identity. Plath also proffers a blistering attack on those women who threaten her selfhood. Hence, at the final phase of her poetic career, she attempts to liberate herself from the repressive, unjust, barbarize and dehumanizing forces.

All rounds in Plath's "Daddy", the tone varies from childlike reverence and venerate to that of a disdainful and detached, yet fearful adult. The tone is found to be innocent, almost near to a lullaby at times, and incredibly manic, deranged and baleful at others. Unlike her variations in tone, her style of using diction throughout the poem, she manages to maintain a dark and heavy style. "Daddy" is a confessional poem, presented in an oppressive, negative manner, not unlike much of Plath's work. One would easily expect her experiences which are reflected in her works in the form of her signature tone and style.

In the first stanza of "Daddy" Plath's use of repetition, it begins in an almost droning, or nursery rhyme fashion. She begins:

You do not do, you do not do
 Anymore, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot (3).

It almost seems playful, like the familiar English nursery rhyme, "The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe." Besides Plath's repetition throughout the poem, the reader also recognizes the continual use of the (oo) sound. It is a gently

calming effective sound and its frequent use within the poem anchors Plath's underlying childlike tone. The reader within the first and second stanza is quickly introduced here to the deliberate use of dark and heavy adjectives such as black, marble-heavy, and grey, he must feel the desperation only an abandoned child could feel. Thus, Plath's use of diction here is totally intentional.

Moving along through "Daddy," the reader is meant to first recognize the adoration Plath felt for her father and the God-like position he had in her life. In the fifth stanza with the line:

I never could talk to you.
 The tongue stuck in my jaw (25)

Plath loved her father but was left alone by him at a time when he was a "larger than life" character to her. The reader can easily detect a fearful tone. Plath felt victimized and that in the tone of the sixth stanza, a vulnerability was expressed. Her choice to use both German and English could be interpreted as an analogy for her disjunction and split-up. In the seventh stanza, the tone of the poem takes on something nearing self-detesting. In the eighth stanza, Plath equates herself to a Jew being transported to a concentration camp. In the ninth stanza with the line, "I have always been scared of you" (41) her submissive tone continues on through. Plath's diction is skillfully chosen with the line:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
 The boot in the face, the brute, Brute heart of a brute
 like you (50).

As soon as the reader reaches the 10th stanza the tone of the poem shifts to that of a desperate and a desolate woman. With adroitly chosen words, the reader cannot help but feel the resentment expressed by Plath. She indicates an attempt of suicide at the age of twenty; something only a forlorn woman would try. At this juncture, her tone moves from desperation to detachment.

Plath's tone transforms toward the final stanzas of the poem. The changes are small, but remarkable in their own way yet her style remains the same. The line that may captivate the reader to the change is:

And a love of the rack and the screw.
 And I said I do, I do.
 So daddy, I'm finally through (68).

In Plath's tone, there is a sense of equivocation which suggested that the scuffle is finally over. She imparts to the reader that she has cut ties with her father's ghost by aptly stating:

The black telephone's off at the root,
 The voices just can't worm through,
 The voices just can't worm through (71).

The final stanzas are fierce, so far somehow reassuring and mollify. They suggest a sense of deserved victory over the demons (both her father and her ex-husband) that tormented Plath. The tone expressed in the final line of "Daddy" is that of a liberated and a free woman. Neither a dead man nor a man in black holds Plath prisoner. She is finally able to rid her heart and mind of the man who had oppressed her for

the entirety of her life.

Sylvia Plath has a phenomenon talent for giving the readers what's she writes what matters to people. Her words were so alive that the power of sensation is exemplified. She has linked together feminine sensibility that there is adequate scope for a gender study of her poems. She skillfully and eloquently uses the fuel of emotion to drive the sense of alienation, expiation and experiences.

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