



Haunting Memories Exorcised: Electra Complex in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

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Written in 1963 and categorized as a confessional poem, "Daddy" stands as a true testament to its author's genius, Sylvia Plath. Although a lot of elements found in the poem refer to the poet's personal life, its deep psychological insight offers the possibility of such an interpretation found to be in great harmony with the psychological trauma and harsh mental experiences many of us are likely to go through in our lives. Giving an account of a very complicated relationship between a father and his daughter who speaks a childlike language, not only does "Daddy" puts the audience through a chilly experience which is in sharp contrast to the intimate tone its title conveys, but it also boasts of its author's knowledge of Electra complex.

Written in 1963, "Daddy" stands out as the advocate of its gifted author, Sylvia Plath. The poem's multilayered nature enables the readers to interpret it from various points of view. It is colored with the elements taken from the author's personal life, but nevertheless offers deep psychological insights applicable to the experiences of many living all around the world. This poem is renowned for its daring portrayal of the Electra complex, which points up Plath's vast knowledge of the Freudian studies.

"Daddy" relates the account of a very complicated relationship between a father and his daughter. Although the title of the poem, "Daddy", bears a positive and intimate connotation, it proves to be highly ironical and tricky. The poem starts with a very simple language, as if it belongs to a child and it also sounds like a nursery rhyme. The onomatopoeic word "Achoo" and the repetitive /oo/ sound may lead the reader to such a decision:

"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" (Plath 1-5).

The use of nursery rhyme, as a poetic device, helps to keep the tone of the poem as complicated as its subject matter. It sounds as if the persona is taking pleasure in her harsh sufferings. But, in reality, the nursery rhyme and the light childish tone become tools for this girl to protect herself from the choking pain and the extreme insufferable mental wounds. In psychoanalytic terms this tool has come to be recognized as 'manic defense' through which the persona gains enough power to fully present the sore situation she has been stuck in. (Alvarez 46).

"Critics have commented on the poem's nursery-rhyme-like sound, some believing it marvelously appropriate in light of the childhood reflections, others deeming it a disaster in light of the poem's horrific rage" (Bloom 41). The rage which Bloom is talking about becomes clearer and puts on a vivid coloring as the poem progresses. Through employing a set of disturbing metaphors and imagery, the speaker makes her anger easily felt by her audience.

The persona suggests how she has been terrified of her father, or rather his thoughts, for thirty years. For all this while she has been trapped like a "foot" in a "black shoe", a phallic symbol representing her father's oppressive image, not daring to make the smallest sound or give the meekest voice to her thoughts. But now all her distressing misery is over. "[T]he poetic persona celebrates her

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belated patricide” (Bronfen 56). The horrific father figure does not live anymore to continue his oppressive behavior.

She tries to portray the mental picture she has created of her father. Just like a child she clearly seems fascinated by this picture. In fact the speaker is so amazed by it that she starts comparing her father to God. Although in order to justify such a comparison in her mind, she has to belittle her own stature. This colossus father who “is larger than life in all senses... [and who has replaced] God” makes her “shrink even into the non-human” (Manners 153). He has robbed her of whatever power she has and has rendered her debilitated and miserable. He has encompassed all her life to the point that any action against the will of this forceful figure seems a great impossibility.

It is not clear whether the imagery used in lines eight to fourteen is espoused at the service of praising and idealizing the father or constructing a fearful monster out of him. Even her praying to recover her father from death has dubious meanings. Is she trying to come to terms with her father? Or is she planning his death? But what one can be sure about is that this imagery is still not as ominous as those which are to be found later on in this poem. The metaphors in the following lines from the poem suggest that the images of this father figure stretch out all over the speaker’s life.

“Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one great toe
Big as a Frisco seal
And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pour bean green over blue
In the waters of the beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you” (Plath 8-14).

Suddenly the persona starts uttering some German words, “Ach du” as if desperately struggling to strike up an awkward communication. She knows that her father is German and was born in a Polish town. But there exist a couple of Polish towns with the same name she has in her mind, her “Polack friend” told her: “there are a dozen or two”. She cannot make out where exactly his father’s birth town is, since her attempt to communicate with the father has always been doomed to failure. But thinking of her father’s German nationality as a grim fact and recognizing Germans as sheer cold-blooded and brutal murderers, later on in the poem “she ... imagines for herself a Jewish mother, so that, by virtue of an identification with the victim, she can deflect her own guilt about the German ancestry inscribed in her blood” (Bronfen 56).

“I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew” (Plath 34-35).

From the sixth stanza on the speaker bursts out with anger, addresses her father with shocking harsh epithets and describes her relationship with him in gloomy terms. Holocaust imagery begins to pour out. The horrible metaphors that she uses in the seventh stanza are noteworthy. The German language has always disgusted this girl; it has always been a source of oppression. To her this language is similar to the trains the Nazis used for carrying the Jews to the concentration camps like “Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” in World War II. She even imitates the sound of the train using the onomatopoeic word “chuffing”. The German tongue has imprisoned her in these formidable camps ever since her childhood. It has been the source of separation and non-communication between the persona and her father just as the race was between the Nazis and the Jews.

The persona claims that she is a descendent of the gipsy ancestress. She also owns a Taroc pack with fortune telling cards in it which proves the fact. But even the gipsy are not excluded from the brutality of the Nazis, since they too, just like the Jews, are thought of as impure. In her mind, the speaker portrays her relationship with her father in terms of scary conflicts between the Jews and the Nazis, with herself as the victim. Even her father’s look is not unlike that of Hitler, the foremost leader of the German Nazis: “And your neat moustache/ And your Aryan eye bright blue” (Plath 43-44). Now she identifies herself with the outcast to the point that she is able to speak their language.

Her father is the “Panzer-man”. The one responsible for her mental health collapse, the one who “scraped [it] flat by the roller” of his tank. The words following “Panzer-man, panzer-man” are

not “Ach du” anymore, as they used to be at the beginning of the poem, instead they have turned to “O You” which implies that she is in a strife to free herself from the yokes of that “obscene” language and therefore the oppression of her father.

The speaker also retracts from her earlier opinion of her father as “God”, a grand figure, and turns it to a “Swastika” a Nazi sign which has come to be associated with evil, which has kept all hope and light from peeping into her life, putting her in an all-encompassing darkness: “Not God but a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through” (Plath46-47). But surprisingly she claims that women easily fall in love with cruel fascist men like her own the father and that is why, later on in the poem she tells us, she too married a man who resembled him.

Having done the Holocaust/ Nazi imagery, in the eleventh stanza the imagery of a devil is put forth. The repetition of the color black reinforces such an idea. The father is one oppressive dictator teacher. Although his appearance may not exactly match a real devil, nevertheless he is a devilish figure who broke the tender heart of his daughter in half. The black and red are in sharp contrast with one another in this stanza, the former symbolizing evil, the latter tenderness and a passion for life:

“You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who
Bit my pretty red heart in two” (Plath 51-56).

The persona tells us that at the age of twenty she committed suicide, but to the reader’s surprise instead of explaining her attempt as getting back *at* her father to fulfill the long waited revenge, she says: “and get back, back, back *to* you” [italics added]. It is as if she thinks that the reunion would heal her wounds. This line may well suggest that deep inside, despite of what she may think, her anger is not pointed at the father himself but at the agent who took her father away from her (Bloom 43).

After her unsuccessful suicide attempt, rescued and brought back to life, the speaker decides to make a model of her father in order to settle her mental issues and get over her gloomy thoughts of him. That is when she agreed to marry a man resembling her Hitler-looking father. This marriage not working out either, she metaphorically kills her vampire husband who sucked her blood to the drains for seven years. Neither in reality did Plath’s marriage end well since her husband, Ted Hughes, left her for another woman. So that may count as one of the reasons she wrote such an angry poem.

The reason for such a choice in marriage can be traced down to psychological studies. According to Freud the tendency to repeat occurs as a result of the incapability to come to terms with one’s own past. The authenticity of this claim can be seen in “Daddy” as the persona accepts a man’s proposal that has striking similarity with her father and thus may awaken the undesirable memories she has of him. Not only this unexpected marriage, but also the repetitive language used in this poem reveals the validity of this Freudian claim. One can constantly hear the /oo/ sound resonating all throughout the poem (Ghasemi, Changizi 86).

But by murdering and exorcising her husband she is finally over the destructive thoughts of her father too, who bears striking similarity with the spouse. He ceases to haunt her life since “the black telephone’s off at the root/ The voices just can’t worm through” (Plath 69-70). The father whose presence not only plagued his daughter’s life but also pestered those around him now lies in his grave cheering those to whom he was once a dire vampire.

The final line sounds a little bit dubious and it can be interpreted in different ways. It might be the case that the speaker means she is done thinking about her father or “the barriers to communication have been breached and the speaker can now establish dialogue with the father” (Gill 63). But there is still another possibility left considering Plath’s suicide which took place a couple of months after writing this poem. It may also suggest that she is done living this painful life and is going to end it. Whatever the interpretation the ending line may bear, along with the ending of the poem the persona is purged of her outrageous emotions or better to say she reaches a catharsis. When analyzing “Daddy” from a psychological point of view the Freudian Electra complex for sure comes to aid, the point which is also mentioned by the author of the poem, Sylvia Plath herself:

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 before she is free of it. (qtd. in Ghasemi, Changizi 84)

Some believe that this poem is a confessional one. A poem which “deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life” (Abrams 56). In this type of poetry, coming to the vogue in the latter part of the twentieth century, “the confessional poet reveals private or clinical matters about himself or herself, including sexual experiences, mental anguish and illness, experiments with drugs, and suicidal impulses” (Abrams 56). Although Sylvia Plath does not claim that what she describes in “Daddy” refers to her own experiences, one can find some biographical evidences from her life in this poem. The facts that her father was a German teacher who died and abandoned her at a young age, her suicidal attempt and her marriage break up bear testimony to this statement.

But what gives this poem its intensive attractiveness is not its being confessional only. Sylvia Plath has managed to create a poem with universal appeal out of her own private experiences. The poem is not only about a complex relationship between a father and his daughter, but also, on a larger scale, about denouncing the dominance of patriarchal power in general. “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” (Ghasemi, Changizi 84).

The poet lived in an era when female authorship was looked upon with hostility. The art of writing, it was believed, was monopolized by men and even if a woman dared to penetrate this forbidden territory she was not taken seriously or deemed worthy of being included in the canon. The role of woman was not that of artistic creation, nor did it deserve a place in the outer world. “[T]he role of woman remain[ed] fundamentally private and domestic. Service -and family- oriented it [was] a role of feeling and relation ...” (Bennett 103). Plath is clearly mad at this male oppression and is struggling to find her way out of it.

Plath is trying to get rid of the trauma caused by her relationship with her father through a poem which has a cathartic nature that helps her to be purged of oppressive thoughts. “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” (Ghasemi, Changizi 84).

The early death of the father prevented her from communicating her feelings of love and/or anger to him. This lack of fulfillment, which gradually built up during her childhood and extended to her adult life, gave way to an Electra complex not easily removed or gotten rid of. For all this while the defense mechanism was at work, operating in a way as to keep her anxiety rooted in her feeling of abandonment concealed. As soon as the defenses break down this anxiety loses disguise and comes out to the surface in the form of a trauma which has to be confronted without any further ado if she wants to break free from the prison in which her mind has been entrapped.

To be relieved from the pains of her mental conflict, the war going on in her mind, all other ways but negotiating the complex seem far-fetched. In order to do so she starts reconstructing her father's figure in her imagination. This reconstruction is undoubtedly painful, but nonetheless worth the effort since it is going to exhaust the life absorbing oppression which has been permitted to linger on for thirty years.

Having reconstructed the father figure, she decides that all of his attributes must come out negative or the process of exorcism would become utterly difficult. Although the father's relationship with his daughter was probably not as harsh as the speaker, describes, her unconscious forces her to tread such a hideous but nevertheless trauma relieving path. Knowing this, all the disturbing imageries and metaphors of Holocaust, Satan and vampire turn out to be more and more understandable.

Even if one tries to scrutinize this poem as a confessional one, no account of a hostile relationship can s/he find between young Sylvia Plath and her father. On the contrary it is believed that their relationship was one based on love and affection. The untimely death of the father left it incomplete and turned it to a problematic one. With the source of all those affection no longer existing, both Plath and the persona in the poem are left in their childhood with their feelings and emotions unshared, preventing them from moving on successfully to their adulthood.

As a result the persona's mind is fixated on a specific period of her life in the past. The loss of the father, the central figure and the object of love, has caused fundamental injuries to her mind and has brought about the fixation which to her is so difficult to cope with. Ever since the childhood, the bitter memories have persisted in her unconscious due to her inability to let go of them. And that is why instead of a contemporary mourning for her loss, deemed as a totally natural reaction, this persistence has led to melancholia, a kind of disposition which has invited abnormal, pathological types of behavior in the life of the persona (Ghasemi, Changizi 84).

Sylvia Plath uses her artistic creation as a curing method to this fixation. To her, writing acts like a filter liberating her from painful memories which unweariedly accompanied her all the way from the early years of her life to nearly its end. She bathed her soul in the purifying river of her verse and let her words wash away the dismal shadow of pain. She broke free from the prison of repressive memory through the window of authorship. She finds her pen her sole survivor. As she herself says:

Writing makes me a small god; I recreate the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word patterns I make. I have powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative or they turn to destruction or waste.(qtd. in Sharif 9)

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