English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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18 October 2016

Sylvia Plath, "Daddy" (1962)

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was raised by loving parents who had high expectations of her. She grew up in a home steeped in literature, the arts, and science. Her father, a noted entomologist, passed away when she was eight years old but her mother ensured that she had the very best education. From an early age she excelled at writing poetry and fiction. Like all of the other poets on this course, she was keenly observant, her highly sensitive antennae always out, feeling her way through the world and thus running up against its unjust limitations as well as its unexpected possibilities. She *felt* things deeply, but she also thought carefully and imaginatively about the world's wonder, strangeness, and heartbreak. Although she lived with bouts of clinical depression beginning in her late teens, she thrived at university, eventually making her way to the University of Cambridge, then perhaps the most prestigious university in the world for the study of English literature. It goes without saying that although she lived with mental illness she was a very great deal *more* than her mental illness.

In England she met and married the renowned poet, Ted Hughes. They had two children but a very unhappy marriage, mostly because Hughes treated Plath abominably. While raising her children and working part-time, Plath returned to her craft, writing vividly realized and frank poems that captured her refined intelligence, her curiosity about the world, her broad and deep reading, and her unusual candidness about her passionate and volatile emotional life. Plath brimmed with desire: not only sexual desire but also the desire to know, the desire to write, the desire to reshape the English language and especially the desire to be heard on her own terms. To her dismay, however, she discovered that she lived in a culture that was hardly prepared to hear and understand a brilliant and desirous young woman. Late 1950s Britain proved to be a profoundly constricting and suffocating place that continued to infantilize smart young women, treating them as lovely creatures to be seen but not heard. As the speaker of "Daddy" says, she's lived "For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breath or Achoo." Plath experiences this culture as a kind of ambient violence, and "Daddy" is a poem whose speaker responds with a kind of counter-violence, searching for the "right" spell, the right combination of words and sounds, to try to ward off that unceasing assault, an assault which is both social and psychological. An infantilizing culture activates ancient fears and losses in her, by which I mean deeply felt emotions (love, hate, attachment, worry) that had shaped her as a girl and that now resurface in disturbing ways. Among the many insights that the poem gives us is the *immortality* of these early emotional experiences, the ways in which they lay a kind of groove in the psyche that remains with us for life. So the poem is not about a speaker who has endured a personal psychological trauma or wounding; it is about a speaker who wrestles with the distressing alignment of a personal trauma *with* the trauma of trying to find her way as an adult in a wreck of a culture that wounds women who possess incandescent imaginations, speak their mind, want to tell their own stories, and have a poet's mastery of the language. As the poem tells us in its own way, the speaker of "Daddy" lives a life trapped in the

land of the fathers, “fathers” here meaning not her actual father but a *paternalistic* culture that at best patronizes a woman like Plath and at worst characterizes them as consumed with their neuroses.

“Daddy” is a ferocious poem that burns white hot, but it is not a hot mess. Written in sixteen stanzas, each identically composed of five verses, the poem works in part because Plath plays the speaker’s palpable anger and sorrow against the poem’s orderliness--a tactic that we’ve seen in other poets on this course, including Keats, who deliberately adopts the stately formality of the “ode” so as to throw into relief the searching restlessness of his speakers. One sign of the poem’s commitment to a certain order is that it has its own internal clock, so to speak, timed around the speaker at 10, 20, and 30 years of age. Orderliness and a searching after order, a desire to set things right and to settle old accounts competes with unruly feelings in this poem, giving it a kind of tense incandescence. This poem reminds us that poems are not spontaneous eruptions by the poet, but extraordinarily crafted things. Plath crafts a speaker, invents her, and creates a space in which to explore what it means simultaneously to feel throttled by a paternalistic culture and to be at the mercy of one’s earliest memories of loss. The speaker is not without certain resemblances to Plath, but it is, finally, *not* Plath.

The loss of the father at an early age triggers a vivid emotional response in the speaker that survives long after the loss. The child-part of the speaker, which has survived into adulthood unbowed, responds to that loss with sadness, to be sure, but also with anger and aggression. She loves the father, but precisely *because* she loves him so, and is so deeply attached to him, she hates the father for “abandoning” her, and hates the seemingly unlimited power that he has over her by dying. His death brings out how completely vulnerable she is, how she is powerless in the face of something over which she cannot have any control. She hates him . . . and, with a child-like logic, she conscripts others in the same campaign of loathing. “The villagers never liked you,” she says, as the poem comes to its inconclusive conclusion. The speaker so hates the father for dying and for inflicting a wound on her psyche that she wishes she had had the chance to kill him before he died—“You died before I had time,” she says, very early in the poem--meaning, metaphorically, she wishes she had as much authority over

him as his death has over her. *Better to have murdered him than him murder me:* such is the cruel logic of the child's psyche at work in the speaker that Plath invents for the purposes of this poem. But as Hammad's spoken-word poems remind us, answering violence with violence is intrinsically self-destructive and sterile.

Hating the father for dying, and, in death, for compelling her to experience her own powerlessness, the speaker endures something strange. The loss of the father binds the speaker ever more tightly to him. Or rather, the loss binds her to an unstable and morphing series of *projections* of him. Whoever the father was in real life is now no longer relevant. What remains is the *figure* or, as the speaker says, the "model" or "picture" of the father that she folds in the depths of her psyche, where his memory is at once sheltered, cherished, loathed and amplified. The father becomes "Daddy," the ghost or phantasm that the speaker can, in one breath, denounce as a vampire or a Nazi murderer, and, in the next breath, sigh, longingly, "O You---," as if affectionately addressing a loved one. The speaker's suicide attempt at twenty years of age is characterized as an attempt to return to her father ("back, back, back to you"), and kind of gift or supplication to him: I thought even the bones would do." Aggression and love mix thoroughly together in this poem. Plath had the presence of mind to remind us how, in the strange inner life of the psyche, the two kinds of impulses can and do blend one into the other. Under these conditions, "Daddy" is a monstrous simplification of the father, a projection or mournful invention of an injured and aggrieved psyche. So the struggle that the poem enacts for us is a struggle between an adult speaker, her childhood projections that rear up in her, and the culture that few viable resources for a woman like Plath to tell her story. One of the ways in which the poem tells us that it isn't simply about the speaker's private fantasies is that the "daddy" figure moves restlessly between the father, the husband, and then, by implication, all men, i.e., all those who are the soldiers and generals in the land of the father. At what point specifically in the poem does the speaker conjure up men other than her father? In what ways do those men resemble the father?

The speaker struggles to speak the mother-tongue, her own tongue, in the fatherland. In the poem's world, the land of the fathers is, metaphorically speaking, "Germany," indeed a very particular "Germany," namely the Germany of the Nazi era, the Third Reich. Plath's father was indeed German, but loathed Nazism. But in the child-part of the speaker's mind, Nazism and the father's German ancestry are mysteriously conflated; it is the way that the speaker transforms the father into the monstrous form of "Daddy." It is interesting to note that Plath's father died in 1940, as Nazi Germany grew into its greatest power. And when Plath wrote the poem, in 1962, Adolph Eichmann, one of the principal architects of the Holocaust, the murder of the European Jews, had just been tried (a trial, set in Jerusalem, that was broadcasted world-wide on television) for crimes against humanity. He was executed for those crimes only a few months before Plath wrote this poem. Nazism's cruelty is the metaphorical bridge that connects the time of the death of the actual father to the time of the writing of the poem about the projected or mythical "daddy."

The poem brings itself to an end with the image of the adult speaker murdering "daddy," now appearing in the form of a B-movie vampire. She says:

> There's a stake in your fat black heart.

Notice how the line brims with single syllable words: "in" "your" "black" "heart." The line slows to the rhythm of these syllables, as if repeating the stabbing motion of that stake. But something else is happening too. At the precise moment in the poem in which we expect that the speaker might finally succeed in striking the fatal blow against her own projections, she is missing in action. We might expect to read "I drove a stake in your fat black heart," but what we get is very different: a stake just appears in that heart, without any substantial sense that the speaker is responsible for sticking it there. The speaker has absented herself, stepped away from her own poem at the moment she might well need to be most present.

The projection she repeatedly names "Daddy" is very hard to kill. He's very hard to locate too, always shape-shifting, always appearing and reappearing in the speaker's mind in new and strange guises: "Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one gray toe," the professor at the blackboard, the Nazi, the vampire, among other avatars. It's not clear where he comes from either. As the speaker notes, "I could never tell where you / Put your foot, your root." And he's impossible to address directly: "I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw." Each of these richly suggestive images and metaphors combine to remind us that "daddy" is a creature who dwells inside the folds of the speaker's memory and psyche, and thus in a location that can't be determined and in a form that can't be pinned down. But he doesn't only dwell there. Plath lives in a land of paternalistic fathers who have no idea what to do with her except offer her no room to breathe and thrive as a thinker and writer. In a culture that is pervasively "fatherly," in the worst sense of that term, it can be very hard to pin down where the paternalism is coming from since it is in effect everywhere. Wherever "Daddy" is, inside the folds of her wounded memory or outside in the social work, he sees her and addresses her; but she discovers that she is barely in a position to see him and address him, except in the indirect form of the poem itself. The asymmetry between the all-powerful and threatening "Daddy" and the throttled "daughter" is the chief source of the speaker's rage and sadness.

At the end of the poem, the speaker finds it difficult if not impossible even to say "I." That's a problem she encounters elsewhere too. Consider, for example, the verse: "Ich, ich, ich, ich." Here the speaker reverts to German, the language of her father and the language that she associates metaphorically with the land of the fathers, the land of paternalism that thwarts her and strangles her. Translated into English, which is Plath's language, the verse reads, "I, I, I, I." The fact that she must keep repeating that pronoun, robotically saying it again and again, reminds us that no matter how many times she says "I," no matter how many times she asserts herself against the fathers in the land of the fathers, it will never be enough. The more times she says "I," the more we see that it won't "stick," so to speak. And indeed, here, when she tries to say "I" what actually comes out is something else entirely, namely "Ich." She can only speak of herself through the foreign language of her father and of the land of the fathers. She has been "chartered" by that foreign language, overrun and over-written by it, unable to say "I" except in the language of someone else and from somewhere else. She doesn't speak as much as she is spoken *through*.

That language, German, she tells us, is "obscene." And much worse, it is metaphorically speaking,

An engine, an engine,

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

Being the "daughter" of these coarse projections, and feeling powerless and frightened before them, feels to her like being a Jew transported to the Nazi concentration camps and death camps. (Dachau was a concentration camp, while Auschwitz and Belsen were both concentration camps and death camps, i.e., camps to which the Nazis transported Jews, often by trains, either to be murdered upon arrival or worked to death.)

The speaker's comparison of her wounded life to the suffering of the murdered Jews of Europe has sometimes elicited alarm. In some circles, such a comparison is thought to be unseemly, as if the sorrows of a young woman born could not be spoken of in the same breath as the mass murder of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis. But this argument forgets that it is not Plath who makes this lurid and atrocious comparison, but her beleaguered and angry speaker, who, after all, is combing the culture for bits and pieces of material to try to make sense of her strangled life. Plath is careful to note that the speaker is not a Jew transported to a camp but "like a Jew." The simile here reminds that the speaker at some level understands that her sense of herself as a transported Jew is a projection, an invention, a *likeness.* (Remember that similes say that something is like something else, not that something is something else, which is what happens in a metaphor). It's telling too to note that the comparison between "daddy" and the Nazis and the speaker and the murdered Jews of Europe is suddenly abandoned in the poem for other comparisons. The comparison to the Nazis is arguably the most lurid one in the poem but it is hardly the only comparison.

"Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," the poem's last verse reads. But the poem effects its own closure in the most ambiguous way, since that verse can mean opposite things. It can mean, "Daddy, I'm through with you" or it can mean "Daddy, I'm finished, you have finished me off." Plath has the courage to create a speaker for whom both things can be true at the same time, a speaker trapped between believing for a moment that she is done with her projections of the father while also grasping that the land of the fathers is not yet done with her, not while she still lives and breathes.

One of the many ways that the poem registers the survival of the child's attachment to the father in the adult's life are the childish sounds and words that bubble up to surface:

I have always been scared of you,

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

Notice how the second verse makes "your Luftwaffe" [the German air force under the Nazis] and "your gobbledygoo" equivalent somehow. An adult's reference, the kind of image that might float around in the mind of an adult, is placed side by side with a nonsense word, reminding us of how closely the two worlds exist in the speaker's psyche. Other traces of the child's point of view are audible in the poem's unusual reliance on simple rhyming sounds: you, who, do, through, *du* [German for "you"]. Go back through the poem underlining how many times this sound is repeated. There is a way in which these

chiming sounds ("ooo") combine together are unfurled like a spell, as if the magic of saying certain words aloud, sounding them out, might be all the speaker has left to ward off the predations of "daddy" and the land of the fathers. Perhaps an important part of poetry is precisely that: creating and casting a spell of words, and a spell of the sounds of words. The musicality or mellifluousness of words is a central part of what makes poetry *poetry*. Perhaps poetry is a kind of counter-spell that brings you to your senses.

Because Plath completed this poem shortly before her suicide, it is tempting to view it as autobiographical, indeed as a kind of suicide note. The poem does contain richly suggestive autobiographical references: the disastrous "seven years" of marriage to Ted Hughes; an earlier suicide attempt ("At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you"); even the poem's opening image of "daddy" with "one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal" remembers a detail from Plath's childhood: her father developed an infection in a toe that led to the hospitalization that marked the decline of his health ending in his death. But these autobiographical references are re-worked in a poem that isn't, in the end, the story of Plath's life but the voice of a persona or speaker that she has invented so as to create a space to express dangerous feelings and thoughts and to pose very difficult questions about love and loss. (One quiet way in which the poem says to us that it can't be reduced to an autobiography is legible when the speaker says her father died when she was "ten," when in actual life he died when she was eight years old. Plath shifts from eight to "ten" because "ten" is so much more symmetrical with the other ages that clock this poem, namely "twenty" and "thirty." A work of art calls for such pleasing symmetries; for the most part, real life isn't symmetrical that way.) If it is an autobiographical poem, it is a poem about what it means to be a resourceful and creative poet trapped in a culture that is impoverished when it comes to providing women with the means to tell their own stories on their own terms. So, an autobiography written under conditions that thwart autobiography. (The setting here is a bit like Keats's, who deliberately adopts the form of the "ode" knowing that it is an exhausted form.) Plath lives under the aegis of a book of myths--to remember Rich's vivid metaphor from "Diving into the Wreck"--that is missing her own name. She responds with a poem that ensures that we will never forget her name.

Plath's poem was published only several years after her death. Publishers and readers initially struggled to understand its importance. But just prior to her death by suicide she recorded a reading of the poem for the BBC which we heard in class. She did that so that we would remember her very particular voice, so distinctly and irrepressibly her *own* voice, so coolly and calmly in command of her own poem, her own vision, her own imagination, regardless of what came next.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hHjctqSBwM