Study Material

Department of English

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Name of the course: EM 09- AMERICAN POETRY

Name of the topic: "Daddy" of Sylvia Plath

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Daddy

Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath regards her father as her greatest tormentor. Father has always been an obsession with her, denoting Electra awe and admiration. Her treatment of this theme is most consistent in many of her poems, such as *Lament*, *Letter to a Purist*, *November Graveyard*, *All the Dead Drears*, *On the Decline of Oracles*, *Full Fathom Five*, *Electra on Azalea Plath*, *The Bee-Keeper's Daughter*, *Man in Black*, *The Colossus*, *Little Fugue* and *Daddy*. Published posthumously in 1965 as part of the collection *Ariel*, the poem was originally written in October 1962, a month after Plath's separation from her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, and four months before her death by suicide. It is a deeply complex poem informed by the poet's relationship with her deceased father, Otto Plath. Told from the perspective of a woman addressing her father, the

memory of whom has an oppressive power over her, the poem depicts the speaker's struggle to break free of his influence.

Daddy belongs to the last phase of Plath's creative life. In *Little Fugue* (1962) the speaker recounts the memory of her father:

> Such a dark funnel, my father!
>
> I see your voice
>
> Black and leafy, as in my childhood,
>
> A yew hedge of orders,
>
> Gothic and barbarous, pure German

This image of the father as black, Germanic autocrat is the beginning point of *Daddy* (1962)— the last poem of the father, "an emotional, psychological and historical autopsy, a final report" (Mary Lynn Broo, *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*).

- In a reading prepared for the BBC, Plath spoke of the poem: "Here is a poem 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 mother very possibly 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."
- But the real father of the poet was neither a Nazi nor her mother a Jew; they are metaphors depicting largely psychic state. She uses images of holocaust to broaden her emotional range, and also to equate her fearful suffering to the universal level. In this process, of course, she strains her personal agony to suit her impersonal design.

- Daddy is a patricidal poem, seemingly too macabre and morbid to pose a question: "How could a poem like this ever be conceived?" The poem opens with an open defiance of the father, "You do not do, you do not do", reverberating Shakespeare and T.S Eliot both (In *Macbeth* the first witch repeats with sinister resolve: "I'll do, I'll do"- Act I, Sc 3, line 10. Similarly in *Sweeney Agonistes* of Eliot, there is incantatory repetition: "How do you do, how do you do?")
- The father is called a "Black shoe" in which speaker has lived for 30 years "poor and white", recalling the legend of the old lady living in a shoe. But now the daughter bent on taking revenge on his father, dismantles his earlier image of a colossus and pulls him down to a ludicrous level, "marble heavy, a bag full of God/Ghastly statue with one gray toe/Big as fresco seal." She then traces his family root to Germany, the land of Hitler. She herself becomes a victim of Nazi gas chamber, "A Jew to Dachaus, Auschwitz, Belsen." For the time being, the daughter enjoys the torture with masochistic delight:

> I have always been scared of you
>
> With your Luftwaffem, your gobbledygook
>
> ……
>
> Brute heart of a brute like you

The pull of this masochistic delight is so powerful that when the father dies, she tries to "get back, back, back" to him, the repetition pointing to her resolve.

- She tries, through successive suicide attempts, to be back with him, but she fails. Then she marries a model man with "a love of rack and screw", again suggesting masochistic delight. But ultimately she has to dispense with him once for all, so she kills not only her dead father but also his living counterpart, her husband:

If I have killed one man, I've killed two—

The vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a tear,

Seven years if you want to know

Daddy you can lie back now

The tormentor-lover is finally killed by putting a stake through his cruel heart, and the daughter heaves a long sigh of relief: Daddy, daddy, you bastar, I'm through."

- Thus the daughter emerges from being an archetypal victim to an assertive victim, from a historically persecuted Jew to a traditional vampire-killer, in short, "from booted to booter." The poem becomes a vehicle of her obsessive mind directly confronting the source of her terror, and it succeeds ultimately in "controlling that by which it feels controlled". Though the poem is surcharged with a contained 'metronomic' terror of nursery-rhyme world, the terror ends in a hysterical, ecstatic release and the speaker feels relieved from the searing awe and pain, which had been deep in her psyche. What is of utmost importance is that the intense horror of the poem does not drag readers to a blind spot where it may stimulate and aggravate their own subconscious fear. It rather leads them to a cathartic by purging fear through sheer artistry, synthesizing both the beautiful and bizarre.
- In hammering a subconscious, surreal subject convincingly to a conscious pattern, Plath makes a poem with an eternal appeal where the accepted association b/w love and hatred, beauty and ugliness, passivity and violence private and public trauma, the fact and fiction are completely mingled.

- Plath uses the color black in this poem to symbolize the nature of oppression—the way it prohibits truth, warmth, and hope. In the first stanza the speaker identifies her father's memory as a “black shoe” in which she has lived her entire life. It is clear the speaker experiences this “black shoe” as oppressive because inside of it she is barely able to breathe or sneeze. While on the surface her description of herself as “poor and white” seems to speak to her economic and racial demographic, the word *white* equally describes the foot to which she is comparing herself. In other words, she is pale from being stuck inside a shoe; she has been kept inside it, away from the warmth and light of the sun.
- This use of the color black is echoed in the tenth stanza, when the speaker describes her father as “Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through.” Again, the significance of the color black is that it doesn’t allow anything else to pass through it—in this case the sky, which could represent air (thus the speaker feeling like she cannot breathe), or sunlight (thus the speaker being “white”). The swastika is oppressive *because* it cannot be seen through; it is too opaque for light to pass through. This is representative of the way the speaker cannot see her father through the image she has of him.
- Once Plath has established the symbolic significance of the color black, she begins to use it more liberally. The speaker goes on to describe a “black man” who bit her heart in half, a “man in black” who has the look of a Nazi, and a “black telephone” which is no longer working. In each of these instances, the word *black* has become a kind of shorthand for oppressiveness—referring to the man hurt her, the husband loved to torment her, the telephone allowed the voices to “worm through”. Only when that phone is “off at the

root" is the speaker able to be free of the voices, and free of the oppressiveness they represent, the oppressiveness of her father's power over her.

- Finally, the speaker claims that there is a stake through her father's "fat black heart". She is able to free herself of his hold by piercing the oppressiveness at the core of him.
- Plath uses imagery related to the Holocaust and Naziism throughout the poem to symbolize illusory ideas of purity and the pain and terror of oppression. This begins with references to the German language (take the "Ach, du," or "Oh, you" of line 15), which connects the speaker's father directly to Germany—the aggressor in World War II. Plath's real-life father was German, and not coincidentally the speaker links her oppressor to Germany throughout the poem; she even says "I thought every German was you."
- Her inability to speak German thus reflects her failure to communicate with her father, i.e., her oppressor. The specific image of her tongue being caught "in a barb wire snare" evokes the barbed wire fences used to enclose concentration camps, placing the speaker in the position of a Jewish person during the Holocaust. This comparison is made explicit when the speaker describes being shipped off "like a Jew" on a train "to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." These are the names of real concentration camps during the war, in which millions of Jews were murdered.
- The speaker is not literally saying she is Jewish; instead, she is—quite controversially—identifying with the plight of Jewish people during the Holocaust to contextualize her own suffering at the hands of an oppressive, male-dominated society. To that end, she also mentions her 'gypsy ancestress"—the word "gypsy" is now considered a slur for the Romani people, an ethnic group that was also targeted by the Nazis. The fact that the

speaker says “ancestress” here specifically describes a female ancestor, underscoring the idea that the speaker is oppressed because she is a woman.

- Of course, the speaker does not just say her father is German; she depicts him as a *Nazi*—a man with an “Aryan eye” and a “neat mustache,” an allusion to the infamous facial hairstyle of Adolph Hitler. Hitler and the Nazis were Fascists, meaning they believed in extreme authoritarianism, dictatorial power, and the—very often violent—suppression of any dissent. The speaker thus associates these qualities with her father, and with male-dominated society in general. Her husband, too, is presented as a Nazi, a man “with a Meinkampf look”; *Mein Kampf* was Hitler’s manifesto.
- The speaker also presents such purity as an illusion. When the speaker makes the ironic claim that “Every woman adores a Fascist,” she is underlining the *illusion* that women are buying into when they accept male authority, those systems and stories that venerate masculinity and punish women. And when the speaker says her father was “Not God but a swastika,” she is saying that her father was *not* in fact all-powerful but rather an empty and perverted symbol; the “swastika” was originally an ancient Hindu symbol commandeered by the Nazi party, the power of which depended on blocking out any dissent whatsoever—on being “So black no sky could squeak through.”
- The use of the word “swastika” thus represents an important moment in the poem, as the speaker replaces her earlier perception of her father as godlike with an understanding that her father’s authority is powerless without her belief in him. And it is not just her father’s authority, but male dominance in general that proves to be built on a lie.

Resources

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