

## Re-visioning the Portrayal of Daughter-Father Relationship in Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*

**Dr. Tarit Agrawal**

Asst. Prof., Department of English  
 Govt. Degree College  
 Pulwara, Bar, Lalitpur  
 Jhansi.

### Abstract

*Daddy* is an unusual poem by Sylvia Plath. The poet feels that her father had German features while her mother was Jewish. The father of the poet is a Nazi. Though he died when the poet was hardly a child, his peculiar image enters her mind. In this poem, a deep-rooted resentment against the father is clearly seen. The poet warns her father not to do any evil deed. The poet calls him Polack friend. She did not like to speak with him. She sees a German in him. She calls him an engine chaffing her off like a Jew. She likes to call him a Jew. She hates his blue eyes and neat mustache. She calls him a 'Panzar man'. She calls him a brute. To her he is a black man who has cut her heart into two pieces. The father died when the poet was only ten. The poet feels that she has killed her father. The poet says that the villagers who never liked him are dancing upon his body. The poet angrily calls her father a bastard and tells him victoriously that her mission is over. Thus, the love-hate relationship between the father and the daughter has been portrayed in the poem *Daddy*. As a matter of fact, she hated her father because he was brutal by nature and a fascist and had no ability to look after the physical needs of the family. She wanted that her father should attend to her but he failed. She always looked at him that he was a German and nothing else. He was an object of fear and even his language was not easily understood. In her eyes, he was a devil and he had died when she was only ten years old. She caught the image of her father in a model and the bond between them was never that of love and affection. Her hatred to her father is due to his carelessness but her love makes her to go to suicide. She seems to warn her father not to do any evil deed.

**Key words:** Nazi, Panzar, Jewish, Resentment, Fascist.

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Sylvia Plath certainly endured more than her fair share of life's ups and downs. It developed in her a 'masculine protest' and filled in her sadism and destructiveness. Her poetry reflects 'a seductive nihilism in contemporary culture that is a barrier to the discovery of one's full humanness – the first step towards trying to find a meaning in life. It is reflected in the nihilism of her poetry and also in her choice of suicide as an evasive measure, a dodge, from discovering her full humanness. Well, her famous poem entitled *Daddy* categorically depicts her relationship with her father. Even the opening lines of the poem invoke those cultural or social injunctions or prescriptions against which the conduct or behaviour of the persons in the poem is measured at both the individual and the social levels. The speaker (the poetess) shows her resentment for her father. The speaker tells her father that he can no longer satisfy her physical requirements. She calls her father 'Black Shoe'. She says that for the last thirty years, she has lived a miserable life and without much vitality, vigour and luster. She has lived with her and she has felt almost crushed in the black shoe which has made it difficult for her to breathe or sneeze. It is because of the inhibitions, culturally and socially imposed upon her that she has considered herself poor and white. To quote a few lines:

*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<sup>1</sup>*

The speaker hyperbolically and in a self-dramatizing way boasts that she has had to kill her daddy. But unfortunately he died before he had time to understand life. She found him a figure made of stone. The look of that figure filled in her great horror and fear. As her father died with big toe, the

<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*. Lines 1-5

speaker found the figure with a big toe. The toe was as big as a Frisco seal. She also realized her father as a great religious man. Here the poetess mythologizes her father's gangrened toe as 'one grey toe big as a Frisco (San Francisco) seal and thus distanced it sufficiently, at least in the poem to have seen the timed toe objectively through hyperbole; resulting in comedy. A few lines in this regard should be quoted:

*Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time –  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
Big as a Frisco seal<sup>2</sup>*

It has rightly been pointed out by Robert Phillips:

"Finally the one way was to achieve relief, to become an independent Self, was to kill her father's memory, which, in 'Daddy,' she does by a metaphorical murder. Making him a Nazi and herself a Jew, she dramatizes the war in her soul... From its opening image onward, that of the father as an "old shoe" in which the daughter has lived for thirty years – an explicitly phallic image, according to the writings of Freud – the sexual pull and tug is manifest, as is the degree of Plath's mental suffering, supported by references to Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen."<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to observe that when her father's head was put in the Atlantic, many beans of green colour spilled from that dead. They scattered over the blue waters of Nauset, off the Atlantic coast. The Atlantic water off beautifully Nauset, perhaps recalls Sylvia Plath's early childhood at point Shirley, Massachusetts where she spent a lot of time in her maternal grandparents property. During this period of her childhood, her father kept busy in his scholarly books, and then he fell ill. His condition moved her. She used to pray for his recovery. But she has over come that desire now so she says 'Ach, du' (she does not care for him any more). Mention can be made to some of the lines:

<sup>2</sup> Ibid lines 6-10

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, Robert. "The Dark Tunnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath." Modern Poetry Studies 3.2 (1972).

*And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du.<sup>4</sup>*

Now, the tone changes into the factual now mixed with family love and hearsay, as the speaker recalls her own family history. Her father Otto Plath, had migrated with his Lutheran parents from Grabow in Poland. In memory, she calls his early life in Poland. In fact, the speaker's father spoke German language, he hailed from the Polish town which had been ruined by war. Her father's ancestral town had been razed to the ground. The memory of the town is still fresh in the mind of the people. The speaker calls him her Polack friend. To quote a few lines in this regard:

*In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
Scraped flat by the roller  
Of wars, wars, wars.  
But the name of the town is common.  
My Polack friend.<sup>5</sup>*

To quote a few lines by Jon Rosenblatt to have a better comprehension:

"Daddy is, of course, Plath's most extended treatment of the father symbol, though it is by no means her best poem. The rapid, often wild succession of elements relating to the father is not entirely integrated into the poem. It opens with a reference to the father's black shoe, in which the daughter has "lived like a foot," suggesting her submissiveness and entrapment. The poem then moves to a derisive commentary on the idealized image of the father ("Marble heavy, a bag full of God") and summarizes his background: his life in a German speaking part of Poland that was "Scraped flat by the roller / Of wars". The daughter admits here, for the first time in the poetry, that she was afraid of him. Yet all these references are merely

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*. Lines 11-15

<sup>5</sup> Ibid lines 16-20



introductory remarks to prepare the reader for the fantastic “allegory” that are to come.<sup>6</sup>

As a matter of fact, her Polack friend told her that there were about a dozen or two of such towns leveled up by wars. So it is not possible for her to say where her father took birth. She can not tell his root. She never could talk to her father because she was unable to speak German. His language always stuck in her jaw. There is a pun on the word ‘Tongue’ here. Here ‘Tongue refers to both language and the usually movable organ in the mouth of human beings. A few lines should be quoted:

*Says there are a dozen or two.  
So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.<sup>7</sup>*

Since her father spoke German language, the language was difficult for her to understand. Its words and sounds stuck in her barb-wire snare. She could hardly pronounce it; the father’s tongue might have silenced her. She could say ‘Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich’. She considered every German her father and she regarded German language a vulgar language.

*It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.  
And the language obscene<sup>8</sup>*

Of course, the daughter-speaker considered German language an engine. Its sound was like the exhaust of a steam engine. The German language discarded her as the Germans despised the Jews. She refers to German brutalities on the Jews in places like Dachau, Auschwitz and

<sup>6</sup> Jon Rosenblatt’s *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*. University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Plath’s *Daddy*. Lines 21-25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid lines 26-30.

Belsen. She began to talk like a Jew. She thought that she might well have been a Jew. To quote a few lines:

*An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Cachau, Auschwitz, Belsen  
I began to talk like a Jew,  
I think I may well be a Jew.*<sup>9</sup>

It is necessary to quote a few lines of Paul Breslin to make this point clear:

“Daddy always makes a powerful and simple effect when read aloud. One hears the gradual release of suppressed anger, building to the triumphant dismissal... The simplicity immediately evaporates when one begins to ask what attitude the poem encourages us to take toward its speaker. To what extent does this voice have the poet’s endorsement? One fines, once the initial impact has worn off, many of the ironic disclaimer associated with dramatic monologue. By calling the poem “Daddy” rather than, say, “Father,” Plath lets us know that she recognizes the outburst to follow as childish, truer to the child’s fantasy of domination and abandonment than to the adult’s reconstruction of the facts.”<sup>10</sup>

The speaker thinks that the snows of the Tyrol or the clear beer of Vienna are not very pure or true. She believes that she may be a bit of a Jew. As her ancestress was a gypsy and her luck has been weird and she is of Taroc Pack like the Jews, the Gypsies too had ‘weird luck’ and although they were into telling the future by reading Tarot cards, the Gypsies could not foresee their own mostly collective end in the Holocaust. Mention can be made to a few lines:

*The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna  
Are not very pure or true.*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid lines 31-35

<sup>10</sup> Paul Breslin’s *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

*With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck  
Any my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
I may be a bit of a Jew.<sup>11</sup>*

In fact, the speaker has always been afraid of her father because of his language. She finds his language characterized by circumlocution and Jargon. She has also been scared of his 'Luftwaffe' the German Air Force during the Nazi regime. She has also been afraid of him because of his neat Moustache. His bright blue, Aryan eye scared her. She felt scared as he was a German soldier of Panzer division. The father's 'Aryan eye', 'Pure' blue eyes and his bearing have always scared the girl (perhaps long after his death who might have thought, in her childhood, that he was really a He, God, Gott, Her Doktor. A few lines must be mentioned in this regard to have a better understanding:

*I have always been scared of you  
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook,  
And your neat mustache  
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You-<sup>12</sup>*

Now the speaker thinks that not God but a Swastika could make a shrill cry through such a black, who possessed a brute heart. Every woman adores a Fascist as he hits the boot in the face. He was a brute. He had a brute heart. The women who adore these brutes bear rough and harsh treatment from such men. The daughter speaker is seen here as a replica, alter ego, of the mother.

*Not God but a swastika  
So black no sky could squeak through.  
Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.<sup>13</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*. Lines 36-40

<sup>12</sup> Ibid lines 41-45

<sup>13</sup> Ibid lines 46-50.

The daughter speaker says that she has a picture of her father. In it he is standing at the black board. The picture shows a cut in his chin. But it should have been in his foot. In spite of that cut in his chin. He appears to be a devil. He looks like a Blackman – a wicked man. It is emotional and verbal representation of her daddy. The first three lines are factual and non-committal. It is in the next three lines, we observe the daughter speaker's reaction to her father's photo, and her hysteric (emotional) reaction is perhaps mistimed now by 'love or dislike'. A few lines in this connection should be mentioned:

*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...*<sup>14</sup>

Mention can be made to what has been remarked by Helen McNeil in this connection:

"Daddy operates by generating a duplicate of Plath's presumed psychic state in the reader, so that we re-experience her grief, rage, masochism, and revenge, whether or not these fit the 'facts.'"<sup>15</sup>

The daughter speaker considers daddy a devil as he divided her pretty heart into two parts. She says that she was only ten years old when he died and people buried him. When she became twenty, she tried to kill herself so that she may get back to him. She thought that after her death even her bones would be contended to meet him. The father and daughter are irrevocable, irreparably and forever separated in his death. The daughter speaker can not get back, back, back (the repetition three times here, a familiar Plath trick, conveys the girl's sense of frustration, dire need). It means to come back,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid lines 51-55.

<sup>15</sup> Helen McNeil's *Sylvia Plath*, in Helen Vendler, ed. *Voices and Visions: The Poet in America*. Random House, 1987.



return, to recover, regain, and to be revenged. Mention must be made to a few lines of the poem:

*Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
 I was ten when they buried you.  
 At twenty I tried to die  
 And get back, back, back to you  
 I thought even the bones would do.*<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the daughter speaker failed in her attempt of suicide at twenty. She felt miserable as the people around her pulled her out of her 'Jack' and 'Stuck' her together with glue. They tried to patch up the broken doll 'girl'. They restored her to life. After this she realized what she was required to do. Then she made a model of her Daddy. She made a man in black with a German look. The poem is, in this respect, her 'Meinkampf' struggle for survival.

*But they pulled me out of the sack,  
 And they stuck me together with glue.  
 And then I knew what to do.  
 I made a model of you,  
 A man in black with a Meinkampf look*<sup>17</sup>

Margaret Deckie rightly says in this regard:

"Plath's poems show the limitations of the minds that operate only to rehearse the perfect kill... "Daddy" is a poem of revenge, and its violence is a reaction against torture... Plath's depiction of the monomaniacal daughter-victim-killer suggests she was aware that such a figure was far from a genius, the simplicity of her language matches the simplicity of her thinking; in fact, her violent rage has subsumed all other feelings or thoughts... The father-husband figure whom she finally kills is then a "Panzer-man," "A

<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*. Lines 56-60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid lines 61-65.

man in black with a Meinkampf look.” emblem of all the black men who have loomed as threatening forces in her poetry.<sup>18</sup>

The daughter speaker considered her father as a man who loved cruelty and oppression. Then she says that she accepted him as such. Now she thinks that she is free from all considerations about her father. Now her contacts with him since her childhood are completely cut off. She gives image of the telephone. She says if the telephone is off at the foot, the voices just can not pass through. Similarly her relations are also completely snapped. The subtle pun on the word ‘worm’, here, perhaps refers to the father’s worm infested body (now dead, the old man can not answer the phone) in the grave as well as to the idiomatic sense or worming through (getting through). A few lines should be mentioned:

*And a love of the rack and the screw.  
 And I said I do, I do.  
 So daddy, I’m finally through.  
 The black telephone’s off at the root,  
 the voices just can’t worm through.*<sup>19</sup>

The daughter speaker thinks that she has killed one person. In fact, she has killed two persons – her father and his substitute, her husband. She has killed the Vampire who told her that it was her father and thus for a year he sucked her blood but in reality that vampire drank her blood for seven long years. Now she asks her daddy to go back to his grave and rest. Now the vampire (the black man) has a seven-year itch for another (Assia Wevill, Hughes’s girl friend), the father may lie back now, he has a ‘worthy’ successor in the philanderer. (Actually, the dead father, can not get back now, he is only present in the husband. It is therefore, imperative for the daughter speaker to kill two if she has to kill one.)

*If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two-  
 The vampire who said he was you  
 And drank my blood for a year,*

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Dickie’s *Sylvia Plath and Ted Huges*. 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Sylvia Plath’s *Daddy*. Lines 66-70.

*Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.<sup>20</sup>*

Finally, the daughter speaker charged her father that there is a split in his fat black-heart. She tells her father that the villagers never liked him. So they are dancing with joy. They are stamping on him. The villagers considered him wicked-hearted. She tells her father that he is a 'bastard'. She considers him a vicious, despicable or disliked not only by the daughter speaker but also by the villagers. He was disliked because he was a blood-sucker, vampire, who fed on others and reduced them to be the living Dead. The daughter speaker decides to snap all her relations from the over bearing and over powering figure of her father. (In the last stanza of 'Daddy' Sylvia Plath transforms the psychological and subjective into myth, legend, folk-tale and popular narrative.) Mention can be made to a few lines of the poem to make the concept clear:

*There's stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always knew it was you.*

*Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.<sup>21</sup>*

In the conclusion of this discussion, it can be said that in the present poem, there is the revelation of an infant who has not grown up and is now craving for that state, her mind with conflicting emotions have always tried to dominate her body. This poem is a self-centered poem. The self is the subject whose sensations make up the poem. The poetess herself refers 'Daddy' as an allegory. There is a curious mixture of nursery rhymes with similes and metaphors. But, death seems to be the main theme. As a matter of fact, Sylvia Plath's attitude towards that 'half-love' for easeful death always remained with her. The more she wrote about death, the stronger and more fertile her imaginative world became. In fact she has made poetry and death inseparable. Her poetry bears the theme of death. The images in the

<sup>20</sup> Ibid lines 71-75.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid lines 76-80.

poems of Sylvia Plath are associated with death. She is the poet of suicide. Her 'self' plunges into darkness. It may be a prelude to her death. It may be a means for her to her to gain vivid and intense existence. The transformation of death into life follows the three parts – structure – enters into darkness, ritual death and rebirth. The poem 'Daddy' has the theme of death. In her poems Sylvia either hints at the death of her or refers to the death of others. The death theme is recurrent in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. She was in love with death in her life. So she embraced death by committing suicide. It is the reason that her poetry has got death as its central theme. Apart from this, the love hate relationship of father and daughter is very clearly delineated by Sylvia Plath. Her hatred is due to the carelessness of her father, but her love makes her to commit suicide, so she could meet him after death. Notes of despair and doubt are also present. But, it has turned out to be a famous poem in spite of all drawbacks.

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