



Daddy

by Sylvia Plath

Content Synopsis

“Daddy,” one of Plath’s most well-known poems, was written in the months before her suicide in 1963 and included in her 1965 collection “Ariel.” Like many of the “Ariel” poems, it represents a stark world observed by a strained and haunted subject. The poem is dark in tone, and addresses such themes as anger and the Holocaust. Yet, the poem also depicts the speaker’s transformation from victim to self-knowing subject, a narrative that parallels the evolution of Plath’s own poetic voice.

The poem begins with an indictment of the “Daddy” of the title. The speaker tells her father “you do not do” (line 1), and states she has been confined “like a foot for thirty years” (3-4) inside the “black shoe” (2) of her father. In contrast to this opening image of entrapment, she claims, “Daddy, I have had to kill you” (6), but then reveals her father “died before I had time” (7). “I used to pray to recover you” (14), she says in the third stanza. Later, she admits a suicide attempt at twenty was an attempt to “get back, back, back to you” (59). These revelations, and the contradictory emotions they suggest, set the pattern of successive transformation that characterizes the poem. They also outline the speaker’s situation. Although she is now an adult-aged thirty, as suggested by the opening stanza—she still suffers both the stifling authority of her father and the pain of his early death. This tension between resentment and sadness forms the context for the

poem’s main theme: the speaker’s journey through horror and rage to self-individuation.

In the second stanza, the speaker characterizes her dead father as a colossal presence, his body “a bag full of god” and a giant “ghastly statue” (9) stretching across America from the “Frisco seal” (10) of San Francisco to the Atlantic. At the end of this stanza, Plath introduces the German and Holocaust imagery that dominate the speaker’s presentation of her father. “Ach, du” (15), she says in German (“Oh, you.”) The speaker reveals her father came from a Polish town with a common name: “So I never could tell / Where you put your foot, your root” (22-23), she says. The attempt to “recover” her father is frustrated even by his nebulous ancestry. However, it is also frustrated by his Germanic status, which she does not share: “I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw” (24-25), she says, “Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak. / I thought every German was you” (27-29).

This characterization of remote, foreign father and alienated daughter quickly resolves into a series of Holocaust images, beginning in the seventh stanza. Alluding to her father’s German background, the speaker compares him to a Nazi. Her father’s German language is “obscene,” “an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew” (30-32) to the concentration camps of “Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (33). The speaker presents her father’s culture as rendering the “snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna; not very pure

or true” (36-37). In this Nazi-made world, she is an outsider, a Jew, or one of the gypsies also persecuted by the Nazis: “With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck / And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack / I may be a bit of a Jew” (38-40). In turn, her father becomes a “panzer [tank] man;” not God after all “but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through” (45-47). He gains a “neat moustache” like Hitler’s and an “Aryan eye, bright blue” (43-44). This light coloring-blond hair and blue eyes, was prized by the Nazis as a sign of “true” German ethnicity, in contrast to the darker coloring of the Jewish people the “Final Solution” sought to purge. By developing this analogy; comparing Nazis and Jews to father and daughter, Plath stresses the speaker’s belief that she, too, has been imprisoned, and that her identity as a person has been taken over and erased. Additionally, the darkness of the Holocaust imagery suggests the desperation of the speaker’s situation, and hint at the trauma she must undergo to free herself from it.

In the tenth and eleventh stanzas, the speaker introduces the theme of masochism: “Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you” (48-50). She refers to a photograph she has of her father: “You stand at the blackboard, daddy, / In the picture I have of you” (51-52). She toys with the image of her father as a charming teacher, insisting that despite the cleft in his chin he is “no less a devil for that, no not / Any less the black man who / Bit my pretty red heart in two” (54-56). Here, we learn that the speaker was ten when her father died, and that ten years later she tried to commit suicide to be reunited with him, even if only in death: “I thought even the bones would do” (60). When this attempt failed, she “made a model” (64) of her father, finding a “man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw” (65-66). She marries him, “And I said I do, I do” (67), perpetuating the cycle of victimization the poem has detailed.

This moment of looking back on her life, however, is also a moment of self-awareness. For the first time, the speaker hints at her own complicity in being victimized. The poem has served as a means of projecting anger onto her father, but also as a means of analyzing this seminal relationship. Once the speaker admits her attempts to “recover” her father have only been self-destructive, she can begin to exorcise him. This epiphany is only implicit, as Plath does not detail the speaker’s change of perspective. Instead, the poem shifts direction dramatically. The line after “And I said I do, I do” (67) reads, “So daddy, I’m finally through” (68). The imagery that follows is of death and disconnect: a “black telephone,” “off at the root,” so “voices cannot worm through” (69-70); a vampire whose “fat black heart” (76) has been staked; and finally, villagers “dancing and stamping” (80) on the corpse of her father. The poem’s last image suggests an analogy between villagers who have destroyed a vampire and are rejoicing over its death, and the daughter who has finally rid herself of her father.

Although these images are in keeping with the dark tones of the poem, their darkness is tempered with triumph rather than animosity and horror. The obscenity of the Holocaust motif has given way to the villagers and the speaker rejoicing over a longed-for death. The speaker’s tone, at first tentative and later outraged, has muted into a relieved bitterness. “Daddy, you can lie back now” (75), she says calmly. The poem has acted as confession and therapy, allowing the speaker to address and resolve her anger through a series of metaphors about her relationship with her father. The underlying problem has been revealed to be not only the trauma of her father’s death, but also more significantly the speaker’s own lack of agency because of this trauma. This, too, is resolved through the poem’s changing images, which allow the speaker to recognize her self-destructive behavior—her passive nature, the suicide attempt, and her problematic marriage, for example. By the end of the poem, the speaker has

evolved from stuttering the word “I” in her father’s language—“Ich, ich, ich, ich” (27)—to asserting herself through her own (poetic) language in the final line: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (80).

Historical Context

Although first published in England, “Daddy” suggests an American perspective. The speaker distances herself from her German father, positioning him as an out-of-touch immigrant and herself as a first-generation citizen speaking English. Yet, the looming figure of the father, which spans the continental United States and even extends into the Atlantic, is also a metaphor of America’s expanding global influence during and after World War II. Plath’s own father died in 1940, and this incident in Plath’s life would have been bound up with the events of war: news of the London blitz, the invasion of Pearl Harbor and America’s entry into the hostilities, the dropping of the atom bomb, and the horrific revelation of the Nazis’ Final Solution. By the mid-1950s, when Plath was again studying at Smith College after a suicide attempt, America was a changed place. Haunted by the traumas of the war, the country was also fostering an era of many changes: rapid technological development, the growth of consumer capitalism, the rise and global influence of American culture, and the social unrest that would spawn the civil rights movements of the 1960s. If post-war, postmodern America embodied the exhilarating opportunities of a new age, it also symbolized a profound malaise, a sense of progress undermined by lingering horrors of the recent past. Although “Daddy” is about the speaker’s specific past—the death of her father—the poem’s tension between stasis and change, and its representation of resurfacing traumas, reflect the America of the times.

Societal Context

“Daddy” also reflects many aspects of the social sphere in the mid-20th century. The generational tension in the poem anticipates the rebellious youth

cultures of the 1960s and 70s. The ethnic quality of this tension—the antagonism of the American daughter toward her German father—also reflects the social diversity of a country shaped by immigration, and hostility toward Germany after the war. The fact that the poem narrates a daughter’s rebellion against her father is also significant, reflecting an atmosphere of increasing feminist awareness. In “Daddy,” Plath associates the figure of the father with other figures of oppression—Hitler, a torturer, a vampire. The poem could be read as a harsh critique of patriarchal authority and women’s relegation to passive roles. In this sense, “Daddy” and other poems in “Ariel” (see “Lady Lazarus,” for example) offer visions of feminist rebellion and rewrite gender roles. This aspect of Plath’s poetry has given rise to diverse feminist readings of her work, and to Plath’s status as a feminist icon.

Psychology has played a similar role in the Plath myth and literary criticism. The poem’s therapeutic function reflects a society deeply influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, and invested in the question of mental health. Sigmund Freud, who devised psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century, takes the view that all mental disturbances are rooted in the unconscious. Accordingly, treatment centers on discussion between the analyst and the patient and involves interpreting associations, memories, and dreams to uncover the unconscious desires or fears causing the patient’s problems. In bringing these desires and fears into the open, the patient is able to free him- or herself from them. Freud’s work had an enormous influence on Western conceptions of mental disorder, although psychoanalysis was not the only means used to treat mental disturbance in 1950s America. In-patient care, prescription of tranquilizers, and electroshock therapy were also common practice. Plath herself underwent different forms of therapy after a suicide attempt, an experience fictionalized in her novel “The Bell Jar” and explored in her poetry. Although the biographical context of Plath’s work has sometimes unduly swayed critical

judgment, it has also raised interesting questions about so-called “confessional” literature.

Religious Context

“Daddy” also reflects a postmodern skepticism about religion. The speaker characterizes her father as “a bag of god.” (8) Omnipresent and omnipotent, he dominates his daughter’s actual and emotional landscape. Yet, the speaker’s attitude toward this God is one of derision rather than piety. She challenges his power and authority, revealing it problematic and unstable. She prays to recover him, but praying establishes neither spiritual connection nor personal fulfillment. Praying is not even an emotionally comforting gesture, but rather a crackling telephone with a dead connection. In this bleak world, even God himself is dead. By the end of the poem, the speaker has reduced her god-like father to a Nazi caricature, then to a slain vampire, and then to nothing—the dust beneath the villagers’ feet. This skepticism about the father’s power suggests skepticism about power more generally, including the power of the Christian god to which he is compared.

Scientific & Technological Context

References to science and technology in the poem generally concern the technology of German warfare. There is the “panzer man” (45) and “roller” (17) (or tank) that level Polish towns; there is “an engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew” (31–32), which refers to the trains used to transport prisoners to concentration camps; and there is also the “Luftwaffe” (42), or German air force, of the speaker’s imagined Nazi father. All of these images allude specifically to the mechanics of violence and death, which heighten the reader’s, and the speaker’s, sense of the obscene. These images, like that of the telephone toward the end of the poem, also form a sharp contrast to Plath’s nature imagery. “The waters off beautiful Nauset” (13) and the Austrian landscape have both been invaded and/or exploited by these other, negative forces. The ocean where the father’s

head lies is “the freakish Atlantic” (11), and the Austrian Alps, under a fascist regime, are “not very pure or true” (37). At the end of the poem, however, the natural side of Plath’s dichotomy triumphs over the mechanical one, as the rural villagers overcome the technological advances of the Nazi-vampire figure.

A less obvious but perhaps more significant appearance of science and technology in the poem concerns the image of the speaker’s tongue “stuck in a barb wire snare” (26). Given the context of the Holocaust analogy at work, this image recalls the barbed wire of the concentration camps, the subjection of prisoners therein to “scientific experiments,” and the pseudo-science behind the Nazi agenda of ethnic cleansing. This theme of science gone awry returns when the post-suicidal speaker remembers recovering from her suicide attempt: “But they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue.” This Frankenstein-like attempt at cure only causes the speaker to turn to her own destructive mechanics. In making “a model” (64) of her father in her husband, she merely submits again to “the rack and the screw” (66). Part of the malaise of the poem corresponds to its postmodern, post-war context: to an awareness that science and technology can be ineffective, or, with more disastrous consequences, overreaching.

Biographical Context

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Massachusetts. Her mother was of Austrian descent and her father, who died when Plath was eight, was German—facts alluded to in “Daddy.” A strong student and active writer, Plath won a partial scholarship to Smith College in 1950. Two years later, she won the “Mademoiselle” fiction contest. She was selected to work as a student guest editor at the magazine that summer. In 1953, she went to New York City for this purpose, but returned depressed. She attempted suicide at her home and was hospitalized, where she underwent psychiatric treatment (events also alluded to in “Daddy”).

After recovering, Plath returned to a successful undergraduate career at Smith, eventually winning a Fulbright scholarship to study at Cambridge in 1955. There, she met the poet Ted Hughes, whom she married in 1956. In 1959, after two years teaching and writing in Massachusetts, the pair moved back to London.

In 1960, the birth of Plath's first child, Frieda, coincided with the publication of *The Colossus*, her first collection of poems. A year later, after a miscarriage, Plath and Hughes moved to Devon where Plath gave birth to a son, Nicholas. However, her marriage to Hughes deteriorated, in part due to Hughes's affair with aspiring poet Assia Wevill). (Wevill was the wife of Canadian poet David Wevill, and she began an affair with Hughes in 1961. Their affair continued after Plath's death, and resulted in the birth of their daughter, Shura, in 1965. Four years later, Wevill killed herself and Shura using a combination of sleeping pills and gas from the kitchen oven.) After separating in 1962, Plath moved back to London with the children. During the final months of her life, she completed the poems that would comprise "Ariel." In February 1963, she committed suicide by gassing herself.

Hughes, who later became poet laureate of England, collected and posthumously published Plath's "Winter Trees" and "Crossing the Water" (1971). He also edited Plath's "Collected Poems" (1981), which earned her the Pulitzer Prize. Hughes's own collection, "Birthday Letters," was addressed to Plath, and was published in 1998, the year of his death.

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Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the final line means? Is the speaker really “through?”
2. What does the speaker mean when she says that the villagers “always knew it was you?” Why does Plath use this image of the community at the end of the poem?
3. Some critics have accused Plath of exploiting the Holocaust by using its imagery to her own ends. Do you agree?
4. “Confessional” poetry is sometimes seen as self-indulgent. Does “Daddy” depict a forceful poetic transformation, or adolescent solipsism? Why?
5. Is the poem dated? Do the issues raised—about family, war, and death—relate to the contemporary world?
6. Plath underwent therapy throughout her life. Do you think this poem acted as a kind of therapy? Do artists and writers resolve issues through their creative work? Does doing so make it less artistically valid?
7. Is this a particularly “female” poem? Could a man have written this to his mother wife, or father? Is gender a fundamental aspect of poetry or creative expression?
8. There has been controversy over Hughes’s involvement in the publication of Plath’s letters. Given the subject matter of “Daddy,” what do you think about relatives or other poets editing a writer’s work? What do you think about writers who “write back” to each other, as Hughes did in *Birthday Letters*?
9. There has been a “Plath myth” industry, of which the film *Sylvia* is a recent example. Discuss how real-life figures become mythologized and commercialized. How does the myth of Plath—or the Plath depicted in the movie—compare to the voice behind “Daddy?”
10. It is difficult to read Plath’s work without thinking of her own life. Is it possible to read poetry in a non-biographical context? Do you think there are problems with relating the author’s life to the characters they create? What is the difference between fiction and biography?

Essay Ideas

1. Compare “Daddy” to another poem in “Ariel.” What are the differences and similarities? Compare motifs, form, and imagery, for example.
2. Compare “Daddy” to a poem from Plath’s first collection, “The Colossus.” In what ways is “Ariel” different?
3. How does the form of the poem—such as its rhymes and diction—relate to any of its themes?
4. Both Plath and Anne Sexton studied under Robert Lowell. Compare the three poets’ work. Why do you think their poems are called “confessional poetry?” What are the consistencies and differences between their motifs and styles?
5. Death-as-rebirth and death-as-vengeance are frequent themes in Plath’s poetry, and are often shown to be intertwined. What role do they play in this poem?

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