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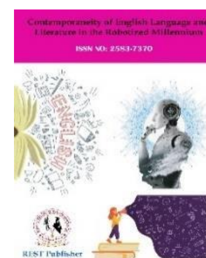

A Dichotomy of The Paternal Figure: An In-Depth Analysis of Sylvia Plath's Daddy

[1]Usman CA, * [2]Najmu KM
[1]*Nilgiri College of Arts and Science (Autonomous), Thaloor, Tamil Nadu, India.*
[2]*CCSIT Kuttippuram, Kavumopuram, Kerala, India.*
*Corresponding Author Email: **najumu2011@gmail.com**

Abstract: *Sylvia Plath was a girl with Electra complex; a psychological stage in which a female child has unconscious desire for her father and consequent hate towards her mother. And regards her father as her greatest tormentor. For her, father has always been an obsession. He was an emblem of Electra awe and admiration alike.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The treatment of this theme can be found in many of her poems, such as Lament, Letter to a Purist, November Graveyard, All the Dead Dears, 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. Daddy 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. The poem was Published posthumously in 1965 as part of the collection Ariel. It is a intricate and complex poem, giving a vent for 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 agent of oppression over her, the poem vividly depicts the speaker's psychological struggle to break free from his overbearing inf. Daddy falls to the last phase of Plath's creative life. In Little Fugue (1962) she recounts the memory of 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. The imaging of the father as black, Germanic autocrat is the foreground 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). Plath herself 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''. It is quite noteworthy that the real father of the poet was neither a Nazi nor her mother a Jew; they are mere metaphors depicting largely psychological condition. Silvia uses images of holocaust to broaden her emotional range, and further to equate her dreadful suffering to the universal level, as well. While doing so, she seemed to strain her personal agony so as to Ther is no denying that Daddy is a patricidal poem, apparently too macabre and morbid to raise the question: "How could a poem like this ever be conceived?" The very outset of the poem is 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 Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes of there is incantatory repetition: "How do you do; how do you do?") She calls her father a "Black shoe" in which she has lived for 30 years "poor and white", recalling the legend of the old lady living in a shoe. But now the daughter gears up to take revenge on his father, demolishing his earlier image of a colossus and pulls him down, "marble heavy, a bag full of God/Ghastly statue with one gray toe/Big as fresco seal." Now she takes risks to traces his family root in Germany, the notorious land of Hitler. She visualizes herself becoming a victim of Nazi gas chamber, "A Jew to Dachaus, Auschwitz, Belsen. Now that, 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 dragging nature of this masochistic delight is so powerful that when the father dies, she tries to "get back, back, back" to him, the repetition shows her firm resolve to be with him. Through successive suicide attempts, she tries to be back with him, but she couldn't. The next phase starts as she marries a model man with "a love of rack and screw", once again suggesting masochistic delight. 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 youAnd drank my blood for a tear, Seven years if you want to know Daddy you can lie back now.So intensely conceived tormentor-lover is finally killed by putting a stake through his cruel heat, and it gives the daughter a long sigh of relief: Daddy, daddy, you baster, I'm through." Thus, the daughter emerges from being an archetypal victim to an confirmed 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, openly confronting the source of her terror, and eventually it succeeds in "controlling that by which it feels controlled". Though the poem is charged with a contained 'metronomic' terror, the terror ends in a hysterical, ecstatic relief, and the speaker feels relieved from the long- inflicted awe and pain, which had deeply rooted in her psyche. It is striking to note that the intense horror of the poem does not drag readers to a blind spot where they may be stimulated and aggravated by their own subconscious fear. On the contrary, it leads them to a cathartic stage by purging the fear through sheer art, effectively synthesizing both the beautiful and bizarre with artistic accomplishment. While molding a subconscious, surreal subject convincingly into a conscious design, Silvia crafts a poem with a universal appeal where the accepted association between love and hatred, beauty and ugliness, passivity and violence private and public trauma, the fact and fiction are stunningly mingled and overlapped. Colour black is used in this poem to symbolize the nature of oppression—the way it curtails 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 that 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. In the tenth stanza this use of the color black is echoed, 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. Having established the symbolic significance of the color black, Plath begins to use it more liberally. The poet 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 cut off. In each of these instances, the word black has become emblematic for oppressiveness—referring to the man tormented her, the husband loved to torment her, the telephone allowed the voices to "worm through". Only when that phone is "off at the root" the speaker could be free of the voices, and free of the oppressiveness and torments they represent, the oppressiveness due to her father's overbearing nature. Eventually, the speaker claims that there is a stake through her father's "fat black heart". Now she gets herself rid of his hold by piercing the oppressiveness at the core of him. The imagery related to the Holocaust and Naziism are used throughout the poem to symbolize illusory ideas of purity and the pain and terror of oppression. This starts 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 aggressive power in World War II. Silvia'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 being unable to speak German brings out 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 in Germany, posing the speaker as a Jew caught during the Holocaust. The comparison is made rather explicit as the speaker describes being shipped off "like a Jew" on a train "to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." The names were of real concentration camps set up during the war, in which millions of Jews were perished. Here the speaker is not literally saying that she is Jewish; instead, she is—quite controversially— identifying with the plight of the Jewish people during the Holocaust and thereby contextualize her own suffering at the hands of an oppressive, male-dominated society. Furthermore, she also mentions her 'gypsy ancestress"—the word "gypsy" is now considered a slur for the Romani people, an ethnic group who were also a target of the Nazis. It is a striking fact that the speaker says "ancestress" here describes a female ancestor, underscoring the idea that the speaker is oppressed due to she being a woman. To be honest, the speaker does not merely say that her father is German; she depicts him as a Nazi— a man with an "Aryan eye" and a "neat mustache," an allusion to Adolph Hitler's infamous facial hairstyle. Both Hitler and the Nazis were Fascists, meaning they believed in extreme authoritarianism, dictatorial power, and the—more often violent—suppression of any dissent. Thus, she associates all these qualities with her father, and with male- dominated society in general. More surprisingly, her husband too, is presented as a Nazi, a man "with a Meinkampf look"; Mein Kampf was Hitler's autobiography. Moreover, she also presents such 'false' purity as an illusion. To shock the readers the speaker makes the ironic claim that "Every woman adores a Fascist," here 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. When the speaker says her father was "Not God but a swastika," she makes it clear that her father was not in fact all-powerful but rather an empty and perverted symbol oppression; the "swastika" was originally an ancient Hindu symbol commandeered by the Nazi party, the power of which depended on blocking out any dissent whatever it is— The word "swastika" thus represents an important moment in the poem, as the speaker comes to the understanding that her father's authority is invalid

without her belief in him, and replaces her earlier perception of her father as godlike. As a matter of fact, it is not just her father's authority, but male dominance in general that proves to be built on a lie as it seems.

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