

## There Was a Young Woman Who Lived in a Shoe: Understanding the Juxtaposition of Love, Hate, And Patriarchal Confinement In Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy"

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: July 05, 2021

Accepted: September 02, 2021

Published: October 31, 2021

Volume: 12 Issue: 5

Advance access: October 2021

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

#### Key words:

Patriarchal Confinement,  
Masculine Dominance,  
Emotional Juxtaposition.  
Victim Mentality,  
Father/Daughter Dynamics,  
Infantile Attachment

### ABSTRACT

In the opening of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" one glimpses a troubled young woman struggling to break free from patriarchal confinement. In a stark play on imagery, she equates her tomb of darkness to a "black shoe" where she has submissively "lived like a foot/Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" for her entire life (Plath 2-3,5). Plath opens the poem with an oppressive tone of confinement. Her tone is that of a victim unable to break free from the powerful pressing of her father. The daughter is acknowledging her life-long imprisonment through the image of conformity and obedience. Her testimony, "You do not do, you do not do/Anymore." is an awakening, an ethereal understanding, she is no longer satisfied with being under her father's foot (Plath 1-2). She mocks her submissiveness and fear by "Barely daring to breathe." or express her autonomy outside of the domineering treatment designated by her father (Plath 5). "Daddy" juxtaposes the extremely childish and infantile dependency on the image of father versus the inherent desire to break free from the entrapment of masculine dominance. As Maher Mahdi points out in the article "From a Victim of the Feminine Mystique," Plath is using "aspects of objectification" to create a breakdown of the typical family dynamic between father and daughter (98). The struggle is real, vigorous, and traumatic to the daughter speaking blatantly throughout the lines of "Daddy." The battle rages as father and daughter fight metaphorically within the confines of the speaker's mind. Plath offers the war-torn country as a backdrop to ease the reader into a sense of disquiet and upheaval. There is something obscenely immature in her attachment to the deceased father. She loves and hates him, desires her independence yet craves the security of her dependency, and she longs for him and yet strives to exorcise his demon from within her own soul. This emotional upheaval allows the reader to assess the speaker's mental anguish and analyze "Daddy" on a more complex level. This study will explore 1) The juxtaposition of victim versus villain in the familial relationship of father and daughter; 2) The daughter's search for autonomy and her unhealthy Oedipus complex; 3) Establishing identity beyond infantile attachment, or as Maher Mahdi points out, breaking free from immaturity requires a certain amount of viciousness in order for the daughter's true liberation (Mahdi 100); 4) The exposure of the Jekyll and Hyde persona, which is noted by Isabelle Travis as the "blurred line" between recognizing the issues and finding one's own part in the familial downfall (Travis 279).

### TAKING AUTHORITY OVER THE PERSONA OF VICTIM

Though one can easily see the devastation Plath has aligned in each word of the poem, the abrupt metamorphosis of the father from God-like to devil, vampire, brute, and malefactor portrays a disturbing picture of horror. The speaker laments, "I have always been scared of you" (Plath 41). One might note that Plath allows her speaker's fear to intrinsically jump off the page. Her words taunt the reader to become entangled with her tangible and seemingly justified uncertainty. The bondage of the shoe, once representing the stoic and glorified shelter of the father, has moved now to a more ominous symbol of the "boot in the face" by a Fascist brute (Plath 49). Pain is equated with love, and even when the daughter feels afraid

in her new and unfamiliar emotional displacement, unsure of her own identity, she still cannot completely disconnect from the painful persona she has religiously held on to. His looming and enormous presence is, in essence, a hindrance or "an obstacle against the daughter's fulfillment of her autonomy. [she is] incapable of the slightest manifestation of her existence" until or unless she can fully exorcise the "demon" within (Mahdi 101). Mahdi is rationalizing the travail of the daughter as she seeks to transition her former adoration of the image of father from God-like to demonic in order to find freedom. This transition is an essential part of understanding the daughter's mental and emotional imprisonment.

In this elegy of mourning, one must go beyond the words professed on the page and look deeper. From beginning to

end, the speaker is assuming a stance of authority over the persona of victim while exalting her emotional renewal of vengeance and retribution. Isabelle Travis, in her article "I Have Always Been Scared of You" calls this transition a "denunciation of patriarchal culture.[where] boundaries between victim and perpetrator are frequently blurred" (277). Travis claims that in this unknown, gray area of uncertainty the speaker struggles with the act of condemning society while accepting the exploitation and even thriving off the desire and need to feel confined. The speaker is at war with her own hypocrisy. Plath deliberately creates the feeling of turmoil and uncertainty throughout "Daddy" in order to show the tug-of-war between confinement and freedom. The speaker is always on the cusp of emotionally pulling free of the constraints before violently immersing herself within the suffocation of darkness once more. Self-contempt and rage are the speaker's catalyst; however, she often struggles with the feelings of love and hate in her internal war to be free. This is often seen as an "Oedipus complex" where the daughter is fixated upon the father with strange and unhealthy feelings of love mingled with abject hostility, and in her sadomasochistic attachment she feels obligated to paradoxically revive the deceased father while simultaneously killing him (Barry 93). She knows her feelings are unacceptable, and her love for her father is marred and tainted by a prevailing darkness of uncertainty so she seeks to eradicate the image altogether.

### **BREAKING BARRIERS: THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX**

One might ask if the daughter is truly seeking autonomy and freedom why does she continuously entomb herself with her father? Why is she so conflicted and hesitant to claim her independence? Jahad Ramazani comments in his article "Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You" that the daughter wants to cast out the patriarch, and yet she knows that "the obliteration of his image necessitates her own demise"; therefore, Ramazani is exemplifying the speaker's "primordial grief...[and] the unresolved oedipal position of the child" by expounding on the immaturity of the daughter as she craves the restoration of her former existence yet fights the need to be confirmed. This notion is challenged by the cruelty of her father's untimely death and her reaction at having to forfeit her power to break the father's mold without killing herself in the process. Ramazani (1150-52). Yet, hesitation still does not stop the daughter from pursuing death: "Daddy, I have had to kill you./You died before I had time" (Plath 6-7). Her acknowledgment of vengeance implies the daughter has attempted to metaphorically kill her father in childhood fantasy; however, as Ramazani proclaims, this death was stalled by the literal death of her father, and this creates a gap for the daughter because his literal death stole her ability to eliminate him emotionally from her soul (1151).

Vengeance is the contrasting and pivotal point in which "Daddy" marks the last stage in this devolution of discursive integrity: the poem hops from nursery rhyme to ritual exorcism" (Ramazani 1150). In agreement with Ramazani's position, one might also understand Plath's need to build upon

the childish, rhythmical structure as a means of emphasizing the harsh breaking of a woman stripped from innocence and propelled into darkness. The speaker's longing is raw and untouchable as she laments: "I used to pray to recover you./At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you." (Plath 14, 58-59). Rejection now comes in the form of Death. He will not accept her any more than her father has accepted her. The daughter is fashioned into an outcast, a traveling gypsy, without stability or security (Plath 38). One could argue that the daughter is seeking empowerment through the retrieval of the image of father as she seeks to be "buried" with him, and to be so close that, as Plath dramatizes, even his bones will do; however, to recover him would necessitate forgiveness. One can assume that Plath is unwilling to allow her speaker the freedom to relinquish hate (65). The daughter says, "I used to." implying that she no longer feels this way, something has changed, and now she does not want this connection anymore, which she later confirms in her statement, "... I'm through" (Plath 14, 80).

### **ESTABLISHING IDENTITY BEYOND INFANTILE ATTACHMENT**

There is something inherently sad about a grown woman who cannot relinquish the stranglehold of her infantile attachment. Her need to reconnect with her father is so intense that she emotionally creates, like a Frankenstein, a replica of him and assigns this persona to a dark and destructive man and immediately she says, "I do, I do" (Plath 67). "I made a model of you" she states, and he loves pain and torture like "... the rack and the screw", and instead of running away from the pattern of destruction the speaker says, ". I do, I do." (Plath 64, 66-67). Plath's use of guilt and reproach as a battering ram for the speaker to punish herself is at once genius and ironic. To allow not one man, but two, to manipulate and control her emotions to the point of destruction is demoralizing. Mahdi claims, "The father becomes the husband, 'the vampire,' and absolute torturer" (102). It is evident that the father and husband are one, and in many ways, Mahdi is emphasizing the revenge of the daughter who wants to rid herself of both men at the same time. She is stifled under the oppressiveness of their combined image and metaphorically killing them seems to be the only way to find true freedom. Plath inflates her speaker's voice by encouraging her to wreak havoc on her perpetrators. Her tone becomes angry and powerful in her proclamation: "If I've killed one man, I've killed two ---" (Plath 71). Internal pain is being redirected to an external viciousness which "the daughter unleashes to [finally] liberate herself" (Mahdi 100). It is a risk to release the pain because it exposes the speaker's vulnerability; however, it is necessary if she truly wants to reclaim and establish her identity outside of the image of her father/husband.

### **THE JEKYLL AND HYDE PERSONA EXPOSED**

The binary opposites of good and evil linger decisively throughout "Daddy." The images coincide with Plath's division of daughter and father, and her use of "you" and "I"

without ever incorporating the word “we.” Two beings connected by blood are divided by the “impermeable separation between victim and victimizer” (Travis 279). Travis is making the point that although the line is blurred, the daughter strives to understand her part in the downfall of the familial relationship. She is the quintessential victim as she agonizes over the pain inflicted by her father. She states that he “bit my pretty red heart in two” (Plath 56). Notice that Plath uses the words “in two” instead of *into*, the typical meaning for severing something in half. Perhaps, this is a way for Plath to express the division of heart and soul that accompanies the acceptance of father as evil instead of good. A Jekyll and Hyde persona emerges so that the speaker becomes two separate individuals through the bitten heart. She is now declaring that she is no longer just a victim, but she is one who has taken on the violent characteristics of the father, and the knowledge is overwhelming and monstrous.

### IN CONCLUSION

The desperation for freedom is the daughter’s plea for wholeness. Psychologically, she is facing the “mirror-stage” according to philosopher Jacques Lacan and accepting that the fragmented pieces of herself must be rejoined in order to be completely whole (Lacan 1164). Her search to discover autonomy is fraught with peril. Plath makes it known that the speaker is merely “glued” back together which implies an impermanence, a weakness to break apart at the slightest incident. She exhibits a more powerful stance as she embraces the painful bite of the “vampire” and the lifestyle of gorging on the blood of the condemned. She says, “There’s a stake in your fat black heart”, and she rejoices that it is finally over. Nevertheless, one might assume that there is still an unmistakable note of ambiguity in her final, gloating words “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (Plath 76,80). One cannot help but wonder if the speaker has really found closure in her elegy of mourning; her conclusion is ambiguous. The repetition of the word “daddy” creates an air of uncertainty, as if the speaker is hesitant to commit to her decision; after all, she is certainly not healed from the painful bite of the “vampire” that fed off her blood for so many years. In fact, legend assumes that vampires seek to transform their prey into exact replicas. This theory is verified as Plath redirects the image of the daughter from victim to victimizer by the end of the poem. She has become the doppelganger of the father/husband, and her thirst for blood and vengeance is insatiable. This argument is confirmed by her desire to see them both punished: “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two --” (Plath 71). It is the sadistic note of gloating in the speaker’s voice which Plath manipulates with perfection in order to show the glee and satisfaction the daughter receives by plunging “a stake” in her father’s “fat black heart” (Plath 76). The word combination: “...the villagers never liked you./ They always *knew* it was you.” allows the reader to feel the wrath of the daughter and the irony of exposure (Plath 77, 79). The word “*knew*” is obviously an intentional emphasis inserted by Plath to accent the similarity between dark and light, exposure and being hidden, and the direct assessment that the “villagers,” or as one might assume, those that are

closest to the situation, are not blinded to the faults and shortcomings of the father/husband duo. Many have been talking and watching, and their rejoicing is a sign that the haze of oppression is at last lifting. Now the symbolism of the shoe has transferred to many feet “dancing” and “stamping” upon the image (Plath 78). There is inconclusive evidence that the daughter is free; however, the great rejoicing over the demise and burial of the image shows an awareness and an awakening of the daughter’s lethargic and submissive attitude from earlier in the poem. One might speculate on the authenticity of her healing. Her declaration screams *freedom!* Yet, the process of removing the deep darkness of the soul is often embedded with mental and emotional scars which can suppress true healing from ever taking place.

Sylvia Plath wields a pen with genuine passion in her poem “Daddy.” Each word is visibly assaulting and yet powerfully effective. One may feel transported by the nursery rhyme melody versus demonic exorcism into a mixed and uncertain realm, a world of fairy-tale intricately intertwined with the bleak darkness of horror. The daughter’s journey is one of love and sorrow, pain and healing, life and death, and she is only one piece in this multifaceted picture. Her struggle to break free from the “law of the father” is the epic centerpiece of Plath’s poem (Mahdi 98). The speaker’s battle to become independent and free of childish attachments, submissiveness, and her journey to find freedom from the entrapment and suffocation beneath the foot, or image, of her father expresses an overt need to truly establish her own identity. Triumph can only be established when freedom has truly been attained. One can question the validity of the daughter’s independence by the end of the poem; however, there *are* signs that something has been exorcised and annihilated from her soul. She is rejoicing over his death and finally finding the voice to speak boldly, the voice and rage she has suppressed for the “thirty years” (Plath 4). Her words carry finality: “And the villagers never liked you” (Plath 77). The words seem to implicate that something is not finished. Hate is the catalyst for killing off the image, for dancing on his grave, and for finishing off the rhythmical curse with a final blow: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (Plath 80). Plath exercises her artistic talent through the heart-rending cry of the daughter. The lines demand a resolution to the speaker’s solemn declaration to eliminate the oppression and patriarchal confinement. The father’s reign is dark and ominous, a giant wielding his foot as a weapon; however, the daughter is no longer blind to his devilish ways, and the conformity she once longingly embraced has now become a prison she seeks to escape. In the end of “Daddy” it is indeterminate whether the speaker accomplishes this feat.

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