

“DADDY,” SYLVIA PLATH

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This incredibly powerful, angry poem speaks of the poet's feelings towards her father. Plath's father died when she was only a child and her troubled relationship with him was not allowed any resolution. Instead, it builds up into an obsessive love and anger towards her father that constrains her entire life. He is always there, an ominous ghost dominating her, subsuming her personality. She even attempts suicide at the age of twenty to attempt to reach him and only when she is a woman of thirty can she really begin to exorcise his ghost. While she declares the conflict over – “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through” – it is difficult to believe that the conflict can fully have been resolved. So much anger and hurt do not easily go away.

The father in the poem, just like Plath's father, died when the protagonist was just a child, a young girl. Like many young girls, she saw her father as a larger than life figure, a “bag full of God”. He was a strong figure, and to the young girl he must have seemed omnipotent. Thus he became not only her father but an image of Daddy, an amalgam of memory and ideal. As such he is untouchable, “marble heavy”, a “ghastly statue” that is too implacable, too distant to reach. Marble is associated with luxury (and thus power) but also it is cold and hard, suggesting a cold, unreachable father.

As a child, she was unable to communicate with him as she recalls with the words “I could never talk to you. The tongue stuck in my jaw. It stuck in a barb wire snare.” For a child who would become a poet, this inability must have been torture. Perhaps had he lived, she would have been able to find a voice to speak to him, to communicate, but with his death, she could not. It could be that Plath's own anger was accentuated by the knowledge that the death of her father, Otto, was completely preventable. He refused to deal with a sore on his toe until it became septic and he required hospitalization. By then it

was too late. Such a futile, stupid death could only make his daughter's frustration worse.

Plath's anger would not have been so strong however had her love not been so deep. “Every woman adores a Fascist” speaks of another aspect of Plath's attitude to her father. She has retained a child's devotion to her father, and in his absence that love has not diminished but grown into a love bordering on obsession. She wanted her father back “I used to pray to recover you” and her whole life has been an attempt to fulfil that love. Like Electra, her entire life is subsumed in her devotion to Daddy. Love and hate, resistance and submission, have dogged Plath through her life because of it. In a way, her life stopped when her father died. Through the poem, the use of childish language such as “Achoo”, “gobbledygoo” and indeed, the reference to “Daddy”, suggests a woman frozen in time: no grown woman calls her father “daddy”. As a child-adult still, she is still submissive to him, suggested by the “black shoe” metaphor. She is constrained, a pale white foot within his black, tight shoe, unable to express herself fully in his presence or with the memory of him alive around her.

“Every woman adores a Fascist” also suggests that Plath has lost herself in her father's domination, her personality subsumed to him. She no longer can speak for herself, but rather speaks for the whole of womankind, trying to find communion in a perception of shared pain. Exhibiting a masochistic side she suggests is symptomatic of womankind, she both loves and hates the control he has over her and would seem to suggest that other women would, do, feel the same.

Plath uses multiple metaphors for her father. The first and most powerful is the comparison between her father and a Nazi. At the time the poem was written, the shadow of Nazism was still clear in many minds and the imagery provides an immediate visual picture to the

reader. Here is an authoritarian figure, a dangerous, evil, black monster, utterly towering over the young girl. Plath's father, Otto, was of German descent and to the poet's ears even his language was "obscene". Plath counterpoints this by comparing herself to a Jew: impotent in the face of her father's control, being driven by her father's hateful language – "chuffing me off like a Jew" – to the concentration camps of the psyche, wherein lies only pain and hardship. This Nazi imagery recurs throughout the poem. Her father is described as "panzer-man" with the "Aryan eye, bright blue."

The second description of Plath's father is as a devil with "A cleft in your chin instead of your foot" who "Bit my pretty red heart in two". Her recurrent use of the word "black", fits with both this image and the others the poet uses. Nazis were often pictured dressed in black, as is the archetypal vampire. Her father is not merely a shoe, but a black shoe; he is described as a "black man" with a "black heart". Black here is a potent symbol of evil, of the darkness in her father and the effect he has had upon her.

The final comparison is that of the vampire. The vampire is a mythological creature that, although dead, lives an unlife by sucking the life blood from its victims. Plath is still her father's victim, just as she was the Jew to her father's Nazi. For years, he has been dead yet still alive, sucking at her life blood, draining her of vitae. The vampire archetype is also often itself a metaphor for sexuality and might further suggest the existence of the Electra complex in the young woman.

Plath tries different methods of coping with the death of his father and his control of him. Her first action is to attempt suicide by an overdose. She does not do this for herself, but rather she does it for him, for her father. She cannot reach him in life, and needing to connect with him, she sees no alternative but connecting with him in death, as she writes: "At twenty I tried to die And get back, back, back to you." However, her attempt is foiled and "And they stuck me together with glue". But she cannot really be whole again. A broken vase that is shattered can be glued together but it will never be as strong, never perfect again.

After the suicide attempt, the poet writes that "I made a model of you" as she attempts to recreate her father in another man, her husband. She looked for a man as strong as her father, a "man in black with a Meinkampf look" who recollects her father's Nazi image and with "[his] love of the rack and the screw" her father's ability to torture her. She believes that, having the husband-father to interact with, she will be able to put an end to her father's influence upon her life. She will be able to refuse to listen to her father's voice coming through the ether "The black telephone's off at the root. The voices just can't worm through". It is debatable with how much success she manages this. Plath's real marriage to the poet Ted Hughes was unhappy, and while they had children, they had separated by the time this poem was written.

Finally, however, Plath begins to fight back against her father's malign influence. Leaving her husband, she has, in her mind, also left her father "I've killed one man, I've killed two." Recognising the way that her father-husband has sucked at her life force, she strikes a blow against it "There's a stake in your fat, black heart." She cannot do this alone, as she is still too weak against his force, but with the "villagers" she can manage it. The villagers are the other women, the other people, oppressed and fearful, who can finally rise up and destroy their oppressors. With their strength she can begin to purge his influence from her battered psyche. She can declare, although not altogether convincingly, that "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

Plath's poem is an angry attempt to purge her father's influence from her life. Losing him at an early age she has never been able to reconcile herself to his loss or to the presence of his ghost in her life. Despite him being compared to a Nazi, a devil, a vampire, she still loves him and cannot easily deny his memory. Even as the poem ends with her declaring herself through, the reader knows she is not. She still thinks of him as "daddy" and we know that within months of the poem's creation, she will have joined her daddy as a second suicide attempt succeeds. From his futile death to her tragic death, the cycle is completed.