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## SYLVIA PLATH, THE ANGRY YOUNG WOMAN

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### Abstract

Sylvia Plath's poetry is categorized as the so-called confessional poetry. Her poetry reflects her relationships with her father and she uses the Holocaust imagery in order to clarify this relationship better. Moreover, she holds on to the classical mythology to describe her experience with her father. This article intends to elaborate the motif of father in *Daddy*, *Colossus* and *Lady Lazarus*. Moreover, this article focuses on the motif of father in her three poems regarding her use of symbolic numbers, German language and allusions.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath, Motif of Father, Symbolic Numbers, German Language, Allusions.

### 1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath's poetry is categorized as the so-called confessional poetry. Her poetry shows her relationship with her father and she uses the holocaust imagery in order to clarify it better. She holds on to the classical mythology to describe her experience with her father. Indeed, Plath's life and poetry are so much interrelated that one cannot separate them and many of her poems have a root in her personal life.

Her father died when she was eight years old and it had a great effect on her life and poetry. The cunning reader of her poetry can trace her father's presence in most of her poems. She portrays him both as an evil and as a divine figure and in order to show her father's cruelty, she represents him as a Nazi.

As she was very creative, she won a summer trip to New York and she has written about her experience in her autobiographical novel the *Bell Jar* (1963). When she returned home, she found out that she has not been accepted into creative writing course at Harvard. As the result of her depression, she committed suicide, but her mother and her brother saved her. Then she attended Cambridge University. It was there that she met Ted Hughes and married him.

Ted and Sylvia had a good life at first. They motivated each other in their writing, but suddenly everything changed. None of them could tolerate the other one; even Ted betrayed Sylvia and had an affair with Assia. It was a big shock for Sylvia. They separated in 1962, and in February 1963, she committed suicide again. This time no one could rescue her.

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Sylvia was very active in her literary career, and as a woman poet, she was very sensitive. She could feel the dominance of patriarchy not only in her personal life, but also in society. She tried hard to get rid of her father's apparition through writing poetry. Indeed, she uses poetry as a way to find her independent voice in society. She intends to escape both her father's apparition and her husband's literary style and language. One can detect the motif of father figure in her most important poems. This article intends to elaborate the motif of father figure in *Daddy*, *Colossus* and *Lady Lazarus* as all these poems reflect the "female passivity, subjection and Plath's own conflicted self-identity caused by social pressures" (Ghasemi, 2007: 58). In these poems, she uses different allusions to show her feeling not only toward patriarchal society system, but also specially toward her father. She later recalled, "He was an autocrat. I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I killed him" (Rietz, 2007: 417). She believes that "the father image... my own father, the buried muse and god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted" (ibid. :422). Therefore, she despises not only her father, but also her husband in these poems, as the ones who dominate her throughout her life. This article focuses on father motif in her three selected poems regarding her use of symbolic number, German language and allusions.

## 2. Analysis

"Although *the Colossus* opens with the first person speaker, it is not at first clear to whom this 'I' refers or to whom, exactly it speaks" (Gill, 2008: 38). The reader notices the speaker's harsh tone toward the statue. The speaker considers the big statue as the symbol of the father and says that she 'shall never get' him and put him 'together entirely.'

Although this is a big statute, it needs repair and the speaker 'crawl (s)' toward this big statue. She approaches the statue like 'an ant'. The speaker likens herself to the ant in order to not only overstate the father figure's position, but also understate his power at the same time; as this big statue needs the little ant's help. He is not as powerful as he was in the past, and now he needs the help of such a tiny creature, which is like the ant. He was "physically huge, sprawled from Atlantic to the San Francisco bay", but now he is shattered (Travis, 2009: 278). Ghanbaralizade believes that the size of the statue refers to the social, political and all other differences between men and women in the society (Ghanbaralizade, 2007: 202).

The presence of this broken statue shows that the father image will be destroyed in years. Although father image is founded for centuries, the speaker predicts that it will be declined in near future. In fact, the speaker finds an opportunity to speak to the colossus and express her anger and contempt (Gill, 2008: 38). As mentioned before, the big statue is not a God anymore.

Not only in *Colossus* but also in *Lady Lazarus*, one can find the father figure. The young Lady Lazarus intends to commit suicide, as she cannot tolerate the patriarchal society and its pressures on her life anymore. In comparison with all her miseries, death is a blessing and it is viewed as an art; the speaker declares 'dying is an art' and she commits suicide soon. She fails in her first and even her second attempt, but one day she will succeed and die. In the patriarchal society, everything should be done by the father's permission; therefore, committing suicide is not a free choice.

As the world she lives in is terrible, she sees her freedom in death but even death is not possible for her. She calls the doctor who saves her as 'Herr Doktor' and 'Herr Enemy' to refer to his cruel action. By saving her, he acts like her enemy because by saving her body, he declares his dominance over her body. Although she desires death, the doctors save her. In this masculine world, she is not free to choose. Therefore, she is not only against the doctors, but also all the father figures. She describes them in a way that they have done a diabolic action when they saved her. In the poem, the reader can notice the image of phoenix that dies and with her birth gains more

strength. She is the same phoenix. She commits suicide and each time she gains her strength; and fights all the father figures through her strong voice.

Besides these poems, in *Daddy*, the speaker shows that she cannot communicate with her father; moreover, it focuses on destructive relationship they had (Cam, 1987: 431). This poem is "the girls struggle to separate herself from her dead father, who dominates her life" (Haralson, 2001: 567). The speaker intends to talk to her father, but none of them can communicate properly. Throughout the whole poem, the speaker calls her father as "daddy" the word that a child uses to address her father. It shows the child's love toward her father and at the same time, it indicates her father's dominance over her life. Daddy is a person whom the child should obey. Even the image of his 'black shoes' show his dictatorship. The speaker cannot communicate with her father and her attempts fail.

The speaker uses German language to talk to her German father, but as the language is foreign for her she cannot communicate with her father. Besides, she cannot express her emotions within foreign language. She uses the word 'Ich' to express her independent identity, but she cannot continue talking in German language because she is frightened by her father's presence and his dominance. "her attempt to define herself as a German 'I' can barely be articulated and splutters out until 'ich, ich, ich' is rendered meaningless through repetition" (Travis, 2009: 282).

Besides the German language, the speaker uses the words 'wild and brute' repeatedly and these words indicate her father's cruelty. "The speaker's relationship with her father is described through a series of metaphors implying suffocation, rejection and violation" (Haralson, 2001: 568) for example, the father is compared with mythic and historic figures like Nazis, vampires and devils. The reader sympathizes with the speaker when she declares that 'the vampire who said he was you.' The father sucks his daughter's blood out of her body and as she has been scared of her father, she dares not protest. Besides the idea of father's violence against his daughter, vampire shows "the violence which is transmitted and the victim being turned into a victimizer" at the end of the poem" (Travis, 2009: 291).

As her father is always torturing her with his presence and his dominance, she compares him to Nazis and at the same time compares herself to Jews. All Plath's three selected poems have the images of Jews, Nazis and holocaust in general. In *Lady Lazarus*, one may notice many references to world wars, Nazis and Jews. In this poem, the speaker relates herself to victims of Nazis for portraying her situation in male dominated society. As she is tortured in patriarchal society, she compares her situation to Jews' situation in the hands of the Nazis.

My face a featureless, fine

Jew linen (1981: 244).

The same comparison is mentioned in *Daddy*. In the poems, she portrays her situation in a male-dominated society and compares her situation to Jews who live under the influence of Nazis. Her father victimizes her till the end of her life the same way the Nazis victimize the Jews.

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew (1981: 223).

Even the use of German language can have relationship to Nazis' presence in her poems. She uses German language to win the sympathy of her torturer, but she cannot. As the language is foreign, she cannot express herself and she should tolerate the situation. Not only language but also meter and rhymes limit her. As Gill mentions there is "claustrophobic movement which embodies the entrapment of the daughter" (Gill, 2008: 62). The theme of power and powerlessness are strengthened by the rhyme and German language that the poet has used.

As she does not intend to tolerate the patriarchal system anymore, she wants to commit suicide and die. As Ghanbaralizade mentions many of Plath's poems are about the death and the pain and in the selected poems, she intends to get rid of this pain by any means (Ghanbaralizade, 2007: 51). The symbolic number thirty refers to the young woman who tolerates all the situations during these thirty years, but now she is not able to endure anymore.

Thirty years now I have labored (1981: 129).

I am only thirty

And like the cat I have nine times to die (1981: 244).

In which I have lived like a foot

For thirty years, poor and white

Barely daring to breathe or Achoo (1981: 222).

The number thirty shows the speaker's suffering. In *Lady Lazarus* she commits suicide to stop her suffering, but the doctors meddle with her intention. She rises like her parallel Biblical figure from death, but here she has no savior. If in the case of Lazarus, Jesus was his savior and his friends help him, here she does not have any savior. Instead of helping her, people gaze at her body; i.e. the poem expresses the effect of male gaze on loss of the power for self-expression (Ghasemi, 2007: 59). Paradoxically she asks her enemy to 'peel off the napkin' as she has no friend to help her see around herself.

The allusion to Lazarus is related to the phoenix image. She rises from death and she is born again in the same male-dominated society. Each time she has a new birth, her voice gains more power and she becomes able to protest against patriarchy. As Gill mentioned *Lady Lazarus* is a poem about "destruction and construction of female subjectivity" (Gill, 2008, p. 60). The patriarchal society destroys her identity, but the speaker intends to reborn again to construct herself and her identity. In addition, Ghanbaralizade thinks that death is not the end but a new path through which she can live a life she wishes (Ghanbaralizade, 2007: 222). Moreover, Dillon maintains that "death functions as a platform for the speaker's launch to new heights of existence", i.e. death forges "creative possibilities of life and speech" (Dillon, 2008: 122).

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air (1981: 247).

### 3. Conclusion

All in all, historical allusions, use of German language and symbolic number thirty are related to the father figure's presence. "Plath's poetry reacts against the absence, especially for women, of a public space, indeed a language for debate, wherein one might make visible and deconstruct the given order of things" (Narbeshuber, 2004: 185). In fact, her poetry is a revolt against normalization in which she trapped all these years, silent and suffering (Rakesh, 2008: 43).

Here Plath intends to free herself of all the patriarchal boundaries and express her individuality through her poetry. Finally, she declares her independent self in her poems.

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