

Biographical influences on plath's daddy

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Plath's famous poem "Daddy" enjoys myriad biographical interpretations. The poem, as well as the literary tradition Plath is most closely associated with: Confessionalism, engender robust biographical interpretation due to their innately self-revelatory idiom. Plath, even more so than other Confessional poets like Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell, explored the poetic possibilities of contemporaneous self-expression which involved intimate, sometimes deeply personal psychological and biographical revelation.

Though biographical and personal details proved essential to the composition and motifs of "Daddy," as well as many other of Plath's well-known poems; the works avoid turgidity by articulating, through the Confessional (personal) idiom, universally experienced themes: "Plath's writing captured the anger, the self-doubt, and the ambivalence that many intelligent and creative women were experiencing in the late 1960s and early 1970s as they became aware of the discrepancies between the potential they had begun to glimpse in themselves and the constrain (Annas 6). Interestingly, Plath herself noted, in a reading for the BBC, that "Daddy" was "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 her mother very possibly part Jewish." (Plath, Nos. 166-188). These words express Plath's attempt to pace a narrative distance between herself and the speaker of the poem and seem to indicate that she felt such a distinction failed to be strongly apparent in the poem itself. This latter conclusion is understandable; close inspection of Plath's diary, biographies, and the lines of "Daddy" exhume a potent

parallels between the events described in the poem and the events of Plath's life.

Beginning with the most obvious parallel as well as the poem's central theme of a "girl with an Electra complex," Plath's journals reveal that she, indeed, suffered personally from an "Electra complex." While undergoing treatment with her psychologist Dr. Ruth Beuscher, Plath experienced a cathartic emotional climax during psychotherapy and recorded her subsequent thoughts. Among observations about her mother and father, Plath revealed that she carried a deep resentment against her mother "I never knew the love of a father, the love of a steady blood-related man after the age of eight.[...]My mother{...}came in one morning with tears of nobility in her eyes and told me he was gone for goods. I hate her for that." (Plath, 430). Plath also noted that her father was an "ogre" and "tyrant" and that he kept a hidden Nazi flag in his closet which he o

ccasionally paraded in front of while dressed in Nazi regalia. "He wouldn't go to a doctor, wouldn't believe in God and heiled Hitler in the privacy of his home." Of her mother Plath observed sarcastically, "She suffered{...} bound to the track naked and the train called Life coming with a frown and a choo-choo around the bend." (Plath Journal, 430) This latter turn of phrase (with its train imagery) returns in the stanzas of *Daddy* when Plath writes: "An engine, an engine/ Chuffing me off like a Jew." Likewise, the Nazi imagery of "Daddy" conveys a sense of bleakest hopelessness, with Plath directly identifying her own childhood pain and loss of her father with the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis. "I have always been scared of you/

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo./And your neat mustache/And your
Arayan eye, bright blue.”

Although the poem expresses the dramatic revelation of an “ Electra complex,” the poem’s opening lines foreshadow a strange inversion of powers; the admonition “ You do not do, you do Plath Page -3- not do/ Any more, black shoe” portends or infers that the speaker has won a victory over her oppressor (s); taken at their full impact, the opening lines convey not only a release from the familial neurosis implied by the aforementioned biographical details, but a sinister hint at the poem’s ultimately suicidal themes. The line “ in which I have lived like a foot/For thirty years, poor and white” mean to strike to the heart of the poet’s entire life and not merely the “ Electra complex” that is so obviously rendered. The “ shoe” is all form of oppression and constriction, though throughout the poem there is a strong sense of male domination and patriarchal oppression. “ Of the poems that concentrate on the family, those dealing with the father provide the clearest and most powerful example of Plath's divided conception of the universe.” (Rosenblatt 119) Plath’s real-life marriage to the poet Ted Hughes involved, as even a cursory glance of the biographic record indicates, a replication of the “ Tyrant” theme associated with her father in her journals and in the poem “ Daddy.”

The sordid details of Plath’s marriage to Hughes involved sexual domination and submission, physical fighting, infidelity, poetic rivalry, and a exploration of occultism, including Cabalistic work and magickal operations. (Alexander) This latter consideration of magickal and cabalistic practices enjoins the

poem "Daddy" in a veiled autobiographical reference "With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck/And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack/ I may be a bit of a Jew." These lines may seem obscure — or purely within the invented scope of the poem; however, inspection of Plath's biography reveals that these lines invoke her sense of oppression through mysticism likely brought upon by her magickal associations with Hughes. In addition to Cabala, astrology, and Tarot, Hughes practiced hypnosis on Plath seeking to guide her to self-affirmation and poetic inspiration.

However, in "Daddy," Plath identifies herself, mystically, as a persecuted Jew indicating that she regarded Hughes' attempts to guide her as artificial and constraining of her own gifts, which, in turn, brought upon her own subjection to oppression. Instead of illumination, blackness, exudes from father and husband: "Images of blackness and Germanic harshness eventually supplant the earlier complex of images relating to the father. Plath completely reverses the idealization of the father[...] The vicious, unmerciful father is now the equivalent in the family world of the brutal Nazis in the historical world. Blackness is the key imagistic element indicating the presence of the father. (Rosenblatt 123)

Here, an important distinction between autobiography and narrative is made; a distinction which propels the poem in a Confessional mode from the merely personal, and thus becoming, perhaps, turgid or melodramatic rather than spell-binding and dramatic. This distinction is that Plath identifies her speaker with the Jews of the Auschwitz, Dachau, and Belsen concentration camps, exalting her personal mode of suffering brought upon by her father's

death and her abusive marriage to a stature that would resonate not merely with those familiar with the details of her life but with those who had never known her at all. That said, the poem gains its most sinister and perhaps most powerful energies from deeply autobiographical confession. Lines such as “ In the waters off beautiful Nauset./I used to pray to recover you.” can only be interpreted as personal motifs, since Plath summered in Nauset with her family and often referred to this time period as the most gloriously happy in her life. These lines read almost like literal transcriptions of fact, rather than the poetic conceits embodied in lines Plath Page -5- where Plath identifies herself with the Jews.

This intense dichotomy between the experienced and the imagined exhibits itself strongly in the works of Symbolist poets such as Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine; it is the technique of merging the child's world (idealized) with the adult's world, a conceit mirrored in the poem's sing-song meter and diction as well as in its imagery and mood. Memory, in the poem, is like the child remembers: “ Daddy” brilliantly enlarges the memory of Plath's father to legendary proportions. Plath dramatizes the situation between daughter and father as if no time had passed since the father's death: the emotional situation is still burning in her consciousness.” (Rosenblatt 160) This constant tension between the ideal and the real – the remembered and the present – the child and the grown woman mirror the universal experiences of most people whether the specific biographical details are similar. That “ Daddy” was written by Plath as an exercise in personal catharsis, as well as a lyric poem meant to excite large audiences, is obvious from the poem's most hermetic lines and associations.

The lines which seemingly abruptly refer to San Francisco: " Ghastly statue with one gray toe / Big as a Frisco Seal / And a head in the freakish Atlantic." identify the daddy in the poem " as a colossus who stretches across America from the Atlantic to the Pacific--a colossus even larger than the one described in " The Colossus." These seemingly obscure details are in fact references to Plath's father: the " Ghastly statue with one gray toe" is Otto Plath's gangrenous leg, and San Francisco Bay is where he conducted his research on muscid larvae." (Plath 194) Similarly, " both the vampire and the Frisco Seal in her poem " Daddy" are almost certainly biographical references to her father's research and publication. The blood-sucking image of the vampire was probably suggested to Plath by her father's study of parasites, " Muscid Larvae of the San Francisco Bay Region Which Sucks Blood of Nesting Birds," a study that documents the endurance, tenacity, and enormous destructiveness of these larvae." (Plath 194)

The poem's narrative arc foreshadows suicide in the poem's opening lines, and repeats the affirmation of suicide in the lines " At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you.? I thought even bones would do." Thus, suicide becomes the implicit form of revenge with the " stake" in Daddy's " fat black heart" being the stake of death— and the poet's death as an act of revenge and personal empowerment. Plath's rage against her husband noted in the poem reveals the aforementioned infidelities of Ted Hughes whose womanizing nature is well-documented " unproductive, Plath's jealousy can hardly be considered unfounded; when Plath met Hughes, he was described to her as the biggest Casanova in town[...] Nor does Hughes's life after Plath suggest that he was in any way inclined reward fidelity; he left Assia Wevill

(the married woman for whom he had left Plath) for another married woman, and after Wevill gassed herself, in an amplified replay of Plath's suicide (killing their child as well)." (Nehring) Tragically, the poem's themes proved not only deeply expressive, but prophetic as well when Plath took her own life shortly after separating from Hughes.

The lines " And the villagers never liked you./They are dancing and stamping on you>" seem to send an even more ominous message of precognition: that of Plath's own posthumous fame which would incite many thousands of women around the world to reject patriarchal oppression, or at least respond to their sense of oppression with a sense of new empowerment. Plath's poem " *Daddy*" can be interpreted productively from the standpoint of biography; indeed, certain lines images and metaphors must be so interpreted, thus enshrining this poem as one of the masterpieces in a Confessional idiom.