

Sylvia plath's childhood and her poetry essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Evolution of One's Self

It may seem that human life is based on the totality of various situations, which give us only experience and certain knowledge at the moment they take place. Indeed, various situations build our character and contribute to our development. On the other hand, some periods of human life have more implications on further growths and development than the others. In this regard, experiences of childhood are of particular importance, since childhood traumas might have ruinous implications for the adulthood and life path in general. From the psychoanalytical perspective, the most crucial relationship is between children and their parents, since they are not only the first inter-human relations a person can have but also because they build the model of an individual's further interactions with the outer world or society. Dysfunctional relations result in subsequent complexes and psychological pathologies like depression and suicide. The complex importance of childhood experience is universal and affects people irrespective of their status, social class of birth or gender. The case of Sylvia Plath is the best example of this. The aim of the present research paper is not to explore the connection of Sylvia Plath childhood experience with its further implication towards her depression and suicide. The aim of the present paper is to track how her dysfunctional relationship with her father was transferred into her relationship with other men and resulted in her death and how this dysfunction was depicted in the poem 'Daddy' and predicted her tragic end. In this context, the author's biography should be explored and track of biographical references should be found in the studied poem. The poem shall be analysed both in terms of interpretive analysis and

literary criticism.

The main feature of Sylvia's early childhood was alienation. It was conditioned by various aspects of family life, but first of all, it was due to the fact that their family was the first generation of immigrants from Austria by her mother line and Germany by her father line. Under those conditions, irrespective of potential open-minded outer society, family was to be of a higher importance for an individual to belong to somewhere rather than school or any other community (Travis 279). On the other hand, the family environment was far from ideal mainly because the relationship between parents was unequal. Sylvia's father Otto Plath was a biology professor at Boston University, while her mother Aurelia Schober was a student at his course, and thus was 20 years younger than him. From the point of traditional German upbringing of the beginning of century, Otto was quite dominant in his roles of husband and father (Kalfopoulou 896). Thus, the young girl was raised in the environment of the patriarchal family, where the first expected child was to be a boy and not a girl. Further on, with the birth of her brother Warren three years after her, in 1935, the attention was paid entirely to the boy as an heir to his father (Travis 291). Under these conditions, by the time her father died of untreated diabetes, when she was only eight, Sylvia did not manage to create a stable emotional relationship with her father due to her gender and his subsequent coldness. After his death, in 1940, she saw the hard life of her mother on her own with two children to take care of.

Plath's life path can be characterised by two tendencies - bursts of depression and creativity. Although she managed to graduate from Smith

College with honour and was awarded Fulbright scholarship in Cambridge, she attempted to commit her first suicide in the age of 20 and spent six months in McLean mental hospital (Kalfopoulou 898). From psychoanalytical perspective, her constant uncertainty in herself was conditioned by looking back to her father's death and necessity of his approval even from the grave. On the other hand, she was looking for someone to take the place of her father to become her guardian and supporter, the one her father had never become. Marriage with Ted Hughes, in 1956, was meant to be her salvation if he did not get involved in an affair with another woman and did not leave her with two children to take care on her own (Travis 285). After five months of their separation, she committed a suicide, on 11th of February 1963. It may seem that the main reason for her death was conditioned in the husband's betrayal, but from the developmental perspective of psychoanalytical exploration the reason was in her father as the model of relations with other men. When she was left in the same situation as her mother, she realised until which extent she was looking for the same person as her father and that she was doomed by dysfunction of that relationship (Lester and McSwain 73). Until a certain extent, it can be argued that her father betrayed her and her mother's trust by leaving them on their own without his support. Although these conclusions might be considered interpretive, her poems as examples of confessional poetry prove these considerations. In this regard, the most controversial poem of Sylvia Plath is the one dedicated to her father, and it was written on 12th October 1962 (Kalfopoulou 897). It is the poem that describes the complexity of her life in the greatest depth.

Irrespective of obvious contents of a person addressing her dead father and arguing that she is free of his control and his shadow, the poem is full of symbols and subsequent hidden meaning behind the lines written. The general impression of the poem is alienation just as the feeling Plath felt through all her life. In this context, the feeling of alienation is achieved through the use of antagonistic word pairs and symbols. For instance, she compares herself to Polish and Jew and considers her father to be German/Nazi as a rival to both other nations (Plath 223). In this regard, she does not only show that the narrator is alienated by the opponent but that two are opposed by one another, and she is the one to be suppressed. The narrator of the poem 'may well be a Jew', scared of the ever-present threat from the past:

'So I never could tell where you

Put your foot, your root.

I never could talk to you.

The tongue stuck in my jaw' (Plath 223).

This passage shows both the suppressed position of the narrator being in fear of her father, and also the emotional numbness of their relationship. Putting this passage into the context of Plath's relationship with her father it can be argued that their relations were based on simple respect and fear rather than emotional caring of father for his daughter. That is why she uses symbols of Nazi and swastika to show the difference and alienation between two. Even outside the family context, the audience would immediately realise that the father of the narrator was as far from her as Nazi German

was far from Polish Jews. Although both nations can be identified as the same species, one was destroying the other in the concentration camps (Lester and McSwain 74). The whole metaphor of Holocaust is used in order to show the complexity and pains of narrator's emotional condition and even the agony of her existence. It primarily indicates that she was abused by her father (Travis 282).

The impression of dominance and one's subordination to the stronger one is achieved by general impression of inconsistency between sizes. In this regard, her father is always shown as a great and magnificent figure. Plath uses such metaphors like a large shoe, and she is very small and lives in it. In another case, he is an enormous statue which stretches over the whole USA. The particular feature of her narration is that she keeps it quite double-meaningful. For instance, Plath uses simile show the size of the toe as San Francisco and then imagery of the statue stretching around the whole Atlantic (Plath 222). Although it can be argued that this style of narration is for the benefits of the whole imagery and audience's interpretation of the message sent; from strictly psychological perspective, this kind of narration also shows a certain hesitation before making a certain decision (Lester and McSwain 75). It also argued for her inability to face her greatest fear just yet.

Irrespective of the outlined above analysis, the poem remains quite a controversial matter in the literary world. In this regard critics are divided between those who consider that the poem should be appreciated for its imagery and symbolical meaning but outside the autobiographical context (Kalfopoulou 894). On the other hand, other critics argue that the poem is

entirely autobiographic and that it should be studied in the appropriate context (Lester and McSwain 74). The antagonists argue that, according to the author, the poem was about an entirely different person - a girl with Electra complex, who worshiped her father (Kalfopoulou 893). In this context, they argue that the author was not on the side of the narrator and that she had only described quite complex interpersonal relationship. Another argument in favour of this was that in times when the poem was written, comparison of one's father with Hitler or Nazi German, no matter how dominant he might have been was considered to be a bit too much and would have been rather used for the enemy rather than a family member (Sarathi 4). It is often argued that, among relatives and friends, Plath had seldom spoken badly about her father and even unfaithful husband.

On the other hand, irrespective of mentioned above arguments, the protagonists of autobiographic nature of the poem have more reasons to consider themselves right. First of all, even putting psychoanalysis aside, Sylvia Plath was a representative of the confessional poetry genre, which was encouraged by her fellow poet Merwin W. S. (Lester and McSwain 76). The essence of the genre was in writing from one's personal experience and in a personal manner. From the contemporary perspective, it can be argued that her genre of poetry can be viewed as a modern diary of one's life experience. From the feminist perspective, her narration style is quite feminine and personal, which makes her a protagonist of female emancipation. In this regard, feminist critics argue that being a woman with quite a complex family history; Plath could not separate herself from her creations. In fact, according to them she was not supposed to do it, and the

success of her works is conditioned by her personified narration perspective (Sarthi 2). Another argument is that her creativity was often triggered by personal emotional explosions and events in her private life rather than a planned schedule of a writer. In fact, from the female perspective, creativity is part of the female experience; it is part of being a woman. As part of female experience, it is incredibly difficult to separate your emotional state of anger and fury towards those who betrayed or hurt you and just keep neutral when write something similar to your situation (Travis 284).

It is also the time justification of the poem, the author gave. The Electra complex was about girl's desire to take place of her mother and become a wife for her father, in case of the poem; the girl does not crave for her father in any sexual manner, but rather aims at self-release from the male/father dominance and oppression (Sarthi 3). The poem shows building of one's self-realisation rather than development of one's desire for a father. The symbols, emotional colour of narration, straightforwardness in the end of the poem argue for the building strength of an individual and one's control over her life. From strictly, psychoanalytical perspective, the poem argues for emotionality over personal issues, which are shown through the references to sensual perception. In other words, attention is paid to colour, visual perception of size, smell and taste. Thus, the author was calling for primeval senses in order for her audience to understand her and to make her hidden meaning more comprehensible for the audience (Lester and McSwain 75).

Overall, from all mentioned above, it can be concluded that the poem 'Daddy' is of an autobiographic nature and that it tells the whole life story of Sylvia Plath and her dysfunctional relationship with men due to her dominant

father. Just as in the beginning of her life, Plath was quite weak and was counting on the power of her father and later husband to take care for her; in the beginning of the poem, she is hidden in the male shoe. On the other hand, later on she managed to grow stronger and kill her suppressors by putting a stake through their hearts. In this context, the poem showed the growth of her personal strength over the circumstances she had to face. She became self-conscious about her life and was strong enough to share it with other people. From the point of the literary world, this poem was a masterpiece of one's self-criticism and confessional poetry. It is a manifestation of female emancipation and an attempt to take her life into her hand even if it is only to commit suicide. With life like hers, such poem could not be written outside personal experience and biography.

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