

Sadness in the poems of sylvia plath and elizabeth bishop

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



Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop are famous American poets. Both poets are lonely: They lose their fathers at a very young age; Sylvia's husband betrays her, and Elizabeth's lover commits a suicide. "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath and "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop share a common theme: Longing for the deceased loved ones. Some readers may insist that the authors show indifferent or even hostile attitudes toward the "you" they talk to. However, they are indeed self-deceiving by hiding their actual loving emotions because they both show contradictory psychology, which ultimately reveals their longings for the "you" to come back.

Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" vividly illustrates her feelings about the death of her father—a devastating nightmare, which is the start of her despairing and miserable lives. Sylvia uses metaphor, considering her father's death a "black shoe", and herself "a foot" that lives in the "black shoe" (2-3). The word, "black" is easily linked to funeral, so it illustrates the sorrow of Sylvia. The poet is "poor and white" because she, as a "foot", is trapped under the "black shoe" for "thirty years" (4): She dwells so much in the sorrowful shadow of her father's death that she could not enjoy brightness things in her lives anymore. Sylvia does not dare "to breathe or Achoo" (5), which describes her experience of growing up. Breathing and Sneezing are necessary human behaviors, which can be considered representations of the poet's needs and willingness. However, without her father's protection, she becomes too insecure to even show her needs and willingness. The poet also uses imagery to show her sufferings of losing her father. The poet writes, "I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew" and "I may be a bit of a Jew" (34-35, 40). Sylvia thinks that "every German" who speaks "

obscene” words is her father (29-30). Sylvia analogies her pain of losing her father to the cruel massacre of Jews by Nazis during World War II. She writes, “ an engine, an engine/ Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (31-33). Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen are three concentration camps where a significant amount of Jews are imprisoned, enslaved tortured, and being used to test biochemical weapons. Sylvia uses vivid imagery to present the scene as if her father, the Nazi, is driving the truck that takes her, the Jew, to the horrific camp. This imaginary scene implies the poet’s believes that her father’s death marks as the beginning of her tragic, hopeless, and dark lives.

Although the poet seemingly wants to accuse her father for abandoning her, her ambivalence implies her true thoughts: She misses her father, and wishes he were still alive. When Sylvia writes, “ Daddy, I have had to kill you” (6), it seems that she really hates her father. However, the following symbols reveal her contradictory attitudes towards her father. She writes, “ Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one gray toe/ Big as a Frisco seal” (8-10). These lines portray Sylvia’s father in her memory□ a man who is tall and strong, and can make his daughter feel safe. Thus, these symbols implicitly show her love and longings for her father. According to the line, “ I used to pray to recover you” (14), it is perceivable that she wishes her father were still alive. Another evidence of her ambivalent attitude is reflected when she says, “...I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do” (58-60). “ Back, back, back” is a repetition, and “ even the bones would do” is an exaggeration. These poetic

devices help strongly present Sylvia's longings for her father to come back. Although some may feel that these lines seem dramatically contradict to previous lines where she wants to kill her father. However, such contradictory feelings actually explain to the readers that she doesn't truly want to kill her father; instead, she wants her father to come back. When she was little, she prays for her father to recovery. But after she becomes an adult, she understands that dead person is gone forever, so she decides to kill herself just so she can be with her father again. Thus, it is reliable that her blames and curses for her father are just her self-deceits to lessen her pain of him, which in results reflects her actual loves and longings for him.

Similarly, in "One Art", Elizabeth Bishop tries to deny her actual feelings by admonishing both herself and the readers that losing is not a disaster.

Elizabeth starts with minor things that everyone might deal with everyday, such as "door keys", and "the hour badly spent". It is easy to convince the readers that losing those things will not bring horrible outcomes. She then gradually moves to more valuable items, such as "[her] mother's watch", "three-loved houses", "some realms [she] owned" (5, 10-11, 14). Since she has been repetitively saying that losing minor objects will not bring disaster, it is easier for the readers to also believe that losing these more valuable items is also acceptable. In addition, she uses parallelism in which she writes, "The art of losing isn't hard to master" for three times (1, 6, 12), which can strengthen her tone and makes her arguments more convincing.

However, in the last stanza where the poet talks about "you", her attitude suddenly become hesitating, which implies that losing "you" is indeed a

disaster even though the poet refuses to admit. Elizabeth writes, “—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture/ I love)” (16-17). The word, “ even” and the fact that all items in previous lines are listed in an order with increasing value expose that “ you” values most in the poet’s heart. Using “—” reveals the poet’s hesitation, which implies that it is indeed a disaster to lose “ you”. The poet adds details explanation in the parenthesis after “ you”, which shows that Elizabeth’s memory about “ you” is still clear and vivid. In addition, the poet writes, “ the art of losing’s not too hard to master” (18), which is slightly different from her previous stanzas. This extra word, “ too”, precisely exposes the contradictory psychology of Elizabeth: She actually feels hard to master losing “ you”, but she doesn’t want to admit. Therefore, Elizabeth’s true feeling is that she misses “ you” so much. Even though she is trying to deceive herself and hide her true emotion, the way she writes the poem reveals her longings for “ you” to come back.

In sum, in Daddy and One art, both poets have ambivalent emotion. On the one side, they hate or do not care the person, but actually Elizabeth and Sylvia miss the person who they loved very much. However, the dead cannot be brought back in the life. People have to move on eventually.