

# A response to 'daddy' and 'digging' essay sample



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Many of us are inexplicably linked to our own fathers: emotionally tied in strange ways. 'Daddy' and 'Digging' account for the relationships between father and daughter, and father and son, but do so with impulsive desire, and longing understanding for something that may never be understood. A mysterious love attracts both Plath and Heaney to their own fathers, something that they both understand very well, in part, but which also mystifies them. For Plath, this manifests into an almost deranged, turbulent deluge of confused emotions that contradict her more open feelings of hate of her father.

Heaney's contemplative mood reaches out to delve into a previously clouded attraction to the cold, physical robustness of his father that he feels he lacks with his well-to-do world of pen and paper. There is a marvellously rich sense of admiration for 'real work' in the field by hard-working men prepared to get their hands dirty and sweat in the sun. There is almost shame, in Heaney's poem for his own 'trade', as he remembers looking down upon his father from a high window, in a quite beautiful moment.

There are obvious parallels. Both poems dig at certain preoccupations. Plath attempts to deal with newly surfacing emotions that oscillate between love and hate in the form of the scattered images of memory and fantasy. She endeavours to piece together perhaps her own identity from her father, and decide exactly how brutalised her fathers memory has left her; she 'could never tell where you Put your foot, your root.' There is a sense of a clouded past here that implies an equally confusing past for herself.

The brutal line, ' Every woman adores a fascist,' evokes crude yet undeniable sexual instincts for a woman attracted by brutality; a sense of masochism and an only partial acceptance of who she is. In ' Digging', perhaps the title and theme of the soil indicates that the speaker attempts to ' dig up' his own roots, and come to terms with his identity. He feels perhaps a sense of guilt that he doesn't follow his father's ways, but vows to himself to ' dig' with his pen, i. e. to be someone worthy of great men like him through writing.

As I read ' Daddy', I feel that Plath immediately immerses the reader in sharing her vivid and shocking sense of pain, and wild frustration. Whereas I feel that Heaney's ' Digging' may be almost an afterthought of affection, Plath makes ' Daddy' a kind of dream, where simultaneous images and emotions concerning her father pound one after another at the heart, or more so, if this were a monologue, whereby these feelings, ripe from the soul, flooded onto a page with no pause for thought.

It retains a fresh quality of spontaneity in my ears, as if she were actually there, almost crying out her feelings in an uncontrolled manner. Plath makes ' Daddy' explicitly real, as if spoken, or wept, there and then; even in the first stanza the childlike qualities of, ' You do not do, you do not do,' feel desperate and oppressive -under it, I sense a deeply oppressive tone. Note how Plath repeats the word Jew in the phrases, ' I began to talk like a Jew', ' I think I may well be a Jew', ' I may be a bit of a Jew'.

It is as if the speaker is obsessed, and has lost control of her argument, churning out panic-stricken thoughts. I feel that Plath very cleverly balances

this spontaneity with complex metaphors in the poem, and this ranting style is a backbone to the structure of the poetry. The mere fact that the ideas are thrown, almost piled onto the page, emphasise this tone, and the fact that these images are based on emotion and not strictly there, as in Heaney's 'Digging', the poem is obsessive and hysteric.

The aim of both poems, apart from addressing some form of self-identity, could be considered as attempting to express emotion and feeling for their respective fathers. The emotions that reveal themselves from the poems are very different. In 'Daddy', what lies underneath the verbal abuse towards her father may not be pure anger, but more so an undeniable fear. 'I have always been scared of you', she remarks and yet love also resurfaces amongst all the hate, creating a confusion of sentiment, since in the lines, 'I used to pray to recover you, Ach, du'.

This is an aching sense of loss, a longing to bring his father back into the world, despite her apparent hatred; 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.' Perhaps for Plath, love and hate aren't opposites at all. A lack of communication surfaces in both poems, and with 'Daddy', the speaker 'could never talk to you', the black telephone's off at the root, The voices just can't worm through'. She, under all the fear; '-I could hardly speak', feels she cannot talk to her father. This may mirror in some way the obvious distancing between father and son in 'Digging', although different emotions play a part here.

For Heaney, 'Digging' is more about a more unspoken, intangible relationship between father and son, where the speaker has a strange

admiration for his hard-working father, as he holds his 'squat pen', in guilt of not having a 'spade to follow me like them.' The speaker feels some sort of guilt of not carrying on his father's and grandfather's traditions of work in the field, stemming from a clear respect for his father, and also a clear love. The intense visual description of his strength -the shaft...

Against the inside knee was levered firmly' adds a scrutinising of his father on the speaker's part; almost an obsession rooted from a desire to be like him. The images, metaphors and the general content altogether used by Plath and Heaney, deeply contrast. When I read 'Daddy', I experience a flood of raw and powerful images, perhaps different ways in which the speaker tries to come into contact with her own feelings for her father. In 'Digging', however, Heaney is content with implying his emotions with bitter-sweet, snapshot memories of childhood and a father he saw at a distance; 'under my window'.

He probably felt the same distance from him emotionally, while at the same time undeniably attracted to this hard figure, his 'straining rump' and 'the coarse boot' were never something to fear but more so to respect. Yet Heaney implies this with the visual imagery of his father in the garden and in the fields. Plath uses violent and exaggerated metaphorical comparison to paint a purely emotional picture of her father; Heaney's is more subtle, implying emotions and feelings of love and respect out of these snapshots of childhood, since the reader can make associations with these quiet beautiful moments himself.

These brief pictures; 'once I carried him milk in a bottle', 'loving the cool hardness in our hands', 'the cold smell of potato mould', altogether hint at emotions without blaring them out in rather uncontrolled metaphors that Plath uses. Indeed, when reviewed in detail, Plath's use of imagery, although blatant and in stylistic stark contrast to Heaney, is nonetheless extremely powerful. The 'black shoe' is a crude militaristic object of both kicking and stamping down authority. 'In which I have lived like a foot' suggests that while the shoe protects the foot and keeps it warm, it is ultimately dark, sinister and suffocating.

The idea of a stamping down of power over the speaker is maintained with further powerful imagery; 'the boot in the face', 'where you put your foot' and the 'grey toe'. Together, there is a terrible overcast shadow of her father constantly looming over her, which Plath depicts extraordinarily well. She continues with the visually explicit image of her father as a 'Ghastly statue with one grey toe', stretching out across America, an all-powerful being, blemished with the seal-like ugliness of a toe.

Here Plath now begins the whole concept of a simile between Hitler and her father, together with Germans and war as a whole; 'in the Polish town' immediately sets the scene with invasion. The guttural qualities of the German language are turned to obscenity by Plath; 'and the language obscene', and visual images of a train taking Jews to concentration camp dominates, as she compares herself to an oppressed Jew under the Hitler of her father, the 'Luftwaffe' and the power.

This image is surely heightened, in my mind, since her reference to Jews is outright stereotyping and almost cruel; ' my Taroc pack... and ' my gypsy ancestress... ' which adds drama and poignancy to this remarkably well-worked set of concepts. Visual scorn of a Hitler-like image follows; '... neat mustache, And your Aryan eye, bright blue', ' a brute like you'. Whence her imagery jumps yet again towards another, and final set of metaphors, where her father is compared to the devil, with ' A cleft in your chin instead of your foot', ' a love of the rack and the screw', and the vampire who ' drank my blood for a year'. This imagery turns almost sour in its outright violence and tortuous sadism, and also suggests dark undertones of another relationship.

The manipulation of childlike tones for separate purposes is clearly evident in both poems. ' Snug as a gun', in line 2 of ' Digging', immediately sets a scene and mood of a child, or childhood memories, with a bitter twist to it; ' snug as a bug' has been wrought with a strange and ominous ' gun'. Even the word, ' Digging' is in itself short, sharp and childish, almost like the word ' giggle' in terms of the vowel sounds. Certainly, ' loving the cool hardness in our hands', evokes childlike pleasures in the smallest things in life, and paints a feeling of lost joy, and of a real, tactile relish in something.

This use of varying senses is repeated using the ' cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap of soggy peat', and feels just as real, and primitively amusing with the onomatopoeic sounds of ' squelch' and ' slap'. ' By God the old man could handle a spade. ' This line begins to add respect as a key ingredient to Heaney's feelings for his father, and his awe at the power of the man; demoting himself in this way to a small child, and the childlike tones he uses. Indeed Heaney's tone changes subtly from academic and

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controlled to joyous and childish, and there never seems to be this wild passion running through the poem, as in Plath's 'Daddy'.

For in 'Daddy', the idea of the creation of a childlike tone in places also adds dominance to the father's position, but in an oppressive and frightful way; Plath wants to heighten the apparent brutality of this man with the antithesis of her as a helpless child; 'You do not do, you do not do', mentioned earlier is childlike; at the same time its tone is deeply threatening. It is as if she has been scolded thus, to the extent where she will chant this in her head under the oppression of her father; fear is also implied quiet vividly.

Sound qualities, and the clever manipulation of language and its parallels, evidently key in 'Daddy' more than 'Digging', are fantastically well controlled in both poems. Indeed, in Plath's 'Daddy', there are almost essential is creating this tone of oppression and ultimately fear. In 'Digging', the whole concept that Heaney admires the efficiency and 'no-nonsense', hard-working attitude of his father is reflected mostly by short, sharp words with one or two syllables each; like, 'squat pen', 'coarse boot', 'lug', 'shaft', 'knee', to indicate a far from fancy, working beat.

The rhythm of 'Digging' also coheres to this concept; note the beautiful alliteration and sharp, 'cutting' quality of; 'the curt cuts of an edge,' and 'buried the bright edge deep'. A monosyllabic and disyllabic drill of words is a key structure in 'Digging'. This is contrasted with a much more beautiful, liquid feel to the pensive reflection at the end; 'Though living roots awaken in my head.' The stanzas also reflect upon this concept; the short, tight



stanzas only have a few lines each, which climax in the centre of the poem, and reduce again at the end.

The onomatopoeic qualities such as 'slap', 'sloppily', and 'squelch' enforce a child's joyous interpretation of these wet, 'earthy' noises. In 'Daddy', however, sound qualities are manipulated for harsher tones, to add a vivid realism and expressive horror to the words themselves. The obvious concept here is that the guttural sounds of the German language are paralleled with Hitler, oppression, and an crude ugliness to the sound.

Plath doesn't fail to enforce this with many harsh gutturals and plosives of her own; . The onomatopoeia of Achoo forms a basis for sounds in 'Daddy', for the words 'Jew', 'Achoo', 'you', 'do', emphasising oppression, fear, death ('do') and you, reoccur throughout the poem, also rhyming with 'blue', 'screw', 'who', 'two', and ultimately, 'through'. Real german is used by Plath to further this, and is used very cleverly to manifest an aura of hate, sadness and fear; 'Ach, du', 'Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich'.

In this line, Plath imitates her tongue unable to speak, or communicate with her father, being 'caught on a barb wire snare', a brilliant image recalling thoughts of concentration camps, with a guttural, harsh, Germanic twist. 'Chuffing' is also onomatopoeic, imitating the sound of a train of Jews to Dachau or Auschwitz. Even the word 'Jew' sounds like 'you', and this is a key word in 'Daddy', objectifying her father is an almost wailing sad, single syllable. The clever spelling of 'mustache' indicates that she 'must ache' in her mourning of her father, just as 'Nausea' surely implies a nausea she feels.

The gentle assonance of ' bean green over blue' uses soft plosives to contrast gutturals in reference to her father, although it also works as a visual image of nausea. Plath also contrasts short syllables in a sentence with long ones such as the shortness of ' you do not do' and the contrast- ' like a frisco seal. Note the sibilants used to superb effect. The repetition of words, like ' brute' and ' brute', ' back' back' back to you', and so on, reflect an obsessive hysteria, and almost mimics the sound of gun fire, since ' back' and ' Polak' sound like the ' ack' of a gun.

It is clear that Plath stretches the language to its full potential in delivering this painful blow to the readers heart down to the core of the poem, and mood it evokes when read, something Heaney does but to a shallower extent, I feel. To conclude, identity is something that all of us have to face, some time or another. It defines who we are and who came before us. In Heaney's ' Digging' one cannot miss the love behind the apparent distancing between father and son, and certainly the respect of a father of little words and much work.

A gracefully nostalgic sense of real work by real men in the field is implied, as the speaker expresses some sort of guilt that he, a writer, cannot ' follow men like them', but only ' dig' with his pen instead; a moral compulsion to live out the greatness of a line of ancestors in the only way he can. Heaney delivers this sense of identity and bonding sensitively; he depicts visual imagery of his father and grandfather, and inserts small flashback scenes of childhood memories, together with an unforgettable childlike tone with a latter more pensive one in reflection.

Plath deals with different emotions, and for her, the poem is more of a struggle in her mind to face her and her father's identity and their relationship, whereas for me, Heaney is merely facing his individuality and his father in a controlled manner. Plath's persona battles with a paradox of feeling in a deluge of emotion, that I personally think is very deliberate on Plath's part; for indeed the way this confusion of love and hate constantly intertwines in 'Daddy', causes a vivid sense of spontaneity in the passion and anger the poetry. The images Plath arrives at are shockingly blatant, and explicitly powerful.

In one way, I prefer Heaney's style of implying his emotions through small, real images, instead of the tangible desperation of Plath's words. Yet the way in which Plath uses sound qualities to muster a bitter cry of anger that, when read, sounds so real and up-front, never fails to burn holes of passionate fury in any reader. Indeed, the final stanzas of 'Daddy' indicate that, in the context of the poem, the scene's symbolism becomes ambiguous because mixed in with descriptions of the poet's father are clear references to her husband, who left her for another woman as "Daddy" was being written. Every woman adores a fascist' -is this a husband or father relationship? For even though Plath herself once commented that 'Daddy' was 'about a girl with an Electra complex', could this 'girl' be her? It is possible that Plath wrote 'Daddy' to reconcile herself with her own emotions at the time, in light of her turbulent and short marriage with Ted Hughes, ending in suicide; which adds further poignancy to the work.