

Heaney and plath: attachment and detachment to their fathers



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Seamus Heaney and Sylvia Plath are two contemporary poets from very different family backgrounds. Heaney grew up rooted in rural Ireland with a close-knit large family, and Plath grew up in a dislocated family with her mother and brother. Her father died shortly after her 8th birthday. These poets' different upbringings could be the reason that they each portray their fathers in very dissimilar ways in their work. Heaney's poems reflect his of pride and admiration for his father's ability as a farmer, whereas Plath's poems display raw hatred towards her father. In fact, Plath even goes so far as to use the Holocaust as an extended metaphor, portraying her father as an oppressive Nazi. However, despite the immediately obvious differences between the two poets' depictions of their fathers, there are subliminal feelings underneath the surface. Despite Heaney's avid admiration for his father and his skill as a farmer, Heaney's own lack of skill as a farmer caused him to detach himself from his farming roots and establish himself as a poet. Meanwhile, Plath's relationship with her dead father is filled with both love and hate. She may hate her father because his absence from her life caused her to become an emotionally oppressed adult, but she also shows feelings of love and longing for the father she never knew. Out of Plath's desperation to be with her father, her strong feelings of attachment emerge. In both 'Follower' and 'Digging', Heaney displays endearing admiration for his father and his adeptness as a farmer, and even goes as far to attribute his father's skill to that of a god. In 'Follower', he watches his father work the horse plough, "his shoulders globed like a full sail strung". The use of the adjective 'globed' invokes the image of Atlas, the almighty Titan who carried the heavens upon his back. Therefore, by comparing his father to Atlas, Heaney is indirectly stating that he views his father as a god-like being. The way his

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father controls the horses with 'his clicking tongue' also suggests god-like attributes. Heaney uses onomatopoeia when describing his father's 'clicking tongue', to help the audience visualise his divine father at work. Heaney's zealous idolatry of his father strongly suggests feelings of attachment, but conversely this metaphor also establishes a separation between Heaney and his father, like the Greek gods that live atop Mount Olympus, looking down upon the mortals. Heaney's conception of idolatry and depicting a father as a distant deity is mirrored in Plath's poem 'Little Fugue'. In the first line of the 8th stanza, Plath declares that 'the yew [is] my Christ', and assuming that the yew tree is a symbol representing her father, it can thus be concluded that she is stating that her father is her personal god. 'Little Fugue' is an exploration of a girl's feelings about her dead father, and the attachment towards him that has arisen from his untimely death during her childhood. This metaphor emphasizes Plath's strong attachment to her father. She worships him, she prays for him, she sacrifices and suffers in his very name and all of this behavior is out of choice. In 'Daddy', she makes more religious references, declaring that she 'used to pray to recover [her father] because '[he] died before [she] had time'. The verb 'pray' signifies Plath's feelings towards her father. Plath praying for her absent father is not an idea that has been unheard of, as psychologists have noted that many children tend to idolise absent parents. Furthermore, the use of the verb 'pray' also implies Plath's desperation to be with her father, as Plath remained ambivalent about religion for her whole life. With this in mind, her use of the pronoun 'Christ' also enforces the notion of Plath's father being her own personal god who she could never meet face to face, but could only pray to and believe in. Plath is attached to her father in a similar way that people are

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attached to their own gods. While gods can be a positive force in a person's life, they can equally be repressive and domineering because to worship a god means being submissive to that god's will. The ubiquitous yew tree in 'Little Fugue' symbolizes Plath's father, and she presents the tree as domineering figure, trapping Plath in its overbearing shadow. She reveals this in stanzas 6 and 7, 'Such a dark funnel, my father! I see your voice black and leafy, as in my childhood'. Her father is the ominous yew tree, and the adjective 'black' enforces the motif of darkness and death in the poem. The choice of the noun 'funnel' also implies a sense of claustrophobia, because it creates an image of someone being trapped in a dark, narrow space. Plath remains attached to her father, because he is the subject of her idolatry, but simultaneously she strives to detach herself from his influence because of his oppressive nature. Similarly, this image of a child being overshadowed by his or her father is also evident in Heaney's 'Follower', when he writes of constantly having to 'follow in [his father's] broad shadow around the farm.' The adjective 'broad' highlights the idea of fathers being like gods, they appear mighty and imposing. Heaney feels attached to his father, because he wants to emulate him and 'grow up and plough' just like him, but instead but all he ever did was 'follow in his broad shadow around the farm'. Sadly, he accepts that he will never be like his father, instead he feels like a 'nuisance, tripping, falling, yapping always'. The action of 'yapping' is a lexical choice that suggests how feeble and small Heaney must have felt because that verb is often attributed to small, shrill dogs. This is in sharp contrast to the word 'broad', that Heaney uses to describe his father's shadow. However, further on in the poem, the role is reversed and Heaney's father becomes the one 'who keeps stumbling behind [him] and

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will not go away.' Heaney's father has now become a nuisance to the poet, and now he wants to detach himself from his father. However, Heaney cannot escape his father's influence and continues to shadow him even as a grown man. Heaney's feelings of attachment have faded with age, as such feelings tend to when children grow up and begin to forge their own identities. In Heaney's mind, he is not the great farmer his father is, so he instead chooses his own individual path and becomes a poet, no longer following his father's shadow around the farm. The adjective 'stumbling', which Heaney used previously to describe his own gawky mannerisms, he now uses to describe his ailing father's frail movements. Perhaps Heaney remains attached to his father because he must care for his the man out of familial obligation, in spite of his wish to become detached from him. Plath also plays on this idea of concomitant feelings of attachment and detachment in 'Little Fugue'. The poem is an exploration of a girl's feelings about her dead father, and how his presence in her life made her weak, but conflictingly his death and absence have also emotionally incapacitated her. Plath writes that she 'sees [her father's] voice,' as opposed to hearing it. Possibly this overlapping of her senses can be attributed to a kind of temporary synaesthesia, emphasizing her deranged state of mind. This idea of muddled senses is also present in Plath's reference to Beethoven, the German composer famously known for being deaf. Plath also describes herself as being 'lame in the memory', likely a result of her father's death. This enforces the fact that she remains attached to her father, and that his death has left her emotions lame and her senses confused. She describes her father's voice as 'black and leafy.. a yew hedge of orders', mixing the images of the symbolic yew tree and the appearance of her father's voice as

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'black and leafy'. The adjective 'black' gives her father a dark and ominous persona, and it compliments the symbolism of the yew tree, which is meant to represent death. Additionally, Plath metaphorically describes her father as a butcher 'lopping the sausages' in a Californian delicatessen. The verb 'lopping' is commonly used when describing the action of removing the limbs from a tree. Thus, since the yew tree stands is a symbol representing Plath's father, she implies that his actions were self-destructive, which eventually led to his death, and ultimately, Plath's lame state. Even after his death, Plath continues to be haunted by a father whose barbarous ways continue to 'colour [her] sleep' well into her adulthood, leading her to remain attached to him in spite of her wish to be detached from his tyrannous and destructive influence. Heaney undergoes the same whirlwind of emotions, the mixed feelings of attachment and detachment, as he demonstrates in 'Digging'. Heaney describes the wish of a son or daughter to become independent from his or her father, but obligation makes it difficult to break the familial attachment. Interestingly, the word 'fugue' (as in the title 'Little Fugue') has a dual definition connects to Plath's conception of mixed senses. In musical terms, a fugue is a contrapuntal musical composition, which runs counter to Plath's personal brand of synaesthesia. In psychiatric terms, a fugue is a state of temporary amnesia in which a person forgets their entire identity for a certain period of time. Thus, Plath's account of her own variety of synaesthesia, and the numbing of her senses is an elaboration on the title of her poem, 'Little Fugue'. Her father's presence in her life was so damaging to her state of mind that she lost all sense of her identity, and this absence crippled her psyche even further. Heaney explores the idea of identity in 'Digging', where he constantly compares his lack of grace as a farmer to his <https://assignbuster.com/heaney-and-plath-attachment-and-detachment-to-their-fathers/>

father's prowess and skill, and through these observations he finally concludes that he has 'no spade to follow men like them', and instead he finds himself in poetry. By separating himself from his family, and cutting off his 'living roots' (as he writes in 'Digging'), he is forging his own identity, which is the only way he will ever be able to detach himself from his father. Heaney also breaks his ties to his father by stating that he will 'dig' with his pen instead of digging with a spade like a farmer. In the 7th stanza of 'Digging', Heaney metaphorically cuts himself off from his traditional 'roots', like Plath does when she assertively repeats that she 'does not do'. Heaney writes about the 'cold smell of potato mold'. The potato is a staple food of the Irish people, and the adverb 'cold' and the mold of the potato suggests that it is rotting and dying. Therefore, Heaney's attempt to break away from his farming roots has left their crops rotting. The sibilance and onomatopoeia of 'squelch and slap of soggy peat' enforces the imagery of decay and rot. Heaney was known for using onomatopoeia in his poems to recreate the sounds and atmosphere of farming. There is also alliteration packed into this stanza, 'the curt cuts of an edge through living roots awaken in my head'. This particular line contains a double meaning, and the metaphorical meaning of this sentence is significant. The deeper he digs into the ground, the more he is cutting off his roots (roots also has a double meaning in this case, either literal roots in the ground or family 'roots') and soon realizes that he is not destined to become a farmer. The alliteration of 'curt cuts' also strengthens the image of the sharp spade cutting off the 'living roots' in Heaney's head. By cutting off these roots, he is killing the living thing these roots are attached to, thus linking back to the potato mold and the 'squelch and the slap of the soggy peat'. The metaphorical action of killing and

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cutting is evident in 'Little Fugue', where Plath writes about her father working in a Californian delicatessen, lopping sausages in her nightmares. She sees herself as one of the lopped sausages, and her father is the butcher. He is the one cutting off her life source, much like Heaney cuts his own 'living roots'. The action of Plath's father lopping, not only the sausages but at his own branches, (bearing in mind that the yew tree symbolises Plath's father) and his destructive nature leads to his own demise and ultimately his own daughter's deterioration and eventual death as well. Through the action of lopping, Plath is quite literally being detached from her father, much like Heaney is detaching himself from his father, by using the 'curt cuts of an edge through living roots in [his] head'. Heaney and Plath find common ground in writing of the persistent presence of their fathers in their childhood and adulthood. Throughout most of 'Follower', Heaney devotedly follows his father around the farm in the hopes that he will become a strong farmer, but fails to live up to his father's example. Eventually Heaney grows up, and it is now his father that is following his son and will not go away. In his childhood, Heaney felt attached to his father as young boys do, but has outgrown him and detached himself from him as a man, yet still he cannot shake off his shadow. Plath suffers from a similar dilemma. Although Plath used her poetry as a way to shed the pain and suffering her father caused in her life, in the coda of 'Daddy' she avows she is 'through' with him. The sense from the poem is that Sylvia Plath's love-hate relationship with her father will always ensure she is attached to him, and the pain of his death will haunt her for the rest of her life.