

Critical analysis of daddy by sylvia plath essay sample

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The first twelve stanzas of the poem reveal the extent of the speaker's possession by what, in psychoanalytic terms, is the imago of the father—a childhood version of the father which persists into adulthood. This imago is an amalgamation of real experience and archetypal memories wherein the speaker's own psychic oppression is represented in the more general symbol of the Nazi oppression of the Jews. For example, the man at the blackboard in the picture of the actual father is transformed symbolically into the "man in black with a Meinkampf look." The connecting link, of course, between each of these associations is the word "black," which also relates to the shoe in which the speaker has lived and the swastika "So black no sky could squeak through." Thus the specific and personal recollections ignite powerful associations with culturally significant symbols. The fact that the girl is herself "a bit of a Jew" and a bit of a German intensifies her emotional paralysis before the imago of an Aryan father with whom she is both connected and at enmity.

Commenting on the persona in a BBC interview, Plath herself suggests that the two strains of Nazi and Jew unite in the daughter "and paralyze each other" so the girl is doubly incapacitated to deal with her sense of her father, both by virtue of her mixed ethnicity and her childish perspective. As the persona recalls the father of her early years, she emphasizes and blends the two perspectives of impotence: that of the child before its father and of the Jew before the Nazi. The child's intimidation is clear, for example, in "I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my Jaw"; but the sense of the childhood terror melds into a suggestion of the Jewish persecution and terror with the next line: "It stuck in a barb wire snare."

What Plath accomplishes by the more or less chronological sequencing of these recollections of childhood, and on through the twenty year old's attempted suicide to the point at thirty when the woman tries to extricate herself from her image of daddy, is a dramatization of the process of psychic purgation in the speaker. The persona's systematic recollection of all the mental projections of her father amounts to an attempt at dispossession through direct confrontation with a demon produced in her imagination. Both psychoanalysis and the religious rite of exorcism have regarded this process of confrontation with the "trauma" or the "demon" as potentially curative; and from whichever perspective Plath viewed the process, she has her persona confront—in a way almost relive—her childhood terror of a father whose actual existence is as indistinct as the towns with which the girl tries to associate him. Plath also accentuates linguistically the speaker's reliving of her childhood.

Using the heavy cadences of nursery rhyme and baby words such as "Chuffing," "Achoo," and "gobbledygoo," she employs a technical device similar to Joyce's in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the child's simple perspective is reflected through language. Like Joyce, Plath wants to recreate with immediacy the child's view. But whereas Joyce evolves his Stephen Dedalus from the "baby tuckoo" and the "moocow" stage into maturity, she has her speaker psychically regress to her childhood fantasies, where every German is potentially her father and the German language seems to be an engine "chuffing" her off to Dachau. Because the persona's past is pathologically connected to her present, this regression requires

minimal distance for the adult woman who has been unable to relinquish the childish perspective.

As the language of the poem begins to exclude baby talk and to develop more exclusively the vocabulary of venom, it signals a change in the persona's method of dealing with this image of the father. She moves from confrontation with her childhood projections to an abjuration of the total psychic picture of the father in an attempt at exorcism. Sounding more like Clytemnestra than a little girl playing Electra, she renounces the deity turned demon with a vengeance in the declaration, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." The virulence of this and the statements immediately preceding it indicates a ritualistic attempt to transform the little girl's love into the adult's hatred and thereby kill the image which has preyed upon her.

The turning point in the poem and in the speaker's efforts to purge herself of the psychological significance of the father image occurs in the following stanza:

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you.

The statement, "I made a model of you," suggests several levels of meaning. On the most obvious level, the speaker implies that she made of her father a prototype of all men; and this is borne out in the merging of the

father with the man to whom she says “ I do, I do.” Her image of the “ man in black with a Meinkampf look” is superimposed upon the husband so that instead of having one unreality to destroy, she has two—the prototypic father and the husband who is fashioned in his likeness. The poem “ Stings” establishes a similar relationship between the dead-imaginary father and the living but spectral husband:

A third person is watching .

He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or me.

Now he is gone

in eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.

A more complicated implication of the speaker’s action in making a model of the father, but one which is also consonant with the allusions to folklore in the later references to vampirism, concerns the persona’s use of magic to rid herself of the mental impressions associated with her father. The making of a model, image, or effigy suggests symbolically a reaction not so much to the real father but to the imago, or projection of his image in the mind of the persona. She employs what Fraser in *The Golden Bough* refers to as “ sympathetic magic”—a generic term for various forms of magic which are based on the premise that a correspondence exists between animate and inanimate objects. One form, homeopathic magic, is predicated on the belief that any representation may affect what it depicts. For example, a picture of a person, a voodoo doll, or any other sort of portrayal can, when acted upon, influence its prototype. In “ Daddy,” it is the model of the father that the

persona destroys; and the solution suggested in the making of the model seems to occur as a consequence of its association with the speaker's own reconstruction after her attempted suicide, when she is "stuck . . . together with glue." Her remodeling, described in a way that recalls the assembling of a collage, seems to be the associative stimulus for the idea of constructing the model through which to effect her dispossession. It is this model, a fabricated representation of a distorted vision of the father—a patchwork mental impression of him—that she seeks to destroy.

The tension between rebirth and annihilation pervades the Ariel poems and seems to be a consequence of unreconciled relationships. Plath recognizes her Nazis and vampires to be mental images of her own creation, but she persists in relating to them as if they were real. Here, as in the other poems, when she lets go of the image, there is nothing left and she is finished, "through."

Paradoxically, the problem with the exorcism in "Daddy" is not that it fails to work, but that it does work.

She roots out the old fixations, but without them she is psychically empty, effaced—as many of the late poems suggest.