

Unresolved Grief and the Electra Complex in Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy'

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Abstract: This paper attempts to explore and understand the unconscious of Sylvia Plath by adopting Freud's psychoanalytical literary criticism to analyse the poem *Daddy* (1965). Psychoanalytical literary criticism holds literature as a reflection of the unconscious or repressed emotions and desires of the writer. By analysing Plath's writing this paper attempts to understand the relationship between her literature and her psyche. The paper also analyses Ted Hughes's *The Table and The Shot* (1998) to further build on the understanding of Plath's relationship with her father, Otto Plath. The analysis will essentially contribute to building a greater understanding of her work as a manifestation of her inner psyche or the unconscious. The paper's discourse reinforces the importance of psychoanalytic theory in literary interpretation and in understanding the intricacies of the human intellect.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism, Sylvia Plath, Daddy, Unconscious Emotions, Otto Plath

1. Introduction

Psychoanalytical literary criticism, rooted in Sigmund Freud's theory, aims to explore the unconscious or repressed thoughts, desires, and emotions of the author by analysing their work. "Freud emphasized that language concealed, revealed, or modified hidden desires, anxieties, and fears. His point was that desire does not express itself easily because culture does not allow or facilitate it, and we need to pay attention to language and other forms of symbolic expression—gestures, sounds, facial expression, writing—to discover it" (Nayar 64). Thus, psychoanalytic criticism attempts to explore and understand the unconscious of the author by dissecting the text considering the author's background. The theory pays special attention to the contribution of one's sexuality in the formation of the unconscious just as Nayar explains, "psychoanalytic criticism, therefore, explores the language of the unconscious...with particular attention to the repression of sexuality and its desires." (64).

Sylvia Plath, who is the pioneer of Confessional Poetry which appeared in America in the latter half of the 20th century (late 1950s and early 1960s), employs this art of writing in her poetry. This style of writing adopts the use of first-person pronouns and addresses the themes of death, depression, trauma, relationships, etc. Being autobiographical, the poems expand on the real-life events, psyche, and other experiences of the poet.

Daddy along with forty-three other poems were published in the collection *Ariel*, 1965. The poem is semi-autobiographical, revealing Plath's plight as she struggles to free herself from her dead father. Coupled with psychoanalytic literary criticism, it becomes a medium for the exploration of her unconscious thoughts, emotions, and desires and the struggle to cope with her father's death. The poem dives into the obsessive fixation of the poetess over her dead father, the one that she carries in her marriage too with Ted Hughes. The poem works as a form of catharsis for her to detach herself from the fixation she has over her dead father. The poem can also be understood as her attempt to

acknowledge her repressed desires, thoughts, and emotions along with the unresolved Electra complex. Thus, it presents itself as a manifestation of her unconscious or repressed emotions and desires.

Electra Complex and Plath

Sigmund Freud, in psychoanalytic theory, expands on the Oedipus complex, which discusses the desire that develops in the male child for the mother during the Phallic stage of psychosexual stages of development. This desire also leads to the child feeling jealousy and envy towards the father. However, this feeling is successfully resolved with the child recognising the father as the authoritative figure and begins to identify with him, turning the rival into a role model.

Carl Jung, in 1913, expanding on Freud's theory, proposed a female version of the Oedipus complex, the Electra complex. Drawing its roots from Freud's theory, Jung's version of the complex focused on the desires of a female child for the father accompanied by hostile feelings towards the mother. Freud believed that if the Electra complex remains unresolved, it can lead to unhealthy and negative fixations or neurosis. He also believed that the females with the Electra complex would continue to pursue father figures or approval from father figures in future relationships, especially romantic ones.

Freud considered libido, the sex drive, to be central to the human psyche and stated that it is these repressed sexual desires that form the unconscious and can also transpire in the form of the Oedipus or the Electra complex. He also professed that these desires manifest themselves in art and dreams. A similar can be considered in the case of Plath, whose unconscious or repressed desires and emotions seem to manifest themselves in her writings. Her poems, such as *Daddy* (1965), *Lady Lazarus* (1965), and *Electra on Azalea Path* (1960), carry autobiographical details, giving the readers an opportunity to explore and understand the life and psyche of Plath.

Born in 1932, Plath grew up in Wellesley, Massachusetts. She was eight years old when her father, Otto Plath, passed

away on 5 November 1940. The tragic death of her father left her with a lasting void, that was also reflected in her writings (Stambouli, 70). However, it was not only Plath's writing that echoed the writer's deep longing for her father. Her marital life also suffered under this complex infatuation that she had with her father. Ted Hughes also alludes to this infatuation that Plath holds for her father in his poems.

Plath from the Lens of Ted Hughes

It was at Cambridge University in England, that Plath met Ted Hughes, whom she later married in 1956. The pair influenced one another's work and often wrote poems dedicated to the other. But the romance was short-lived as the two separated six years after their marriage in 1962. It was in 1998, that Hughes had published the last of his poetry collections, *Birthday Letters*. Published thirty-five years after Plath's death, the collection was marked with many autobiographical elements and provided insights into the couple's relationship. In his poems, Hughes also references the relationship his wife shared with her late father. He provides the readers with the images of an obsessive woman driven by incestuous desires for her dead father. This ghost of Plath's father haunted the marital life of the couple, as Hughes describes in his poems.

In the poem, *The Shot* (*Birthday Letters*, 1998), Hughes argues that the death of Otto was significant to the trajectory of Plath's life. He expands on how it was the death of Otto that triggered his wife and set her down on a fixed path. This fixed path was plagued with trauma, as Plath throughout her lifetime struggled to cope with her father's death. Hughes further dives into the influence and control that Otto had over Plath's romantic relations even in death. He comments on how no man was capable of being equal to Otto or even understanding the ardent feelings the daughter had for her dead father.

Another one of the poems that provides the readers with a deeper understanding of this turmoil is *The Table* (*Birthday Letters*, 1998). The poem presents the table as a metaphorical door, leading to Otto's grave.

I revealed a perfect landing pad
For your inspiration. I did not
Know I had made and fitted a door

Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave. (Hughes, *The Table* lines 10-13).

Hughes in the poem admits that he had the said table made for his wife, unknowing to the fact that she would use it as a gateway to her father's grave by reviving him in her poems. In the lines, "Into our house. While I slept he snuggled / Shivering between us. Turning to touch me" (Hughes, *The Table* 28-29).

Hughes makes it clear that he had to share his marriage bed with his dead father-in-law. Though dead, Otto still finds a place in his daughter's marital life through his manifestation in his daughter's writing. The image of the dead father lying between the married couple also symbolises how he has become the bone of contention between the couple. The death of her father left the confessional poetess with a void

that remains unfulfilled even after her marriage, as Hughes just remains as a pale shadow of Otto.

Thus, Hughes's collection of poems, *Birthday Letter* (1998), provides deep insights into the dynamic of the relationship between the couple and the dead father. His poem, *The Shot* (*Birthday Letters* 1998), presents to its readers an abandoned image of Plath, who is starved of the love of her deceased father and therefore searches for that fatherly love in every man. In *The Table* (*Birthday Letters* 1998), the narrative shifts, as now the father is no longer haunting his daughter's mind alone. Otto has now found a place for himself in his daughter's marital bed, where he lays "shivering" between the couple, not allowing them to be close and intimate.

His poems very well confirm Plath's alliance with Freud's deduction of an unresolved Electra complex. Otto is only able to be a part of the marriage between Plath and Hughes through his manifestation in his daughter's poems. It is the art and literature of Plath that evokes the ghost of her dead father, who then interferes in her marital life. Thus, from the perspective of psychoanalytical literary criticism, it is the unconscious desire of the daughter to be reunited with her dead father that refrains her from being intimate with her husband.

Applying Psychoanalytic Criticism to *Daddy*

It is not just Ted Hughes's poems that hint at a case of unsolved Electra complex in relation to Plath and her father. The confessional poetess when introducing the poem *Daddy* (1965) on BBC radio in 1962 mentioned that a girl with Electra complex orates the poem. Though the persona created by Plath cannot be attributed to the poetess herself, the poem does draw its inspiration from her life. It is not only a semi-autobiographical poem, but also a cathartic confession. Plath lays herself bare as she comes to terms with the infatuation she felt for her father and seeks a release from these emotions by the end of the poem.

The poem can be viewed as her acceptance of the unconscious, as these repressed emotions or desires become the creative driving force behind her words. The poem begins with the poet's confession of how harsh and mulish her father was.

Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (Plath 2-5).

Plath confesses that she has lived this torturous life under her father for thirty years. But Plath was just eight years old when her father passed away and she was thirty years old when she took her own life in 1963. The torture that she has been put through for thirty years is physically impossible, as her father was long dead. But then why did Plath have to mention thirty years when she could have easily written eight years? One might try to reason that her early years under her father must have left her traumatised, causing her to write thirty years instead of just eight.

However, the relationship between the father and daughter contrary to the beliefs is said to be a loving one. So the torture that the poetess talks about is rather the psychological

one that she has to suffer through on being devoid of her father's love after his death. The sudden loss and abandonment leave her confused and isolated. It is this feeling of loneliness that she experiences due to the loss of her father's love that creates a sense of bitterness in her mind towards her father.

Plath's words make it appear as if her father is still present with her in physicality and thus the torture continues. The torture continues even after her father's death due to her unconscious desire to be united with her father. This can be testified through Ted Hughes's poem *The Table* (1998), in which he mentions how Otto Plath shares the bed with the husband and wife and sleeps in between the pair. For thirty years, she bears the torture by manifesting the ghost of her father again and again in her writing.

Furthermore, in the line "Any more, black shoe" (Plath 2), the words "black shoe" (2) have been associated to be a representation of her father and his dominance. Black as a colour also stands to signify grief, loss, and mourning. By saying that she has lived in a "black shoe" (2) for thirty years, Plath may be implying that she has lived a life full of grief and pain. Her grief has enclosed her in a tight spot like a foot in a shoe.

The second stanza of the poem begins with the line, "Daddy, I have had to kill you." (Plath 6). This line could be understood in two senses: first in which the daughter pleads to erase the sour memories of her dead father, she is struggling to liberate herself from the lasting influence of her dead father. The other would be the literal sense, where Plath through her words had tried to convey her wish to kill her father (Stambouli 71). However, in the third stanza, Plath contradicts herself by saying, "I used to pray to recover you." (Plath 14).

Had she wanted to kill her father, why would she pray to recover him or bring him back to life? Plath's relationship with her father is beyond complicated, while in one line she wants to kill him, in the next line she is praying to recover him. While she is writing about wanting to kill her father throughout the poem, Plath keeps his spirit alive and immortalises him by manifesting him in her craft. In the following stanzas, she calls her father a brute and compares him to a Nazi. She presents her father to be a fascist and then in stanza 10 she continues, "Every woman adores a Fascist," (Plath 48).

Plath here makes an open confession of loving and adoring a fascist, that is, her father. Though she only remembers her father as a cruel brute, the poetess still holds warm feelings in her heart for her fascist father. By generalising that women can easily fall in love with a fascist, the poetess has attempted to reason both her love for her dead father and her marriage with Ted Hughes, who was also a fascist. Furthermore, in the twelfth stanza, she writes, "At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do." (Plath 58-60).

The following lines express the urgency of being with her father, if she cannot "recover" her father, she would rather kill herself to be with him even in bones. Plath's infatuation

for her father is unfathomable. One minute she wants to kill him, then she wants to recover him, and now she wants to join him in his grave. But when all her attempts to reconvene with her father fail, the poetess marries a model of him.

"I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look" (Plath 64-65). Once the realisation is attained that she cannot reconcile with her father, she makes a "model" (64) of him and marries the said model. Plath continues to pursue a man who resembles her father in her marriage with Ted Hughes in 1956.

The usage of "black" in line 65 is a reference to the "black shoe" (2) mentioned in the first stanza, of the poem. The narration of the poem is initiated by declaring how she had "lived like a foot" in the "black shoe". This black coloured shoe works as a metaphor for Plath's father. By incorporating the word "black" with the "model" she has made of her father, the poetess has tried to hint at the similarities between the two men. By mentioning that the man has a Meinkampf look, she has again presented another similarity between the Hughes and her father, both of them are German. Thus, Hughes serves as a perfect replacement for her father for Plath, who with her unresolved Electra complex, attempts to seek a man similar to her father to appease her improper desires.

The marriage starts on a loving note, with the poetess satisfied with the model of her father, ultimately dissolving all kinds of connections with her father. But Hughes in his collection of poems *Birthday Letters* (1998) continuously references how his wife's fixation with her dead father remained a point of conflict between the couple. The romance does not last long as the marriage falls apart with Hughes's infidelity coming to light. The pair decides to separate in 1962 as Plath discovers about the affair between her husband and Assia Wevill, his friend.

"So daddy, I'm finally through. / The black telephone's off at the root, / The voices just can't worm through." (Plath 68-70). By repeating the word "black" for the third time, Plath has yet again alluded to her father. The "black telephone" (69) becomes a metaphor for the connection between the daughter and the dead father. The connection is now "off at the root" (69), that is, it is broken and now the dead father's voice cannot reach to his daughter. This disruption in communication symbolises Plath's awareness regarding the infiltration of her father's ghost in her life. She has been tormented enough and has finally gathered the courage to cut off all ties with her father's ghost. It should be considered that the poem was written one month after the poetess's separation from her husband. Thus, by cutting ties with the living model of her father, Hughes, she has also cut her connection with her dead father.

While writing *Daddy* in 1962, Plath describes her marriage through the following lines:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know. (Plath 71-74).

Hughes is described as a blood-sucking vampire, who drains the poetess for seven years of their marriage. In line 72, she addresses how the vampire, her husband, said “he was you” (72), the word “you” (72) is addressed to her father.

Additionally, in continuation to this stanza she writes, “Daddy, you can lie back now. / There’s a stake in your fat black heart” (Plath 75-76). She writes that there is a stake in her father’s heart, a method believed to be used to kill a vampire. By doing so, Plath hints at a connection between the vampire, her husband and her father once again. As she also says “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two——” (Plath 71). Considering the connection she draws between the vampire and her father, the line can be understood in the sense that Plath does not consider the two men to be different. She views her husband as not only a model of her father but also her father himself. That is why by staking the heart of one, she has killed both of them. This further strengthens the argument of her unresolved Electra complex.

Plath composed this poem on the anniversary of her father’s leg amputation surgery, on 12 October 1962. Otto Plath had an amputation surgery on 12 October 1940, he would then pass away soon after on 5 November 1940 from a cardiac embolism. By composing the poem on the amputation anniversary, the poetess has attempted to amputate her father from her life, bringing an end to the long thirty years of torture. The last line of the poem very well encapsulates her feelings: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” (Plath 80).

The poem ends on a cathartic note with the readers experiencing Plath’s purgation of emotions. The poetess amputates the lingering ghost of her father who had infested her unconscious. She emancipates herself from the negative fixations she had developed after her father’s death. By writing this poem, Plath confronts her unconscious desires of being with her father by manifesting them into a cathartic confession of liberation in *Daddy* (1965).

2. Conclusion

Freud’s psychoanalytical literary criticism considers literature to be a manifestation of the writer’s unconscious and repressed desires. In this context, Sylvia Plath’s *Daddy* (1965) proves to be an outcome of the American confessional poetess’s unconscious desire to be with her dead father, Otto Plath. Being deprived of her father’s love after his death, Plath’s love for her father turns bitter. She develops negative fixations over her father’s death due to her unresolved Electra complex and tries again and again to be reunited with him. However, after her multiple failed attempts, she settles for a model of her father, Ted Hughes. Her marriage with Hughes is full of complications as she is unable to let go of her dead father. She manifests the ghost of her father in her art, but this ghost of her dead father also intervenes in her marital life, as depicted in Hughes’s poems, *The Table* and *The Shot* (1998). In *Daddy* (1965), Plath manifests her father and her repressed desires and emotions to be with him once again and writes the poem in an attempt to bury the ghost of her father. Thus by writing this poem, she indulges in a cathartic experience and is liberated from the looming ghost of her father that had plagued her mind.

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