

SYLVIA PLATH: HER GROWTH BEYOND ELECTRA COMPLEX: A STUDY OF HER POEM "DADDY"

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath is a great poet from America in the 20th century. Although she is known as a talented woman poet, she is said to have been unfit to adjust herself in the society due to mismatch between her aspirations and societal expectations from her. The society expected her to settle down into a family by marrying a man, and giving birth to his children. On the other hand, she wanted to build her career in writing. She didn't want to give in to the pressures of the society. However, she couldn't go against the conventions of the society for long. The pressure from the society was too much upon her. She is said to have undergone the experience of close emotional attachment to her father who had died when she was just eight. Some of her works including the poem under study show a girl-child's strong emotional attachment towards her father. The present research work has made an attempt at exploring the theme of Electra Complex in her poem Daddy.

Key Words: *Electra Complex, Neo-Freudian psychology, ambivalent mind, substitute father.*

INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), usually labelled as a confessional poet (Abrams 46) among others, had an exceptional talent that earned her a full bright scholarship to study in Cambridge. Her father died when she was eight that haunted her throughout her life. He left her exposed to intense suffering. Her life was full of ups and downs. Her life seemed perfect only at the surface. "Sylvia's surface perfection was however underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father... when she was eight" (Sharma 2013, p. VII). She tried to kill herself as she felt the reality of the society too much upon her. Sharma writes (2013, p. VII) "During the summer following her junior year at Smith, having returned from a stay in New York city where she had been a student 'guest editor' (for a woman's magazine), Sylvia nearly succeeded in killing herself by swallowing sleeping pills". She underwent mental breakdown as she was unable to deal with the pressures of the society. She had the first attack of depression in 1953 due to overwork, attempted suicide, and was hospitalized for six months. She recovered after series of therapies and electroshocks. She married Ted Hughes, a British poet, in 1956. Her nervous breakdown and her husband's affair with another woman had a stress on the

marriage. She separated away from her husband in 1963. The same year she, in one of the coldest winters in centuries, now with two children, ill with flu and low on money (Sharma 2013, p. VIII), committed suicide at the age of 31 by gassing herself in the kitchen (Sharma 2013, p. VIII).

The *Bell Jar* (1963) is a famous novel which is an autobiographical work of literature. This novel shows the mind of the novelist, Sylvia Plath. However, she is acclaimed as a great poet of the century.

Her first book of poetry is *The Colossus* (1960) that she got published after she came back to England. *Ariel* was published posthumously in 1965. Her other books of poetry are *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1971), and *The Collected Poems* (1981), which won the Pulitzer Prize. The poem "Daddy", written in 1962 sometime before her death in 1963, was published in *Ariel* (1965).

Some critics opine that she is a feminist because of her misogynist husband and 1950s repressive America while others hold the view that she is a tragic heroine- a talented but doomed young woman unable to fit in the society due to her mental breakdown (poetry foundation). Whatever the case may be, the death of her loving father lingers on in her life throughout. Some of her poems, including the well-known "Daddy", are concerned about her troubled relationship with her authoritative father and her feelings of betrayal when he died (poetry foundation).

In neo-Freudian psychology, the electra-complex is a girl's psychological competition with her mother for possession of her father (wikipedia). There is an intense love of a girl child for her father at a certain stage of earlier life which a child represses as she grows younger. In case a girl child fails to overcome electra complex even after she has grown young, then she is supposed to suffer electra complex in her adult life.

A STUDY OF HER POEM "DADDY"

"Daddy", the most talked about poem, which appears in *Ariel* (1965), has been much analyzed by various critics from different angles. However, the writer will attempt to look at the poem from the perspective of her complex relationship with her father, Otto Plath, who died when she was just eight.

The poem has 16 stanzas of 5 lines each. It is about her dead father. The speaker says- she feels like she is a foot living in a black shoe for 30 years, too timid to breathe or sneeze. She needed to kill him, but he died before she had time. He is heavy like a bag full of God. She remembers how she prayed for his return from death. She couldn't talk to him. She thought every German was him and she believed herself a Jew being removed to a concentration camp. He is less like God. He died when she was 10, she tried to join him in death when she was 20. When she failed to kill herself, she was glued back together. She compares him to a vampire; she remembers how he drank her blood for a year. The villagers now celebrate his death. She concludes "Daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (Plath 1997, p. 752).

Plath herself talks about the poem in an interview to BBC:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. The father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other. She has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it (qtd in Osborne).

She knew her father only for eight years and she knew her husband also for eight years. In the beginning she wants to kill her father. She presents herself as a victim and she calls him a Nazi, a vampire, and a devil. But later, as Osborne observes, "She wants him to be resurrected in the form of her husband. In fact, she wants to be with her dead father". She wants to be united with her father.

Bit my pretty red heart in two
 I was ten when they buried you
 At twenty I tried to die
 And get back, back, back to you
 I thought even the bones would do (Plath 1997, p. 752).

Her love for her dead father, even after 10 years' time, is so strong that she wants to "lie" next to him. She addresses him as:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God
 Ghastly statue with one grey toe (Plath 1997, p. 750).

She sees her father as a god-figure. But the God-like father deprived her of love due to his early death which caused her hatred for all men (Philips 1977). It is therefore that she compares him with the Nazis, although she loves him so much. Sharif (2006) observes, "(The poem) clearly depicts her ambivalent mind. It reflects that she suffers from electra complex... (there is) an emphasis on the expression of the imagination as realized in dreams and presented... without conscious control." Obviously, the theme of electra complex is evident in the poem.

Later, she realizes that she can't join her father in the grave, she decides to marry a man like her father:

And then I knew what to do
 I made a model of you
 A man in black with a Mein-kampf look

 And a love of the rack and the screw
 And I said I do I do (Plath 1997, p. 752).

Her husband is her substitute father. She finds her father in her husband. She addresses her husband as her "vampire father" who haunted her ever since his death. They have the same emotional quality in her life suggesting that the electra complex has not been resolved.

She creates a substitute for her father, probably by finding a real man whom she imagines is like her father (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2016).

Now, once she finds a model father, she doesn't have further concern with her father. She needs her father no more. But still her memory of the father keeps on haunting her. However, the phone is cut off and she can't communicate with him. Finally, she wants to kill both the men to outgrow electra complex. She grows matured in death.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two
 The vampire who said he was you

Daddy, you can lie back now (Plath 1997, p. 752).

And in the last 2 lines in the final stanza she says:

They always knew it was you

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through (Plath 1997, p. 752).

The ending of the poem suggests release from both the men and ultimately from Electra complex. The word 'bastard' also suggests a sense of 'liberation' (Kannan 2011) away from Electra complex only at her death. Finally the Electra complex is resolved although at her death.

SOME DELIBERATIONS ON TEACHING POETRY

Poetry is basically to be reflected upon. It has meditative dimension. Explicating a poem requires "dissecting, examining, analyzing it" which is invariably followed by "reading it aloud several times" (Joshi 2069, p. 1). Poetry is primarily for pleasure. Marjorie Perloff claims that "the sheer jouissance or pleasure of the text and the importance of attentive line-by-line, word-by-word reading cannot be eliminated" (2004, p. 17). Practical criticism fosters the pleasure of reading, understanding and the ability to judge a poem. Practical criticism favors close reading. Students should be encouraged to see how words are arranged to make sounds complement content."

Classroom teaching of poetry should be predicated on two goals: primarily for pleasure in engagement with language, its meaning, its sounds, its phrasing and rhythms, and secondarily for reevaluating the pleasure in terms of a meaningful relationship to the world and to the selves who write and read it" (Pandey 2069, p. 1).

Teaching poetry should be based on aestheticism by identifying the major characteristics of poetry so that it gives a sense of " the pleasures of the fictive, the what might happen" (Perloff 2004, p. 18).

To sum up, teachers shouldn't solely depend on lecturing, though it has its value in teaching-learning activities. As Thapa puts it, "we will have to make strategic use of lecturing method and combine it with critical pedagogy of discussing and questioning" (2069, p. 8). Critical pedagogy involves doing, telling, showing, reflecting and researching. Students should be made to think, reflect, participate and come up with their ideas.

CONCLUSION

The poem clearly shows the speaker's growth, rather psychological growth, beyond Electra Complex. Every girl- child experiences a close psychological attachment to her father in course of her maturation process. However, she must outgrow the complex in order to grow more matured. A close reading of the poem vis-à-vis neo-Freudian psychology reveals the speaker's mental growth beyond the complex and she becomes stronger.

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