

How Does Plath's Poem Daddy Express About the Poet's Psychological Response to the Conditions of Living in Her Patriarchal Society?

Mingli Zhang^{1, a, *}

¹ Foreign Language School of Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China,

*Corresponding author. Email: mingli.zhang@st.btbu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Being a postmodernist poetess, Sylvia Plath devotes a big part of her poetry to representing the dilemmatic condition the modern women are confronted when facing the patriarchal values and the awareness of the voices of their own existence, identity as well as self-value. This paper embarks on probing Sylvia Plath's Confessional Poetic way in presenting postmodernist women's psychological experiences in articulating their own innermost sufferings, struggles, as well as their awareness for self-values and social status in the postmodernist world by exemplifying Sylvia Plath's well-designed and chosen imageries in her poems, *Daddy*.

Keywords: *Confessional Poetry, Patriarchal Society, Psychological Response, Imagery.*

1. INTRODUCTION

From the 1950s to the 1960s in American, Confessional poetry formed a trend and prevailed in the literary circle as it attempts to establish a new genre in exposing the poet's self in the complex academic work, breaking the tradition of non-personalized form built by Eliot. Readers could have an in-depth dialogue and communication with the writer through their writings to have a closer experience of the writer's feelings, thoughts, and emotions the writers mean to reveal, which could easily lead to reader's resonance on the matters the writers intend to elaborate on. Being a widely acclaimed poetess, representative of the Confessional group, Sylvia Plath writes from her talent as well as with her hard work, making people more and more interested in her confessional poetry, in which, Plath, by quoting numerous myths, fables, historical events, and intertextuality, empowers her poetry with richer and wealthier underlying meanings.

Rosenthal named Plath a confessional poet because she puts herself at the center of her poems in such a way as to make her psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of her civilization. [1] Her civilization could be the topics in her poems: attempt to catalog despair, violent emotion, obsession with death. Being of the significant concerns Plath cares much, women's real social condition and their feelings and emotions in a

post-patriarchal scenario have been explored and exposed in Plath's poetry. The focus of this paper is to exemplify Plath's *Daddy* in the context of her life and thus to explore How Plath expresses in the poem her psychological responses, and to a larger scale, the women collective's reactions to the whole male-dominated society.

Through a confessional way of exposing her psychological anger and struggles in a male-dominated society, Plath expresses her rage explicitly in her poems *Daddy*. It is often the case that while reading her confessional poetry, readers could easily have the impression that Sylvia is examining and exposing her mental and psychological feelings and reactions to the imaginary readers as "you". Frederick Feirstein analyzes, in his *A Psychoanalytic Study of Sylvia Plath*, exemplifying Plath's last poem *Ariel*, that Plath, tortured by the schizoid pathology from the symbiosis of her bipolarity and her resent to men, finally transformed herself into a tragic heroine and commit suicide, suggesting her ultimate psychological victory or her own choice over the mental and psychic burden from the patriarchal troubles and anxiety on her. [2] To some extent, it may be true that Plath's poem could be her exploration into her innermost world of the hurt, or the trauma mostly men leave one her, one is her late dead father and the other her beloved husband who later betrayed her.

This research believes that Plath's self-indulgent writing is not only a way to reveal her personal anger or hatred. More than that, she concerns the psychological responses of herself to the male-dominated world, and her, a woman in the postmodernist world, experiences and struggles in a male-centered world. Such is the poetess, Plath's psychological responses to the patriarchal world, and moreover, any woman's experiences, feelings, struggles, tortures, or frustrations in her time.

From the late 19th century to the 21st century, modern feminism has undergone four waves, with the first one calling for equal right for suffragettes and other equal rights under the social context of industrial society and liberal politics in the late 19th to the early 20th century, and the second wave in the postwar period from the 1960s to 1990s in response to the need of radical voices of black and homosexual's power and rights. From the mid-1990s onwards, the third wave intends to find its voices and rhetoric in writing and representing women's images, feelings, thoughts, and psychological emotions by overthrowing the ever established and long-dominated male-centered social culture, demonstrating and exhibiting women's consciousness and subconsciousness to the restrictions imposed upon them, articulating their own voices out and exposing to readers in their unique as well as feminine writing rhetoric. Helene Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, poses: I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put themselves into the text—as into the world and into history—by their own movement. [3] She proposes that women write about women themselves from their body, write their own world, and create their own history, thus giving their own voices out and letting the world hear their action, their movement, and behold their struggling and protests.

Plath devotes her own type of poetry to express women's inner thoughts, feelings, and emotions in the postmodernist patriarchal world. A representative of Confessional poetry, Plath elaborates on designing and creating a unique mystic style of her way to express women's reaction to the harsh physical environment they are surrounded and restricted into in the post-war period. Her uniqueness in women's writing particularly lies in her well-designed visual imageries, which, undoubtedly, have strongly foisted into readers the uttermost psychological feelings of women in this decades—taking the poem *Daddy* to illustrate. All through the entire verse, Plath seems to be communicating her tortures, frustrations, and mental troubles in being confronted with the men's shadow and dominance over women. In this poem, Plath elaborately

designs her imagery to afford readers her sensorial perceptions of the male-dominated world, as well as her very hatred and ultimate protest against the men-defined culture and history. She carefully designed imagery functions to their extreme to provide readers visual experiences and psychological pathways to be involved in the very painful and torturing sufferings under the patriarchal context. When savoring Sylvia Plath's confessional poetic imageries, readers are undoubtedly offered a channel to access women's psychological responses in modulating women's writing from women's own perspectives.

Confessional poetry engages in fabricating poetry 'of the personal', and it often focuses its concentration on taboo topics such as mental illness, sexuality, suicide, and mortality, which are sometimes set in relation to broader social themes such as feminism. Plath's confessional poems impress readers by their indulgent nature. She indulges in her own inward world, speaking of her feelings to readers as 'you'. Such a way of speech allows readers full contact with the poetess' psychological world and true feelings toward the world around her.

2. AS A DAUGHTER IN THE CONTEXT OF PLATH'S DADDY

Even in the post-modernist era in the 20th century, women are still confronted with the brutal fact that the pervasive conventional male-dominated culture permeates every aspect of social life, leading to the invisible restrictions and confinements of women's free articulation of their thoughts and feelings. Helene Cixous claims, "...the enormity of the repression that has kept them [women] in the 'dark'—that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute—there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. [3] The brutal patriarchal culture defines the place where women should belong to. They "live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests and social conditions to certain men—father or husbands—more closely than to other women." [4]. Women's social, economic, as well as familial status are defined in relation to men, which is the black place where women are the same for their womanly attributes. They live in the shadow of male power without any recognition by the main male-dominated social culture. Without social reception or realization of self-value, just being a dependent part of men, women's inferiority to men or even to their husband frustrates and tortures women in that period. To boldly exhibit women's such helpless situation, Plath firstly writes her desperation as a daughter who lives under the influence of her father as well as her sick psychological attachment to him:

You do not do, you do not do

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

At the very outset of the poem, Plath portrays a daughter's pathetic condition: she was born to obey her father, the emblem of patriarchal power on woman when she was born and the authority that ever defines her idiosyncrasy. Born innately as an indispensable part of men, women live like a foot which is naturally confined by the black shoes, which is such a phenomenon that not only humans but also most women themselves take it as a general fact that they are used to such patriarchal authority instinctively. The kinship between a father and a daughter is quite similar to the relationship between a foot and the black shoe. The foot has been used to be tied up and restricted in a shoe. The black shoe suggests to readers the serious, choking and smothering repression that a father's executed on her daughter, which has been such an enormous load that the daughter even dares not to breathe or achoo, clarifying the over-cautiousness and meticulousness the daughter is in when confronting her father.

The narrator "I" speaks to the imagined "You", symbolizing her father: she accuses her father of such a long time of thirty years' confinement and repression, which made her such a timid daughter that she is now so scared that can even barely dare to breathe or Achoo. The woman lives under the patriarchal environment, and her 'barely daring' and timidity to defy implies her irresistible helplessness amid the patriarchal sphere.

If as a daughter, the narrator is shadowed and outcast by her father's domination, on the other hand. Contradictorily, this daughter adores her father, the male power, like he is God:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
 Ghastly statue with one gray toe
 Big as a Frisco seal

As a daughter, she worships her father's power; she honors him as God, who is so powerful and significant in her life that "I used to pray to recover you". Such is the ironic situation: she, a daughter living under the power of her father for thirty years, having been so used to his male chauvinism who hold superior position over her, that she, although harboring hatred and spite psychologically, still prays for his recovery. The contradictory and dilemmatic psyche suggests itself in the narrator's well-refined imageries 'Marble-heavy, a bag full of God', 'Ghastly statue', 'big as a Frisco seal' and 'a head in the freakish Atlantic': on one hand, 'God', 'statue', 'Frisco seal', and 'a head' elucidate the enormity or the greatness a father's image could be, while, on the other hand, 'Marble-heavy', 'Ghastly' and

'freakish' express the narrator's paradoxical psychological reactions to the thirty years' long time of manipulation over her, which is so irresistible and unavoidable. Such reflection is exactly the dilemma: shadowed in the shelter of parental-conjugal phallogocentrism, women, while on the one hand, have been used to their innate inferiority, and on the other hand, have secretly and subconsciously harbored hatred against the oppressive authority over them but refrain from bursting out.

3. AWARENESS OF BEING RESTRICTED AND OPPRESSED

The condition that we have to be brutally aware of and needs to be cautious is that: "The domination of man over women, pervasive everywhere, needed to be analyzed and criticized, and the subject needs to be brought into the open wherever it shows itself, thoughts out in all its forms and from all points of perspectives. [4] Undeniably, patriarchal authority exists everywhere in all kinds of forms and could be discerned through every angle of the patriarchal lens. The first response for Plath to fight against is to "I have had to kill you."

Plath has now realized how brutal and tyrant the father's power is on her. She spares a big part of the poem *Daddy* from stanza 4 to 9 in accusing her father's repression, the parental and patriarchal influences, and crimes committed on women. An array of imagery is utilized to denounce the guilt executed: 'German', 'roller of war', 'scraped flat', 'language obscene', 'an engine', 'Chuffing me off', 'Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen', 'your Luftwaffe', 'your gobbledygoo', 'your neat mustache', 'your Aryan eye, bright blue', and 'panzer-man'. With such big pool of images listed, the barbarous and inhuman scenes of fascist holocaust on Jewish unfold in front of the readers. Such visual imagery says no less much than a big chapter in a novel but underlines them the whole story of the unimaginable sufferings fascist brought to Jewish people, likewise, metaphorically, the anguish patriarchal society loaded on women. During the period of 1950s, the American women in the middle class were forced by the patriarchal system to stay at home, and their mission was to be totally obedient and following their parents' orders. Thus, most of the women, including the well-educated intellectuals, were confined to their household monotony, deprived of their self-identity, let alone their sense of achievement. Like the victims of the massacre, women felt that life was meaningless and became psychologically troublesome.

Women are born as women as the whole society and surroundings defines when they are born. Women are restricted and are urged, "Be women, stay women, become women. [4] While women are born, bred, and instilled the attributes as women like commodities for a

long enough time, they have got used to such endowed nature:

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.

Women have totally accepted the socially stipulated roles. Thinking that they are the ones should be in a repressive and depressing position. Bearing such thought in mind, they behave like a Jew as they are supposed by the collective surrounding to be so. They even articulate just like Jew who are deprived of their thinking and power for their own discourse. Modeling and being modeled an oppressive object, they stay in a silent position and lose their right to speak out or stand out for their own but act and react in the society as the whole world around them prescribed.

On the other hand, although being physically and psychologically attached to patriarchal sovereignty, being scared of her father's sacred power, [5] Woman like Plath plucks her courage and comes up boldly to confront the parental sovereign, proclaiming that "Daddy, I have had to kill you." She must kill 'her father' the parental influences on her so that she could finally escape from the suppression.

4. SUPPRESSED AS A WIFE

If as a daughter, the woman is suppressed and tortured by the patriarchal power, scared of the parental father's tyranny. She struggled and strived for any chances to be herself, or she even imagined killing her father to flee from her father's influence. When her father finally died, "I was ten when they buried you", she at the moment to part with the thirty years' confinement, shockingly, as a female in the society, she has been raised accustomed to such inertial confinement. She even committed suicide, "At twenty I tried to die", and trying to "get back, back, back to you."

While, physically, the father died, the narrator still cherishes a psychological dependence on her father. She even wants to reunite with Daddy at the sacrifice of her life. They are enslaved and tortured by men, but they remain longing to return to them, to love them until they are exploited to the last drop of blood. Women are in such a pathetic situation: when the patriarchal influence died, it does not necessarily suggest women's psychological detachment from parental power. They have adjusted to the male power from their birth. And now, they are not used to the absence of such parental domination. To replenish such physical as well psychological vacancy, she finds another man as a substitute:

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look

While her Daddy died, in replace, she found a man just like her father, and she falls in love with him and takes him as a lover. After the marriage or combination, she finds the attachment again and "I lost my self" and "The voices just can't through", suggesting that she is deprived of the opportunity to make her voice heard again. Images like 'model', 'in black', 'rack and the screw', 'vampire' signals the physical male's influence that remained and the power women used to cling to. Here the parental power disappeared and was replaced by the male-centered authority in marriage. Another kind of male power on women. All she can do is to follow the man's orders and do what he tells her to, just like what she did when her father was alive. Once again, she is placed in an object position as a wife and behaves as any woman does: she cares for the family, lives dependent on her husband, the male power, and is deprived of any right to express herself. Unfortunately, the man cheating her into marriage betrayed her. Despite her seven-year's of devotion and love, she is still in a pathetic and helpless situation.

5. WOMEN'S PROTEST AND THE FINAL TRIUMPH

While tortured and struggled in the male-dominated world, women shall never keep reticent; they shall never be indulged in the man fabricated field as their whole world; they shall never harbor torrents inside but never speak out; they shall not be ashamed of their women's strength. Plath in her poem reveals her strength and lets it burst into accusation against the patriarchal oppression over women. She lets her awareness of the miserable plight open to the readers. While a daughter, she is restricted and confined, and being a wife, she remains being enslaved, with no possibility to escape from the man-knit trap for women. Being repressed and tortured for such long time, her patience has finally reached its lowest limitation of tolerance, and she ultimately decides to break the chain of enslavement.

"Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart

...

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

The narrator finally decides to put a stake in her father's indifferent black heart, who, to her, is nevertheless a vampire. It is by this action and the final determination that she herself frees herself and gets emancipated psychologically. The manifesto "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" forecasts her final liberation from influences from the phallogocentric society, whether patriarchalism or male Chauvinism.

In her poem *Daddy*, Plath places her, as a female poetess's psychological responses in facing the whole phallogocentric society the center, thus setting women the

subject in this poem. By doing this, she intends to give full voice and liberation for women in her writing. Simon de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* formulated the relation that has structured the relationship between man and woman: the man sees, the woman is seen; man is subject, the woman is the object, other, second, irremediably so; man is culture, the woman is nature, prisoner of her psychological condition, of this womb that subjects her to destiny, maternity. Undoubtedly, all through history with an astonishing stubbornness, women's voices have been raised to protest at this condition that her domination created, but also to claim civil and political rights. [4] Plath in this poem puts a female, not only as a daughter but also as a wife, representative of the collective women the subjective position and their obedience, hatred, pains, struggling and psychological experience under the domination of the male-centered world thread that knit up the whole poem. Such content as well as the structure reverses the traditionally accepted history of writing in which man is the subject and the center of a story, and thus creating a women's writing in the male-dominated world, and giving women's voices out to readers through her confessional way of writing poems.

According to Robert Phillips, all through her entire poem *Daddy*, Plath seems to be communicating her tortures, frustrations and mental troubles in being confronted with the men's shadow and dominance over women. It may be true in some way, but I would still argue that Plath's innermost voices of her pains and sentimental emotions represent not only her but also, to a greater scale, women as a whole collective's dilemmas, struggles, hatred against the patriarchal sovereignty. As she claims:

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always knew it was you.

The villagers, who are harassed by the nightmare of the vampire, are happy now. "They are dancing and stamping on you", symbolizes the promising victory of the eminent woman's liberation movement over male domination. It is quite reasonable that the villagers should be females in Plath's time, as they are also tormented by the male vampire. Once the male domination over them is overthrown, they feel the excitement. Dancing and stamping suggests to readers the whole women group's ecstasy of final liberation from male dominance. Hence here, 'the villagers' could be treated as Plath's intention to enlarge her focus of the psychological experiences or hers to the whole women's collective.

6. IMAGERY AS LANDMARKS AS WELL AS BENCHMARK FOR HER EXPRESSION OF FEMALE'S SUFFERINGS

While exploring and tracing Plath's revelation of her psychological experiences in the male-centered world, besides placing herself, a woman poetess's feelings and emotions the subject of the whole poem, Plath elaborately designs her imagery to afford readers her sensorial perceptions of the male-dominated world, as well as her very hatred and ultimate protest against to the men-defined culture and history. When savoring and tracing Plath's confessional poetic imageries, readers are undoubtedly offered channels to access women's psychological journey in a male-centered world. And her elaborately refined imagery affords readers women's accurate responses to the patriarchal culture. Plath's carefully designed imagery functions to their extreme to provide readers visual experiences and psychological pathways to be involved in the very painful and torturing suffering under the patriarchal context.[6]

Such a huge array of imagery is listed and exhibited in Plath's poem *Daddy*, rendering the whole work a shocking and even blood like tint, which is the approach for Plath in her poem as a tool for expressing her psychological journey. Susan E. Schwartz in *The dead father effect on the psyche of a daughter—Sylvia Plath reflects on the death image of a father* remarked, "The American poetess Sylvia Plath (1932 - 1963), her life and works illustrate what is called the dead father effect on a daughter. These display the personal and collective issues when a father is absent physically or emotionally. As a result, the daughter remains psychologically shackled to the absent and dead connection." [7] Plath, a woman, experiences this missing connection passively at first, and then after the betrayal of her lover, she finally initiatively embraces such disconnection and resolves to live through the detachment and meet her rebirth from the psychological trauma.

Typical of the postmodernist writing, imageries in Plath's poem seem to be fragmentary, illogical, unconventional. Kathleen L. Nichols in *The Cold War Gothic Poetry of Sylvia Plath* sees her imagery as Gothic, showing terror and horror in her poem. She then defines the elements as Cold War Gothic. She also claims that, although Plath is often deeply engaged with Gothic themes and images, "but poetry is not just a reprise of established conventions... Instead, a product of the Cold War period (roughly 1946-1964), Plath was sometimes transfixed, like many of her generations, by the real-life horrors of her own historical era. A study of Plath's poetry shows that she was trying to write a new kind of Gothic in a new Gothic subgenre—one that we might call the Cold War Gothic poem as opposed to the traditionally dark romantic Gothic novel of the past. [1]

In some way, I would accept her proposition that Plath integrates Gothic elements into her poetry. But these factors in themselves are a new category of the postmodernist attribute, suggesting the psychological state in the postmodernist era.

Plath employs the postmodernist imageries in the form of a random, fragmentary way superficially. I would argue that, under this ostensible surface, there lies the logical organization and elaborate design of the well-chosen imagery. For the purpose of anti-patriarchy, imagery in *Daddy* is stated in reference to the different psychological phases a daughter as well as a wife experiences in her life when confronted with male sovereignty. Firstly in her thirty life, attachment to her father's parental power, then, disconnection of the fatherly power but another kind of patriarchal authority embodied in a husband. Imagery changes following the psychological feelings. Thus all through the short, compressed, and compact piece of work, the finely refined imageries elucidate clearly the torturing spiritual journey of a woman in breaking the shackles male society imposed on women. Furtherly, these refined images enrich the poem itself by their underlying suggestions.

7. CONCLUSION

For a long period of history, women have been actively or passively kept reticent and retained their rights and voices under the suppression of the mainstream patriarchal culture. While the majority of women have got used to the condition of being purposefully dismissed by the trend of history. Some pioneers of female feminists strive hard for and devote themselves to the liberation and emancipation of the whole women group. Helene Cixous calls out for women not to remain taciturn on their own freedom from male power: And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these foods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naiveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? [3]

Spurred and stimulated continuously by fervent calls of the feminist avant-garde, more female writers realize their strength. They are no longer fearful of the man power, and they come up boldly to confront the manly defined culture and topple down the already established male culture by introducing and creating their unique way of expression to repaint their own half of the world. Plath, one of the pioneers, creates a confessional way, employing rhetorical tools of imagery, and pairs of dichotomies to express her inner most psychological

experience of the patriarchal authority over women. Thus placing women the subject of her womanly writing; while men the object. By applying such imagery, Plath, as the narrator, gives readers the most sensorial taste of a women writer's love, hatred, frustration, protest, struggle as well as the last spiritual triumph over patriarchal society. In her somewhat maybe self-indulgent world, Sylvia Plath places women the very center of her confessional poem, and writes about women's real mental and psychological experiences in her poem. When overflowing with the hatred and the internal torrents against the main stream male culture, Plath felt her yearning to speak her voices out, representing any women in her time. The superficially Gothic, unconventional and eerie or even freakish imagery could then be considered as women's long-repressed and tortured psychological responses to the sovereign male culture imposed on women in general. In this regard, Sylvia Plath's poem *Daddy* could be held as a typical type representing women's psychological journey in a patriarchal scenario.

REFERENCES

- [1] Kathleen L. Nichols. The Cold War Gothic Poetry of Sylvia Plath. *A Companion to American Gothic*, 2013: 328-339. DOI: doi:10.1002/9781118608395.ch26
- [2] Frederick Feirstein. A Psychoanalytic Study of Sylvia Plath. *The Psychoanalytic Review*. Vol.103, No. 1, 2016:103-126. DOI: 10.1521/prev.2016.103.1.103.
- [3] Helene Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *The Laugh of the Medusa*. The University of Chicago Press, 1976. Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893.
- [4] Simone De Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books. London. 2015.
- [5] John Rietz. The Father as Muse in Sylvia Plath's Poetry, *Women's Studies*, 36:6, 417-430. 2007. DOI:10.1080/00497870701493369.
- [6] Lindberg-Seyersted Brita. Dramatizations of "visionary events" in Sylvia Plath's poetry. *Studia Neophilologica*. 1996:205-215. DOI:10.1080/00393279608588185.
- [7] Susan E. Schwartz. The dead father effect on the psyche of a daughter—Sylvia Plath. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 2017. DOI:10.1080/08893675.2017.1351707.