

# Oppressed Women's Voices and Female Writing in Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" and "Daddy"

Shiyun Tang<sup>1, \*, †</sup>, Wanqi Zhang<sup>2, †</sup>, Zehui Zhang<sup>3, †</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, 518000, Guangdong Province, China

<sup>2</sup>Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, 518000, Guangdong Province, China

<sup>3</sup>Beijing Huijia Private School, Beijing, 102200, China

\*Shiyun Tang. Email: s19013.tang@stu.scie.com.cn

†Those authors contributed equally.

## ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century American poet Sylvia Plath combined her social, physical and spiritual condition with a display of femininity to express her opposition to patriarchy. Her poems contain an abundance of imagery related to death. In general, many analyses of death imagery have focused more on Plath's autobiographical trauma. In contrast, this essay applies Hélène Cixous's theory of women's writing to explain how the death imagery in "Daddy" and "Tulips" is a medium of opposition to patriarchy rather than an autobiographical presentation of personal trauma and vulnerability. Using an applied-theoretical approach, this essay applies the concept of feminine writing proposed by Hélène Cixous to explain how Sylvia Plath opposes patriarchy by writing about her feminine self in "Tulips" and "Daddy". Plath ultimately achieves her protest against patriarchy by examining her weaknesses and building a new identity, which is parallel to two dimensions of Cixous's feminine writing. This essay examines how the imagery of death in Plath's *Tulips* and *Daddy* subverts rather than succumbs to the markers of male oppression and therefore contributes to an understanding of how Plath, as a celebrated poet of concessions, expresses her rebirth of female identity rather than merely showing autobiographical vulnerability.

**Keywords:** *Sylvia Plath, Hélène Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa, Postmodern Feminism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In "Tulips" and "Daddy," the 20<sup>th</sup>-century American poet Sylvia Plath discusses her own experiences of recovering from surgery and the accusation of her father's stifling oppression over her. Significantly, Plath vehemently throws her voice against the patriarchy through death imagery. This refers to how Plath uses death imagery to protest for her oppressed female identity under the social system dominated by men, where women's identities are being defined by men. Plath's voicing against patriarchy through the use of death imagery parallels how Hélène Cixous proposes the concept of feminine writing, or "L'écriture féminine" in French, in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa."

More analysis of Plath's "Tulips" and "Daddy" "Daddy" has focused more on Plath's autobiographical, domestic presentation in the poem. For example, Jeannine Dobbs claims that "domesticity is an ultimate concern" [1] in "'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry." Previous research such as Dobbs's essay has

focused on how Plath presents her personal life—struggling with her domestic roles as a wife and a mother and showing suicidal tendency due to mental problems—in these two poems. On the other hand, death imagery also plays an essential role to project Plath's voice against patriarchy in "Tulips" and "Daddy". This could indicate the existence of two levels of feminine writing that Cixous has mentioned in the "Laugh of the Medusa,"—first, women should write about themselves and censor their identities, and second, women should voice against patriarchy based on their suppression. This essay will apply Cixous's female writing theory to explain Plath's "Daddy" and "Tulips", by doing so, one might expect to see Plath's voicing against patriarchy through death imagery rather than an autobiographical presentation of personal traumas and vulnerabilities.

In this essay, the discussion will be divided into two sections: the first section will examine by presenting the death imagery, Sylvia Plath deletes the existence of a traditional female identity, instead of that, she creates a new form of female life. This recreation then becomes a

preparation against patriarchal society. This idea shows in Cixous's as women's "individual" existence for combining both body and spirits by using female writing. The second section will discuss how the death imagery Sylvia Plath shows in her poetry is one move to resist male persecution in the way of taking back women's right to speak. This will also refer to the second level of Cixousian feminine writing where women voice against patriarchy based on their experience of being oppressed.

## **2. RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH DEATH IMAGERY**

There is a parallel between how Plath uses death imagery as a tool to reconstruct her female identity "Tulips" and the first level of Cixousian feminine writing. In the first level of feminine writing, Hélène Cixous suggests that women should first confront themselves by writing about themselves, then reconstruct their female identities beyond the previous identities of being oppressed under patriarchy, and Plath portrays how her female identity undergoes rebirth through death imagery. Cixous propounds that women should first "return to the body" [2], which is usually an "uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure" [2]. In stanza 1 of "Tulips," Plath first approaches the female body by depicting her feeble and static state after the surgery. "I am learning peacefulness" [3] and "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions" [3]—These lines show the impassiveness of the languished female body by presenting her nihilistic attitude toward her physical health and her life, reflecting the female's unwillingness and passiveness to living. As Greg Johnson suggests in his article "A Passage to 'Ariel': Sylvia Plath and the Evolution of Self," "Tulips" is deceptive in its forced calmness of tone; the poet is presenting death imagery rather than a resolution of tensions when she presents peace in "Tulips" [4]. Sylvia Plath also presents how her name is given "up to the nurses" [3] and her "history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons" [3]. Plath continues to portray how the female narrator observes herself as being freely manipulated by others in these two lines. Greg Johnson also points out that Plath shows how "she has given up her home, clothes, history, body, surrendering entirely to the death-self" [4]. Plath's description manipulates the female narrator's body as a subject role. It is explained by the awareness of the woman's languid, dying self under manipulation when she returns to her body for the first time and scrutinizes it.

Sylvia Plath's use of death imagery is arguably the first step for her to subvert the restrictions attached to her identity by observing herself through giving out a sense of passiveness at first glance. This propels her to "censor the body" [2] and reconstruct her identity. One evidence of this is "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;/Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks. /I have let things slip..." [3]. As Robles explains,

writing is an action. [5] Writing is Sylvia Plath's action to re-establish her female identity. As Sarah M. Gilbert writes in "'My Name Is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition," the action we see most in *Ariel*, "is Plath defining herself [5]. Gilbert (1977) explains that "the female confessional poet...writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self, a certainty, a tradition...she experiments with different propositions about her nature" [5]. This shows how Plath takes the advantage of writing as a subversive action to overwhelm her previous female identities.

Notably, Sylvia Plath attempts to remove the female roles such as a wife and a mother attached to her. When the poet describes how she "let things slip" [3], including her "husband and child" [3], she is arguably killing her confined self-trapped by the roles of a wife or a mother, killing the "false woman" [2], to develop a new, independent female identity. As Cixous mentions in "The Laugh of the Medusa," women have been restricted by the "guilty... for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing" [2]. Patricia Hampl highlights in the article "The Simile of Accomplishment: Sylvia Plath's *Ambition*" that Plath is "quite explicit about the destruction of the autobiographical self" [6] when she "let things slip" [2] in her writing. She deconstructs things tied with the old female identity to build her new female identity. As such, Plath's presentation of death imagery, her languished physical state, and rejection of life after the surgery, is an attempt to confront her "dead figure" [2] in the prospect of achieving "emancipation" [2] from her false identity, and this foreshadows her protest against patriarchy.

Plath then turns to present a sense of rebirth through the imagery of tulips after censoring and realizing her fragility and internal death. She mentions how she could hear the tulips "breathe" [3] "like an awful baby" [3]. This immediately introduces a sense of birth and vitality that contrasts with the previous morbid and nonchalant tone. Admittedly, confronting such a new birth of life is initially difficult for the poet—she describes how the tulips are "upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color" [3] and her initial resistance to accepting vitality, holding on to the tendency to "efface" [3] herself.

However, such resistance proves how Plath has endeavored to overcome obstacles and strive for the liberation of her new identity—she is reconstructing herself out of the uncomfortable self-deconstruction. Sholeh Abhari Laleh mentions in the article "Plath's Quest for identity" that "as a confessional woman artist, Sylvia Plath's writings depict her great dissatisfaction with her life and her social identity to such a degree that many of her poems deal with death and birth imagery" [7] Van Dyne (1993) interprets this issue in the following terms: "The poet's reversionary strategies of the use of the birth metaphor is a form of self-realization and an attempt to

create a sense of subjectivity both social and linguistic” [7]. As such, death imagery in “Tulips” is a form of rebirth after Plath has strenuously struggled through the process of destroying the old female self.

Hence, by abolishing the old self and creating a new one, the poet-persona is capable of changing, developing, growing, and creating mentally and artistically [7]. As Plath depicts how she feels her heart “opens and closes” [3]. This line enlivens her experience of feeling the heartbeat in her body, revealing her realization of her concrete existence as a living woman. Here she presents how she starts to enter a new state of life with a liberated, new identity. “It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her” [2]—Plath achieves to face “the Old” [2] through writing herself according to the first level of “L’écriture féminine,” and she “kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing” by presenting death in “Tulips,” hence leaving room for the growth of her new self and the new strength for voicing herself against patriarchy.

Up to this point, Plath has reconstructed her new identity through presenting death based on the close-up of her own body in “Tulips.” According to Greg Johnson’s article, “Yet the very lack of energy in a poem like “Tulips,” the tone of helpless drifting melancholy, indicates that the transformation is not yet complete” [4]; nevertheless, as Hélène Cixous suggests that the two levels of feminine writing “cannot be separated” [2], Plath soon fully enters her protest against patriarchy after the preparation of reconstructing her new self through writing herself which she has done in “Tulips.” Her “new self even breaks free” [4] in “Daddy,” and again, such protest is based on the presentation of death imagery.

### **3. THE DECONSTRUCTION OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION THROUGH PERSONAL PAIN IN “DADDY”**

In “Daddy,” Sylvia Plath “physically materialized” [2] the patriarchal oppression on two levels. Firstly, she displays her realization of patriarchal oppression through her sensations of pain. The “black shoe” [8] that is used to address Sylvia Plath’s father is an implicitly oppressive image with the connotation of airless and dark. However, Sylvia Plath compared herself to “afoot” [8], a part that bears all the weight of a body and locates at the bottom of the metaphorical hierarchy of a body. This attempt can be explained by Helene Cixous’s second level of female writing as she stated that females’ “flesh speaks true” [2]. This series of metaphors about Sylvia Plath’s daughter-father relationships are instinctive and perceptive. By returning to Plath’s own body and suffocative feelings, she realized the society that she had long lived in was problematic as suggested by the starting line “You do not do, you do not do/anymore, black shoes/ In which I have lived like a foot/ For thirty years” [8]. The suffocative feeling was then attributed to the patriarchal structure in

the society as Plath illustrated the power dynamic in her father-daughter relationships. In the poem, the daughter is metaphorically as well as physically smaller than life [9]. For example, the title ‘daddy’ accompanied by the nursery rhyme in the first stanza infantilizes the daughter and the simile “foot” [8] emphasizes the inconspicuous nature of the daughter. On the other hand, the father is larger than life in all senses [9]. Plath associated spiritually and physically enormous images with the father such as “a bag full of God” [8] and “a Frisco seal” [8]. These images make the father a powerful and omnipresent subject.

Secondly, Plath illustrates females’ silence by writing about her bitter struggle with language. According to Helene Cixous, every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak [2]. Similarly, Sylvia Plath explicitly represents the inability to speak in daddy. “Barely daring to breathe or Achoo” [8] deals with the inability in terms of courage. This lack of courage can be explained by Cixous’s ironic description that “how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak” [2]. Moreover, Plath expressed her difficulty in having an identity in German through the stutter of the German word “I” in “Ich, ich, ich, ich/ I could hardly speak” [8]. In the poem Daddy, German is the speaker’s father’s language, a symbol of patriarchal language. This difficulty is exemplary of females’ struggle in society as Cixous suggests females’ voices “fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in a language only that which speaks in the masculine” [2]. This exemplarity illustrates Cixous’s claim about women as a subject for history: “In women, personal history blends with the history of all women” [2].

By blending her “personal history” with “national and world history” [2], Plath compares females’ silence with World War II: “The tongue stuck in my jaw./ It stuck in a barb wire snare” [8]. Here, the metaphor “barb wire snare” was used in concentration camps to keep Jewish people in World War II. Extending this metaphor, Plath explicitly connected her identity with the Jewish: “I began to talk like a Jew. I think I may well be a Jew” [8]. By alluding to Holocaust and comparing the oppression she experienced in the father-daughter relationship with the oppression the Jewish experienced from the German, Plath successfully “draws her story into history” [2] and “confirms women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence” “by taking up the challenge of the of speech which has been governed by the phallus” [2] as proposed by Helene Cixous.

By scrutinizing her father’s image—“You stand at the blackboard, daddy, In the picture I have of you” [8]—Plath confronts the vulnerability and oppression she had experienced. In stanza 9, Plath deconstructs her fear of the authority figure—her father. She lists all the terrifying features of her father: the “Luftwaffe” (German air force), “gobbledygoo” (misspelled version of ‘gobbledygook’) [8], and his “Aryan eye, bright blue” [8]. The image

“Aryan eye, bright blue” [8] alludes to the Nazis and World War II since Adolph Hitler believed Aryan descent was a superior race of people. This illustrated Cixous’s statement of “female is an integral part of all liberations as a militant” [2] as by linking her father to oppressive Nazi ideology, Plath’s attempt at liberation “will do more than modify power relations between; she will bring about a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis” [2]. Those images disassemble the authoritarian power of her father and the Nazis, revealing the fact that those powers were founded on the illusions that sustain them.

#### **4. THE REBIRTH PRESENTED IN “DADDY” BY REBELLING AGAINST THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY**

First of all, Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” presents the fightback against the patriarchal society and masculine power which can be referred to as the second level of feminine writing in Cixous. Cixous proposes that women had lost attention from a patriarchal society that “her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear” [2]. In Plath’s poem “Daddy,” she argues that the suppression from males is extremely strong, they do not just lock women in the “black shoes” [8], instead of that, they take women’s right to speak and breathe, to erase their presence by not listening to them. As Strangeways has mentioned: “...but in the sense that Plath uses the situation depicted in the poem to explore the dynamics of her attitudes toward individualism” [10]. She has aware of this terrible suppression: “I never could talk to you. The tongue stuck in my jaw” [8]. or love him, instead of that, she withdrew from words, and she no longer approached any phrase that could express her point of view, because her tongue is “stuck,” just like herself. She lost the tool to speak, even more, the courage to speak toward the man who suppressed her.

Right now, women cannot take this suppression any longer, they know they need to find a way out, to find a way to gain their power of speaking. According to Cixous, women achieve this by freeing themselves from the masculine hand: “all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her” [2]. She does not need the existence of speak, of the word itself. She achieves the goal of trying to break through male power by presenting herself in her full form because their freedom is the best counterpoint to suppression.

According to Blaydes : “Plath’s poem “Daddy” becomes a persuasive polemic for death through her metaphor” [11]. The concept of fighting back has been buried deep in the hearts of women: “Daddy, I have had to kill you” [8]. She decides to kill the man who always controlled her, her anger is growing to wait for a release day.

Forough Hassanpour and Ruzy Hashim have argued that: “this poem can be considered Plath ‘s forum to speak about the problems women struggle with within the male-

dominated society” [12]. This fight-back that women are trying to take is so difficult under the indelible influence of patriarchy. She couldn’t through her father’s vague veil see who he was: “I thought every German was you. And the language obscene” [8]. She saw her father’s face everywhere, it began to surround her with consistent pressure, yet she won’t be able to speak. In this stage, she is still under the control of her father, she realizes the disappearance of language and the continual appearance of her father

Ghada Mohammad interpreted it similarly: “Plath is haunted by her father’s image as authoritarian and persecutor” [13]. Right now, such constant anxiety broke her, and her consciousness cannot help but remind her how painful she is: “Not God but a swastika. So black no sky could squeak through” [8]. The gloom that is made by her father is “so black,” yet no one can see pass through it. What torments her most at this moment is that she is aware of the violation, yet she is unable to see her father with absolute clarity because her father is not only a single person, but also a representation of every man who ever tortures her. Cixous finds a way out at this base: “hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” [2]. Cixous argues that women can only resist, they must resist. They must erase the existence of men in their minds and their history and become the one who holds and releases the power based on their willingness, the best way to do it is to write.

After the moment of confusion and dilemma, Plath comes to the defiant solution that Cixous has presented— “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two” [8]. Plath kills the figures of her father, at the same time, she kills her husband. They have the same faces that torture her for years, by killing both of them she breaks through the constant persecution of the patriarchy, she is finally learning how to fight back against the pressure surrounding her. Just as the way that Al Strangeways has interpreted: “having made a final and inescapable connection with him—having, in short, given up her freedom” [10]. This defiance grows stronger and stronger: “There’s a stake in your fat black heart” [8]. The stake is a metaphor that represents Sylvia Plath’s fight back against the patriarchal society, she killed her father, her husband, and every man who ever infringe on her with her hand, a stake straight into the heart. Plath truly liberates herself by ending his father’s life in her mind.

As Cixous has presented: “She draws her story into history” [2]. Plath not only kills her father to break down his patriarchal power over her but also, she took his place in history to write her own story: “I may be a bit of a Jew” [8]. She started to accept the identity of the victim that has been tortured by her father, on top of that, she stabbed him and killed him to achieve a reclaiming of power and place in history from her father, as a “Jew” who reclaims her dignity and strength from the “German.” After the defiance, the new way finally begins, “the poet’s hidden

true self is reborn through the ultimate violence of death” [13]. After the series of oppression and resistance, Plath was reborn: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” [8]. A new life and identity arose, she freed herself from the shackle her father has made on her, walked through the days of torments, and left her father in the grave of patriarchal society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath’s poetry shows how the women in the dilemma caused by patriarchal society can escape and build a new identity. To achieve that, Plath first shows the denial of women’s rights and consciousness by traditional patriarchal society through the display of the female body. At this stage, death imagery symbolizes the destruction of the false women, and through this destruction, Plath can create a new female that is presented in Cixous’s theory. Secondly, Plath showed patriarchal power on two levels. The first is her pain and struggle. By doing so, Plath can show the oppression and deprivation of women by the patriarchal society, as well as their pain. On the other hand, Plath shows how strong “Daddy” is, he and every man who likes him, control everything about women. By using historical imagery, Plath can present her silence and the loss of voice which distorted her from the realization. Therefore, it comes to the reborn stage that presents not only can she find a way to speak, but also she can break through the predicament that patriarchal society has made. At first, Plath displays a women figure who has no strength to speak nor to fight. However, after the solution that Cixous has presented, Plath starts to uncover her vulnerability and wounds but turns them into a new form of reborn. Overall, Sylvia Plath has presented a new life and form for the traditional women’s figure, women cannot only aware of their existence and identity, but also they need to understand the importance of fight and breaking.

## REFERENCES

- [1] J. Dobbs, Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath’s Domestic Poetry, *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1977, pp. 11–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3194361>
- [2] H. Cixous, et al., The Laugh of the Medusa, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>
- [3] S. Plath, Tulips, Poetry Foundation, 2003. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49013/tulips-56d22ab68fdd0>
- [4] G. Johnson, A Passage to Ariel: Sylvia Plath and the Evolution of Self, *Southwest Review*, vol. 65, no. 1, 1980, pp. 1–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43469198>
- [5] L.G. Robles, Poststructuralism and Female Identity in Sylvia Plath’s Ariel, *Inquiries Journal*, vol.12, no.9, 2020, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1805>
- [6] P. Hampl, The Smile of Accomplishment: Sylvia Plath’s Ambition, *The Iowa Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1–28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065x.4377.G.D>
- [7] S.A. Laleh, Plath’s Quest for Identity, *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2009, pp. 59–66.
- [8] S. Plath, Daddy, Poetry Foundation, 2003, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48999/daddy-56d22aafa45b2>
- [9] M. Manners, The Doxies of Daughterhood: Plath, Cixous, and the Father, *Comparative Literature*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1996, p. 150. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1771652>
- [10] A. Strangeways, S. Plath, The Boot in the Face: The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1996, pp. 370-390. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208714>
- [11] S.B. Blydes, Metaphors of Life and Death in the Poetry of Denise Levertov and Sylvia Plath, *The Dalhousie Review*, 1977, pp. 495-505.
- [12] F. Hassanpour, R.S. Hashim, An angry language: a stylistic study of the images of men in the Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”, *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2012, pp.123-128.
- [13] G.A. Mohammad, Violence in Sylvia Plath’s Poems Lady Lazarus and Daddy, *International Journal of Language Academy*, vol. 7, no. 28, 2019, pp. 497–510. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18033/ijla.4166.44>