

# Striving for Freedom from Patriarchal Authority —A Comparison of Poems “Diving into the Wreck” and “Daddy”

Xi Zhang<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan 430070, China.

<sup>a</sup> xizhang@whut.edu.cn

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses the similarity and difference on female’s resistance against patriarchal authority between poems “Diving into the Wreck” and “Daddy”, which were written respectively by American women poets Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath. Having suffered in male authority and control, the female speakers made their efforts to strive to control their own life and be free of male domination, but in a way of sharp contrast. Rich made positive and optimistic practice, while Plath, more pessimistic and negative, went astray in self-destruction. Anyway, after the process of suffering and struggling, Rich and Plath have finally reached the freedom they want.

## 1. Introduction

According to one critic, “Modern American poetry is generally characterized by tones of personal expression and confession” [1]. Concerning the social issues of 1960s and 1970s, none has been raised more often or more resoundingly than that of women’s rights: from “the call for greater justice and equality for women in American society to the protest against the patriarchal traditions that have oppressed women from the recorded history” [1], questioning the male-centered society of misdirection. Among the active leading roles against the patriarchal authority, a number of renowned American women poets became the pioneers in the movement, representative as Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath. Both known as confessional poets, through their achievements in poetry Rich and Plath made their own voices, or rather, the women’s voice heard in their struggles against the prejudices that crippled women.

Both dealing with the pressure and pains caused by the male oppression, however, these two poets had different ways to express their feelings and respond to their situations, ending in different outcome of their lives. Rich, more optimistic and positive as reflected in her poem “Diving into the Wreck”, later “turned to direct confrontation in social action movements against the wall built by the enemy defined quite specifically as ‘patriarchy’” [2]. In contrast, Plath, rather self-destructive and negative as showed in “Daddy”, trapped herself deeper and deeper in the mire of frustration and fury, and finally went to extremes in personal protest—ending as tragic suicides.

Facing sufferings, with different attitudes Rich and Plath had totally different endings in their life. Maybe both of them have got the freedom they pursued, though in different perspectives. Obviously there is a striking coincidence manifested in their poems “Diving into the Wreck” and “Daddy” with their real life. People say a great poem is usually about way more than just the author and her life at a particular moment. The effect of those personal incidents to a poem is just like that of a few ingredients in a delicious stew. But relating the life and poems of Rich and Plath, a conclusion could be also drawn that the poetry itself is a mirror of a poet’s thoughts and intentions, or even a fortune teller in some extent. Thus tasting these two poems that share the same theme—struggling for the freedom from male oppression is the most direct way to take a glimpse at the inner worlds of these two feminist women writers.

## 2. Female Suffering from the Patriarchal Oppression

In their real life as well as in their poems, both Rich and Plath revealed the evidence of female depression and sufferings brought by males and their families. Both the poems deal with themes like life, death and depression—all are serious and tragic matters with a gloomy and even scary atmosphere between the lines.

Rich's marriage collapsed a few years before she wrote "Diving into the Wreck". Sadly, her ex-husband also committed suicide not long after that. So one could hardly ignore all these sufferings Rich was experiencing when she wrote the poem. The title "Diving into the Wreck" suggests a lot of things. The sad scene of "the wreck" and the horrifying dead bodies remind the reader of any experience where one plunges into a disaster, where things change suddenly for the worse, or in other words, any human suffering like a divorce or a death in the family, which Rich herself had encountered. The feeling of "loneliness" is also emphasized three times as "but here alone", "there is no one to tell me when the ocean will begin" and "I have to learn alone to turn my body without force in the deep element" [3], giving a sense of choking melancholy. Moreover, the significant symbol "book of myths" [3] refers to any lies, made-up stories, or statements recorded or passed down in a male-dominated culture, or in other words, "his story" rather than "her story". By the last few lines "a book of myths in which our names do not appear" [3] Rich shows her disappointment and oppression to the false history that silencing the voices of women, as most men are glamorized or portrayed to be what history is all about.

Known as intensely emotional "confessional", Plath's poetry is primarily autobiographical, as the poem "Daddy". Plath's father was a German immigrant who died when she was a little girl, like the father in the poem. Plath, similar to the speaker in the poem, tried to commit suicide at about twenty. Plath's marriage lasted for about seven years, and Plath wrote "Daddy" after her husband, poet Ted Hughes, left her for another woman, as the speaker's husband sucked her blood for seven years. This already difficult change for Plath became more difficult as she was left to care for their two young children during the particularly harsh London winter.

From beginning to end, in a language of desperation and violence, "Daddy" is actually a disturbing howl full of pain, hatred and oppression from a woman who has lost both her father and her husband. A tortured woman, she became fatherless when she was so young that daddy seemed huge and powerful, like God. Memories of him have caused her pain—the internal struggle between loving and hating her deceased father has made her want to die. When dying doesn't work, the speaker tries to find a husband just like her father, who later turned out to be a vampire.

The speaker figuratively characterizes her father like a black shoe that she's had to live in, like God, like an evil Nazi, a devil, and finally like a vampire, while taking her own part as a Jew and a victim. The whole poem casts a strongly disturbed feeling of terror and suppression. Nazi Germany, words such as "Luftwaffe", "panzer-man", and "Mein Kampf" are symbols of the horror of male domination [4]. The use of similes and metaphors such as "Chuffing me off like a Jew", "A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belson." and "I think I may well be a Jew" clearly shows the feelings of anguished hopelessness and the ripping agony she must have felt [4]. Plath's conflicts begin in her relationship with her father and unfortunately continue with her husband. By "Every woman adores a Fascist", Plath may be commenting on the sad fact that women allowing themselves to be dominated by men [4]. "The vampire who said he was you, drank my blood for a year, seven years" describes her husband or the ability of male power to draining a woman's life away [4]. This poem is a powerful statement from a female against males who have suppressed, betrayed, or died and left behind their daughters and wives.

In both poems, having suffered a lot in male authority and control, the female is now ready to strive for the right to be herself, to make choices, and be free of male domination.

## 3. Struggle for Freedom

In the two poems, Rich and Plath both made their efforts in their pursuit to be free from male influence, but in a way of sharp contrast. Rich is making positive and optimistic practice, while

quite differently, drearily pessimistic and negative as Plath, has gone astray in destruction and self-destruction.

Rich's poems always reflect her desire to help open the minds of others and inspire them to find an exit of their misery and problems. As in the poem "Diving into the Wreck", though the history is distorted by the male authority, Rich is determined to dive into the ocean, discover the truth herself, and record the individual feelings and experiences. She is trying to rewrite the history and speak out the voice of the silenced group. Describing the process of diving into the wreck, Rich makes us to ponder at our society and history; by the act of writing this poem as a way of confronting and recording the individual existence, Rich offers us hope that we, every individual, or every woman, can change this fact that we can rescue our stories from the book of myths. Out of the seemingly gloomy scenes in the poem, Rich leaves us the rejoicing of step-by-step self-discovery and encourages other women to take a look inside and understand their own femininity, resulting in the creation of new definitions of humanity and history.

Whereas, Plath's "Daddy" is a negative and dark poem that oppresses and stifles the readers, with a tone engulfed in outrage and hysteric. The whole poem conveys a feeling of gloom and suffocation, which actually reflects the negative attitude that Plath adopted to get rid of the oppression and pursue the freedom. From "*Daddy, I have had to kill you*" to "*If I've killed one man, I've killed the two*", from "*I used to pray to recover you*" to "*At twenty I tried to die*" [4], these poisonous expressions reveal Plath's inner subconscious lust for destruction and self-destruction, by which she was getting more and more possessed. Except the mad fancy of revenge in her own world, she did nothing to re-discover herself or make a difference of her life for better. From stem to stern, by grinding her teeth to squeeze out every abhorrent word, Plath has never heartily relieved herself from the animosity that has trapped her from the real freedom.

Groping their way for freedom, in the darkness Rich and Plath have gone in different directions, one gradually seeing the light emanating from the exit of the cave, while the other getting into the deeper darkness at the other end of the cave, without realizing to turn back.

#### 4. The Final Freedom

At the end of self-exploration and inner confession, it seems that both Rich and Plath have got rid of male control and found their way to freedom. But if perceiving carefully, one may tell the hints of different destinations of freedom.

The closing stanza of "Diving into the Wreck" unites everyone together and closes a loop with the first lines by "*We are, I am, you are/ by cowardice or courage/ the one who find our way/ back to this scene*" [3], giving positive message of the power of solidarity, and calling on the mass to join the discovering of truth. There is a determined force expressed as well as the hope to redeem the twisted facts. Having completed the whole process of discovery, though a little disappointed at the status in quo of this male-dominated society, a feeling of relief and freedom could be sensed and her rebirth is symbolized.

Plath ends the poem "Daddy" by killing the vampire and shouting out her declaration as "*Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through*" [4]. But was she really through and let pass all her love and hatred to her father and husband? In the previous lines she once said "*So daddy, I'm finally through*" [4] when referring to the moment of her marriage by which she hoped to get over her complex feelings of her father, but later it proved that she was married to a vampire for seven years with the suffering continuing. So it's hardly to make one believe finally the speaker, or Plath herself, with the resentful calling of her father as "*bastard*", really let go all the outrage and oppression and achieve the peace and freedom. Her anguished tone betrayed her heart that she was not through at all. Let the fact tell the truth. In such presumed psychological confinement, Plath finally committed suicide in 1963, shortly after she wrote this poem, which itself dropped a hint of her self-destruction tendency. But taking a different point of view, the self-destruction is another way to achieve the permanent freedom by giving her weary soul to the god and leaving all the tortures on the earth.

Anyway, after the process of suffering and struggling, Rich and Plath have finally reached the freedom they want.

## 5. Summary

The conflict of male authority versus the right of a female to control her own life and to be free of male domination is the everlasting theme in feminism literature. Boiling over the similar bitterness brought by the male manipulation, Rich and Plath, took a stance, active or passive, to protest against patriarchy, and to be free from the patriarchal weight of identity imposed on them in and out of the poems. As a critic writes, “The spirits of the too-early ‘destroyed but not defeated’ Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich—who are living powerfully through their poems—share the triumph as they shared the agonies of the long and difficult battle against patriarchy in American society and the world” [1].

## References

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