

Representation of Plath's Savage Psyche in Her Autobiographical Poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus"

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Since time immemorial, man remains a constant narrator of his own sages and stories. Autobiography is a literary genre in which a poet or writer depicts his/her own experiences of life, sometimes in direct way and sometimes in a symbolic manner. To reveal his/her personal thoughts emotions and visions in front of the readers or audience, the writer has to select, modify and distribute some of his or her life's facts. Augustine's autobiography *Confessions* can be the first example of this genre, but "it was Robert Southey, who for the first time coined the term autobiography in 1809"(Sodhi 37). With the passage of time, it developed in a form of literature and many renowned politicians, writers, singers, actors, and prominent persons have recorded their lives in their autobiographies. Numerous writers have penned down their experiences in their autobiographies, such as Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Prime of Life*(1960), and Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being* (1985). Sylvia Plath is one of the most prominent literary figures in the history of English literature, who depicts her personal experiences in fictional novel, *The Bell Jar*(1963) and in many of her poems.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a group of poets, including Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, W.D. Snodgrass, and Sylvia Plath shared their personal lives with the whole world through their writings. The group of these American poets is called the 'Confessional Poets'. The subject matter of these poets is private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression, and relationships. Lowell's book *Life Studies* was a well-known account

of his life and familial ties and had a significant impact on American poetry. M.H. Abrams's book *A Glossary of Literary Terms* reads confessional poetry as "... a type of narrative and lyric verse... which deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life...." (64). Sylvia Plath under the banner of confessional poetry unveils her pent-up feeling of death and melancholy in her poems and her only autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). A bulk of her poems is inspired by fluidity of her behaviour and her infatuation for suicide. This infatuation for suicide can be seen in two of her famous poems "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy".

"Daddy," a poem by Sylvia Plath written in October 1962, published in *Encounter* magazine in 1963, deals with her personal anger for her father in a very brutal manner. The poem was written just after Plath's separation to her husband, Ted Hughes, another famous English poet who held the post of Poet Laureate from 1984 to 1998, because of another woman. This separation triggered her anger and reversed her psyche for patriarchal society and she penned out her frustration and anger for her father, who died when she was in her growing up period. She confesses and explains her venomous nature in an interview given to BBC which was never broadcast. She speaks:

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 possible 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. (Bloom 46)

Autobiographical elements dominate in many of her poems and her solo novel which includes the events of her personal life through an allegorical protagonist. "Daddy," concerns with the feelings of betrayal and her troubled relationship with her authoritarian father, who

left her when she was eight. Readers find the savage psyche of Plath when she expresses her rage in a childish manner. Opening lines of the poem reveal this frustration for her father where she blames 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.

She spent her whole life in depression and tried to commit suicide thrice and finally achieved her goal to kill herself in her final attempt. Her biography reveals that from the beginning years of her life she was not satisfied with certain things; she did not have fair relation with her mother and early death of her father also shaped her behaviour so rigid, which can be observed through her poems. In this five-line stanza poem, she expresses her intention to kill her father when she says “Daddy, I have had to kill you / you died before I had time-----” World War II made a great impact on Plath, she portrays the Holocaust theme and imagery in her poems; “Daddy” has a direct reference of brutality of Nazis against Jews. She was not a Jewish but was a German, yet was obsessed with Jewish history and culture and she imagines that she is being taken on a train to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen”, and starting to talk like a Jew and feel like a Jew. She paints the Holocaust imagery as:

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Duchau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.

She taunts her father like a school-going child “Panzer-man, panzer-man O you-----”. The result of her unresolved issues with her father leads her to describe the new man, (her husband) who mirrors her father. She tells her dead father that her husband whom she calls a ‘vampire’ who drank her blood for seven years (here she gives reference of her marriage to Ted Hughes which was ended after 7 years) is “a model of you / A man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw.” She does not rest her tongue here, in final lines; she abuses and calls her father a bastard:

There’s a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always knew it was you.

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

In “Lady Lazarus”, readers also find the autobiographical threads of Plath’s life which can be correlated with her three time suicide attempts due to her ambivalent relationship with her mother and early death of her father. Her passive approach for life leads her to commit three suicide trials, finally her third trial resulted her violent death on 11 February 1963. She suffered all her life with loveless relationship with her loved-ones. The emptiness in relations led her to write poems with utmost brutality. Later, her poems were characterized with a specific genre called confessional poetry.

Like many of her other poems “Lady Lazarus” also questions the structural form of universe or human world. The poem “Lady Lazarus” was written in October 1962 and recorded for BBC on 30 October 1962. “Lady Lazarus” appears as the monologue of a woman speaking spontaneously out of her pain and psychic disintegration; it describes close calls with death at the age of ten, twenty, and thirty and these calls can be correlated with Plath’s attempts when she did nearly die from an accident at the age of ten, tried to kill herself at twenty, and purposefully ran her car off the road at thirty. “Lady Lazarus,” a poem about her recurrent suicide attempts opens with the narrator’s declaration that she can conquer the death: “I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it-----”

The poem focuses on three major themes annihilation, rebirth, and female power. Its title refers to the biblical story in which Christ brought Lazarus back from the death. However, Plath portrays a woman who comes back from the death on her own without the help of a male/God figure. She not only has brought herself back from death, but she had done it three times. She utters about her this ability to bring herself back from death and humanizes the divine power.

And I a smiling woman.

I am only thirty

And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade.

Plath was very passionate to take her life with suicide and this passion can be clearly observed in “Lady Lazarus”. In this poem she calls death a mere art “Dying / Is an art, like

everything else. / I do it exceptionally well". Like "Daddy" this poem also has a reference to Holocaust brutality and Nazi world. Her third death, for her skin is compared to "a Nazi lampshade" and her face a "featureless, fine / Jew linen." She speaks now to "O my enemy" and asks "Do I terrify?" Towards the end of this poem, narrator prosecutes not evil Nazis but God as well as Lucifer. God and Lucifer, in fact, may be one here. After her third death, the narrator comes back consumed with vengeance and now makes her victims as insignificant as they had wanted to make her. Their destruction helps to sustain her and it is so easy.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air

To conclude "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", these poems can be analyzed for their dealing with death. Plath displays her savage psyche inspired by her ambivalent relationship with her loved ones. Both the poems guide the readers to Holocaustic imagery of Nazi world and its brutality against Jews. All in all Sylvia Plath can be concluded for her writings about death, depression, loveless relationships, and suicide in an inhuman manner which earned her a sobriquet of 'confessional poet'.

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