

M.A (English)
3rd Sem.
CC-10

Daddy : Critical Appreciation

The poem entitled "Daddy" is one of the most popular poems written by Sylvia Plath. It was written in October 1962 and published posthumously in Ariel 1963. It was the last phase of her life when she separated herself from her husband, Ted Hughes, and began to live in London. She had already lost her father so she was passing a lonely and disappointed life.

In this poem, Sylvia Plath deals with the theme of father's fixation. She has preserved the memory of her dead father for a long time that she felt the need to get rid of him. Her father Otto Plath, a German by nationality, was a great scholar of Biology and German language of Boston University. Her father's death in 1942 was her first ever encounter with death and all her life she remained obsessed with death in some form or the other. Her father is always present as a worship deity in her poetry. Sometimes she is angry with him or sometimes she is pleased with him.

The poem begins with the speaker describing her father in several different ways. In the very first stanza she compares him with a "black shoe". It seems like a strange comparison until she reveals that the speaker herself has felt "like a foot" that has been forced to live thirty years in that shoe. The stanza reveals that the speaker felt not only suffocated by her father, but fearful of him as well. In fact she expresses that her fear of him was so intense

that she was afraid to even breathe or sneeze. The first four stanzas give us the emotions of Sylvia Plath towards her father. As she writes :-

" 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."

Further Sylvia Plath focusses upon her early life and her relation with her father. She knows he comes from a Polish town that was overrun by "wars, wars, wars," but one of her Polish friends has told her that there are several towns of that name. Therefore she cannot uncover his hometown. She also reveals that her father used to speak in German which she could not understand. This idea is contained in the following lines :-

I never could talk to you
The tongue stuck in my jaw
It struck in a barb wire snare
Ich, ich, ich, ich
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you
And the language obscene."

In the last five stanzas, Sylvia Plath describes the Nazi

temper of her father Otto Plath. The Nazi has no faith in the existence of cross of God. Plath thinks that every woman worships a fascist. They treat men and women with brutish force. Plath believes that her father had cruel heart.

Thus, the poem is remarkable for reflecting and blending the private feelings and experiences with universal and public concern. It is certainly a difficult poem for some: its violent imagery, invocation of Jewish suffering, and vitriolic tone can make it a decidedly uncomfortable reading experience. The poem's greatness consists not so much in its horrible theme as in its technical excellence. It makes use of nursery rhyme, rhythm to suggest the innocence and vulnerability of the daughter. Although the pattern of rhyme is irregular, Plath makes use of the same rhyme in all the sixteen five-lined stanzas of the poem. The result is that the poem acquires a weird and unnerving chant preparing us for the final virtual murder of the persecutor. The poem starts with a steady rhythmic beat as is evident in the opening line ("I do not do; I do not do") and culminates in a hysterical and savage outburst: ("Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through"). The final triumphant dance of revenge is executed against the background of nursery rhyme rhythm, colloquial diction and the ritualistic chanting of the word "you". This in collaboration with internal rhyme ("knew/you") and end rhymes ("you/you/you"/"through"),

creates the impression of one psyched in to frenzied behaviour. The energy and force of the speaker is evident in the choice of syllables that explode on articulation more than the lexical meaning, it is the sound of the words that communicates the emotional range of the speaker. The poem has a variety of tones created by broken sentences, incomplete sentences, repetition of certain words, use of German words. The language is plain, the rhythms hypnotic and the content horrible, making the poem Plath's work par excellence. The symbols used by Plath in the poem "Daddy" is also noteworthy. Plath uses the colour black in this poem to symbolize the nature of oppression - the way it prohibits truth, warmth and hope. In the first stanza the speaker identifies her father's memory as a "black shoe" in which she has lived her entire life. It is clear the speaker experiences this "black shoe" as oppressive because inside of it she is barely able to breathe or sneeze.

The telephone here is a symbol of communication. Communication has been a source of anxiety and struggle for the speaker, who cannot speak to her father or express herself in his language, a language she finds oppressive. Her attempts at communication leave her stuttering and even put her in danger. Therefore, the telephone being "off at the root" signals that the speaker no longer desires to communicate with her father.

Thus "Daddy" is one of the finest creation of Sylvia Plath. The words and images are appropriate. The poem is full of personal emotions and mythical images. The poem expresses the mood of frustration of Sylvia Plath.