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Plath's DADDY as a Break-up Letter

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Sylvia Plath's best-known lyric is steeped in the psychology of the Freudian family romance. The poet herself invoked the "Electra complex" of her speaker in a much-quoted BBC interview (Plath 196) and "Daddy" is almost invariably read with a focus on the father–daughter relationship it depicts. Even if one ignores the various biographical para-texts that have accumulated around the poem since its publication in 1963, few readers would deny that the eponymous dead "Daddy" constitutes both its main subject and addressee ("you," "du"). The poem has been categorized accordingly: as an elegy for a lost parent, for instance (Ramazani, Regan), or the prime example of a series of works by Plath that are directly inspired by what, in her journal, she calls her "father-sea-god muse" (Rietz 418).

As obvious as the father's centrality to the poem may be, however, it is still possible to regard the speaker's appeals to him as framed by, and in a sense subordinate to, a more situational and immediately pressing emotional concern. The governing illocutionary act performed by the author-speaker might not be the self-therapeutic mourning of the deceased father, but a different one that only becomes manifest near the end. For although demonstratively reaching out to "Daddy," the poem can also be seen as targeting, and even indirectly addressing, a third human being that appears in the text. Phelps has found traces of a maternal presence in Plath's "Austrian references" (249), but I am referring to the more palpably embodied "model of you" that is introduced in line 64, only three stanzas before the end, the "man in black with a Meinkampf look" in other words (l. 65), "the vampire who said he was you" (l. 72) and who only merges with "Daddy" in the very last lines (ll. 71–80).

Prompted by the "I do, I do" in line 67 and the "seven years" for which Plath has him drink the speaker's blood (l. 74), biographical readings of "Daddy" regularly identify this father-like figure with Ted Hughes, Plath's real-life husband of seven years whose marriage-wrecking affair she noticed by

accidentally answering a phone call by his lover (Kulen and Negev 96–98)—an event relatable in turn to the “voices” that can no longer “worm through” the violently disconnected “black telephone” (ll. 69f). Readings along these lines often draw attention to such salient biographical details as the fact that “Daddy” was written on the day when Hughes finally agreed to getting divorced (Wagner-Martin 28, 243), but most of them nonetheless subordinate the husband’s role in the text to Plath’s much more prominent concern with her father.

Laure de Nervaux, to give an example, goes as far as considering the relevance of Plath first composing “Daddy” on handwritten manuscript pages by Hughes “as if looking for material permeated with her husband’s bodily presence in order to enact a symbolic killing” (§ 27). Yet in the last analysis she still sees his presence in the text as merely one of many “fantasmatic projections” into the void left by the death of Otto Plath:

The poem enacts a dizzying process of metaphoric substitution and deferral which is the very opposite of any form of unveiling. The father is successively compared to “a bag full of god”, a gigantic statue, Hitler, a “black man”, a “devil”, an ogre and a “vampire”. (§ 21)

Placing the husband’s various manifestations in this sequence of signifiers is by no means inappropriate, given that Plath eventually conflates him with “Daddy.” Unlike the other metaphoric father substitutes in the poem, however, the husband occupies an ontological position that is at least temporarily distinct: “a model of you” (l. 64) is not the same as the original, and there are “two” men the speaker claims to have killed (l. 71). Furthermore, the identity of the father-like husband appears to transcend the various shapes that denote him: It is he, rather than the father per se, who forms the tenor behind the mini-sequence of “model,” “man in black,” “vampire” (ll. 64–72). For a few lines at least, the husband is thus granted independent existence as in fact the only living person in the poem apart from the speaker herself.

The husband also happens to constitute the one intradiegetic entity that can plausibly be conceived of as a real-life audience of the poetic speech act. The speaker’s father, after all, “died before I had time” (l. 7) despite being rhetorically apostrophized throughout, and the frequently noted theatricality of the poem (Regan 196, Britzolakis 7) seems at least slightly at odds with a soliloquy aimed exclusively at the speaker herself. In addition, the already mentioned biographical correspondences to Hughes’s infidelity and the couple’s divorce—agreed-to on the very day of the poem’s composition—strongly suggest the familiar textual genre of the break-up note or letter, of a final reckoning meant to put a marital relationship to rest just as much as, and probably more effectively than, a life-long father complex.

As Marjorie Perloff suggests on the basis of precisely the above biographical details, “perhaps the deepest thrust of this poem” consists of “a cry of outrage

against the deceiving husband" (15). Although I would certainly agree with her emphasis on conjugal even more than filial "outrage" as the source of Plath's violent imagery, it does not quite express itself in the form of a "cry." Entirely husbandless and preoccupied with the father as they are, the first twelve stanzas of the poem hardly convey such confrontational spontaneity. Instead, they elaborately prepare the final identification of the Vampire with the paternal corpse—"Daddy, you can lay back now" (l. 75)—in what practically amounts to a passive-aggressive put-down of the husband. All the crying, the speaker makes clear, is reserved for "Daddy," so that even the "fat, black heart" (l. 76), once pierced by the speaker as a van-Helsing-like anti-Cupid, no longer belongs to the vampiric husband. At this point, significantly, the latter collapses into the father again.

In a poem primarily occasioned by her divorce from her husband, then, Plath's speaker retrospectively reduces their stormy marriage to a mere symptomatic episode in her troubled psycho-biography. Even when she actually talks about her marriage, she insists that all that matters about it is her own reenactment of her childhood trauma, which she has already dwelt on at length in the preceding stanzas, namely through the obsessive construction and dismissal of "Daddy" substitutes (ll. 58–63). The husband, by implication, is demoted to a small collection of temporary shadows of her father, an unstable and only fleetingly individuated homunculus whose appeal to her turns out to have been entirely due to her filial pathology, something that her friends, as represented by "the villagers," were always aware of and concerned about (ll. 77–79).

At the same time as putting the husband in his place as a placeholder for the father, the speaker's recounting of her entire life as a reaction to the latter's early death can be seen as an assertion of individual independence: however painful her childhood loss may have been, it also defines her identity without reference to any other living person. Her poetic transformation of the new and hence frightening loss of a husband into the all-too-familiar loss of her "Daddy" may even have a soothing effect on her, as an old wound taking the place of a new one, so to speak. In any case, reading the poem as a break-up letter does not mean denying its elegiac dimension. It means fully acknowledging this dimension whilst simultaneously subordinating it to the marital split that occurs in both the poem and its biographical context.

Reading "Daddy" as an occasional poem, then, functions similarly to a gestalt switch and will rarely conflict with the details of existing interpretations. There may still be interpretive consequences worth exploring, though. If indeed occasioned by the speaker's marital troubles, for instance, her representations of the ever-elusive father might sometimes take their cue from the figure of the husband rather than vice versa. Perhaps it is not only broad stereotypical associations with authoritarian patriarchs, Germans, and hopeless

suffering that give rise to Plath's controversial Jew–Nazi analogy in the childhood sections of "Daddy" (stanzas 7–10; cf. Strangeways regarding the controversy). Her speaker might also be projecting backwards the erotically charged associations she has with the blood-sucking, torture-prone "man in black" (ll. 65f, 72). Here, as in other respects, her filial memories might be blackened by the irrepressible pain of her divorce and thus prepare the appearance of the husband as the unacknowledged driving force behind this particular act of mourning the father.

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