

# SYLVIA PLATH'S 'DADDY'



**Carl Tighe**

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Sometimes the professional writer pushes at the boundaries of the 'normal' and the 'acceptable', to get at a part of life, society, experience and identity that makes us uncomfortable. But even then, that does not necessarily mean what is revealed is exactly autobiographical. Sometimes the persona narrating the poem or story, giving us a particular experience, is not exactly the same as the author...

Sylvia Plath (1942-63). Born Boston USA, educated at Smith College, won a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge, England. She met the poet Ted Hughes (1930-98) while she was a Cambridge student and secretly married him in 1957. She gave up her academic career the following year and shortly afterwards had her first child.

Her poetry is about her experience as a woman – as a daughter and as a wife - and as a would-be suicide. In total we know about four suicide attempts. It seems now that her final attempt was probably not genuine. Unfortunately her plan to be discovered went wrong and she died. Her death gave many of her very impressive and commanding final poems an edgy feel which they might not have otherwise had.

Her first collection *The Colossus and Other Poems* was published in 1960: her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* appeared in 1963 and dealt with one of her suicide attempts. She committed suicide before any of her other work could appear: posthumous volumes included *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1971), *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1979), and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982).

Plath is usually painted as a feminist martyr to the cool brutality and serial infidelity of her husband, the poet Laureate, Ted Hughes. Her gravestone in St Thomas's church in

Heptonstall, Hebden Bridge, describing her as Sylvia Plath-Hughes, was regularly defaced by feminists who wanted Hughes' name removed. Eventually Hughes had the gravestone taken away altogether. Her grave is now unmarked save for small cairns of stones and flowers left by those who know where it is located.

The poem 'Daddy' dates from 1962 when she began to fantasise her father as a Nazi and to see herself as a kind of Jew: while neither of these things was 'true', the ideas helped her get at some aspects of the relationship. Her father Dr Otto Plath was no Nazi. He had in fact fled Germany just before the war. He was an ornithologist, entomologist, ichthyologist and expert on bees who taught as professor of Biology at Boston University. He died when Sylvia was eight or nine years old. However, he is clearly part of her problem and she uses him as a kind of extended metaphor, a stalking horse for what ails her.

The poem was published in *Ariel* (1965). The fantasy in the poem is that she herself contained her dead father, like a woman possessed by a demon. She actually refers to herself as a vampire and by this I think she means in the original sense of the word, as a female, a kind of revenant spirit or possessed of a dead spirit. To be free of her father, he has to be released somehow, possibly through her repeated suicide attempts.<sup>1</sup> Suicide clearly interested her: but she did not view herself or the idea of suicide without irony and a cool sense of detachment. In one of her poems she describes herself as 'Lady Lazarus':

I have done it again  
One year in every ten  
I manage it –

Later in the same poem she says:

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else,  
I do it exceptionally well.

It is possible that a near death experience was also an ambiguous way for her to be closer to her father. In a BBC reading of the poem she referred to the poem's narrator: 'She has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it'. Clearly, for her, Plath the narrator and Plath the poet are not the same person, though the one grows out of the other. It is possible to hear Plath reading the poem: Sylvia Plath reads 'Daddy': [www.openculture.com](http://www.openculture.com).

While Hughes' long silence on the subject of their marriage, his infidelity and her suicide generally did him no favours in the eyes of feminists, over the years a more balanced

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<sup>1</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study in Suicide* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1971), p.54.

view of their marriage and her seriously flawed personality has emerged. Erich Homberger, for example, said:

Those who only knew the brisk, polished, formidable Sylvia knew the least of her...<sup>2</sup>

It seems Sylvia was 'a woman of razor-sharp sensitivities, of prodigious gift and even more debilitating self-doubts, depression and self-defeating rages.

In this marriage, Sylvia Plath's rudeness and destructive rages, her troubled relationship to her father and frustration with her own biology seem to have been the cause of Hughes' infidelity rather than the result, and this in turn contributed to her final suicide attempt. On the other hand, it is now acknowledged that Hughes was attracted to women who were interested in suicide. His first wife, his son and one of his lovers all committed suicide.

Although for many years it was fashionable to read her poems as autobiographical on one level or another, over the last decade it has become possible to see this is not simply the case. Her problems were the starting point for her poems. She used the facts of her life as the basis for the expression of something that went far beyond her own problems. Her struggle as a professional writer was to somehow get beyond her own ego, to voice something more than autobiography. As Seamus Heaney put it:

When this happens, sound and meaning rise like a tide out of language to carry individual utterance away upon a current stronger and deeper than the individual could have anticipated.<sup>3</sup>

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**'DADDY'**  
by  
**Sylvia Plath**

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.

Daddy, I had to kill you.  
You died before I had time –  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

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<sup>2</sup> E. Homberger, 'Sylvia Plath: a Life under the Bell Jar', *The Times Literary Supplement* (11 March 1988), p.17.

<sup>3</sup> S. Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1989), 148.

Ghastly statue with one grey toe  
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
Scraped flat by the roller  
Of wars, wars, wars.  
But the name of the town is common  
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.  
So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.  
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen,  
I began to talk like a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna  
Are not very pure or true.  
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck  
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,  
With your Luftwaffe , your gobbledygoo.  
And your neat moustache  
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –

Not God but a swastika  
So black no sky could squeak through.  
Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any the less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said, I do, I do.  
So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two –  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.

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.

## NOTES

- Line 7: before she had time to do what?
- Gypsies, Jews, Poles, women – the outsiders and traditional victims?
- Is her biology a kind of Fascist imposition?
- What do we understand by the word 'fascism'?
- Fascism here lies in the power of her father over her as a daughter, but also in her own choice in choosing a man just like him to marry.
- 'I do, I do, I do' – her marriage?
- 'Achoo' rhymes with, among several other things, 'Ach, du'.
- 'If I've killed one man, I've killed two' – meaning her father / husband figure?
- Ambiguous last line: 'through' meaning, as in telephone, or finished, or just I've finally put you behind me?
- How is this poem relevant to the idea of professional development or writing towards a professional standard?
- In what sense is this professional writing?