

German Images in "Daddy"

Sylvia Plath, an outstanding poet with a short life span, was born in Boston, Massachusetts and brought up in the U.S. Plath studied as well as lived in England for years. She was an offspring of an ethnic German father who was born in Poland and a mother who was a first-generation American of Austrian. However, Sylvia Plath's father, Otto Plath, passed away when she was ten due to the undiagnosed diabetes. In October, 1962, shortly before her death, Sylvia Plath composed a poem, "Daddy," in memory of her father. Sylvia Plath might be regarded as a father-hating daughter when people read this poem at the very first time; however, despite her father's early death, Sylvia Plath's strong admiration toward her father can be seen through her words. Although Sylvia Plath had never lived in Germany, the poem, "Daddy," written mainly in English contains several German words and many German images. It is noticeable that through the ethnical symbols, Sylvia Plath shows a sense of closeness toward her father.

To begin with, Sylvia's father, Otto Plath, was an ethnic German who was brought up in Poland and assumedly spoke German as his mother language, and his background is revealed in line 15 and line 16, "Ach du./ In the German tongue, in the Polish town." Therefore, Sylvia Plath applies some German words to set a different atmosphere which English is unable to present in "Daddy." For instance, line 15: "Ach,

du” expresses affinity which Sylvia Plath longed for from her father. In German, *du* and *Sie* both stand for you. However, *Sie* is used to call someone you are not familiar with. In contrast, *du* is used to call someone who you are close to. Besides, in line 27: “ich, ich, ich, ich,” the word *ich* is pronounced as [iç]. From line 26 to line 28, Sylvia Plath writes that “It stuck in a barb wire snare/ Ich, ich, ich, ich/ I could hardly speak.” Right before the line, “I could hardly speak,” Sylvia Plath here uses *ich* in German repeatedly instead of *I* in English because *ich* is aspirate at the end syllable and gives people a sense of lengthening and sighing to emphasize this nondescript feeling to this situation in which she felt like stuck in a barb snare and could barely speak. In addition, “Ich, ich, ich, ich” in line 27 resonates to the line 29, “I thought every German was you.” When German people come to mind, the German language narrowly follows. In brief, Sylvia Plath applies some German words in “Daddy” to gain closeness to her long-dead father and creates an atmosphere which could not be copied by using English.

Furthermore, Sylvia Plath applies some images linking with German in “Daddy.” She mentions Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen, or the death camps established during WWII, in line 33. Besides, in line 65, Hitler is mentioned by his autobiography and manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. These images link with German, such as wars, the death camps, and Hitler, and especially focus on the time of World War II. Line 16 to line 18,

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“In the German tongue, in the Polish town/ Scraped flat by the roller/ Of wars, wars, wars” suggest that Otto Plath might encounter WWII in person. Born in peaceful times, shown in both line 35 and line 40, Sylvia Plath views herself as a Jew. It is believed that Otto Plath’s early death brought a heavy strike upon Sylvia Plath, so she associates the sorrow as well as a sense of betrayal of Otto Plath’s early death with Hilter’s cruel deeds done during the 1930s.

In conclusion, through “Daddy,” readers can clearly see the admiration and memory of a daughter toward a long-dead father. With the aid of some German words and images, Sylvia Plath relates her emotions with her father’s personal background to strengthen the bonds between she and her father in a strong expression.

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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 have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off the 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.
I think I may well be 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 mustache
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.

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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 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.