

Her Love and Hatred to Her Father:  
The Contradiction in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

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## Sylvia Plath's Love and Hatred to Her Father:

### The Contradiction in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

Sylvia Plath, as an American poet, novelist, and short story writer, has a great influence on American literary history, renowned for her tragic and death-related writing style (Zhang). Especially her famous poem, "Daddy," attracts readers from time to time to visit the gravestone of Sylvia Plath's father, Otto Emile Plath, in America ("Sylvia Plath" *Wikipedia*). In this poem "Daddy," Plath uses heavy and dreadful wording to show her hatred to her father as well as the agony in her miserable life. However, in the light of deconstruction, what is seen literally in this poem does not refer to what was really in Plath's mind. While her words want to "kill" her father (Line 6), Plath herself indeed deeply loved him, which can be perceived in the poem between the lines. And it is the contradiction between her love and hatred to her father that present how she struggled with her dead father and her husband in her real life and how her destiny inevitably came to an end with suicide.

If we approach Plath's poem "Daddy," according to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction process of "double reading" (Dobie 148), in the first process of going through the direct meanings of the poem, the hate feeling is everywhere in the poem expressed by the vivid words; but just on the second reading, the love feeling can be easily discovered from an alternative incompatible view. The "binary opposition" between the love and hatred to her father, therefore, is formed (Dobie 142).

First, the title of the poem "Daddy" shows great contradiction to the whole poem. A. Alvarez says that "the poem, despite everything, is 'a love poem'" (qtd in Marsack, 46), because "Daddy" is often a word used in a more intimate way than "Father." If Plath really hated her father in the extreme, she would never use this word "Daddy." Plath is self-betrayed by the first word "Daddy" just at the beginning of the poem; it obviously shows that in fact, she loved her father.

Then, the form of the whole poem also shows the inner conflict in Sylvia Plath herself. Robyn Marsack observes that "[the poem] never loses its incantatory power, its nursery-rhyme swing" (46). And that "the constant repetitions, like a stuck record needle, serve to emphasize the drama rather than slow the action" and creates much tension in the poem and strengthens Plath's hate feeling to her father as well (46). However, it is the style of the structure that contradicts the content in the poem. Zhang Fen-ling in "The Ariel in the Bell Jar: Sylvia Plath and her Poems" notes that the poem is written in a tone of a little girl who has the Electra complex which can be

seen in the repetitive structure of the words, the short and simple structured lines in the poem, and the same rhyme (/u/) from the beginning to the end in the poem (Zhang). Zhang argues that the structure points out the immaturity of a little girl and the dependency on her father, which can be explained in the way that if Plath had no dependency on her father, she could never have written down those similar structures in the poem. Besides, normally, if a girl hates a person who she is talking to, she will not use repetitive structure of language to show how she feels because the structure in the poem is rather playful than serious. Therefore, if Plath really feared and loathed her father, she would never use repetitiveness like a little girl to show her dislike.

As for the content of "Daddy," the poem contradicts itself much indeed. In this poem, no matter what words Plath uses to show her hatred toward her father, there are always clues to be found to oppose what she has mentioned in the poem. And the way she contradicts herself in this poem can also be seen at the way she was mentally disordered in her life.

The metaphor of the shoe (as her father) and the foot (as herself) at the beginning of the poem also contradicts Plath's hate feeling toward her father. She wants to stop the relationship with her father by saying that her father can not be a black shoe any more, for she, like a poor and white foot, has already stuck in it for thirty years and even dares not to breathe or achoo (Line 3-5). However, the figure of the years for how long she has stayed in that shoe, "thirty" (years), has secretly exposed her unwillingness to run away from the relationship, because if she really did not want to live in the shoe, she could just have escaped from the shoe thirty years ago instead of writing down this poem, complaining about her suffering from being in it thirty years later. For the past thirty years, she still loved her father deeply.

Then, what follows from line six to fifteen is also expressed in a very contradictory and somehow confusing way. At first, Plath clearly declares, "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time" (Line 6-7), but very shortly in line fourteen she just says "I used to pray to recover you." And in between, no matter what she describes, whether the words are terrible or bizarre, the three sentences do evidently make a violent contradiction with one another. If she really hated her father to the degree that she could have killed him, it is, however, unnecessary to find him back in the end.

Then in the following from line sixteen to sixty-five, the Jew-German relationship is the main subject, also for which the poem "Daddy" is well-known. The German/Jewish metaphor in this poem points out not simply the hatred in the victim-criminal relationship but also the inescapable fate of Jews in this relationship, which implicitly reveals Plath's contradictory feelings to her father, who was a German.

From line sixteen, Plath starts to look for her father but in vain: "I never could tell where you put your foot, your root, / I never could talk to you" (line 22-23). But contradictorily, she then compares herself to a Jew and her father a German to show her fear for her father. Even though she could not find her father "in the freakish Atlantic," "in the Nauset," and "in the Polish town" (line 11, 14, 16), she still considers every German as her father, whom she could never escape from. She again and again tries to run away from her father, but again and again she pulls herself back to him and to the "snare" she sets for herself (line 26).

In the following, she considered herself to be a Jew in the lines "I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew," and "I may be a bit of Jew" (line 29-30, 40), in contrast to the horrible image of her father as a German in the lines "I have always been scared of you, / With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo. . ." (line 41-45). In these lines, she emphasizes her subordinate status to her father to show her terror of him. Nevertheless, these lines also show her passively accepting the fate of being a Jew (Marsack 48). Compared to a Jew, she can do nothing to change the situation where the society has already denied the existence of her great anger. Therefore, in the end she contradictorily indulges herself into this tragic character of a Jew. Besides, this "brutal relationship of tyrant and victim" is even strengthened by the sound "Jew" and "you" everywhere in the poem (Marsack 47).

Plath also contradicts herself in the line "Even woman adores a Fascist" (line 48). She, as a woman, although comparing her father as a brute, still "adores" him, which shows that she has already entirely accepted to be the oppressed and even behaved just like the oppressed. In other words, on one hand, she is annoyed with her fate stuck in her father's "Fascist" snare (line 48); on the other hand, she quite enjoys it.

And then Plath refers in the poem to her own experiences about her attempted suicide at twenty and her marriage with her husband, Ted Hughes; all of her descriptions in the poem also reveal that subconsciously she was trapped by her father and her husband and especially herself.

In line fifty-eight and fifty-nine, she mentions that at twenty she committed suicide to get "back, back, back" to her father, but was prevented by others. However, after others saved her from death, from her going back to her father, Plath still made a model of her father to keep herself haunted by her father's image (line 64-65). And then she found this model, her husband, to whom she said "I do, I do" (line 67), who kept imprisoning her like "a love of the rack and the screw" (line 66). And by the act that she continuously went back to find love from her father, she seemed to be willing to fall into this cage.

Moreover, in the final ten lines, Plath portrays the relationship between her and

her husband and combines the images of her father and her husband into a terrifying creature, “the vampire,” to demonstrate how the two men affected her (line 72). And Plath clearly knows that she could not get rid of the trauma her father’s death caused at all (Zhang), but she could not stop loving her father and her husband, so she just lets herself collapse in the end to show the painful struggle between the hatred and love by saying “I’m through” (line 80).

Like a little girl, Plath tried hard to pursue the lost love of her father (Zhang), and then she married her husband in the adulthood. Ironically, in the end, it is this enduring love to her father that led to her tragedy. She desperately wanted to find love in her husband; however, the disloyalty of her husband, like her father’s death, again struck her. Therefore, finally, in the poem, she is through, exhaustedly capitulated by the affection which brings not simply happiness but also severe pain to her, resulting in her contradictory feelings to her father (Marsack 48).

Last but not least, there are totally eighty lines in this poem “Daddy.” If Plath had no feeling to her daddy at all, she would have never written down the poem. The length of the poem betrays Plath’s great love to her father.

In conclusion, a deconstructive reading of the poem “Daddy” shows some significant features, including “sliding, abyssal, and undecidable.” And all of the contradictory feelings appearing in the lines prove Plath’s great hatred and love to her beloved daddy. Nevertheless, because of the characteristic of deconstruction that the meaning in the text is interconnected among “textuality,” “rhetoricity,” and “intertextuality” (Leitch 21), apart from what was discussed in the paper, this poem can still be analyzed in different contexts, and the analyses may also reflect distinct views both on Plath and the poem itself.

## Works Cited

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Appendix 1

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.

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.