

DADDY BY SYLVIA PLATH

Sylvia Plath's father was O. E. Plath (full name Otto Emil Plath). He was a German-American author; professor of biology and the German language at Boston University and an entomologist. He is popularly known as Otto Plath: and, of course, as Sylvia Plath's father. He is notable for being the probable subject of Plath's one of the most famous poems, Daddy. Otto Plath was born on 13th April, 1885 in Grabow, Germany. His father, Theodore Plath, emigrated to America when Otto Plath was 15 years old: due to lack of employment in Germany. Theodore Plath's grandparents were already settled in Wisconsin. Otto Plath began to become ill in 1935: shortly after the birth of his only son, Warren. Sylvia was the first child of the Plaths, born in 1932, and the elder sister of Warren. After inaccurately self-diagnosing his illness as lung cancer: he refused to seek medical care. In 1940, Otto Plath saw a doctor due to an infection on his foot. It was diagnosed as an advanced stage of diabetes. He died soon after in November, 1940 in Massachusetts.

Otto Plath's daughter, Sylvia, was just eight years old at the time of his death. (Even though the girl persona in Daddy says 'I was ten when they buried you.') The death of her father was thought to have been a traumatic event in her life. Otto Plath is thought to be the subject of his daughter's poem Daddy. Plath committed suicide on 11th February, 1963. The poem was written on 12th October 1962, and published posthumously in 'Ariel' in 1965.

In a reading prepared for BBC radio, she said of this poem: that it is a poem spoken by a girl with a strong Electra complex. Her father died while she, the 10 years old girl-persona speaking in the poem, thought he was God. Her case is further complicated by the fact that her father was a Nazi too: while her mother was very probably partly Jewish. In the daughter these two strains are mingled together. She has to act out the whole episode once over again before she can be free of it.

The poem Daddy is a very strong expression of resentment against patriarchal domination of women and of violence of all kinds for which human beings are responsible. The speaker expresses her rage against her daddy, but daddy himself stands for the male members of society. 'Daddy' is as well a symbol of more general forces and agents of oppression, like reason, science, violence, war, Germany and Hitler: and all other inhuman agents of oppression. The speaker is also a symbol of the creative feminine principle: humility, love and humanity in general.

The poem, Daddy can also be analysed from the psychological point of view. It is an outpouring of neurotic anger through the channel of poetic creativity: some sort of purgation of the negative emotions of anger and hatred. The poem is also remarkable for its allusions and images. Though it is slightly autobiographical, the poem must be psychologically and symbolically interpreted: without limiting it to the poetess's own life and experience only.

The poem begins with an angry tirade (series of abuses) against daddy: 'You do not do, you do not do', 'black shoe', 'I have had to kill you'. The name-calling continues: daddy is a ghastly figure, a Frisco seal, a German, Hitler himself, a man-crushing engine, a tank driver ('panzer-man'), a "swastika" (symbol of the Nazis), a 'devil', a 'vampire': and so on. The speaker has lived for 30 years,

'poor and white', trampled by daddy's foot: as in the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. Trampled by daddy's foot, she has not been able to breathe or express her emotions, or do anything, for example: simply sneeze. Her tongue is stuck in her jaw, or in the snares of barbed wires. She repeats the German word 'ich' meaning 'I' four times: as if she feels her daddy, an egoistic megalomaniac, is standing before her. She is always scared of daddy and the idea of the infamous Nazi concentration camps in Auschwitz, Dachau and so on. She feels like an oppressed Jew herself. She feels as if she is crushed under a roller: as the Polish were by the Germans in 1941. The names of the Polish cities vary: but the oppression continues.

She is afraid of and repulsed by the German language: which seems "obscene" and vulgar to her. Moreover, to the girl-persona speaking in the poem Daddy, every person of German origin seems to be her daddy. She remembers the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Dachau, Belsen, where thousands of Jews were killed. She feels as if she were a descendant of a "gipsy ancestress". She is afraid of her daddy's neat Hitlerian moustache and his bright blue Aryan eyes. The image of a boot on the face comes to her troubled mind. The girl-persona lays emphasis on the brutishness of her daddy:

'... the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.'

She thinks that her daddy has a brutish, black heart.