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A Study on the Theme of Parent-child Relationships in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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**“How Does Sylvia Plath Present the Theme of Parent-child Relationships in Her Poetry?”**



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Much of Sylvia Plath's poetry was extremely autobiographical in nature and yet still, by drawing from her own personal experiences as a woman, the poet's writing touches on countless global experiences to which many female readers might still relate to in this modern day. Arguably, one of the most prevalent examples of this phenomenon comes in the form of a common theme throughout much of Plath's poetry; that of parental relationships. Plath wrote of her own experiences of being both a daughter and a mother in poems such as *Daddy*, *Medusa*, *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, *You're*, and *Morning Song*, offering the different perspectives of each side of the parental relationships. Through these five poems, Plath explores the themes of oppression and emotional conflict from the perspective of a daughter, as well as the themes of maternal instinct, insecurity and expectation from the perspective of a parent.

*Daddy* and *Medusa*, two of Plath's best known poems, share similar themes in that both are written from the viewpoint of a daughter directly addressing a parent whom she wishes to exorcise from her life. The differences between the poems lie in the fact that in *Medusa*, the daughter figure is addressing her mother; whilst in *Daddy* the daughter addresses her father. Whilst both the parental figures in *Medusa* and *Daddy* suffocate their daughters, the father in *Daddy* does so with strict hierarchical oppression, as opposed to the mother in *Medusa*, who smothers her daughter with overtly caring attention, constantly involving herself in every aspect of her daughter's life. Within the context of the time period in which the poems were written, it is impossible to ignore that *Medusa* was composed only days after *Daddy*, (Tresca, 2020), inextricably linking the two as a pair to be compared when studying either. The contrast in tone between the two texts is obvious from first reading the

title. Plath chose to make the title of each poem the intended recipient, but whilst one narrative speaker addresses her father with the affectionate, childish name “daddy”, the other refers her mother “Medusa”; alluding to the hideous and dangerous monster from Greek mythology. From the difference in these titles the reader gains an understanding that often the over-attentive smothering oppression depicted in *Medusa* can have more negative effects than the harsh and obvious oppression in *Daddy*.

On first glance at the title of *Daddy*, the reader may assume that the narrator is a child, in that the name “daddy” is usually associated with what small children call their fathers. However, as the poem continues, it becomes evident through the use of explicit language such as “bastard” and the gruesome themes of Nazism and death, that the poetic voice is in fact an adult. The title, “daddy” takes on a new connotation, displaying the way in which the daughter almost regresses into a child-like state when talking to her father, cementing the dynamic in that he is to be respected and she is to listen. Indeed, the father figure in *Daddy* is portrayed as oppressive, being described as “marble-heavy” and “so black no sky could peak through”. The connotations of the colour “black” include a sense of dark and sinister, suggesting that the poetic voice also finds her father to be malicious. The metaphor of “no sky” being able to “peak through” suggests that his presence diminishes any joy or beauty from his daughter’s life. This effect is reinforced by the names she calls him: “bastard” and “vampire”, as well as her proclamation that “[she has] always been scared of [him]”, connoting the hatred, stemmed from fear, that the narrator feels towards her father. Similarly, Plath employs vivid imagery to convey the manner in which the poetic voice in *Medusa* feels subjugated by her mother, in that her mother is “paralyzing”, “squeezing the

breath from her”, leaving her “dead and moneyless, overexposed, like an X-ray”. The word “paralyzing” connotes that the poetic voice feels as though her mother is preventing her from moving forward in life. As well as this, the choice of the adjective “moneyless” suggests that the narrator feels her mother drains her of her freedom, in the sense that financial stability is often viewed as a means of being self-sufficient, therefore, by being robbed of this, one ultimately has their independence stripped from them. Beyond this, however, the daughter feels that her mother’s obsessive attachment to her daughter will one day leave the narrator “dead”. This paints the mother’s relatively well-intentioned entrapment of her daughter, driven by loving attention, as far more sinister than the father’s oppression in *Daddy*, as throughout *Daddy*, there is never the suggestion that the poetic voice’s father will be the one to cause her death.

In turn, the need for the narrative voice to be free of her mother in *Medusa* comes across as far more desperate than the desire of the narrator to cut ties with her father in *Daddy*. In *Medusa*, Plath employs the metaphor of an “Atlantic cable” to represent the bond between mother and daughter. The term “Atlantic” suggests that the bond is so strong that it can stretch across oceans; oceans that, presumably, the daughter put between herself and her mother in order to free herself from her mother’s domineering parenting. Yet, despite the deliberate distance from one another and the daughters attempts to “escape”, the cable is described as being “in a state of miraculous repair” connoting that the poetic voice has attempted frenziedly to cut herself off. In fact, the daughter figure in *Medusa* finds it necessary to go as far as to reject even basic physical necessities such as nourishment from her mother, as evidenced when she exclaims she “shall take no bite of [her mother’s] body”,

(Tresca, 2020), which is described as the holy “Communion wafer”, which suggests that the poetic voice will stop at nothing, even rejecting God, in order to free herself from her mother.

Plath continues to explore the theme of parents’ inescapable presence in *The Moon and the Yew Tree*. Even in the land of the conscience of the poetic voice, the most private of places, the offspring cannot avoid their parents, as “the moon is [their] mother”, and the yew tree is presumably their father, deduced from the way it’s “eyes lift... and find the moon”, which suggests romantic attraction. The title, combined with the fact that roughly half of the four stanza poem is dedicated solely to describing the moon and the yew tree, results in the parents becoming the dominating centre of the whole text, reflecting the way in which they are central figures in the reader’s mind. By employing the use of the auxiliary verb “were” in the line “as if I were God” instead of the definite verb “am”, Plath highlights the way in which the narrator feels as if she is not in control of even her own mind. By presenting the mother and father figure immediately in the next stanza, Plath suggests that this feeling of lack of autonomy comes from the claustrophobic presence of their parents. Before the “clouds... flowering blue and mystical”, the “stars” and the “delicate feet” of the “saints” are described, the narrator’s focus is expended only on the moon and the yew tree. In these first stanzas, language such as “headstones” connotes death, or otherwise “upset” and “despair”. This implicates that all the narrator’s parents bring them only negative emotions and thoughts. Then, proceeding the first three stanzas, when the moon and the yew tree are no longer the focus of attention, the narrator is able to recognise the mystical beauty, reflecting the way in which being free of their parents presence is a reprieve for the poetic

voice, allowing them to enjoy their surroundings. Yet, this fleeting positivity is cut short with the sharp sentence “the moon sees nothing of this”, which connotes the critical nature of the mother figure in this poem, as she is unable to identify any of the beauty. The final two lines of the poem circle back the focus back to the moon and the yew tree, and immediately the language returns to a tone of darkness and danger with “blackness and silence”. Plath’s structural choice to place the only positive imagery in the beginning of the third stanza creates the impression that for the poetic voice, the presence of their parents blocks the beauty of the world.

Whilst the narrator’s resentful emotions towards their parents is unwavering in *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, Plath portrays the narrator’s relationships with their parents in *Medusa* and *Daddy* to be more complicated. In fact, whilst evidently hating him, the narrative voice in *Daddy* seems also to idolize her father, in such a way that ensures the power dynamic between the two remains in his favour. She describes him as “a bag full of God”, suggesting his omnipotence. However, Plath’s decision to compare the man to items as opposed to people: “statue”, “vampire”, “black shoe” and “swastika”, suggests that the narrative voice views her father as something not human. The use of the colour “black” to describe the father in the poem is repeated when he is described by his daughter as a “black shoe in which [she has] lived like a foot”. The simile at first gives the reader the impression once again that the narrative voice feels suffocated, but on further inspection, it could also allude to the idiomatic expression ‘big boots to fill’, which would insinuate that whilst on some level she despises her father, she also feels a need to live up to the standards he sets and wishes to make him proud of her. Plath also suggests that the poetic voice does not want to

possess the feelings of resentment she holds against her father when she tells him “daddy, I have to kill you”. It can be assumed that the verb “kill” is not meant literally, but is in fact a metaphor for how the narrative voice feels she must cut ties with her father, to save herself from oppression. However, the phrase “have to” displays that this is not something she wants to do, but feels she must for her own good, portraying that she perhaps wishes her relationship with her father was not the way it is. The duality of resentment and instilled respect for one’s own parent is displayed clearly when the father figure in *Daddy* is described by his daughter as “God” and then “not God but a swastika”. Overall, Plath’s use of paradoxical metaphors in *Daddy*, as well as the language used when the poetic voice describes her father, represents the internal struggle that women of her time may have experienced in their relationships with their fathers. In 1962, when the poem was written, misogyny was prevalent in global society and many women felt oppressed by men, often times their own fathers. The idea that despite the amount of pain a family member may cause, one must still retain an almost mandatory love for them, is one many people related to at that time and still relate to now.

Similarly, the poetic voice in *Medusa* seems to retain conflicting emotions surrounding her mother. Plath’s chose to paint the mother as rather a martyr through repeated allusions to Judo-Christian symbols that portray her as Christ-like; being referred to as a “God-ball” with “Jesus hair” (Tresca, 2020). She is also described as having a “red stigmata at the very centre”, which not only links her to Christ, but also evokes a sense of sympathy within the reader, in that the mother is in some way suffering. The location of the wound, “at the very centre” can be interpreted to mean that the mother is hurt at her very core; emotionally,



and perhaps offers an explanation for her behaviour towards her daughter. The narrator's acknowledgment of this suggests that on some level she understands her mother's behaviour and perhaps, on a deeper level, is either consciously or subconsciously trying to find a way to forgive her, despite still holding resentment towards her.

Beyond idolizing her father in *Daddy*, Plath also suggests that the daughter in the poem relies heavily on her father to guide her perception of life. There is the sense that she views her father as a wise man who can teach her life lessons, as evidenced by the image of him "[standing] at the blackboard", like a teacher. The narrative voice continues to describe how she "thought every German was [her father]", which indicates his prevalence in her everyday life in that, even when he is not present, he continues to be at the forefront of her mind in the people she meets. From here, she ponders with the phrase "I think I may well be a Jew". Not only is this an insight into just how oppressed the daughter feels, so much so as to compare it to the Holocaust, but also the way in which she centers her identity and perception of herself around him. The phrase "I think" is unsure, suggesting lack of confidence, but she seems to assume that because her father is a "German", she must be a "Jew", and perhaps if she viewed him differently, she in turn would view herself differently as well. The integral role of the narrative voice's father in her life is reinforced when the reader learns that he passed away and was "buried" when she was ten years old, and as a consequence, at twenty years old she "tried to die and get back, back to [him]". This portrays the relationship between the two in a different light, in that despite the fact that her father's presence in her life was an uncomfortable and distressing one, life without his overbearing presence is so unfamiliar that when it was gone she yearned for it back, so

much that she would take her own life to be with him again. When the suicide attempt proved unsuccessful, Plath suggests that the poetic voice attempted to emulate her father's presence in her life when she "made a model of [him]". This line, when combined with the lines "I do, I do" that connote marriage, allow the reader to deduce that the narrator intentionally chose to marry a man like her father, in order for her new husband to act as a substitute replacement to fill the void he left.

In the poem *Morning Song*, Plath's narrative voice speaks from the perspective of a parent, namely: a mother who has just given birth, and is directly addressing her new-born. Initially, the experience of parenthood displayed in this poem differs greatly from those depicted in *Medusa* and *Daddy*. *Morning Song* gives the reader an insight into the mind of a mother who does not possess the same smothering bond that the mother in *Medusa* does towards her child, but instead retains a sense of disconnect towards her baby. The first interaction recounted between the baby and an adult is not, as one might expect, the interaction between mother and child, but is instead when "the midwife slapped [the baby's] footsoles". There is no emotional reaction from the narrator, not joy at the sight of her child nor worry at the manner at the rough way in which it is "slapped". Indeed, upon hearing the first cry of the child, the poetic voice recalls how the sound "took its place among the elements". This informs the reader that the sound of her child's wails are neither distressing nor, in fact, significant in any way to the narrator, but instead fade into the background. Then, more explicitly, the narrator tells the child "I'm no more your mother than the cloud that distills a mirror", revealing the complete sense of detachment that the mother feels, that despite having given birth to this child, something as wavering and intangible as a cloud

could just as easily feel a more maternal connection. However, after the third stanza, halfway through the six stanza poem, the tone shifts. The mother hears the baby's tiny "moth-breath", barely audible, and in contrast to the way she seemingly ignored the child's earlier cries, she "wake[s] to listen". Then, the child utters "one cry" and the poetic voice proceeds to "stumble from bed". Here, it seems that despite the mother's earlier reaction to her new-born, subconscious maternal instincts have applied themselves, and the mother is all at once attentive to her baby. When studying this alongside *Medusa*, Plath seems to imply here that it is inescapable (even for a woman who apparently possesses no maternal instincts at first) for a mother to be completely absorbed in her child. From this, the reader can see how this natural attentive instinct can turn easily turn to the extreme obsessive attachment presented in *Medusa*, despite the disparities between the two mothers in the respective poems.

In *Morning Song*, Plath also explores the lack of confidence that mothers often feel in their role when the poetic voice describes herself as "cow-heavy". Ostensibly, this description applies simply on a physical level, referring to the weight women gain from being with child. However, this self-deprecating comment can also connote how insecure mothers can feel in all aspects of having and raising a child. Plath also explores this in the poem *You're*. Once again written in direct address, the narrator in *You're* is an expecting mother talking to her unborn child. In this poem, the narrator finds the idea of her baby and looming motherhood something unfamiliar, describing it as "vague as a fog" and "farther off than Australia". In order to better understand what lies in her future, she attempts to draw similarities between the baby and things she already knows, such as "owls", a "clown" and even the

extinct “dodo”. The fact that she feels she knows more about a dodo, a bird she has never seen, than about her awaiting role as a mother displays how out-of-depth she feels. By including this insecurity in two poems centering around motherhood, Plath shows the reader that it is a common feeling amongst new mothers, and this insecurity often follows them later as they wonder whether or not they are doing right by their child or being an adequate maternal figure. Whilst the a baby or pregnancy is never explicitly mentioned in *You’re*, the context of when it was composed, whilst Plath was pregnant with her first child, allows the reader to assume this. Reinforcing this interpretation is the fact that, every aspect of the poem seems to connote pregnancy. The title itself is a contraction of the words ‘you’ and ‘are’, whilst the structure is comprised of two nine-line stanzas, reflecting the nine month gestation period (Spacey, 2019). The poet’s decision to allude to pregnancy with every part of the poem reflects the way that, once a woman becomes a mother, her life becomes centred around her child, and everything she does from that moment on is inextricably involved in her duty to her offspring and her role in its upbringing. This is comparable to the mother figure in *Medusa*, who is so obsessed with mothering her child that she takes it to an extreme that has negative effects.

*You’re* can also be compared *Daddy*, when the poetic voice calls her unborn child “high-riser”. There comes ,with this nickname, the connotation that the mother already has great expectations of her child, despite the child not having seen the light of day yet. This effect is further reinforced when she calls the baby “bent-backed Atlas”, alluding to the Greek Titan who was burdened with the responsibility of holding up the sky for eternity. In fact, in the field of psychology, ‘Atlas’ is used to refer to a child who has excessive responsibilities

(Spacey, 2019). This reflects the way in which the narrator in *Daddy* felt that she had to live up to her father's standards and expectations of her, and the way this oppressed her.

Intentionally or not, Plath suggests through this that both mothers and fathers can have the tendency to place suffocating expectations on their children. The narrator in *You're* also refers to her child as "right, like a well-done sum", reflecting the way many mothers feel that their baby is just perfect. Continuing with this theme of childish, untainted, pure perfection, she calls her baby "a clean slate". This suggests that perhaps the expecting mother sees in her offspring a second chance. In that becoming a mother changes a woman fundamentally, she anticipates the chance to reinvent herself in this new role.

In conclusion, Plath's poetry is often considered difficult, which, in the context of parent-child relationships, directly reflects the content of her works. By representing differing perspectives as well as differing experiences of parental relationships in *Daddy*, *Medusa*, *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, *You're* and *Morning Song*, Plath mimics the complicated and personally unique nature of the bond between parent and child. Yet, Plath also presents one continuous similarity between each parental figure in the five aforementioned poems; they all have a fault. Whilst the parental figures are too overbearing in *Medusa*, *Daddy* and *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, the mothers in *Morning Song* and *You're* are too detached from their maternal roles, and both parental figures in *Daddy* and *You're* have presumably unattainably high expectations of their child. It can be deduced from this that Plath believed that despite the disparities between individuals' parental relationships, there exists one universal truth: all parent-child relationships are flawed, and furthermore, Plath believed these flaws to always be a direct result of the parent's behaviour. The significance of the

parents' role in the nature of a parent-child relationship is evidenced by the way that, whilst the parental figures in *Medusa*, *Daddy* and *The Moon and the Yew Tree* share the similarity of being overbearing, the way in which they oppress their children differs, and as a result, the daughter figures' relationships with their respective parents differ too. Therefore, the theme of parent-child relationships in Plath's poetry takes on a subtle subtext, no doubt influenced by her own personal experiences in life, that the responsibility of the maintenance of a healthy and happy parental relationship lies with the parent figure, and ergo, the child figure in any unhappy parent-child relationship should be considered free of blame.

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