

How does the use of the Holocaust as a metaphor in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath compare in her development of the definition of self-identity?

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Introduction

In "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, a persona is widened to a collective metaphor of herself as a Jewish victim of the Holocaust. This is to illustrate her struggle in defining her identity against the consuming male oppression with which she is faced. The use of allusions to the Holocaust of "two of the most celebrated, controversial, and critiqued of [Sylvia Plath's] poems," "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," is enlarged to a metaphor which embodies her fight against the presence of repressive male dominance that she finds within her life (Narbeshuber, *Confessing* 63). In these two poems, Plath reinvents herself to be a persecuted Jewish woman punished by the Nazis—metaphorically the male dominion that crushes her freedom of self-expression and sense of individuality. *Ariel*, published posthumously in 1965, houses these two poems in its collection; they are "not confessional poems in which the poet displays her wounds, but dramatic monologues in which the speaker moves from a state of psychological bondage to freedom, from spiritual death to life, with suicide paradoxically, standing as a metaphor for this transformation" (Pollitt 98). But specifically, how does Plath transcend her physical state of an individual overcoming her adversaries in "Lady Lazarus," characterized as an oppressive force as powerful as the Nazis to being a Jew?

The expected assimilation of women into interior spaces intended for protection under the pretense of duty and privacy of the home from prying eyes of the public is erased when Plath speaks of her inner-conflict, and enlarged into a historical context. This unveiling, a part of Plath's rebellion, represents her conception of femininity and individualism for a grip on her idea of identity separate from expected gender roles, and unleashes a journey of personal subversion.

The rationalization for Plath's use of metaphor has been under scrutiny amongst critics since the publication of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", as Plath displaces an

individual persona and identifies herself with the persecuted Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War in the two works. Plath in both poems refers to herself, not as a solitary entity but as a collective population—the persecuted Jews of World War II, often called a "collective metaphor," Linda Hutcheon sheds light on this technique of "[Plath's poetry].... seen as a feminist reworking (or parody) of the modes of male modernism in which she inherited" (54). Essentially, Plath sets herself apart from referring to herself as a singular being to a multiple-person population or "collective" embodiment to form a metaphor for her suffering at the hands of the two primary oppressive male figures in her life, her late father, and her husband, Ted Hughes.

The idea of the two poems investigated in this essay supported by the audacious, over exaggerated, accusations of feeling as persecuted Jewish people terrorized by the Nazis, but many have argued that this comparison is overstepping the boundary between what is appropriate and justifiable for acceptable. "Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews," Leon Wieseltier declared, an American literary critic and editor for *The New Republic* (Nelson 26). His comment serves as an exemplar for the quintessential criticism that Plath has faced after "Daddy," in particular, which began to circulate amongst avid poetry readers and critics. Although Plath has often been questioned for surpassing what is considered to be "tasteful" literature in both poems, she shows a successful representation of "a crisis in language and identity" by many literary experts since the time of their publications (Rose 228).

Widespread criticism aside, Plath felt it was absolutely necessary, however arguably, to wage metaphorical war on the oppression she felt in order to be free to claim her own identity. She targets in "Daddy" her husband as the poem continues, destined to be a replacement of male authority in her life with his "Meinkampf look" after her marriage to him, which sets her bound within a submissive husband-wife dynamic. This state of affairs in her reaction ultimately serves as a reflection between Plath's childhood interactions with her father, and contributes to the motif of male supremacy and tyrannical treatment toward her. More deeply however, Plath feels the pressures of this weight of male domination that drives her to madness at the conclusion of both poems.

A prevalent theme of both "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" is the dissolving of what is considered usually considered private feelings to shed light on inner conflicts. The two poems uncover an ugly private life and makes Plath's hidden unhappiness of her internal struggle of self-identity and individual mentality to public light. In order to achieve this, Plath's recurring metaphor in both works contain a collective element with regard to both parties of comparison. In "Lady Lazarus," Plath exposes herself in front of a "peanut-crunching crowd, [shoving] in to see" the spectacle she is making in "[unwrapping] me hand and foot" (Plath 7). In "Daddy," Plath openly purges her father; "There's a stake in your fat, black heart...the villagers never liked you" revealing a community setting rather than a private confrontation regarding the relationship between herself and her father (Plath 51). The villagers then go about "dancing and stamping" upon him, as a collective response to a community problem showing public disapproval, evidence of Plath's displacement (Plath 51). In Lisa Nabershuber's book, *Confessing Cultures*, Plath "radically redefines herself in terms of historically grounded, collective worlds...Plath displaces the solitary, private individual... [and identifies] herself with the concentration camp Jew" also in effect comparing herself to a community, just as she identifies her father and husband, who play the tormenting Nazis as a part of a historical political organization (66). This shifted viewpoint from interpersonal to a historic perspective might seem to be reminiscent of a parody; but in fact, Plath herself reveals these intentions by admitting her thoughts in an interview on personal writing: "one should be able to control and manipulate experiences like madness, being tortured....and one should be able to manipulate these experiences to the [ignorant] mind. I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant" (Hardy 65).

Plath's personal opinion is a reflection of the two poems' openness in her struggle for identity in taking personal experience and enlarging it to a relevant situation, giving purpose and meaning to her use of applying a collective meaning: the persecuted Jewish people. In response to the above quote from the interview describing her justification for her poetry's application to a historical event in history, Plath seeks to be free of a typical narcissistic inward experience in order for her emotional strife to be something easy to understand to the ignorant or sane mind. She looks at the situation she is embroiled in

through a historical lens to make her pain more tangible to others, which could be taken as an audacious claim of equalizing her suffering to the likes of those six million dead. But in the two poems studied, Plath feels that a Jew's pain in the hands of the Nazis is an effective comparison for the general public to understand her own internal conflict, believing that a universal event of anguish that can be comprehended by all. This gives justification for her collective metaphor in defining her identity against the male oppression that she feels.

In "Daddy," Plath introduces the concept of male domination through using most notably her father as a representation of her submission to his power. Plath proclaims that she has lived in a tight-fitting "black shoe...for thirty years," where there was little space for freedom, as "this domestic realm stands out in the open, but unnoticed hidden—or as the poem suggests, underfoot" of her father's irrepressible presence over her (Plath 49, Narbeshuber, "Poetics" 189). For the rest of the poem, Plath proceeds to dismantle this closed off-world to reveal "a new worldly theatre" from "beautiful Nauset," to "Tyrol," and "Vienna," these various locations offer a sudden to contrast the little shoe she had previously lived in. (Narbeshuber, *Confessing* 66). The tone of the poem is dark and accusing, as Plath describes the boundaries of her world to be utterly unyielding. The restrictions she faces within her environment are all preceded by "black"; "so black no sky could squeak through...[and] the voices just can't worm through" (Plath 50). Although she breaks apart from the limited, domestic environment, Plath is still under the authority of the "Aryan eye," a representation of her husband after grown older from the childhood rule of her father, a figure who keeps her confined through the transition of childhood to adulthood (Plath 50). In the line "Not God but a swastika," Plath acknowledges that in her world, not faith in religion can determine fate but rather a symbol of authority of the oppressor's power can ultimately define her future (Plath 50). In this case of secularism, culture is raised over spirituality in the lines "Herr God, Herr Lucifer in "Lady Lazarus," similarly making the Germans more powerful than the God and Devil in heaven and hell as a determination of Plath's fate. Not only does the pain she feels from the oppression she faces penetrate her emotionally and spiritually, but physically, altering the language she uses to convey her thoughts.

As Plath is under the control and jurisdiction of her father throughout "Daddy," represented as a Nazi for a figurehead of male dominance, the German language and its presence is directly linked to what extent Plath is free from this source of control. "I could never talk to you/The tongue stuck in a barb wire snare", stanzas 24 through 26 state in the poem "Daddy," a resentful relationship without understanding in reality. The "Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich," in the following line uses repetition in order to show stuttering as well as give a voice to the anger within Plath's tone (Plath 49). "Ich," meaning 'I,' in German is continued in the next stanza, "I could hardly speak". Plath is resistant against authority, and speaks only with great difficulty in a language that she finds so "obscene" (Plath 50). In a parallel manner, she addresses the male oppression within her life as "Herr Doktor, Herr Enemy...Herr God, Herr Lucifer" In "Lady Lazarus," a representation of secularism acknowledged above to attribute this power with more importance than God (Plath 8-9).

By using German language, not her native tongue, Plath begins to lose her identity; "I think I may be a Jew" and at the end of the next stanza "I may be a bit of a Jew" (Plath 50). This repetition of words or stuttering is found throughout the poem to show Plath's rancor towards the oppression thrust upon her, seen in the stanzas "You do not do, you do not do" in beginning of poem, and "wars, wars, wars" (Plath 49). Ironically when speaking of her husband "the man... with a Meinkampf look," Plath writes "I do, I do," usually a happy and joyous proclamation of a union of love on the event of a wedding day (Plath 51). But for Plath, it is the exact opposite. Instead, she has found herself imprisoned in her marriage instead of loved, and silenced. The repressive, mechanical powers that rule over her is illustrated when "an engine, an engine" is shown "chuffing" off to concentration camps of "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen," to meet her demise (Plath 50). However, she fears and is hateful toward this power over her; she proclaims that "every woman adores a Fascist" which shows an underlying desire to be loved by her father (Plath 50). "The German language [represents] Plath's collection of discourses (hospital, mental institution), [and] acts like a repressive, mechanical power, bearing down on the collective body," but because this metaphor is enlarged to a collective comparison, Plath also implies to be accepted socially by the entire community for her idiosyncrasies and the unjust rule pitted against her. (Narbeshuber, *Confessing* 67).

In both "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," death is a motif that represents liberation, ultimately her escape from the tyranny with which she is confronted. Paradoxically, life is characterized as full of preventative and restrictive measures against freedom, and death, usually found to be dark and constrictive, but shown as the escape. In "Daddy," Plath writes: "I was ten when they buried you/At twenty I tried to die" (Plath 51). When her father was buried, a part of Plath died as well and attempts suicide to try to "get back, back to [him]" (Plath 51). In this case, Plath's yearnings to be free through death can be blamed on her father's demise at childhood. From this, the reader can conclude that his memory haunts her still, and that she feels the need to die to be free from the clutches he still has on her even while not living. This can also be seen in "Lady Lazarus," Plath writes that "I done it again/One year in every ten/I manage it" continuing motif of self-destruction found in "Daddy" of dying a little (Plath 6). With her father's death though, Plath admits that "the first time (at the age of ten)/It was an accident... [but] the second time I meant to last it out and not come back at all" (Plath 7).

"Dying is an art, like everything else/I do it exceptionally well" she admits (Plath 7). As in "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus" puts her persona on display in dramatic fashion in front of a crowd for a public response, "the peanut crunching crowd" similar to the "villagers" stamping on her father, making a spectacle of herself for a performance, a theatrical art form; this parallels the statement in which she believes that dying is an act of art (Plath 7, 51). As in "Daddy," the death she transcends is the commoditization of her body. First she again identifies with persecuted Jews, the marginalized and hidden, and secondly, her body has been stolen from her and divided into diverse saleable objects, reminiscent of the "cleansing" of Jews, a violent treatment the persecuted were subjected to when entering a concentration camp (Narbeshuber, *Confessing* 69). In effect, parts of her body are up for exploitation in front of the public. Ironically, in "Daddy," the collective response is the "Polish village" in which Plath metaphorically resides in to have her father destroyed by her fellow, imaginary villagers. In "Lady Lazarus," the roles are reversed, as Plath herself is being thrust into the crowd of male dominion itself, represented in a crowd for a taunting "strip-tease". Plath mirrors the speaker with imagery of German exploitation of the Jewish people: "There is a charge/For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge/for the hearing of my heart—it really goes" is also a charge for a

bit of blood, a lock of hair or her clothes for value by the crowd which is rebellion against male oppression (Plath 8). By the end of the poem, she faces a death much like those subjected to the gas chambers: "Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—/A cake of soap, a wedding ring, a gold filling" (Plath 8). This haunting tone of showing her ghostly remains, makes her "theatrical" spectacle more dynamic in front of the Nazis as "her theatrics somehow resurrect a powerful self-possession" (Narbeshuber, *Confessing* 69).

At the conclusion of both poems, Plath finds solace in her death by avenging both her husband, father, and in "Lady Lazarus" the male population as a whole. After her suicide she "melts into shriek/I turn and burn... [turning into] ash, ash" (Plath 8). Plath warns her enemies to "beware, beware" (Plath 9). The origin of the poems' title foreshadows the ending of "Lady Lazarus" in its biblical reference. Jesus had resurrected Lazarus in the New Testament, Gospel of John, in which he restores Lazarus to life after being proclaimed dead for four days. Like Lazarus, Plath rises "out of the ash" but also "[eats] men like air," and implying that like smoke, she grasps at anything she touches to accentuate her newfound power (Plath 9).

Sylvia Plath is a symbol of rebirth and vengeance, who states outright her ferocity towards the male oppression she has been faced with in her previous life. She wins over the dominion in "Daddy" as well with the stomping villagers, as she proclaimed: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" in the final line of the last stanza (Plath 51). His memory is killed "with a stake in [his] fat black heart" and can rest and "lie back now" with her reassurance and personal victory (Plath 51). "Lady Lazarus" defines a particularly brutal and dehumanizing relationship between the individual and her society, within her use of a collective metaphor, but "in spite of this, the poem has the vocal quality of a manifesto, a statement of purpose and intent, self-assertion" for the development of defining her identity through her struggles, which she finds resolution in death (Annas 136).

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