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PHANTASMAGORIA IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *DADDY*

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ABSTRACT

In the Twentieth century arose the Poetic Renaissance with the writers of the New Poetry bringing in a whole new spectrum of themes as well as style. Confessional poetry and Imagism were in vogue. Sylvia Plath was a poetess who translated private intolerable hurt into images that revealed her personal life as well as the themes of Feminism and Holocaust. The death of her father and the two World Wars are the two events that have impacted and laid the foundation for her works. This paper is an attempt to analyse her phantasmagoria in the poem "Daddy" that is a very rhythmic, performative poem. It unravels the subtle, complex rhythms and bizarre, ritualistic imagery that perplexes and astounds the readers' minds.

Key Words

Confessional Poetry, Feminism, Holocaust, Phantasmagoria.

INTRODUCTION

"America" is a cluster of attitudes involving desire for a better future, nostalgia for a lost past, impatience with inherited forms, anxiety from relentless change, conflicted disdain for industrial (& virtual) society, sentimentality for nature and youth, and the domination of all by the individual...

(White par. 4)

Art cannot be created in vacuum. The socio-economic context and the contemporary culture of the Age play a very important role into the making of Literature and all Arts. The 20th century America saw an emergence of

cities due to industrialisation and urbanisation. There was concentration of wealth in the hands of industrialists, businessmen and bankers. The rich Americans spent a lot of money, visited Europe and inspected historical sites, buildings, museums and galleries. American tourists brought home European manners, style, dresses, forms of architecture and paintings. Literatures of England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain were taught in American Colleges and universities. There was, however, the neglect of the native authors. Lack of confidence was visible in its own cultural integrity. This led to the search for Identity in many artists and common man.

The two World Wars in this era led to the rise of Liberalism. There were protests against the privileged classes, exploitation of workers and corruption of business and politics. This is visible in the literary works of this time. The social stage displayed a gloomy scene. The movement of Populism gained momentum. It reflected the yearnings of the common man.

In the field of Literature, there was a rapid rise of Poetry in the 20th century America. A violent revolution manifested itself in content, form and style. Established forms of verse were put into defensive and Blank Verse came into vogue. Verse no longer remained traditional and poetry began to centre around common life and common people articulated in a common language. It was at once realistic and sarcastic, comic and tragic. The Trio of Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg was so popular that they came to be known as **Poets of the People**. Writers of the New Poetry like T. S. Eliot, Frost, Robinson, Masters, Sandburg, Lindsay, Millay and Pound led to the Poetic Renaissance. The movement of Imagism and Confessional poetry became marked characteristics of the poetry of this era. One of the writers whose name shines in the firmament of the poetry of this time is Sylvia Plath.

Sylvia Plath

I write only because
There is a voice within me
That will not be still.

Sylvia Plath (*Letters Home*)

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27th, 1932, Sylvia Plath was the talented child of Otto Plath, a German émigré who became a professor at Boston University, and Aurelia Schober, an American of Austrian-Jewish descent. She began speaking at a much earlier age and started writing in her childhood itself. She had overwhelming affection for her father. Otto Plath was ill, and thought had lung cancer. No effective treatment was available so he didn't go for any. But later, it was diagnosed as Diabetes. By the time the fact was revealed, it was too late and his leg had to be amputated. He died on November 5th, 1940, when Sylvia was only eight. Plath proclaimed:

I'll never speak to God again.
(Review/Television; Sylvia Plath in Painful
Retrospect)

This traumatic event led to bouts of depression and later figured as an obsession in her poetry. She was educated at the Marshall Livingston Grammar School and later at the Gamaliel Bradford Senior Highschool. Entering Smith College on a full scholarship in Sept. 1950, she graduated *summa cum laude* in 1955. She attended Newnham College, University of Cambridge as a Fulbright Scholar and received an MA degree in 1957. While at Cambridge, she married the British poet Ted Hughes on June 16th, 1956. Plath taught for a year at Smith College, she decided to devote her full time to writing. The Hughes intended to settle permanently in Europe and hence returned to England in 1959. Sylvia Plath's first book of poems, *The Colossus* was published by Heinemann in 1960. In January 1963, her novel *The Bell Jar* appeared. On February 11th, 1963, she took her own life while she was at the height of her creative powers. *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* (Both 1971), were published posthumously.

Plath's voice is powerful: both with regard to the speakers of the poems and her actual voice. Her voice booms in her recordings of her own poems. These recordings are forty-five to fifty years old. Listening to Plath read her own work helps us as readers; her readings act as a guide to her poetry, assisting us in interpreting them. Elizabeth Hardwick comments:

Long after I had been reading her work I came across the recording of some of her poems she made in England not long before she died. I have never before learned anything from a poetry reading... But I was taken aback by Sylvia Plath's reading. It was not anything like I could have imagined. ... [These poems] were "beautifully"

read, projected in full-throated, plump, diction-perfect, Englishy, mesmerizing cadences, all round and rapid, and paced and spaced.

Plath's creativity gave birth to some of the most beautiful lines in Literature. However, her bouts of depression led to her suicide attempts. At 10, she first encountered death in a drowning accident. Later on, at the age of 20, she tried to embrace death by swallowing a large number of sleeping pills and locked herself in the cellar. She once again tried to kill herself by deliberately driving off the road. In 1963, she finally lost her battle with life when she put her face in the open oven and turned on the gas. Six months before this, she wrote in her journals:

I feel outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness. (517).

One of the reasons for her suicide attempts was her marriage. Ted Hughes had developed a relationship with another woman and left Plath for her. Her love for Otto Plath and Hughes that had a ubiquitous control on every aspect of her life is mirrored in her poem "Daddy".

Phantasmagoria in Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*

Written in the autumn of 1962, the poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue. Here, a daughter verbally assassinates her father. This gives rise to a series of images that are sometimes bizarre, sometimes dream-like but always very thought provoking. The opening stanza itself presents **a foot trapped in a shoe** for years together so that it becomes so poor and white:

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.

(Lines 1-5)

The **accompaniment of the sound with image** is exceptionally impressive. The thumping opening lines have the sound 'u' or 'oo' in you, do, shoe. These sounds effects continue throughout the poem. Again the image of throwing off the influence of the black shoe creates an atmosphere of denial against cultural and social injunctions. It also reflects the status of woman in the society where she is suppressed by the male and hence, her progress is thwarted. Content shapes the style and imagery of the poem.

Then comes the **shocking image of the daughter murdering the father** out of the compulsion of constraining her life too much. This brings forth however, a shocking revelation that her father died when she was too young. Her immense love for her daddy created a vacuum that always remained unfilled. She has to eliminate Daddy from her mind to gain liberty from the constant remembrance and influence of her father.

The **surreal image of the barb wire snare** reminds us of the concentration camps where the Jews were tortured and killed by the Nazis. The imagery of these tortures begin with the engine transporting the innocent Jews to the Camps:

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

(Lines 31-33)

The Onomatopoeic sounds make the image clearer in our minds where we start to visualise the inhuman treatment meted out to Jews in these camps surrounded by the barb wire. The subtle and complex rhythms help to vividly describe the images. Then comes the immaculate image of the **Nazi and their Swastika**. The Swastika is so black that no sky can squeak through. The poet has an obsessive belief that her father's pure Prussian ancestry could have made him a Nazi and her mother's Jewish background may have consigned her to a concentration camp. This translates her private hurt into wonderful public image:

"Daddy" achieves the classic act of generalisation, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all. (George Steiner)

This conflict is resolved by the **violent imagery** of throwing the boot in the face of the brute i.e. the Nazi like her own daddy. The image of the **Devil** is created wonderfully when Plath points out that her Daddy had a cleft in the chin instead of the foot but he was no less a devil for that. The **cruel** image of her pretty red heart bit into two evokes pungent pain in the heart of every reader. Then come the images of her **suicidal attempts**:

At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.
(Lines 58-60)

After surviving the suicide attempt, she decides to cut off all memories and overwhelming impressions of her father and hence the image of “**the black telephone’s off at the root.**” Once again we are reminded of the evil forces when Plath describes her husband as the **Vampire**.

At last comes the image of the **Ritualistic Killing**. The devil is killed by driving a stake in the heart and his death is celebrated by the villagers by dancing and stamping on his corpse. The **Colour** plays a significant role in the imagery too. The colour black of the shoe, the Swastika, the blackboard, the man (Daddy), the black apparel (of the man), the telephone and the heart of Daddy, signifies the evil forces that have restricted the growth of and wrecked a hell in the life of this sensitive girl. The colours green and blue signify life. The colour red of her heart articulates her dreams and desires that were shattered at the premature demise of her beloved father.

The outstanding images along with the **complex echoing** and **highly musical patterns** create an aesthetic treat for the readers and listeners of the poem. Hughes comments on Plath’s images:

One can see... how exclusively her writing depended on a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus. If that could have been projected visually, the substance and patterning of these poems would have made very curious mandalas.

CONCLUSION

“Daddy” is like a nursery rhyme, simple in narration and suggesting the innocence of the young girl. The ambivalent attitude of the speaker is brought out when she simultaneously hates and admires her father. Based upon the “Electra Complex” of the Freudian psychology, the poem beautifully narrates through images and sound effects, the conflicting emotions that restrict and dwarf her life to such an extent that she must get rid of the situation by killing her Daddy. Serious themes such as Feminism, Holocaust and Suicide are treated in a rhythmically light and conversational mood. Simple vocabulary, verging at times on the colloquial, along with highly articulate and ordered musicality, give the poem a height and grandeur that make Sylvia Plath an inescapable name in the history of the 20th century literature and poetry at large. As Wagner comments:

Plath’s work is valuable for its stylistic accomplishments--it’s melding of comic and serious elements, it’s ribald fashioning of near and slant rhymes in a free-form structure, its terse voicing of themes that have too often been treated only with piety.

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