

“Every woman adores a Fascist”: National trauma in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”

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Received: Sept. 12, 2022

Accepted: Oct. 17, 2022

Published: Jan. 1, 2023

Abstract

This paper explores how the personal trauma of Sylvia Plath, as manifested in her poem “Daddy,” spiraled into a national one, shedding light on her tumultuous relationship with her father, mother, husband, and the Nazis. It also examines the intersection between trauma and memory against the backdrop of psychological theories expounded in the works of Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Pierre Nora. Freud wrote extensively about trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961); Caruth discussed the theory of trauma in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Nora elaborated on how memory is associated with the sites of memories in his book *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Sites of Memory) (1996). The paper attempts to find answers to the following questions: how do trauma and memory stand at crossroads? What is the outcome of this junction? Where are the sites of memory in her poem? Why are they so significant? How does this intersection prove the national trauma? Furthermore, the paper examines the poetic techniques in “Daddy” and investigates how they are used to emphasize the poet’s sense of trauma and to guide readers to the sites of memory.

Keywords: Plath, “Daddy”, national trauma, sites of memory, Pierre Nora

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath, an American and modern poet of Jewish origin, was born in 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts. She lived a short turbulent life and left

many poems, which caused a great sensation as well as mystery, such as “Parliament Hill Fields,” “Green Rock, Winthrop Bay,” and “Point Shirley.” “Daddy” is considered the masterpiece of her psychological and autobiographical poems. Plath’s creativity was born out of reading the great poets of her time such as T. S. Eliot and Thomas Mann, as Wagner-Martin asserted, “poems to model the work of young writers on - these were the legacy of Eliot and Auden. And to deal with such writers, Plath, and her contemporaries were indeed asked to model, to copy” (2003, p.84). As she got older, she began to have her style of writing poetry. This was clear in her reaction against the Holocaust which occupied a great part in her poem “Daddy”, unlike Eliot who decided to deny the whole matter. Plath made her familial problem a podium through which she could decry the anguish of her ethnoreligious group—the Jews. That was why she called her father a “Fascist” and “Nazi” to emphasize his callousness.

Unlike many researchers whose studies overlooked the point of transformation of Plath’s trauma from being personal into a national one, this paper attempts to contextualize Plath’s “Daddy” into a wide spectrum of literary works and films which expose how personal trauma is a manifestation of a national one. It offers a close reading of “Daddy” in which the personal trauma of Plath, who once accuses her father of being a “Fascist,” is investigated in the light of the national trauma, employing the intersection of the temporal line (trauma) and the spatial line (memory) to study how her poem is a mirror which reflects the trauma of a whole nation. In addition, I argue that “Daddy” is full of sites of memory that stand as witnesses to Plath’s tormented psyche. These sites transform her personal trauma into a national one. To explore this intersection, my paper follows two separate, yet related paths: the first will trace the trajectory of the tragic events in Plath’s life; the second will focus on the sites of memory scattered in her poem “Daddy.” Eventually, the temporal line of events intersects with the spatial line, exposing the transformation of her private trauma into a national one, highlighting her neurosis, and explaining her love-hate relationship with her father and her immense love for her mother.

So, it is important to have a glimpse of the trauma studies before discussing the poem. After World War II, it was revealed that almost six million people, mostly Jews, were burned to death in concentration camps. This mayhem was later called the “Holocaust” which came as a great shock to the world. Humanity was in danger. Thereinafter, Holocaust literature was born, as Bloom confirmed:

Holocaust literature is born. Its birth, a testament to more than silence, more than madness, more even than language itself, must be seen as a miracle of some sort, not only an overcoming of mute despair but an assertion and affirmation of faith. (2004, p.24)

Holocaust literature was the way through which the suppressed pain was revealed as it gave voice to the voiceless traumatic person. Trauma studies emanated from the Holocaust literature, which flourished after World War II, as Sonya Andermahr stated:

The field of trauma studies emerged in the early 1990s as an attempt to construct an ethical response to forms of human suffering and their cultural and artistic representation. Born out of the confluence between deconstructive and psychoanalytic criticism and the study of Holocaust literature, from its outset trauma theory’s mission was to bear witness to traumatic histories in such a way as to attend to the suffering of the other. (2015, p.500)

Trauma studies provide an ethical response to the various manifestations of individuals’ and nations’ painful experiences and their representations in art, literature, and film studies.

According to Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trauma is the thing that is too powerful to break through the protective object of one’s self, as Freud asserted “we describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (1961, p.23). Meanwhile, Caruth defined trauma as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996, p.11). Like Freud, Caruth used literature along with clinical studies to adopt an approach to historical trauma such as the Holocaust and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima.

Freud assumed that there is a subconscious where intense effects are stored when registered in an alternate or dissociated state of consciousness which

is now called “repression”, as he wrote, “the state in which the ideas existed before being made conscious” (1989, p. 5). As the mind protects the traumatized person by repressing the first traumatic incident.

In the aftermath of trauma, demons start to haunt the traumatized person. These demons are posttraumatic stress disorder, as Caruth asserts, “PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence and to be the most destructive psychic disorder” (1996, pp.57-58). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the link between the human psyche and its outer effects. Childhood is considered a reservoir of good and bad memories that any human being passes through. The childhood phase, in Plath’s life, is a fertile field that is worthy of study as the greatest event that affects Plath’s whole life happened when she was a child and is stored as a memory.

Memory studies flourished recently due to Maurice Halbwach’s research on collective memory. He considered that history was born out of the collective memory of the people. The French psychologist Pierre Nora discussed the French National memory by using the spatial line of memory. He proposed that some places keep memories alive: they are haunted by tragic events.

2. Literature Review

Many studies on Plath’s neurotic poetry were published. In the following section, I will start with recent studies on Plath’s poetry and then move on to the oldest. Lots of studies have analyzed Plath’s “Daddy” with Electra Complex’s theory and focused on her relationship with her father as the poem is full of many parts that reveal her love for her father.

Mostafaei and Shabanirad (2018) asserted that Plath’s works are considered auto-biographical as her works discuss her relationships with her father and husband, mostly. Mostafaei and Shabanirad investigated the role of the father in two well-famous works by Plath, “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” using Lacan’s symbolic order.

Bhasin (2015) asserted that Plath used several autobiographical elements in her poem “Daddy”. Bhasin mentioned that the Electra Complex that Plath used in her poem was different as it had not been used to silence her

feelings of anger towards her father as in her previous poems, instead it had been used to describe him horribly and point out the great need for his extermination.

Amin (2014) examines how poetry can tell about the psychological status of the poet. Amin has put Plath’s poetry into comparison with Smith’s poetry as both of them are confessional poets. She has, also, discussed the great effect of the art of poetry in healing the psychological disorders of the poets.

Travis (2009) points out that evil does not live in isolation. To happen, it needs one person to do something that another person then experiences. There are two different types of people in relation to evil: perpetrators and victims. The poetry of Sylvia Plath has frequently been read as a critique of patriarchal culture or as allegations against the biographical individuals in the poet’s life. These interpretations all place Plath’s speakers in the role of the “victim,” which is what unites them. However, the distinction between the victim and the perpetrator is usually hazy.

Abu-Zaid (2003) examines the representation of Plath’s feelings in her poetry. Abu-Zaid has pointed out the danger of depriving the child of the feeling of security which may cause him psychological disorders in his adulthood. She also exposes the influence of pains and pressures upon the human being.

Saber (2002) investigates Plath’s poems from a psychological perspective. She has succeeded in highlighting recurring images such as the sea, the mysterious male, and transfigurations. However, her analysis lacks a thorough investigation of the relationship between Plath and her parents.

Unlike the previous studies which have tackled Plath’s poetry from psychological, autobiographical, and symbolic perspectives, this paper investigates a different and new side of her poetry—the intersection between trauma and memory in her controversial poem “Daddy,” employing a distilled psychological framework based on selected terms from Freud, Caruth, and Nora’s theories. Thus, it opens a venue to study the poem in retrospect, linking her trauma to the national one.

3. Discussion

3.1. Trauma

The successive traumatic events, from Plath's birth until her suicide, constitute a major part of her ordeal. Therefore, it is important at the outset to provide a brief view of the temporal line of events of Plath's life to have an insight into how her poetry reflects these traumatic events.

Plath was born in 1932, a year that witnessed the most crucial economic slump in the history of the US. Time and place played a major role in shaping Plath's formative years as the Great Depression and the crash of the market had a great impact on the residents of Boston to the extent that many of them were not able to pay the rent of their houses, facing the specter of eviction and being homeless. Fortunately, her father's job, as a professor at the university, protected her family from the bad economic consequences of the Great Depression as it offered stable money every month which secured her life. However, in 1940, and by a strange twist of fate, Plath lost her father and she had to face a world, stricken by the economic slump, all alone herself, as she writes:

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 (Plath, 1965, p.51).

Plath's father left her in a decisive phase of her life in which her father was the only source of safety and protection from the outside world. Plath tried many times to die to be with her father again.

In 1936, Plath's family moved to Winthrop Center near the house of her grandparents which explains the good connection with her grandmother and how she always reminisced about the simple life in the countryside which was highly reflected in her poem "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay." In 1940, Plath and her brother did not have the opportunity to attend the funeral of their father. In 1956, Plath met the poet Ted Hughes, but they married secretly as if happiness had no place in her life. In the same year, she moved with Hughes to the UK and then back to the US before returning finally to the UK in 1959.

Plath and Hughes' relationship was an emotional roller coaster: she was back and forth from England to America; in 1960, she gave birth to Frieda

and that was the only glimmer of hope in her miserable life. Nevertheless, in 1961, she had a miscarriage that left an indelible mark on her psyche, and what increased her misery was that she did not find any support from the people around her:

Your absence is inconspicuous;
Nobody can tell what I lack. (Plath, 2015, p.153)

What exacerbates Plath’s pain was the nonchalance of everyone around her during her ordeal. Plath hoped for containment for her feelings for the great loss of her fetus.

One year later, she was shocked to find out about Hughes’ betrayal, and she could not overcome his infidelity and decided to separate in the fall of 1962. In February 1963, Plath committed suicide and died after many failed attempts.

In Plath’s life, trauma is two incidents: the second awakens the first. The death of her father was the first trauma that went peacefully and was not felt by her. Her mind threw a heavy cloak over the tragic event. It was not felt until 1961 when Plath experienced the second shock which was the loss of her fetus.

3.2 Memory

Memory is reincarnated into “sites” where every time a person visits these “sites”, he/she makes a trip down memory lane. It is as if “memory has begun to keep records: delegating the responsibility for remembering to the archive” (Nora & Kritzman, 1996, p. 8). The archive keeps the memory alive. Memory is “a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, 1996, p.4). In Plath’s “Daddy,” she reopens many of these wounds, as she writes:

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. (Plath, 1965, p. 50)

After World War II, the cities of Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen were notorious for their mass killings of millions of people, including the Jews. These cities are etched in the memory of humanity ever since.

Concentration Camps in Dachau and Belsen were created in 1933 for “Hitler’s political opponents: communists, socialists, and other democrats and political Catholics” (Byers, 2014, p.17). They became a model of human destruction. Auschwitz was and still is the most notorious; it became the epitome of the Holocaust. It was opened in Poland as a prison for Poles and an outstation for colonization of the East.

By bringing into mind the names of these notorious cities, she reconnects her personal trauma to the national trauma of the Jewish people, making it universal. Plath retold the trauma of the Jews by narrating the whole story of the Holocaust from the very beginning accompanying the readers on a tour of the places which stood as witnesses to the massive genocide of her nation.

Trauma is not only individualistic, but it could happen to the collective memory of the nation too. It is evident in “Daddy” where Plath effaced her father’s death for two years: Otto Plath died when she was eight years old, but Plath claimed in “Daddy” that she was ten years old. What happened was that the brain romanticizes reality on the ground and entirely rejected the facts when it engaged in effacement.

Effacement is clear in Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, where the trauma of Hiroshima’s nuclear bombing awakens the trauma of the French woman who had a brief affair with a Japanese architect. The French woman used to have a German lover with whom she was disgraced in Nevers, a city in France, for having an affair. Once on a business trip to Japan which turned out to be a romantic fling with a Japanese architect, the French woman witnessed the massive destruction of the nuclear bombing. This brought back the trauma of her first lover which had been effaced from her memory, but only the place “Hiroshima,” revived these traumas. By the end of the movie, both protagonists identified themselves with their own cities, as if the cities were haunted by the memories of traumas:

SHE: Hi-ro-shi-ma.

Hi-ro-shi-ma. That’s your name.

(They look at each other without seeing each other. Forever.)

HE: That’s my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers-in France (Duras & Resnais, 1961, p.83).

The Japanese man and the French woman did not have any names throughout the movie and when they had names, they had the names of their own cities. The Japanese man agreed that his name is Hiroshima as he lost his family in the nuclear bombing of the city of Hiroshima. The French woman is like Nevers as her German beloved was occupying her heart with his love like the German forces which occupied Nevers. When the French woman decided to escape with her beloved, Nevers was liberated then the villagers discovered her love for an enemy of her country and shaved her head and her parents locked her in a room.

Effacement is a sign of trauma in which the mind wipes out the terrible events for some time before reliving again the pain and anguish by remembering what had taken place. Nora pointed out that France after the bitter defeat in World War II erased the shameful defeat and effaced the national trauma of the German occupation as “a ravaged country had to be made to believe that it had liberated itself, virtually unaided” (1996, p.218). The French President Charles De Gaulle declared on the victory podium, after the liberation of France from the Nazis:

Paris had been freed by itself, freed by its people with the support of the armies of France, with the cooperation and support of the whole of France, of the France which fights, of the only France, of the true France, of the eternal France. (qt. In Gabriel, 2003, p.199)

The collective nation of the French people refused the extending hand of the Allied forces as it was against the dignity of the French people. So, De Gaulle glorified the sacrifices of the French people instead, denying the role of Britain and the US in liberating France. The bitter memories of defeat and the first pro-Nazi government of Vichy France haunted the French politicians and the nation too. The war caused trauma to the French people so there was a need for removing all the traumatic effects of the war and focusing only on the great sacrifices that the French people showed.

One year and two months before Otto Plath passed away in 1939, the same year when World War II started. The war was one of the terrible events that resulted in millions of deaths. The Nazis were at that time persecuting Jews throughout Europe. Plath’s trauma thus intersects with her national trauma, causing more misery. After almost one month of breaking up with Hughes, she came out with “Daddy,” one of her best-known poems that

lived after her to tell the story of the unhealed wound. Her poem showed a “delay” in the following lines before she finally concluded that her father was the real perpetrator and should have been killed: “Daddy I have had to kill you./ You died before I had time —” (Plath, 1965, p.49). There is a latency after the incident before the person knows that he is traumatized. Freud explains that latency that occurs in the neurosis between the first reaction towards the traumatic event and the appearance of this trauma is the typical trauma:

The phenomenon of latency in the neurosis between the first reactions to the trauma and the later appearance of the illness must be recognized as typical. The illness may also be regarded as an attempt at a cure, an endeavor to reconcile the divided Ego divided by the trauma with the rest and to unite it into a strong whole that will be fit to cope with the outer world. (1939, p.125)

Latency is the period in which the effect of the traumatic experience is not apparent as the victim comes to forget as he/she is not full-conscious because it is hard for the brain to accept the traumatic event and store it.

Being traumatized and experiencing many crises since her childhood, Plath’s poetry was a model for embodying trauma into lines. Trauma was manifested in the existence of two incidents, the second awakened the first one. The poet also went through effacement, which is one of the signs of trauma. Plath’s connecting of her personal trauma with the national trauma of the Jews in the Holocaust helped in making her trauma universal. This connection was achieved through the use of sites of memory such as the cities which witnessed the Holocaust, Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen.

3.3. Technique

“Daddy” is an evocation of Plath’s tormented life so her poetic techniques, which include the use of colors, anaphora, repetitions, and similes, should be examined as evidence of her trauma.

Everything is dyed in dark colors such as “black” and “grey” since her father’s death, as she writes:

Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal. (Plath, 1965, p.49)

Grey conveys feelings of melancholy and indecision. The anaphora in “an engine, an engine” emphasizes the mayhem accompanying the

transportation of the Jews to Auschwitz. The repetition of “Jews” throughout the poem emphasizes the link between her trauma and theirs. Plath’s misery is linked to the fate of millions of Jews in the Holocaust in the simile “I began to talk like a Jew.” She emphasizes her empathy for the suffering of the Jews by using the word “Jews” many times. As she wrote, “Chuffing me off like a Jew”, she was troubled by the fate of the Jews and how they were persecuted. The word “chuffing,” which Plath uses in her poetry, is an onomatopoeic representation of the sound made by the train that carried Jews to the concentration camps like Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen.

The apostrophe helped Plath in expressing her sincerity to her father as she was always remembering him and talking to him even if he did not answer her:

Daddy I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time – (Plath, 1965, p.49)

She used an “apostrophe” to indicate that she had never forgotten her father in her chat with him. She was able to set a depressing tone for the poem by using “alliteration,” which is the repeating of the sound /h/ in the words “have” and “had,” which appears to be a sob of sorrow over the death of the father.

4. Conclusion

Plath’s life witnessed great crises since her birth at the peak of the Great Depression. Plath’s trauma of losing her father was awakened after her miscarriage trauma. As the loss of her fetus with the lack of support brought back to her mind the death of her father who used to be her only support in the world.

There were lots of contradictions in Plath’s life which were reflected in her relationship with her mother, her father, and her husband. Plath had a great bond with her mother which manifested greatly in her letters to her mother, but she also considered her mother guilty of marrying an old man who died before teaching her how to face the world alone. Her love for her father was full of contradictions as well. Her trouble with her father was manifested in transforming her personal trauma into a national one: her father left her alone, due to his death, and this was an imitation of how the

allies and the Europeans had left the Jews and other races burned down by the Nazis. Even another version of her father, her husband, left her after she had fallen in love with him.

The transformation of personal traumas into national ones is solidified by the sites of memories mentioned in “Daddy”. Plath’s trauma is autobiographical and personal, whereas the memory line is national and universal. By using cities like Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen, Plath merged her personal trauma with the national trauma of her nation so that people might show sympathy towards her.

Techniques pointed out the intersection between trauma and memory in “Daddy.” Cities such as “Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen” evoke dark memories for her and all the Jews. These are the sites of memory that she visited in her poem and was always haunted by their bloody past.

Since “Daddy” invokes many interpretations, it will remain one of the unresolved mysteries in poetry and scholars will never stop examining it as a masterpiece. What this paper does is an attempt to contextualize “Daddy” among a plethora of works that exhibit the national trauma such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

For further studies, many poems need to be re-examined since they have sites of memory like T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”. The poem is full of sites of memory that stand as witnesses to the destruction and devastation of World War I.

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