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The Effect of Sylvia Plath's Mental State in Her Works

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath had a sad and rough childhood. Pleasing her inattentive father was all what she lived for until he died when she was eight years old. After his death, she tried to follow him because she wasn't able to live without him. After that accident, she tried to commit suicide again when she was married to a famous poet. For her, her husband was as bad as her father, and was also responsible for her mental disorder. In addition, her husband left her with two kids that she wasn't ready to take care of and that also made her break down and think of suicide. In the end, her suicide was successful. All of these events in her life caused her mental state disorder and this is clear in the poems I chose to analyze, "Daddy," "Morning Song," and "Lady Lazarus." My paper will examine how Sylvia Plath's mental state did affect her works and how it is important for the reader to know the background of Sylvia Plath to understand her works.

Sylvia Plath's family was multi-cultural. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, who is the writer of *Sylvia Plath*, Plath's father, Otto Plath, was German and her mother, Aurelia Schober, was originally Austrian and both of them were immigrants (vii). Otto Plath was born in 1885 in Germany. According to Edward Butscher, who wrote the biography *Sylvia Plath: Method and madness*, when Otto was fifteen, he emigrated to the United States to follow his father and to study there (4). His goal in life was to be an entomologist and he sought to achieve his dream and he got a Doctor of Science degree in applied biology (5-6). He became a teacher at Boston University and there is where he met Schober (7). They got married even though there was twenty-one years age gap between them (7). This marriage's result was Sylvia and her brother Warren Joseph Plath (Butscher 8).

Sylvia was born in 1932 in Boston. According to Butscher, Sylvia said that her father in the beginning didn't want a child, but after seeing her, he loved her a lot (8). Butcher is not sure if this was true or not because it could be a myth she made about her childhood (8). Having a brother wasn't a good thing for Sylvia because she was the center of the family and she didn't want anyone to share her world. According to Butscher, Plath expressed her feelings of hatred once she knew that she was going to have a brother by saying "A baby! I hated babies. I who for two and a half years had been the center of a tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth. Babies!" (8-9) These words from a kid who was only two and half years are a lot but to her parents, their family was completed now, and they were satisfied (Butscher 9).

Plath felt that her brother took all the attention and she felt off-stage, so she thought of pleasing her father to get his attention back, but her father was inattentive to her efforts (10). By using her cleverness, she decided to make an effort in what her father had an interest in, insects. She started to memorize the Latin names of assorted types of insects and then she succeeded in gaining his attention and his proud too (10). He was adoring of her precocity and boasting about her whenever the opportunity arose (Butscher 10). According to Butscher, Plath was afraid that if she showed her negative emotions, she would lose her father's love, so she decided to repress her emotions (10). Her attitude developed an unhealthy environment for her to grow with false impressions (11). In the beginning, it was good for her because it developed competitive relationships in her but then because all what she wanted was to please her father, she started to lose her real self ;

“it suggested to the quick-witted child that her major worth as a human being depended upon what she did rather than who she was” (11). According to Butscher, Plath’s mother also treated her husband as if he was a “tyrant king” (11). Plath saw her mother as a rival because she developed an unnatural attachment to her father (11). The father was diagnosed with diabetes and he died in 1940 because of the complications of his leg amputation (Bronfen vii). According to Butscher, the father’s death was emotionally disturbing or distressing to the eight years old Sylvia because her life was all about her father and without him, she was lifeless. She even thought that his death was deliberate (13). After her father’s trauma, Plath sought public attention as a substitute for the lost parental love (13). In 1953, after returning from work exhausted, she attempted suicide but she was found and hospitalized (Bronfen vii). Bronfen described this suicide attempt as a “psychic death”, followed by a period of “regeneration”, and it ended up with the “rebirth” of her artistic poetic self (9).

Plath was married to the British poet, Ted Hughes. According to Bronfen, Plath met Hughes on a trip she had in February of 1956 and they got married in June of the same year (viii). Plath and Hughes both shared the same interest in poetry, and they decided to devote themselves to their writings (viii). In 1960, they had their first child Frieda Rebecca and in 1962 they had Nicholas Farrar. Nine months after having Farrar, Plath and Hughes decided to separate (Bronfen viii). According to Bronfen, in 1963, Plath ended her life by “placing her head into her stove one night, after having made sure that the gas would not leak out through the door to harm her two small children sleeping in the next room” (6). According to Marianne Egeland, who wrote *Claiming Sylvia Plath: The Poet as Exemplary Figure*, Hughes was a victim of her act, “Ted Hughes, was met with accusations of desertion, censorship, abuse, and even murder” (1).

Plath captured herself in her works as someone who is imprisoned in a “contradictory array of false and provisional selves” (Bronfen 9). She used this style of writing before she discovered her real self the year before her suicide (9). Hughes shared his thoughts about this by saying that the roots of her poetic framework were about her inner trauma that started after her father’s death. He added that it was in its culmination after her suicide attempt in 1953 (Bronfen 9).

In “Daddy”, Plath wrote about a woman who talks about her relationship with her father and husband. Plath in an interview talked about this poem saying that it is about a girl who suffers from an Electra complex. Electra complex is a term for a daughter’s unnatural attachment to her father. According to Bronfen, the girl’s father dies while she thought that he is a God. The girl’s father was a Nazi and her mother is possibly Jewish. The daughter imagines that both races marry and demolish each other. And as a result, “she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it” (82). Bronfen continues, because the father is around no more as a “protective colossus”, who was as “black shoe” where she used to live in for thirty years, instead he became as a “ghastly statue” (82). The poetic persona is enjoying her late patricide by saying “Daddy, I have had to kill you/ You died before I had time” (6-7). Furthermore, the girl mentions her husband and how he was as bad as her father by saying “The vampire who said he was you /And drink my blood for a year/Seven years, if you want to know” (72-74).

The girl in “Daddy” shares many things with Plath as the girl reflects Plath and her relationship between her father and husband. As mentioned before, Plath developed an Electra complex in her relationship with her father. Plath also hated her father for making her life miserable. About her father’s personality, Butscher mentioned that all who knew her father agreed that he was nothing like how Plath captures him in her works (7). One of his colleagues described him by saying that he was “friendly, sort of kindly in a way, gentle” (7). According to Butscher, some of them believed that his attitude had some rigidity which grew bigger as he grew older (7). Plath’s father was always single-minded and only focused on his job (8). About her husband, Bronfen said that Hughes tried to rescue his wife from her fascination with death, but he unexpectedly drove her to the underworld (25). He kept calling on her to write to make her forget her past but by doing so he was encouraging her “imaginative encounter with this lethal predecessor” (Bronfen 25). By keep calling on her she started to hate him, and she thought that he was as bad as her father, and was also responsible for her mental disorder.

In "Morning Song", Plath wrote about a woman and her relationship and feelings about her newborn baby. According to David Ketterer, who is the writer of "Plath's Morning Song", all the critics agreed that this poem expresses Plath's own conflicted feelings after she gave birth to her first child, Frieda. In the poem, Plath describes Frieda's arrival. Ketterer continues, the poem also includes Plath's feelings of servitude and diminishment that she felt while expressing motherhood. An example of her servitude and feelings of diminishment was when she describes herself as a cow instead of a caring mother by saying "One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral" (13). On the contrary, Butscher mentions that when Plath's friends came to see the baby one of them commented: "she seemed more humane and outside of herself than I had ever seen her" (261). This shows the conflict in her personality and that she was still not showing her negative emotions, fearing that she will lose the people whom she loves.

"Lady Lazarus" is a poem about a fight for the absolute control of one's art, which is death according to Theresa Collins, who wrote "Plath's Lady Lazarus." According to Laura Dahlke, who wrote about "Plath's Lady Lazarus", Plath showed a lot of interest in the story of Lazarus from the Bible after her failed suicide attempt in 1953. Dahlke continues, "deaths of Lady Lazarus correspond to her [Plath's] own crises", so Plath found herself in the Lazarus story. According to Michele Herrman, who wrote a review, "Sylvia Plath: The Real Life Lady Lazarus", Plath used the poem to show her feelings by trying to reach her dead father and then she rejects him and as a result she liberates her lost self from her miserable past. As doing so, she became powerful and indestructible (7). According to Herrman, her feelings in the poem were conflicted (8). In the poem, she is showing off her indestructible art: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well." But on the other hand, she shows her revulsion at being dead in a grave by saying "feels like hell." (8) Even though this poem shows her rebirth and indestructibility, she committed suicide four months after writing this poem (Herrman 7).

Sylvia Plath's childhood affected her life in the long term. During her life, Plath developed a mental state disorder, and this was clear in her writings. Her writings show how she really felt about herself and the people around her. People around her didn't know her hidden feelings. Knowing Plath's background will enable the reader to understand her works especially the poems I chose, "Daddy," "Morning Song" and "Lady Lazarus", because the speaker in these poems was Sylvia Plath herself. In "Daddy," her mental state disorder can be seen when she describes her father and husband as opposed to what they were. In "Morning Song," Plath presents her conflicting emotions that show that she didn't get past her trauma even though the people around her thought that she became better. "Lady Lazarus" shows the conflict in Plath's personality, wherein the poem she is strong and indestructible, but the truth is that she was weak and couldn't handle the life anymore, so she committed suicide. Plath's mental state disorder appeared in her works as a conflict between what she thought and what the truth was.

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