

Electra complex in Sylvia Plath

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Abstract— *Electra complex is a term coined by Sigmund Freud to denote the opposite of Oedipus complex. It shows an infatuation of a daughter towards her father. It is not easy to over look this aspect in Sylvia Plath's poetry, though many critics have blown this out of proportion. Poems like "Daddy", "Cut" and "Fever" can be examined from the delicate influences of "Love-hate" relationship from a sensitive, feminine poet.*

Keywords— *Electra complex, Father figure, Sigmund Freud, Sylvia Plath.*

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston, to Otto Plath and Aurelia Plath. Otto Plath was a professor of Biology at Boston. He was an international authority on Bees. Plath was their first child, lovable and adoring, and liked by one and all at home and at school. The life took a new turn when Plath lost her father at nine. Her mother becomes the supporter of the family and (who) takes up teaching. The grandparents who come to live with them try to make amends for the paternal love. Plath bags the prestigious fellowship at Smiths. Sylvia taught art as "a volunteer art teacher" at Peoples' Institute, Northampton while she was still at college. Her creative writing won her a guest editorship with *Mademoiselle* (a fashionable New York magazine) in summer 1953.

The vibrant, young, lively promising poet had many suitors, but decided to accept Ted Hughes, a British poet, as her life partner. They were married on June 16, 1956, in a simple ceremony. They lived and worked together, inspiring each other's creativity for six years. Frieda Rebecca, Nicholas Farrar – their two children brought more sunshine to their life. She lived in London first and then in Devonshire. Ted Hughes looked as Sylvia as an intellectual companion and started looking around for other women for emotional companionship. There came the breaking point. She was separated from him in 1962 and lived by herself with her two children. Plath could not face the loneliness as bravely as she thought. Her poor health made her feel more desperate, and she decided against fighting a losing battle. She killed herself in the early hours of February 11, 1963. The collected poems, includes many previously unpublished poems, appeared in 1981 and received the 1982 'Pulitzer Prize' for poetry posthumously.

Sylvia Plath's poetry is collected and published in four volumes, *The Colossus*, *Winter Trees*, *Crossing the Water* and *Ariel*, the posthumous collection. Her poems reflect a haunting challenge, says, Robert Lowell, in his introduction to *Ariel*.

Everything in these poems is personal, Confessional, felt but the manner of Feeling is controlled hallucination, the Autobiography of a fever.¹

Electra complex is a term coined by Sigmund Freud to denote the opposite of Oedipus complex. It shows an infatuation of a daughter towards her father, with a deep rooted sexual instinct as an undercurrent. It is not easy to over look this aspect of Sylvia Plath's poetry, though many critics have blown this out of proportion. Poems like "Daddy", "Cut" and "Fever" can be examined from the delicate influences of "Love-hate" relationship from a sensitive, feminine poet. But when it comes to reading of "Electra on Azalea Plath," "The Colossus" "Lady Lazaus" and the series of Bee poems, the confessional streak become brighter which emphasize the relationship of the poet with her father without any connotations. Carole Ferrier, in his essay, traces many shades of the father figure and says

In examining Plath's relationship to patriarchy as she perceives and expresses it, I will look at her treatment of the father figure, who variously appear as colossus, drowned man, assorted historical imperialists and tyrants from Napoleon to the Nazis, man in black, and beekeeper. In her later poems, there is an attempt first to consciously realize and then to eliminate or exorcise the destructive or repressive aspects of dominating masculinity.

Plath's father was stern, rigid and dark complexioned. There is very little reference to him as a person. In "Ocean 1212" where Plath gives at least some insight into the characters of her grandparents, her mother, brother and even her uncle. The sole mention of her father appears in the closing words:

And this is how it stiffens, my vision
Of that seaside childhood. My Father

Died, we moved inland.

If there is only a scanty description of her father, however, there is wealth of suggestion regarding his effort on the poet's life. "The Colossus," title poem of her first volume, critically deals with a broken huge ancient statue. She feels that his stifling rise has turned her to a stone.

I shall never get you put together entirely,

Picked, glued and properly jointed.

(‘The Colossus’)

The reference here, is probably not only to her father, as the statue that ‘I’ despairs of patching, but also to herself and her own emotional ‘break’ approximately three years earlier. As a passing phase, she gives up her effort of putting the broken image together and starts searching him, in her lovers. Gordon Lameyer, who was camouflaged as Buddy williard records his reflection in his essay “Sylvia at Smith.”

Basically, I think Sylvia wanted someone to replace the father she had lost in childhood. After coming close to us, as this suitor as not godlike enough to be both father and lover. I later came to feel that Sylvia's narcissism, a fixation caused at the time of father's death, prevented her from loving any-one else fully.

Giving a margin to biographical details, if the critic wants to build up a poetic image of the father-figure, strictly from her poems, the poem “Daddy” is an important one. A few critics, including John Resenblatt, think that by no means it is her best poem. The poem has Plath's most extended treatment of the father Symbol. It begins with mentioning the father's black shoe, in which the daughter “Lived like a foot,” suggesting her subservience and entanglement. The poem then moves on to an idealized image of the father.

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one grey toe big as a fiasco seal—does not leave any room for suspicion, as it is clear from the biography that he had his leg amputated before his death.

Plath herself describes it in her note:

*The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter, the two strains marry paralyze each other she has to get out the awful little allegory once before she is free of it.*²

The poem starts on the note of a nursery rhyme, recalling the tale of the old lady in the shoe. On the other hand, she talks about the political implications—Jews being taken off to “Dacham Aushwits, Belsen”. The father is a “Panyer-man” but he is also called “Gobbledy goo” German and English intermix grotesquely: I never could talk to you

The tongue stuck in my jaw

It stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich, ich, ich, ich.

Plath wants to justify her love towards her father who was a “brute” and universalizes feminine psychology when she says

Every woman adores a Fasist

The boot in the fare, the brute,

Brute heart of a brute like you.

She further confesses how she

At twenty tried to die

And get back, back, back to you

And how she felt sorry that she was rescued but they could not make her the original self

And they struck me together with glue

And then I knew what to do

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look

But suddenly the killer instinct, while she expresses in the beginning like

Daddy, I have had to kill you

You died before I had time

Comes to surface and ends on that note

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through

“Electra on Azalea Plath” exaggerates the dead father as Agamemnon, the mother as Clytemnestra, and the daughter as a conscience stricken Electra. Its revelation of guilt and sexuality eventually leads to new image of the father as the Black Man and the daughter as his victim:

I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.

The truth is, one late October, at my birth cry

A scorpion stung its head, an ill starred thing;

My mother dreamed you face down in the sea. .

O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at

Your gate, father-your hound-bitch, daughter, friend,

It was my love that did us both to death

(‘Electra on Azalea Plath’)

And in “The Eye-Mote” she use still another, similar classical reference to describe the conflict:

I wear the present itch for flesh,
Blind to what will be and what was
I dream that I am Oedipus
What I want back us what I was
Before the bed, before the knife.

This love towards her dead father, naturally affected the love of her mother. Poems like “Maenad” “The Disquieting muses” which emphasize the strained relationship of Mother and daughter makes the critic wonder at the authenticity of the “Letter’s Home”. The soft, innocent love, child-like enthusiasm to share her success with her mother, her friendly confessions seeking advice about a new boy friend sounds like a fantasy.

In ‘Maenad’ Sylvia Plath says
The mother of months didn’t love me
The old man shrank to a doll.
O I am too big to go backward!

She sternly warns her
Mother, keep out of my barn yard,
I am becoming another

She holds her responsible in “The Disquieting Muses”
Mother, mother, what ill bred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep...
Day now, night now at head, side,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone
Faces blank as the day I was born.

Sylvia Plath compromises with herself and comes out of that wrath in her Bee poems. “The Bee Meeting,” “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” “stings,” “The swarms,” and “Wintering” are the series of poems which are grouped under the above heading. Plath uses the Bees as metaphors for a number of different concerns. She herself becomes the Queen Bee. Her love towards Beekeeping, which she had inherited from the father, gives her a solace and also acts as a source of poetic inspiration. She cries for love in vain

I am nude as a chicken neck, does
no body love me?
She is sacred too and wants to hide it
They will not smell my fear, my fear My fear.

And finally she concludes

I am exhausted, I am exhausted

She assures herself that

The loss is only temporary
(The Arrival of the Bee Box)

Sylvia Plath’s sublimation of her Electra complex and her struggle to reduce the idealization, yields fruits when she enters into wedlock with her beloved Ted Hughes. She forgets herself, in the struggle of life, excuses her parents

and thanks her mother for her altruistic temperament. Begetting her own children makes her aware of the sacrifices it demands on the mother hood. Her fame as a poet and awards and prizes as encouragement in the companionship of her “poet husband” made complex fade away. But when Ted Hughes fails her in life, she could not excuse him, as she excused her father. She could not take revenge on him directly, lest indirectly joined her father in death, thus, reviving her Electra-Complex.

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