

**Sylvia Plath is undeniably known as a great feminist writer, but to what extent do you agree that the poems in the collection *Ariel* are solely an attack on the oppressive patriarchal society at the time?**

“Plath has long been hailed as a feminist writer of great significance”<sup>1</sup>, her poetry highlighting the oppressive and dogmatic nature of patriarchal society in post Second World War America, where women experienced limited personal freedom, restricted by their gender deemed as; “cute but essentially helpless”<sup>2</sup>. It is this political context which arguably fuelled Plath’s poetry, but also tragically led to her psychological instability. ‘The Applicant’ is an incisive, satirical and searing poetic portrait of marriage, constructed as a metaphorical interview where the worthiness of a potential husband is weighed against an inventory of domestic duties which will be carried out by the servile wife. In the poem ‘Daddy’ Plath presents patriarchy as unscrupulously; “denigrating, exploitative and repressive”<sup>3</sup>, with the imago of the father silencing a fragile female voice, woman is oppressed and becomes the subjugated victim. Taken together these two powerful and controversial poems written within days of each other in October 1962, just months before her suicide, beg the question as to how far Plath stands up for feminism in attacking patriarchy, or is there a case to be made that these poems are rather more a stage for Plath’s personal vengeance, a rage against her father and her husband? And in light of her looming self-destructive fury, are these poems more like a sort of revenge poetry? Therefore is Plath worthy of celebration for her inspirational defiance against patriarchy or is she in fact an ‘accidental feminist’.

In ‘The Applicant’, Plath presents a taut and disheartening reflection on the ritual of marriage that draws our attention to the oppressive plight of women in the 1950-60’s. Woman is expressed as a mere asset; “not having a sense of identity independent of their husbands”<sup>4</sup>. Plath constructs the female to be an item of commodity, who is ready to be purchased by the male consumer. The man is given a “hand” symbolic of the subservient hand of a wife, who will do “whatever you tell it”, impressing upon us the stereotypical image of the household wife upholding the attributes and chores required; “it can sew... it can cook”. The repeated use of the impersonal pronoun; “it”, coupled later with; “naked as paper”, serves to remove any sense of personality or individuality, she is dehumanised, condensed to a material who’s only purpose is it be written upon. This is reinforced by reference to bald marital landmarks; “twenty-five years she’ll be silver, in fifty, gold”, which further serves to objectify the female as she is conflated with a precious metal, suggesting a female is nothing but a cold, hard product with market-value. There is no loving coalition, it is rather a business transaction, a job interview where; “marriage inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy”<sup>5</sup>. By the denouement Plath highlights, in a rather sarcastic tone, the way in which society condescendingly requests the women to; “come here, sweetie” to simply fulfil the patriarch’s need. Woman is dependent and immobilised; “powerless as they are caught in a marriage trap”<sup>6</sup>. Plath’s use of the belittling oxymoron; “living doll”, portrays the female as helpless and docile, void of emotion with a frozen expression, simply a synthetic toy or

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<sup>1</sup> Kinsey-Clinton (1997)

<sup>2</sup> Bertens( 2001)

<sup>3</sup> Bertens (2001)

<sup>4</sup> Bassnett (1987)

<sup>5</sup> Barry(2002)

<sup>6</sup> Bassnett (2005)

superficial “robot wife”<sup>7</sup>, someone who needs the steer of a man who becomes the metaphorical puppeteer. Plath thus mocks the imbalance of power that patriarchy callously generates through the subjugation of women, highlighting the indisputable inequality of power between the sexes at the time.

However, though Plath attacks patriarchy through exploring female oppression in ‘The Applicant’ ironically, she also draw attention to the toxic strain placed upon men to be masculine and the “sort of person” that is sociably desirable. Interestingly the man is the focus of the poem and the woman has a far more minor role, and though this can be seen to symbolise how females are cast aside and ignored within society and therefore emphasising her case, it may also be perceived to be exposing the weakness of patriarchy as it fails to benefit anyone, leaving everyone felling “empty”. Plath presents the man to be emotional and vulnerable thus exposing the fragility of patriarchy, he is abruptly told to “stop crying” in response to possible rejection, evoking the common yet warped stereotype that “boys don’t cry”<sup>8</sup>. He is also s exposed by being; “stark naked”. Thus Plath highlights that the oppression of marriage works both ways, men are almost cruelly harassed to be the ideal, dominating man that society demands, and therein unable to express themselves freely. There is a question then; who is the dictating speaker? The poem ends despairingly, with a sense of hopelessness as there appears to be a lack of fulfilment for the female character, as insultingly she is the; “last resort”, which also suggest that the man is desperate for the “hole” to be filled by the “poultice”. The hole may be symbolic of the women, but also the empty hole of life without a wife, as man is susceptible and destitute without the woman. The haunting echo of the final line; “Will you marry it, marry it, marry it”, intimates that the meaning of marriage becomes obliterated as the repeated words trail off into meaningless silence rather than inculcating an ideal. Of course, this is the “silence of Plath’s voice”<sup>9</sup> which becomes a strident overture for feminism, in this sense Plath becomes every person who is victim to patriarchy, and the poem exists and belongs to the reader. Plath raises western marriage in the mid twentieth century to a level of general observation: she highlights a society where inequality is enshrined in the sacrament of marriage, and in doing so, she attacks the patriarchal order and becomes the spokeswoman for a generation and a harbinger for societal change.

It is unambiguous however, that in ‘Daddy’, Plath explores the subjugation of the infantile female voice to patriarchy, as the man is placed in positions of high supremacy through the presentation of her dictating father, where the female is intimidated and forced into an inescapable life of submission to the man, depriving her of any power. The poem has a sing-song quality to it, with subtle internal rhymes; “black shoe...achoo”, there is a device of using an almost filial language in places almost echoing nursery songs, coupled with the juvenile title of the poem, ‘Daddy’, which serves to undermine the female as if she is as helpless, vulnerable and reliant on the male as child is to its parents. Later, the father becomes a “fascist”, a ‘Nazi’ who torments Plath’s “Jew”, although this has been critiqued for ‘touching upon a sensitive subject’ and ‘dramatizing her personal plight’<sup>10</sup>, she conveys a torturous and despotic side to men, where females are profoundly and even criminally

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<sup>7</sup> Bundtzen (1983)

<sup>8</sup> Goodey(1997)

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm (1994)

<sup>10</sup> Yeh (2014)

disempowered. It is these images of oppression and tyranny that stand out throughout the poem; a “brute”, a teacher “you stand at the blackboard”, a ‘Nazi’ with “a Meinkampf look”. She superimposes the description of the father with imago of ‘God’ which implies the irrevocable control, omniscient and over-bearing power of men. But there is a complex reversal to this oppression insofar as Plath tells us; “every woman adores a fascist”. She perhaps suggests that the oppression of women is of women’s own doing, and therefore patriarchy is propped up by the willingness of women to be subjugated.

‘Daddy’ unquestionably attacks the relationships which Plath saw as dictating women’s freedom, and those in her life which drained her of her individuality; “drank (her) blood for seven years”, the poem is a platform to present a treatise on the extermination of oppressed people and therefore representative of the oppression of patriarchy. In a sense the daughter becomes every person who is subject to the “boot in the face” and Plath highlights the inexcusable injustice of patriarchy, both at a domestic level and a political level where female expression is suppressed, the speaker is; “barely daring to breath” with her “tongue stuck in my jaw” which implies the fear and trepidation that patriarchy creates, in turn “perpetuating sexual inequality”<sup>11</sup>. The poem can be read therefore as a call to feminist arms, a rally call which highlights patriarchy and gives rise to desire for the restoration of rights for the suffering oppressed woman.

However, it would be naive to ignore the personal nature of this “aggressive”<sup>12</sup> poem, Plath’s own vendetta against her estranged husband and absent father. There is an argument that ‘Daddy’ can’t solely be an attack on patriarchy as it instead refracts something more emotional; “writing simply as a form of personal catharsis”<sup>13</sup> to free herself rather than seeking to free women more generally. The poem conveys her disparaging feelings still held towards her Father, “a brute” and therefore she isn’t attacking patriarchy per se but a menacing and intimidating figure in her life who she has; “always been scared of”. Plath sees her father as “allowing his illness to go untreated, until he stubbed his toe”<sup>14</sup>, this coupled with the use of the ominous metaphor: “ghastly statue with one gray toe, Big as Frisco seal”, then becomes a matter of huge significance, as what appeared an arbitrary detail, a “toe” reveals the depth of hyperbolic private symbolism and therapeutic expression as it takes her back to her father’s premature and traumatic death.

Seamus Heaney, while not doubting the quality of the poem, saw ‘Daddy’ as Plath’s bitterness in response to her; “her difficult parental and marital relations”<sup>15</sup>. Heaney finds Plath’s use of other people’s suffering as uncomfortable. Arguably, ‘Daddy’ encourages the reader to be critical of Plath for her identification with the holocaust, which she compares to the oppression of the father and her husband, a comparison which may be offensive to many. And her language has violence and acrimony, firstly she wants to “kill” her father but, to her disappointment he “died before I had time”. And then; “at twenty I tried to die”, referring to her attempt to kill herself<sup>16</sup>. Both of these acts, murder and suicide, were legislated against in the 1950’s in the USA, so Plath’s reference to killing directly stands in opposition to the

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<sup>11</sup> Barry(2002)

<sup>12</sup> Rose (1991, p.223)

<sup>13</sup> Moore (1997)

<sup>14</sup> Feinstein (2001, p.51)

<sup>15</sup> Heaney (1978)

<sup>16</sup> Steinberg (2010)

infrastructure of social and moral exchange within society. The poem is hyperbolic and provokes a lack of sympathy, though that is not to say that her means of killing off patriarchy are more condemnable than patriarchy itself.

It would be an overstatement to praise Plath for successfully outing patriarchy's ills at a socio-political level, as arguably she is writing more as a "final attempt to free herself"<sup>17</sup> which in 'Daddy' she achieves with the portentous; "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through". However, personal plight and politics are inextricably linked and if Plath was not motivated by experience then her poetry would lack the emotional depth to reach her readers. After all the outpouring of hostility towards the father resides with feminist ideals by exposing the unjust oppression of that era which is arguably still existent today.

Overall, Plath's poetry in *Ariel* initially appears to be an attack on the oppressive patriarchal society when analysed at a merely superficial level. However, although her poems 'The Applicant' and 'Daddy' are Plath's way of expressing and profiling her own personal grievances and not to solely attack patriarchy, it is irrefutable that Plath has great feminist standing and is hugely influential in "the feminist movement that began to gain momentum in the course of the 1960's"<sup>18</sup>. Many great literary works stem from a biographical standpoint to then go onto be a strident attack on political ills, in Plath's case, it is a memorable attack on patriarchy. Although her poetry is egotistical, it is her honesty in the exposition of her own personal trauma that she speaks to female solidarity as; "all the women involved might look at their own lives and realize the extent to which they share experiences with other women"<sup>19</sup>. Plath's poetry continues to be of significance today, not so much accidentally but rather consequentially, her use of her own experiences heightens her work to highlight the unjust oppression and agitates us to strive for change.

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<sup>17</sup> Kendall (2001)

<sup>18</sup> Bertens (2001)

<sup>19</sup> Pilcher & Whelehan (2004)

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### **Plot summary**

**The Applicant-** The poem is some sort of interview asking an applicant if there's anything missing. He starts crying due to the absence of a wife, to which the interviewer responds by giving him a hand, a hand which will bring him tea, roll away headaches, shut his eye close after a tiring day, dissolve him of sorrow and essentially do whatever he tells it to. Then the interviewer asks if he's ready for marriage and emphasises the responsibility and permanence of it, which must be carried to the grave. Then he claims that the applicant head is a bit empty and that it needs filling, he calls from a closet a woman. He dehumanises the woman and calls her 'it' throughout, saying how she has all the qualities of a good wife who can complete him. And the applicant has no choice but to accept her. So, will you marry 'it' the interviewer says.

**Daddy-** Sylvia Plath explores her complicated relationship with her father in "Daddy", who had died when she was just 10 years old, she uses symbolism to describe her relationship with him. He's like a black shoe that she has lived in all her life, like a statue as big as San Francisco, like God, like a Nazi, like a Swastika and then lastly like a vampire. The speaker characterises herself as a Jew, victim to the Nazis (her father) cruelty. Yet, the poem is also an attempt to be rid of her father claiming to have killed him as a sort of revenge. The poem ends with Plath 'being through' with her father as if she's trying to put her pain caused by him behind her.