

Women Should Write Themselves: A Study on Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Ariel"

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ABSTRACT

In the poems "Daddy" and "Ariel", Sylvia Plath breaks with the tradition of male writing rules in terms of both language and writing perspective, contrasting the images of 'father' and 'mother' under a patriarchal society. Hélène Cixous in her work *The Laugh of the Medusa* emphasizes that women writers should write about themselves, and that a fundamental feature of women's writing is to always include the image of the 'mother' in their work. This paper focuses on these two aspects to explore Sylvia Plath's approach to her writing as a female writer and the image of 'mother' in her poems "Daddy" and "Ariel". The study will provide readers with a new perspective on how female writers employ different modes of writing from those formed by men, and how female writers write about themselves.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, "Daddy", "Ariel", *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous

1. INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is one of the representatives of American Confession poets. During the period following her separation from Hughes, she has written "Daddy", "Ariel", and "Lady Lazarus" within just five months, which typically show her thoughts on feminism [1]. In some ways, Plath's thoughts can be explained by what is announced in *The Laugh of the Medusa* written by Hélène Cixous. This article discusses why feminine writings should be written by women, which awakens women's consciousness. They are all the milestones of the development of feminism.

Scholars have created great research results on the feminist spirit reflected in Sylvia Plath's work in the past studies. Most of the studies focus on two aspects: firstly, combining the distressful life of the woman in the patriarchal society with Sylvia Plath's resentment in the poems to reveal the man's dominated position and the woman's reaction to this situation [2, 3]; secondly, by analyzing the Plath's life experience and her understanding of death to explore the feminism spirit in her works [4, 5]. However, "how do woman writers write?" has rarely been discussed. Language is the tool to deliver thoughts, so how to use language is one of the critical elements in a woman's writing. Just as Hélène Cixous's idea that women should write in their way [6], and women

writers are breaking the language system men have created. Thus, this paper will pay attention to the language and the signified of Sylvia Plath's poems "Daddy" and "Ariel" to explore how can women writers convey their voices.

In order to analyze Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Ariel" and understand the poet's thoughts, the essay includes two relevant sections. The first section talks about the subversion of gendered language. By analyzing some images with symbolic meanings and gender identity in Plath's poems and the structure of her writings, this section will describe how feminine writings break the traditional language and thinking patterns derived from the patriarchal society. The second section focuses on the implications of 'father' and 'mother' in the poems. By comparing the images and social station of then in the poem, this section will show how postmodernist feminism reflects in the poem and explain why women should write women's writings.

2. WRITING STYLE IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

"Daddy" and "Ariel" were created in the last year of Sylvia Plath's life, in October 1962, and she completed her last suicide in 1963. Thus, the style of these poems is similar. As one of the most important works of Sylvia

Plath, "Daddy" uses the tone of a girl with Oedipus complex to express her ambivalent emotion toward her father. "Ariel" narrates a horse running to the rising sun in the early morning, which contains strong praise to the mother. The central idea of *The Laugh of the Medusa* by Hélène Cixous is that the woman should write herself and not need to follow the rules made by men [6]. These two poems written by woman poets are typical sources explaining Cixous's thoughts. The paper in this section will focus on how woman writer Sylvia Plath uses her way to write by analyzing both language and contents.

Sylvia Plath occupies the initiative in the language in the poem "Daddy". At the opening of the poem:

*You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe [7]*

an imperative statement establishes a counter-discourse [8] to hold the discourse power in a woman's hand. According to Hélène Cixous, almost the entire history of writing is confounded with the phallogocentric traditional, "men capable of loving love and hence capable of loving others and of wanting, them, of imagining the woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as a superb, equal, hence 'impossible' subject, untenable in a real social framework." [6]. In "Daddy", man has become silent and passive and has become an objection to being gazed at. The poem narrates the tough life without father's protection in the patriarchal society. With the complaint and yearning, the man's image in this poem is entirely formed by the view of the woman writer, and men have no space to explain themselves. In this poem, Sylvia Plath seizes the right to love and makes the man an imaginary image.

Sylvia Plath talks about herself in the poem and uses a woman's identification to discuss women. As Hélène Cixous emphasizes: Men have led women to hate women, to be their enemies, and have made the woman an anti-narcissism [6]. Under this atmosphere, women are rear to explore themselves and avoid talking about themselves in writing. Sylvia Plath mixes her own experience and emotion into the poem, as in the first stanza of "Daddy":

*For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. [7]*

She does not conceal how her life was changed by losing her "Daddy" in her childhood and exposes her weakness and sadness to the readers. In this poem, she focuses on her position and used her sight of view to express herself and her understanding of man.

From the perspective of the writing structure, the language of "Ariel" is also fragmented. Plath uses four dashes in the poem, which looks like the speaker is shouting and even fighting for something. It is special that Plath writes the subject and predicate in separate lines. For example, in the poem, she writes:

Melts in the wall.

And I

Am the arrow, [9]

The subject "I" and the predicate "Am" are in different lines in this vignette. It breaks the traditional grammatical rule and, similarly, is like shouting. Women have their own patterns of writing, which men should not limit. The isolated "I" shows that the speaker emphasizes the importance of herself. I am I, not you; and she is she, not he. He creates the rules to bind her, but she can and will break them.

Sylvia Plath's "Ariel" contains some symbolic images. These images reflect the subversion of gendered language from the perspective of the thinking patterns. For example, the word "Ariel" is one image that reflects gender identity. "Ariel" is considered as "God's lioness" [9], which is also a horse belonging to Sylvia Plath or the spirit in Shakespeare's play the *Tempest*. In Plath's poem, whatever the explanation for the image "Ariel" is, it represents a woman in most cases who has escaped from the oppression of patriarchal society. In the Hebraic culture, "Ariel" is one of the archangels in mythology. She is "God's lioness" [9], responsible for protecting animals and nature. She also has the charge for the order of the cosmos. She has real power. She is free. Additionally, according to Gary Lane, "Ariel" may refer to "Shakespeare's sprite, who finally gains release from his (Prospero's) bondage in the *Tempest*" [10]. By using the image "Ariel", Plath portrays a woman who has been humiliated, then seeks the way out, and finally liberated, like the flying horse, "at one with the drive, into the red" [9].

The meaning of the image "Godiva" is also worth thinking about. In the poem "Ariel", Sylvia Plath cites the story about Lady Godiva. Lady Godiva is a noblewoman in the eleventh century in England. According to legend, she has once ridden the horse nakedly through Coventry's streets to relieve the local citizens from heavy taxes imposed by her husband, the Earl of Mercia. It is no doubt that Godiva is a heroine in the citizens' minds. She is a wise and kind-hearted woman. Facing the humiliating unfair requirement of her husband, she has decidedly ridden in the streets without dressing, using her beautiful body to fight for her rights. In the poem, the speaker considers herself the "White Godiva" [9] and turns her nose at the male gaze. She confidently shows her body to the world. She subverts the traditional stigma given to women by men.

In Sylvia Plath's poems, the woman speakers break with the traditional language patterns formed under patriarchal society from the perspectives of language structure and thinking patterns. Women are the victims of patriarchy, suffering from all kinds of compression physically and mentally. However, the women in the poems aware this and make resistance. In *The Laugh of*

the Medusa, Cixous says that “For once she (the woman) blazes her trail in the symbolic, she cannot fail to make of it the chaosmos of the ‘personal’—in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents. And for good reason. There will have been the long history of gynocide” [6]. After the long period of suffering, struggling and thinking, the women fight for freedom, taking different kinds of actions, to break the “rules” from outside (structure) to inside (thinking pattern)—and this is what an awakened woman should do first.

3. THE IMPLICATIONS OF ‘FATHER’ AND ‘MOTHER’ IN “DADDY” AND “ARIEL”

In Sylvia Plath’s poems, the image of ‘mother’ is subtle. The ‘mother’ here is not only a physical concept but also a symbolic social character. According to Hélène Cixous, “the mother is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her” [6]. A ‘mother’ is one who can influence and even save her offspring physically and mentally. Similarly, feminine writing plays the role of ‘mother’ from the perspective of society. It speaks women’s voices aloud and tries to awaken them. In the following paragraphs, “Daddy” and “Ariel” will be taken as examples to explain the implication of ‘mother’ in Plath’s feminine writing.

In “Daddy”, ‘father’ implies a tall man in spirit. According to Hélène Cixous, man always steps into an upward stage for women to idolize and then make them obey men’s orders [6]. Sylvia Plath’s father died when she was eight years old. In the poem “Daddy”, she remains the upward angle in her childhood of looking upon her father:

*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. [7]*

This is the poem’s first stanza where she puts her feeling directly: her thirty years without her father are “poor and white”. The deficiency of protection from the father affects the daughter, and she dares to do nothing. Patriarchal society makes the man the mainstay of social activity, and one’s psychology is formed in the patriarchal society. The deficiency of the accompanying of the father is a lack of conditions for living in the patriarchal society. In “Daddy”, Sylvia Plath clings desire to be with her father and the poor condition in the patriarchal society she was in on the father’s image, so the image is tall.

The image of ‘father’ also implies the patriarchy. In the concept of gaze by Lacan, if a child has accepted the status and function of the father, the father’s implication and authority will always be with the child, so if he/she wants

to have the right to express herself, he/she must become how the father look like [11]. In “Daddy”:

*But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you, [7]*

Although her father has left her for over twenty years, ‘father’ is in her heart, influencing her to follow the patriarchal rules. In the tenth stanza, she writes:

Every woman adores a Fascist, [7]

The worship of the leaders in Fascism is like adoration to the ‘father’. ‘Father’ is the ruler of this society.

In the poem “Ariel”, the woman speaker also tries to escape from “motherhood” to herself, which means that she makes efforts to get away from the control of patriarchal society and convey her own thoughts. The whole poem talks about her story with her horse “Ariel”. At first, they struggle in the dark. According to Esra’a Qazzaz, “the darkness may refer to the condition of women under patriarchy in which they are mistreated and not allowed a real chance of forming their independent identities” [12]. The darkness surrounds her with the identity of a mother and wife. The woman rides the horse and unites with it, trying to run away from the darkness and act herself. This is the first step of her awakening.

During the journey with “Ariel”, the woman breaks the shackles of the patriarchal society step by step. Instead of taking care of her crying baby, she ignores the baby and goes on her own way, pursuing freedom. In the poem, Sylvia Plath writes:

*And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child’s cry
Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow, [9]*

She is herself and then a mother. A mother has the responsibility to bring up her babies. However, the identity of ‘mother’ in this poem is the product of patriarchal society, representing the compression under this kind of “power politics”. From the perspective of traditional patriarchal society, the mother should look after the baby, even at every moment of the whole day. The crying of the baby is another type of pressure on her. With struggling, the woman in the poem overcomes the problem. She finally breaks free from the bondage of “motherhood”.

In the poem “Ariel”, Sylvia Plath describes the process of a woman’s evolution into being an independent ‘mother’. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous

points out that “in women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes. We will rethink womankind beginning with every form and every period of her body” [6]. ‘Mother’ symbolizes a spiritual power that can tell her babies, especially her girls, what should be done and what the world is. Feminine writing can be considered a process of giving birth to a baby. In “Ariel”, the woman speaker shares her adventure with readers and speaks aloud with her own words. Her experience is what women have undergone and what they would better do next. She writes to women and conveys their thoughts. To some extent, she can be considered as an independent spiritual ‘mother’ of the girls in that patriarchal society, and she wants to bring them up with her “milk”, which is the words she has written in the poem, though she ignores her crying baby in the end.

The images of ‘father’ and ‘mother’ are complicated, by combining the contents from Sylvia Plath’s poems and theories, the implications under the images has began to take shape. The two images take two types of roles separately, which ‘father’ is a ruler in the patriarchal society for controlling people’s thoughts invisibly, and ‘mother’ is a identify formed by the patriarchal society but also a rebel. These two images provide us a meaningful opportunity to think about our situation and psychology in the patriarchal society.

4. CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath is one of the greatest women poets in the field of feminine writings. In Sylvia Plath’s poems “Daddy” and “Ariel”, the women speakers convey women’s thoughts by telling their stories. They firstly break the rules men make and then try to create their own ways physically and mentally. Although women are still under men’s control or even oppression, they make efforts. Pioneers like Sylvia Plath have made efforts to speak women’s voices aloud and write for women. They are like Medusa, a female magician who can make people die when they look into her eyes. She is a bad person. However, she becomes a “bad” person because of Poseidon, a powerful man’s violation. In this way, she is a brave resister, which is similar to the women’s identities in Plath’s poems. The sound of Medusa represents the sound of women who stand up and fight for their rights under men’s governance. In the unfair patriarchal society, women need some “Medusa” or even become “Medusa” to break the rules and punish the arrogant men. This is what Sylvia Plath wants to tell her readers in her poems.

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