

Poetry
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Lecture No. 60
Sylvia Plath

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Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

- Historical and Literary Context
- Sylvia Plath
- Two Poems: Background
 - "Mirror"
 - "Daddy"
- Analysis



Hello. Let us discuss Sylvia Plath and her poems in this lecture. She was born in 1932 and died at an early age in 1963. We will see the historical and literary context first and then look into her life briefly. Touch upon the background to her poems we have chosen for this discussion, Mirror and Daddy. Analyse the poem and then offer our impressions.

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Historical and Literary Context

- The Great Depression, 1929
- The Second World War, 1939-1945
- Migration of Europeans to the US and other places
- Confessional poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich were making waves
- They gave free expression to their self without inhibitions.
- They focussed on the multifarious sufferings of body and soul and a shipwrecked image to represent their place.
- Plath was married to Ted Hughes, a well-established British poet.



Here is a historical and literary context for understanding Sylvia Plath. The Great Depression in 1929, the Second World War in 1939 and 1945 actually put people into trouble. Some Europeans came to the US, and some Americans went to the Europe. That is how this kind of exchange of people was happening. We have confessional poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich in these times, they were making waves across the country.


They gave free expression to their self without inhibitions. They focussed on the multifarious sufferings of body and soul and a shipwrecked image to represent their place in the world. Plath was married to Ted Hughes, a well-established British poet of the times.

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Sylvia Plath

- Poet and novelist
- Two traditions: American-British
- Born in the US but married the British poet Ted Hughes in 1956 and committed suicide in 1963.
- Betrayal, Creativity, Depression, Suicide
- **Confessional poetry in the US**
- **The Alvarez Group in the UK**
- A feminist poet par excellence: "Lady Lazarus"

"Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air."



Sylvia Plath was a poet and also a novelist. She belongs to actually two traditions, both American and British literature. She was born in the US, but she married the British poet, Ted Hughes in 1956 and committed suicide in 1963. She had a brief marital life of 7 years. And this kind of suicide happened for many reasons, and one of them is betrayal. Betrayal is betrayal from her husband and then her own uncontrollable creativity which led to her depression and then finally suicide. Actually, she attempted she suicide many times and at last she succeeded.

We have confessional poetry in the US, and the Alvarez group in the UK. These two groups actually influenced Sylvia Plath's poetry. She is a feminist par excellence as we can see from "Lady Lazarus," a poem. We have a quotation from this poem,

"Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.”

This is the feminist understanding of Plath that we have in this poem, ‘Lady Lazarus.’ From this we can understand, Lazarus was a character in the bible and she wrote not about the male Lazarus but about the Lady Lazarus.

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Two Poems: Background

▪ “Mirror”

- Probably written in 1961
- Published in *Crossing the Water* in 1971
- a free verse poem of two nine-line stanzas, 18 lines
- A reflection on a fractured self

▪ “Daddy”

- Written in 1962, four months before her death in 1963
- A poem 16 five-line stanzas, total 80 lines
- A reflection on authority as sources of oppression and depression



We have chosen two poems for discussion, one is the “Mirror” and another is “Daddy.” Mirror was perhaps written in 1961, and published in “Crossing the Water” in 1971, after her death. It is a free verse poem of two nine-line stanzas, consisting of 18 lines. It is a poem which reflects on a fractured self, a divided self as we can see in the poem. “Daddy” was written in 1962, 4 months before her death in 1963. This pre death period was considered to be an excellent creative period for Plath. This poem is a poem of 16 five-line stanzas with 80 lines in total. It is a reflection on authority as sources of oppression and depression.

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Mirror - I

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful,
The eye of a little god, four-cornered. 5
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

.....
□ A mirror reflection as an image of mental reflection,
examination of the self and the other



First, let us see the poem, Mirror. We have two stanzas, first we will see the first one, next, we will see the second stanza. The first stanza is here. It is actually the voice of a mirror, there is a mirror and the mirror speaks;

“I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful,

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the times I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked as it so long

I think it is part of my heart. Bit it flickers.

Faces and darkness separates us over and over”

There is a mirror on the wall and this mirror looks at the opposite wall and in between some images are seen and this particular poem tells us about this mirror meditating on the opposite wall. This is a mirror reflection as an image of mental reflection, examination of the self and also the other.

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Mirror - II



Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, 10
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes. 15
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old
[woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. 18

.....
□The mirror and the lake assume a self whereas the woman is presented as an other.



Here is the second stanza, now, the mirror assumes another voice. The voice of a lake;

“Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman.
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.”
.....

First, we saw the mirror, then the mirror turned into a lake and the lake assumes itself, whereas the woman is presented as an other. So, this mismatch in our normal understanding, the woman is expected to have this self, but then, the lake assumes the self and the woman becomes the other for the lake.

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Questions for Discussion



1. What impression of **the speaker** do we get from the poem?
2. What does the **mirror** do?
3. What does the **lake** do?
4. What does the **woman** do?
5. What do we as readers do after reading the poem?
6. How is drowning literally and figuratively linked with Plath's life?

- **Death by drowning/water** is a common phenomenon in the universe.
- We float while we are alive and also after our death.



We have some questions which can help us understand the poem much better. Let us look into these questions and after that, if we read the poem again, we can understand the poem much better. What impression of the speaker do we get from the poem? Here, we have a speaker, who is that speaker? Mirror and the lake. What does the mirror do? It meditates. What does the lake do? It receives the woman everyday and reflects her image back to her. What does the woman do? She looks at the woman and she also look into the lake and she sees herself, but then she sees the truthful picture of her own life and she finds it broken, particularly in the water, when the water moves, she can see her own divided self. What do we as readers do after reading the poem? It is a big task for us. In confessional poetry, we have the responsibility of sharing the emotions, experiences of this speaker of the poem that we read.

How is drowning literally and figuratively linked with Plath's own life? We can see it prefigures her own drowning, her own death, that is her own suicide. In her case, she committed suicide by turning on the gas in the kitchen. This death by drowning or water is a common phenomenon in the universe. We all float while we are alive and also, after our death. We see the dead body floating on the water at the end of the poem, rises everyday like a terrible fish. That's it.

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Thematic Contrast

- Self and Other
- Illness and Health
- Suffering and Joy
- Life and Death
- Nature and Human beings
- **Trust and Betrayal**
- Light and Darkness
- Young and Old
- **Beauty and Ugliness**
- Surface and Depth
- Appearance and Reality



We have the thematic contrast between self and other, illness and health, suffering and joy, life and death, nature and human beings. We also have the contrast between trust and betrayal, light and darkness, young and old, beauty and ugliness, surface and depth, and at last, appearance and reality.

What is important for us in this poem is the trust and betrayal within her own life, the trust she had in her father, the trust she had in her husband, both were betrayed. Her father died early, in the case of the husband, the husband went on to have affair with another woman. And in her case, she was thinking about her own beauty which probably she was losing as she had started giving birth to a child. So, this change in her own body, in her appearance might have led to feel more depressed and then she would have probably committed suicide after writing so many poems of great poetic worth.

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Poetic Devices

- **Alliteration & Conso**: I see I swallow immediately (2)
- **Assonance**: I see I swallow immediately (2)
- **Consonance**: I am not cruel, only truthful (4)
- **Allusion**: a little god, reference to Cupid?, Omniscient
- **Personification**: Mirror as meditating (6)
- **Assonance and Consonance**: it is part of my heart (8)
- **Metaphor**: But it flickers (candle/ lamp image) (8)
- **Personification**: Candles and moons as liars (12)
- **Metaphor**: drowned a young girl and an old woman rises
- **Simile**: like a terrible fish (18)



There are a number of poetic devices in this poem. Alliteration and consonance, we have in line number 2, I see, I swallow immediately. We have distinguished between the two. We have underlined “S;” we have highlighted “L.” So, that is how we can see the difference between alliteration and consonance here. Then, we have assonance in the second line also, that is I see, I swallow immediately. ‘See,’ ‘me’ these two vowels have similar sound pattern. Then we have consonance in ‘I am not cruel,’ ‘only truthful.’ Then allusion we have to ‘a little God,’ perhaps it is a kind of reference to Cupid or it’s a kind of reference to God who is omniscient, who knows everything.

The mirror may be considered to have some knowledge of everything that happens in the room so we can say omniscient. But then a little God, we associate with Cupid looking over human beings and putting them into trouble with love and other things. We have personification in mirror as meditating. This is an object which does not have any consciousness, but it meditates, more than a human being it meditates. Then we have assonance and consonance in, ‘it is part of my heart.’

Then we have metaphor in “but it flickers,” there is a reference to the candle, perhaps some kind of lamp image we have. Then we have personification in candles and moons as telling lies, these candles do not give the truthful picture of the human being present in the context. Moons also, moonlight, will not show the correct picture, that is the authentic picture. That is why these are used in literature as beautiful. Whereas, the mirror understands that they are liars.

Then we have metaphor- drowned a young girl and an old woman rises. When she comes to the lake, she sees herself as a young girl, but then after some thought, she rises as an old woman. She becomes old or she becomes conscious of the old age within her. Finally, after this drowning, she rises like a terrible fish.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Rhyme:** Free verse, hence no end rhymes; not even a single rhyming pair between the two stanzas also, indicating the clearly broken self of the speaker
- **Rhythm:** Short declarative sentences and long lines reveal the urgent and the upset mind of the speaker.
- **Meter:** Irregular meter with strong breaks; stops in middle of lines and commas at the end of lines.
- **Line lengths** vary from 9 to 14 syllables
- A tentative **tonal grouping** is here:

Now/ I am a lake.// A woman/ bends over me, /
Searching/ my reaches/ for what she/ really is.



Let us see the rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. It is actually a free verse and there is no end rhyme at all. Not even a single rhyming pair between the two stanzas also, perhaps indicating the clearly broken self of the speaker. Rhyming words normally refer to this kind of coherence, unity. And here, this poem does not have any, even between stanzas, it does not have any and so, it refers to the divided self of the speaker.

Then the rhythm, the sentences that we have in this poem are short, declarative sentences and sometimes, we have the long lines. They indicate the urgent and upset mind of the speaker. Again, the meter is irregular with strong breaks. Actually, strong stops are there in the middle of lines and commas at the end of lines. The line lengths vary from 9 syllables to 14 syllables. They look like 2 perfect stanzas. A tentative tonal grouping we have attempted in the two lines we have given here;

“Now I am a lake, a woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.”

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Overall Impression

- The speaker assumes the voice of a mirror and speaks about its role of truthful reflection of what is around, including the pink and speckled wall opposite, which it becomes.
- The mirror changes its shape to that of a lake, again with the property of reflection.
- Now the opposite wall is a depressed woman who sheds tears and so the lake swells.
- The lake reflects the ageing of a young girl into an old woman.
- While the mirror is not cruel, the lake turns out to be a murderer of the woman as she drowns in it.
- The other can be nurturing or destructive, suggesting the importance of the other (family members, friends, teachers, etc.) in the life of human beings.



Here is the overall impression. The speaker assumes the voice of a mirror and speaks about its role of truthful reflection of what is around, including the pink and speckled wall opposite, which it becomes. The mirror changes its shape to that of a lake, again with the property of reflection. The mirror and the lake, both have the same reflective quality. Now the opposite wall is a depressed woman who sheds tears and so the lake swells. The water in the lake increases. The lake reflects the ageing of a young girl into an old woman.

While the mirror is not cruel, the lake turns out to be a murderer of the woman as she drowns in it. The other can be nurturing or destructive, suggesting the importance of the other, that significant other like family members, friends, teachers and so on, in the life of human beings. Particularly the father and the husband in Plath's life; they were significant others and they were sources of oppression, depression for Plath.

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“Daddy,” Stanzas 1 & 2



You do not do, you do not do (repetition)

Any more, black shoe

In which I have lived like a foot

For thirty years, poor and white,

Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. 5

Daddy, I have had to kill you. (revenge)

You died before I had time—

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one gray toe

Big as a Frisco seal 10



We have the next poem, “Daddy.” It is a long poem; we will have only short extracts from this poem. Now let us see the first extract from stanzas 1 and 2. ‘Daddy’ is an informal term and the poem is all informal, very personal for Sylvia Plath.

“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. 5

Daddy, I have had to kill you.

You died before I had time-

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one gray toe

Big as a Frisco seal” 10

Here we have this repetition throughout the poem, this “oo” sound will be there, it indicates, some critics have said that, it is more like a nursery rhyme and in the second stanza, in the first line itself, we see the sense of revenge that is there in the speaker.

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“Daddy,” Stanzas 4 & 5



In the **German tongue**, in the Polish town (identity)
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars. (repetition)
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend 20

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you. (communication problem)
The tongue stuck in my jaw. 25



“In the **German tongue**, in the Polish town

Scraped flat by the roller

Of wars, wars, wars.

But the name of the town is common.

My Polack friend 20

Says there are a dozen or two.

So I never could tell where you

Put your foot, your root,

I never could talk to you.

The tongue stuck in my jaw.” 25

We have this problem of identity, linguistic identity in the case of Plath. She has German origin because her father was a German. Her father spoke German language and he also wanted her to speak in German with him. We have repetition of words like “Wars, wars” and this war assumes greater proportion in this poem, a personal poem, Daddy. We have this communication problem which she mentions in one line, “I never could talk to you.”

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“Daddy,” Stanzas 11 & 12



You stand at the blackboard, daddy, (Prof. Otto Plath)
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who 55

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die (suicidal tendency)
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do. 60



Another extract we have here, ‘You stand at the blackboard, daddy,’ actually, Plath’s father was a professor, so, she says,

“You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
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.”

She mentions about her own suicidal tendency after the death of her father at a young age. So, she wants to reach out to her father, go back to her father, join with her father, probably indicating some kind of electro complex, which Plath also mentions in one of her notes.

Plath's father was Professor Otto Plath. She looked at a picture of her father standing in front of a blackboard that she refers to in this poem.

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"Daddy," Stanzas 15 & 16

If I've killed one man, I've killed two – (father and husband)
The vampire who said he was you (vampire slayer)
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know. (7 years life with Hughes)
Daddy, you can lie back now. 75

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. 80



Another extract is here,

"If I've killed one man, I've killed two-
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through.

That is the last line of the poem, "daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through." The sound "U" is repeated, emphatically repeated, throughout the poem and in some cases, we have this

rhyming- you, you, you, through in the last line, it is very clear. This killing the father, killing the husband, she achieves poetically, imaginatively at the end of the poem and she feels relieved after taking the revenge. In the case of the father, he had already died, but in the case of the husband, he was living and she had marriage of seven years at this time and so she refers to this seven year. And this poet assumes the image of a vampire slayer, referring to her father and her husband.

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Thematic Contrast

- Father and Daughter
- Husband and Wife
- Individual and Society/ Institutions
- Human beings and God/ Authority
- Victim and Victor
- **Revenge and Forgiveness**
- **Love and Hate**
- Life and Death
- Faith and Betrayal



We have a thematic contrast between father and daughter on the one hand, husband and wife on the other hand; Individual and society, human beings and God, victim and victor, revenge and forgiveness, love and hate, life and death, faith and betrayal. This whole poem is personal for Plath, she examines the kind of disturbed, conflicting relationship that she had with her own father and with her husband. And that is why she has written such a poem. After writing the poem, probably she felt free, relieved and this kind of feeling that is present in human beings, after reading some people may feel relieved about their own hidden emotions.

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Poetic Devices



- **Simile:** lived like a foot (1)
- **Metaphor:** black shoe (2) for father
- **Simile:** Big as a Frisco seal (10)
- **Alli/ Asso:** where it pours bean green over blue (12)
- **Metonymy:** blue (12) blue ocean
- **Metaphor:** a barb wire snare (26) for German language
- **Simile:** Chuffing me off like a Jew (33)
- **Assonance:** clear beer of Vienna (36) (**seeing sound**)
- **Alliteration:** bright blue (44)
- **Allusion:** a cleft in your chin instead of your foot (53)
- **Allusion:** A man in black with a Meinkampf face (65)



A number of poetic devices are found in this poem as well. We have simile in ‘live like a foot;’ metaphor in ‘black shoe’ referring to her father. And then, simile, ‘big as a Frisco seal,’ Frisco, here, refers to San Francisco, the sea and the seal that she found when she was a child in San Francisco. Alliteration and assonance, we have in ‘where it pours bean green over blue;’ this bean-blue is alliteration; bean “ee” sound refers to assonance. Then we have metonymy, blue referring to the ‘blue ocean.’

Then we have metaphor in a barb wire snare for German language. This language is a snare, a trap for the speaker, that is why she says a barb wire snare. Simile we have in ‘chuffing me off like a Jew.’ This whole poem evokes the image of the Second World War. The number of Jews being killed in Germany by Hitler and his concentration camps and officers. Some people were taken by trains to the place of death. Many concentration camps were there. So, chuffing me off like a Jew, probably some kind of onomatopoeic effect also we can see in this line.

We have assonance in ‘clear beer of Vienna.’ We can see the sound in clear, beer of Vienna that is why we have indicated “seeing sound” in brackets. We have alliteration in ‘bright blue.’ Then allusion in ‘a cleft in your chin instead of your foot.’ A cleft footed person is considered to be a devil. In this case, Plath’s own father has a cleft in chin. And she says, ‘You may have a cleft in your chin, that does not mean that you can cheat me. I can understand very well that you are a devil.

Then lastly, we have this allusion ‘a man in black with a Meinkampf face.’ This is a reference to Hitler and also to Ted Hughes, her Husband who often wore a black coat.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Rhyme:** unrhymed free verse but in a stanza form of five lines each with the dominant sound of /u/; do, shoe, Achoo, blue, two, du, true, **gobbledygo**, who, glue, through,
- **Rhythm:** short lines with alliteration, assonance, and repetition of words and phrases indicate a fast paced rhythm
- **Meter:** irregular meter with line lengths of two syllables to 12 syllables, from one foot to six feet
- **Caesura, Enjambment and End-stopped lines:**
The snows | of the | Tyrol, | the clear | beer of | Vienna
Are not | very pure | or true.
With my | gipsy | ance | stress and | my weird | luck
And my | Taroc | pack and | my Ta | roc pack
I may | be a | bit of | a Jew. (Stanza 8)



Now let us come to rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. This is a free verse poem of course; it is unrhymed, but in a stanza form of five 5 lines each with the dominant sound of “u:” do, shoe, Achoo, blue, two, du, true, gobbledygo, who, glue, through. And this sound alone dominates throughout the poem. We have rhythm in the short lines with alliteration, assonance and repetition of words and phrases indicating a fast-paced rhythm. It is an outpouring of emotion, anger, revenge from the speaker.

In the case of meter, we have irregular meter with line lengths of 2 syllables to 12 syllables, from 1 foot to 6 feet. Then we have caesura, enjambment and end-stopped lines. Here, we have another passage to give an example for caesura, enjambment and end-stopped lines in this context:

“The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.”

There is a kind of a guilty feeling in Plath because she was a Jew, she escaped whereas many millions of people died and that is also possible interpretation for this poem.

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Overall Impression

- “Daddy” is a confrontational poem of a daughter with a father, a wife with a husband, an individual with the society, a human being with God, etc.
- The speaker takes a poetic revenge on a dead father and living husband for their oppression of her, which is presented through the images of a black shoe and a vampire.
- Invoking the German and Jewish origin of her parents and the black coat used by her husband, Plath conjures up the holocaust image in the poem to represent the sufferings of victims of various forms of patriarchal oppression in the world.
- Not surprisingly, it became an iconic poem of the feminist movement.



Here, we have the overall impression. “Daddy” is a confrontational poem of a daughter with a father, a wife with a husband, an individual with the society, a human being with God and all sources of authority. The speaker takes a poetic revenge on a dead father and living husband for their oppression of her, which is presented through the images of ‘a black shoe and a vampire.’

Invoking the German and Jewish origin of her parents and the black coat used by her husband, Plath conjures up the holocaust image in the poem to represent the sufferings of victims of various forms of patriarchal oppression in the world. Not surprisingly, this poem became an iconic poem of the feminist movement.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Sylvia Plath
- Two Poems: Background
- “Mirror”
- “Daddy”
- Analysis



To give a summary of our discussion, we have seen the historical and literary context in which Sylvia Plath wrote her poems. Belonging to two different traditions, both American and British, she was able to write confessional poetry and also poetry which belongs to this Alvarez group in Britain. We looked at 2 poems, one the “Mirror” and the other “Daddy.” The mirror is more objective whereas Daddy is more personal, more revengeful, more expressive and these poems have become very popular among the readers. They give expressions to the feminist understanding of rebellion, resistance against patriarchal oppression in the world.

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Here are some references which may be of some help to you to understand Plath and her poem much better. The last reference by Uroff says she is not exactly a confessional poet, because she uses more of strategies to express herself which are not exactly confessional. That means, she is not talking about her own self because she imagines many things. Her father was not a tyrant like she has presented in the poem, the kind of Jewish references that she had mentioned, they are all imagined.

So, this poem and many other poems written by Plath are not exactly confessional, they are just expressions of emotions using rhetorical strategies. Thank you!