



Evolution of the Representation of Gendered Body in Sylvia Plath's Poetry: A Study of "Pursuit" and "Daddy"

Yue Zhao

School of Foreign Languages, Xinyang Normal University, China

Email: benzy@126.com

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Abstract

There is an obvious tendency and ample evidence to show Sylvia Plath's representation of the gendered body throughout her poetry. However, inadequate attention has been paid to the evolution of her such kind of representation. Taking one of her early poems "Pursuit" and a later one "Daddy" as examples, this essay aims to explicate this evolution of representation. In her early poetry, her representation of gendered body centers on Freudian interest as seen in "Pursuit," but in her later poems this representation changes to her political consciousness as is the case in "Daddy." Therefore, this evolution embodies both her change of poetic subject matter and her concern with gender politics under the influence of the social culture.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath; Representation of gendered body; "Pursuit"; "Daddy"; Social culture.

1. Introduction

Body, especially gendered body, has aroused the American poet Sylvia Plath's great interest since her childhood. Ample evidence concerning this aspect can be found in her personal journal entries and her contemporary cultural context. It is quite frequent and common to come across the gendered representation of body throughout Sylvia Plath's short but serious collection of poetry, which cannot be neglected by readers and critics alike. However, among Plath's published scholarship so far, except some early serious journal articles (Lant, 1993; Wurst, 1990), there is little research which concerns her representation of body, not to mention her gendered representation or even the evolution of such a representation. Due to this lack of research, this essay, taking Plath's poems: "Pursuit" and "Daddy" as two examples, attempts to probe into the evolution of the representation of gendered body in her poetry.

2. Gendered Representation of Body in "Pursuit"

Plath's journal entries indicate she had been interested in Sigmund Freud's ideas quite early (Plath, 2000, 92, 98, 306). In her letters home dated on October 15, 1954, she told her mother, during the preparation for her graduation thesis concerning double personality, she was reading Freud among other authors (Plath, 1992, 146). One of her contemporaries Betty Friedan said in her book titled *The Feminine Mystique*, whose publication coincided with Plath's death, "Freudian psychology became much more than a science of human behavior, a therapy for the suffering. It became an all-embracing American ideology, a new religion" (Friedan, 2001, 123). Moreover, she continued, "Freud was the spiritual leader, his theories were the bible" (Friedan, 2001, 124). Thus, there is no denying the fact that Freud had overwhelmingly influenced the post-war America.

Friedan further pointed out that as the eminent psychoanalyst Clara Thompson put it: "The castration complex and penis envy concepts, two of the most basic ideas in Freud's whole thinking, are postulated on the assumption that women are biologically inferior to men" (Friedan, 2001, 114-115). Clearly, Freud shifted the cause of woman's inferiority from the social-cultural factors of their lack of education and their confinement to the home to the biological ones due to their God-given, irrevocable nature. Accordingly, to Freud, even more than to the magazine editor on Madison Avenue of Friedan's time, women were "a strange, inferior, less-than-human species...childlike dolls, who existed in terms only of man's love, to love man and serve his needs (Friedan, 108). Thus, middle-class women of Plath and Friedan generation were told by Freudian psychology, together with the powerful mass media, to "desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity" (Friedan, 2001, 15) as suburban housewives. So came into being American woman's problem: "the problem that has no name", that is in Friedan term, "the feminine mystique", the easy, dependent and passive life of which, being without end, or value, or even reward, was compared by Friedan to that of "a comfortable concentration camp" (Friedan, 2001, 307).

As a talented and sensitive girl, Plath had already sensed and been even instilled by the culture the gender inequality of her time just as she narrated in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* about the double social standards regarding sex for boys and girls and what the heroine's boyfriend always told her about his mother's words, "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security," and "what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from" (Plath, 1971, 76-79). There is no doubt that Plath's experiences further proved that powerful influence of Freudian ideas about woman's inferiority and the feminine mystique of her time. As a consequence, since her early age, according to her mother, Plath had formed the habit of catering to boys to satisfy their superiority. However, deep down she was troubled by her own female identity, and thus buried her real self and constantly tried to find a balance between her writing career and her future family life as wife and mother. Her two sharply contrasting images of an "all-round," submissive and proud daughter and a competent, troubled and struggling woman writer were clearly demonstrated in her *Letters Home* and *Journals* respectively.

The representation of gendered body in one of Plath's early poems "Pursuit," which was written in early 1956 collected in her first published poetry collection titled *The Colossus and Other Poems*, shows her interest in Freudian ideas. In the same year, Plath was studying as a graduate student on a Fulbright scholarship in Newnham College at Cambridge University where she met and later married Ted Hughes. According to one of her biographers Paul Alexander, "Pursuit" was dedicated to Hughes, whose poem titled "Jaguar" published in a back issue of *Chequer* was read by Plath and thus inspired her. The central focus of hers concerns a woman being stalked by a panther, whom she flees, still believing that she has become his "bait" (Alexander, 1991, 180). In her letter to her mother dated on March 3 of the same year, Plath admitted that she had written her "best poem" about "the only man I've met yet here who'd be strong enough to be equal with" (Plath, 1992, 221). Soon her praise for Hughes tended to be worship or idealization as it is indicated in her another letter, "I met the strongest man in the world, ex-Cambridge, brilliant poet whose work I loved before I met him, a large hulking, healthy Adam, half French, half Irish [*and a good deal of Yorkshire farming stock, too*], with a voice like the thunder of God—a singer, story-teller, lion and world-wanderer, a vagabond who will never stop..." (Plath, 1992, 233). The other two subsequent poems published in the same year titled "Ode for Ted" and "Faun" are more obvious examples for her such a tendency, which also coincides with her idealization of her dead but God-like father.

In "Pursuit," her representation of gendered body bears a contrasting and overt Freudian gender dichotomy: male superiority and female inferiority, though also "about the dark forces of lust" (Plath, 2000, 214) as she herself states in one of her journal entries. In this poem, at the beginning, the humanized "panther" is described as active and powerful as a Faun with his divine danger and grace, "His greed has set the woods aflame./ He prowls more lordly than the sun./ Most soft, most suavely glides that step./ Advancing always at my back" (ll. 4-6) (Plath, 1981). In contrast, the woman is depicted as weak, passive and full of feelings of awe and submission as follows, "Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks./ Haggard through the hot white noon./ Along red network of his veins/ What fires run, what craving wakes?" (ll. 9-12) The virility and lust of the panther with "his mouth's raw wound./ Keen the rending teeth and sweet/ The singeing fury of his fur;/ His kisses parch, each paw's a briar" (ll. 16-19), "his starving body" (l. 24), "fluent haunches" (l. 28), "bright those claws" (l. 31), "hungry, hungry, those taut thighs" (l. 32), "his ardor" (l. 33), "yellow gaze" (l. 36), "assault of radiance" (l. 44) in comparison to the terrified woman with "snarled thickets of my eyes" (l. 29), "run[ning] flaring in my skin" (l. 34), whose "blood quickens, gonging in my ears" (l. 48) as she, "entering the tower of my fears" (l. 45), "bolt[s] the door" (l. 47) or subdued women who lie "charred and ravened" as his "bait" (ll. 23-24) brings to readers' mind the vivid picture of the desirous Apollo pursuing his first love Daphne in the woods. Though Daphne is rebellious against the former's uncontrollable lust, the woman or women in "Pursuit" seem to have "secret want" (l. 43) or "that dark guilt," which betrays the double entendres of the poem.

3. Gendered Representation of Body in "Daddy"

The representation of gendered body in one of Plath's later poems "Daddy" is much more complex than that of "Pursuit," in that, on the one hand it continues with her Freudian interest; on the other, it diverts its attention from Freudian interest to gender politics.

The Freudian interest, the Electra complex in particular, is quite overt in "Daddy," as Plath said of this poem in her reading comments prepared for BBC radio:

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 and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it (Plath (1981, 293).

While Plath continues with her old subject about her persona's father-worship with an unsuccessful struggle to recover his dead body embodied in her first collection *The Colossus and Other Poems*, her representation of gendered body focuses not just on the semi-biographical, narrow and incestuous father-daughter relationship, but on a more broad or relevant level as she mentioned in an interview:

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things, such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on (Orr (1966, 172).

Thus, in the later period of her writing, Plath's poetic subjects evolve from her persona's Freudian interests in father-worship to her fury and hatred towards her father and husband and even patricide and self-annihilation, generally her sense of gender politics or her resistance against the so-called "patriarchal nastiness" by Bloom and Harold (2001, 9). Though being influenced by the social culture of her time which required women to be housewives, Plath frequently showed her contempt for the unmarried women professionals in her works such as *The Bell Jar* and early poems like "Two Sisters of Persephone," and "Spinster" both in 1956 and others, she later showed her sympathy for and identity with Virginia Woolf (Plath, 2000, 269) and her hatred of men due to their prejudice against women (Plath, 2000, 461-2). This betrays her gradual change of gender and even feminist consciousness.

In "Daddy," at the very first stanza, the persona narrates the unhealthy and unequal father-daughter relationship by alluding metaphorically to her father as a powerful and manipulating "black shoe" and her, a passive and restrained "foot" which is "poor and white" (ll. 2-4). "Black" indicates the death and the following attempted recovery of the "Daddy," while the metaphorical pair of "shoe" and "foot" implies her so called Electra complex and the Foucaultian discipline and punishment. Though with hatred for him as she says, "I have had to kill you" (l. 6), the persona also shows her worship for Daddy as a patriarchal, "God(ly)" (l. 8) and "ghastly statue" (l. 9). The stunning contrast between the father-and-daughter body images is overtly portrayed, which explicates the patriarchal power-and-control and oppressor-and-victim relationship between the two. Worse still, as the daughter, the persona associates her father with a German oppressive Fascist with his scaring image of "Luftwaffe," "gobbledygoo" and "neat moustache," "Arant eye, bright blue" (ll. 41-44), and herself with an oppressed "Jew" with her "gipsy ancestress," "weird luck" and "Taroc pack" (ll. 38-40). Accordingly, she denies him as a "God" (l. 46), but recognizes him as "a devil" with "a cleft" in his "chin" instead of his "foot" (ll. 53-54). And now the Electra complex of the persona dwindles to blind adoration and submission for every woman, who "adores a Fascist,/ The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you" (ll. 48-50). Plath's gender-based construction of Holocaust informs the readers of the above-mentioned Friedan "comfortable concentration camp" during the 1950s and early 60s of America. This also shows Plath's sense of "relevance" via her description of gendered body, though Plath's invocation of Holocaust once caused much critical controversy among a generation of earlier critics (Rosenfeld, 1980, 179; Steiner, 1967, 301).

In addition, Plath extends the oppressive gendered body of the persona's father to that of her husband who "bit my pretty red heart in two" (l. 56). As "a model of you," he is also "in black with a Meinkampf look" (ll. 64-65), betraying his similar fascist and patriarchal control and torture of her with the "rack" and "screw" (l. 66). The familial, patriarchal and even racial, social constraint and oppression result in the persona's loss of voice and even complete submission as she admits that "the voices just can't worm through" (l. 70) and that "I'm finally through" (l. 68). Thus, as a marginalized "other," she loses her voice as well as identity.

Oppression of the power is destined to evoke resistance against it. In order to restore their lost identity, the muted women have to find their voice from forced silence first, just as the feminist (Irigaray, 1985, 209) holds: there is a "voix"(voice), there is a "voie" (way). Thus, for women as the "other," the term "voice" has become a symbol of identity and power. In "Daddy," the voice and identity of the persona are both variable: it changes from a silenced and pitiable little girl with an Electra complex, to an angry imaginary Jew as a victim and lastly a frantic woman like a witch with spiritual patricide who kills the vampire. Special attention needs to be paid to the end rhyme like "do," "shoe," "Achoo," "you," "Jew" and "through," for the emphasis of anger, the repetition of "I'm through" like incantation. According to the critic (Britzolakis, 2006, 114) "Daddy" wreaks its revenge on the patriarchal father and husband as oppressor through "parody voodoo rituals" against the patriarchal voice and power represented by Daddy's sign ("Ich"). The unleashed voice of the persona not only ritually dismembers the oppressor's body into parts but also ends his life: "There's a stake in your fat black heart." (l. 76) Moreover, the ritual like a carnival of violence gains its support from the villagers who "never liked you" (l.77) and who "are dancing and stamping on you" (l. 78). Via the help of the ritual as well as the supporters, the persona restores her voice and new identity. With the patriarchal body being controlled, mutilated and perished, the power is subverted. As Plath herself admits that she is a political person during a poet interview and her death coincides with the rise of the second wave of the feminist movement, the final "I'm through" (l. 80) signifies both the conclusion of the poem and the persona's as well as the poet's sacrificial contribution to the feminist movement.

4. Conclusion

According to the recent research, the body in literature has always been a highly controversial site. A good understanding of it cannot be achieved without a close review of its historical and cultural context in that it is the locus of socio-political resistance (Hillman and Maude, 2015, 6). There is no exception in the representation of the gendered body in such poems as "Pursuit" and "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath.

Both of the poems reflect the social and cultural context of Plath's time, that is, the great interest in and huge impact of Freudian theories and the American post-war gender problem. The representation of gendered body in "Pursuit" indicates Plath's early great interest in Freudian theory, whose ideas on femininity incurs the sweeping influence of the "feminine mystique." In this poem, Plath skillfully and imitatively caters to the social trend with materials based on her own personal experience. In the latter poem, the focus on Freudian ideas remains, but it clearly shifts from its former obvious gender dualism to imaginary gender politics concerning Electra complex and patricide. The evolution which embodies both her change of poetic subject matter and her concern with gender politics under the influence of the social culture stands out. The evolution also paves her way to a mature and major poet of post-war American literature.

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