Internal Struggle: Eros and Thanatos in Sylvia Plath’s Poems

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ABSTRACT
Shakespeare says that the world is like ‘A stage where every man must play a part’ and Sylvia’s role in this worldly stage was that of a victimized soul. Plath’s poetry is like an expedition into her depressive state of mind. This paper examines how her poems revolve around multiple centres where at one instance her poems are seen as a reflection of her creativity and thinking. And on the other hand her works give insight into her depression. Her insightful poems are like suicide letters which when interpreted properly take us to the principal cause of her multiple suicide attempts. The psychoanalytical reading into the works of Sylvia Plath helps to unveil certain hidden aspects of her psyche. The paper will also focus on the struggle between the Eros and the Thanatos in the life and poems of Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath who was a renowned American poetess and novelist of the twentieth century had a troubled relationship with her father and her husband. Both these relationships caused so much trauma and pain to Sylvia that she infused all her distress and suffering into her poems. This paper seeks to trace the trajectory of Sylvia’s toxic relationships with the help of her poems.

Keywords: confessional poetry, psychoanalysis, Eros, Thanatos, victimization, trauma.

INTRODUCTION
Psychoanalysis was originally a clinical method and a therapy for neuroses which was developed by the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis works on a foundation belief that the unconscious mind holds authority over the conscious mind. Freud works on the different dimensions of human mind and personality. Id is based on the pleasure principle and consists of consists of two kind of biological instincts: Eros and Thanatos. Eros is the life instinct that helps people to survive in the world. Thanatos refers to the death instinct that are a set of devastating and ruinous instincts found in all human beings visible in all human beings. Freud sees these two instincts as a reason of conflict within the individual and among the individuals. Thus, he characterized the human existence as the struggle between these two opposite forces.
The second part of human personality is ‘Ego’ that is based on the reality principle. It develops during infancy. Ego operates both at the conscious and the unconscious mind. The third human personality is the ‘Superego’ that operates on the moral principle. It develops during childhood. During this stage the child tend to follow the same sex parent and tries to form an identity for themselves. The superego it motivates individual to behave in a socially acceptable way. The demand is created in every part of the psyche apparatus that often lead men into difficult situations. Therefore, every individual is under the emotional struggle that generates conflicting emotions. These emotional struggle and the conflicting emotions can also be viewed in the literary works. These psychological dimensions when applied to a literary works, tend to create new centres for the readers. Where the reader is not just limited to the literal meaning of the text rather they are open to fresh interpretations.

“Daddy” Sylvia Plath’s poem “Daddy” helps us to investigate different facets of her traumatic life, which affected her psyche to an extent that she committed suicide in London in 1963. Sylvia Plath lived a conventional life of a twentieth century American woman but her life took a new turn with the sudden death of her father. Otto Plath suffered a cardiac arrest on 5 November, 1940. Sylvia was just eight when she lost her father. His absence in her growing age created an irreplaceable void in her life. This distressing phase led to bouts of depression which later turned into her fixation to the father figure. For her “daddy” became an essential but a mysterious preface to every chapter of her life.

The poem titled “Daddy” automatically invokes the image of a caring and nurturing father. As the father in the poem is not seen as a symbol of respect and admiration but as an object of fear and terror. The poem does not glorify the father-daughter relationship rather it depicts the love-hate relationship that a daughter develops for her father. The ‘Daddy’ in question here is Sylvia’s own father who stands as a negligent and unaffectionate father figure. As the poem unfolds Otto Plath is seen as a dominating and authoritative father. Sylvia like any other child wanted to cherish the tenderness of the fatherly love but it was never written in her stars. With the sudden death of Otto Plath, Sylvia was left alone with the dreadful and suffocating memories of her father with an unconscious desire to be loved and accepted. She never got an opportunity to develop a good relation with her father.

Sylvia refers to her father and says that he cannot dominate her anymore as he is dead now. She compares her situation just in parallel to a foot that is trapped and suffocated in a “black shoe”. The poet has mocked the symbol of shoe which in general sense may be seen as a shelter. But, by attaching the connotation “black” she tries to implement an idea that the very shelter of her father was stifling. A father figure who was supposed to provide protection and comfort to the girl child turned out to be a nightmare for her. Though after her father’s death the physical domination was over but the internal wounds that he left in her soul affected her life time. In the second stanza she says that “Daddy, I have had to kill you.” This line presents an equivocal meaning. On one hand the line may suggest that the daughter does not want to kill her father rather she wants to eradicate the memories of her father as these memories are the reason for her misery. On the other hand if we go by Freud’s understanding of Thanatos we can interpret this line as a psychological condition where the death drive overrules the life instincts. In such a situation the person tends to direct this negative
energy toward other in the form of violence. Thus, it could also mean that Sylvia wants to kill her father as her Thanatos overpowered her Eros. She further compares her father as a “ghastly statue” a figure that scares and terrifies her. She even calls her father a fanatic “a bag full of God” who is ready to do any harm to anyone in the name of religion. Plath throughout the poem presents herself as a tortured soul. To exaggerate her portrayal she tries to evoke an image of herself as a Jew. In the poem she has treated herself as a helpless and victimized Jew who was tortured by her father, whom she presented as a Nazi. Secondly, to manifest her father as a cruel Nazi she links his physicality with the images like “the Aryan eye”, “the neat moustache” and “Meinkampf look”.

After these comparisons she brings forth the allegorical image of the holocaust like “the chuffing of the train” which took Jews to the concentration camps “A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen”, that of the “panzer man” and the “swastika”. These images has been deliberately used to juxtapose the tortured and oppressive relation between the Nazi and the Jews to her relationship with her father, which she imagines to be turbulent and oppressive. Throughout the poem we can see Plath’s fixation to the father figure. In a lecture called “Traumatic Fixation- The unconscious”, Freud introduces the idea of fixation. In this lecture he explains that some people have a fixation to trauma, some past events or people because of which they remain alienated both from the present and the future. In the poem “Daddy” Plath develops this father fixation to mitigate the reminiscence of her father so much so that she has imagined a fictional and unstable relationship with him. The other lens to her psyche is that of a child who longs for her father’s presence. As a child she craves for fatherly love and protection. She even confesses it in her poem that she prayed to God to return her father to her “I used to pray to recover you”. The absence of the father figure in her early childhood created an unresolved emotional and psychological problem in her life. These vexed emotions created an unsettled dispute of emotions in Sylvia’s mind where at one point she felt liberated with her father’s death and on the other hand she felt a dire need to be with her father. Now, looking at the socio-psychological aspect of their relationship we can very well understand the twentieth century American society.

As we say that literature is the reflection of the society. Similarly, the poem “Daddy” is the reflection to the twentieth century America. These portrayals alludes at the subjugated position of women in the beginning of the twentieth century America. In 1900’s women were marginalized and were given very few rights. Marriage was the only institute that could provide an identity to a women. In addition to this women could not vote, serve on juries or hold public office. The male dominated American society sees women as no less than an animal where they hold no right over their own body. Women in that patriarchal American society had no right to control her biological reproduction. Thus, the poem daddy somewhere or the other stands as a proof that women in the early twentieth century holds a subjugated, suppressed and marginalised position.

Living in such a restricting environment of twentieth century America was full of torture for Sylvia. When she could not verbally express herself she used poetry as a medium to confess her inner emotions. She moved and shook the world with her artistic creation. Poetry not just gave her a voice but an identity. She says, “I write only because there is a voice within me that will not be still.” (Plath’s, Letters Home). Electra complex: Replacement of father figure Throughout the poem “Daddy” the father is portrayed as an authoritative figure. The question that troubles every reader is
that if the father’s presence was so dominating then why does Sylvia long for his presence. The answer to this question lies in Sigmund Freud’s essay “Transformation of Puberty” that was bought out in 1905. Later on Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst called this psychological condition as Electra complex. The poem “Daddy” is stuffed with the hints of sexual pull that Sylvia feels towards her father. When Plath read “Daddy” 18 for BBC radio in 1962 she herself agreed that the speaker of the poem is a girl having Electra complex, “Here is a poem spoken by girl with Electra complex.” Sylvia was just eight years old when her father died. Then how come a child develops sexual attraction towards her father. The answer to this question lies in Freud explanation of infantile sexuality.

This terminology is based on the idea that it’s a misconception that sexuality begins at puberty i.e. with the physical maturing. Freud says that sexuality develops in infancy. Thus, Sylvia must have developed this desire at infancy. In this poem Sylvia confesses that she “lived like a foot for thirty years” in her father’s “black shoe”. Here shoe stand as a direct reference to the “phallic image”. This is the first instance in the poem where Sylvia shows hints of Electra complex. She further confesses that she adores a dictator and a dominating figure like her father “Every woman adores a Fascist,” “The boot in the face, the brute”. From this point we can see Sylvia developing an incestuous desire for her father. Where she viewed her father as an object of desire. When she was denied her object of desire by the set norms of the society she tried to commit suicide to get back to her father. Sylvia had a suicidal tendency ever since her childhood. She sees death as a medium to reunite with her father. Her first documented suicide is in August 1953. Thanatos can be seen pre dominant from her early childhood days. After surviving the suicide attempt, Plath decides to eradicate all the memories of her father and start a new life with her husband. Her husband became her new centre.

This new relationship helped Sylvia to lose the connection she once had with her father. She quotes this feeling in her poem and says, Casting off of Otto Plath 19 When her Ego i.e. her pleasure principle could not be satisfied by the father figure she tried to find a new centre for her survival. Her husband, Ted Hughes became her new centre around which she set her new life. For her, her husband was a model who could fulfil her sexual desires. They lived a happily married life until Plath found out about Hughes extramarital affair. Thus, in September 1962, Plath and Hughes separated. Sylvia was in pursuit of happiness and comfort. She wanted a relationship that could provide her emotional stability. But in this pursuit she got another vampire and devil. Sylvia was broken after the betrayal by Ted, she felt the same sense of abandonment again in her life. She calls her husband a “vampire” who “drank my blood for a year” may be because he was as dominating as her father. She compares her husband to be no less than her father. For her the betrayal by Ted was a heart breaking moment which she mentions in her poem, “Bit my pretty red heart in two”. Even her new centre failed to provide her emotional stability and comfort. The problematic issue raised here is how two poets could not understand and support each other being poets they both were highly sensitive but this sensitiveness was not worth enough to heal Sylvia’s inner wounds. Being poets they both were highly sensitive but this sensitiveness was not worth enough to heal Sylvia’s inner wounds. Every human soul in this world is struggling to find a centre for themselves i.e. a reason to live for. But with the betrayal of Ted, Sylvia could not relate to any centre. Thus, On February 11, 1963 Plath succumbed to her Thanatos and she committed suicide using her gas oven. Plath killed herself at the age of thirty by sticking her head in an oven and turning it on. Psychiatric Perspective
to Plath’s Lady Lazarus The modern man is continuously striving to find his existence, to find peace and pleasure in the world around him. The feeling of alienation and being left alone is killing the modern man.

“Lady Lazarus”
Man tries to find hope from the external world in the form of relationships and expectations but when he loses that hope or relationships they get perplexed. The bewildered man is unable to cope up with the surrounding so he death as an ultimate destination to find solace. Similarly, the character Lady Lazarus has gone through all kind of depressions and wants to overcome the anxiety. The character Lady Lazarus directly hints at Sylvia herself. Like the poem “Daddy” the poem “Lady Lazarus” further validates Plath’s obsession with death. She seeks pleasure by physically afflicting pain to herself. It appears that she is upset with her relationships and she wants to hurt those who has hurt her but when she couldn’t do it to others she did it to herself. Suicide were the outcome of her repressed heartbreaks. Her poems can be seen as the sublimation of her heart breaks. In her poem Plath directly explores the theme of death, but what triggered her suicidal tendency remains debatable. This poem stands as a witness for her suicides. This makes it easy to interpret them on Freud’s theory of Thanatos. Death as a Final Destination in Lady Lazarus The poem “Lady Lazarus” is like a diary to Sylvia’s multiple suicide attempts. The poem presents Sylvia as a women who cannot associate with herself. It is a tragic poem that assists us to unveil her depressed state of mind. She committed suicide because she suffered from existential crises and finds her life incomprehensible. Her meaningless existence is due to her failed relationship with the males in her life. This shows that Sylvia’s life force (Eros) was centred round her outer relationships. So, when she lost her relationships she lost the connection with herself. Her traumatic association with the male filled her life with sorrow and miseries. Due to this she was left with no centre to live for. So she tried to commit suicide.

‘Lady Lazarus’ is a confessional poem about Sylvia’s failed suicide attempts and her changed persona after her third attempt. The poem intrigues the reader as it brings forth one of the darkest sides of human psyche. The title ‘Lady Lazarus’ is ironical. Lazarus is a biblical character who spent three days in the tomb and was bought to life the fourth day by Jesus. In this poem Lazarus has been given female representation to allude at Sylvia. Through in the title it may appear that the poem would be about triumph over death. However, the poem is about female Lazarus who is decaying in the tomb rather than Lazarus who had been resurrected by Jesus. Thus, the title sets the pessimistic tone for the rest of the poem where the poet bears the burden of resurrection.

The poem consist of imagery to allude at her suicidal tendency and her real suicide attempts. Sylvia sees suicide as an escape from the suffocating memories of her husband and her father. Secondly, her suicide attempt hints at her desire to break free from the shackles of the patriarchal society. The poem begins with the following lines, “I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it” (lines 1-3, Lady Lazarus). Sylvia wrote this poem at the age of thirty. By this time she had already committed three suicides. Throughout the poem it appears that she is obsessed with the idea of death. Her first suicide attempt was the result of her father’s death it took place when she was ten years old. She tried to commit suicide by drowning in the river. Her second suicide attempt was at the age of twenty. She swallowed her mother’s sleeping pills and hid in the basement beneath her
house. She remained there for three days but was found. Her third attempt was at the age of thirty, when she deliberately drove her car off the road, as she got to know about her husband’s affair. In the second stanza she calls herself a “walking miracle” because every time she commits suicide she is brought back to life. She compares herself to a Jew who has been tortured by her life circumstances. She compares her skin to be as bright as a “Nazi lampshade” thus, presenting the terrific image of Nazis making lampshade from the skin of Jews. She uses this metaphor to draw parallel to her suffering to the suffering of the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps.

Further in the poem Plath compares her right foot to be as heavy as the paper weight. She uses this metaphor to present the heaviness in her heart. Sylvia uses the imagery of featureless face to show her existential crises. Moreover, she compares her face as a “fine Jew linen”. The body of Jesus and Lazarus were covered with Jew linen. Thus, by drawing this comparison she wants to convey that she already feels like a dead body. Sylvia wants people to see her scars and her shattered heart and soul. She challenges the people to peep into her soul which is decomposing inside the alive flesh. This is the point in the poem where she identifies herself to the Lazarus decaying in the tomb. She further proves this point by expressing the image of the dead body. “The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath / Will vanish in a day.” (Plath, lines 13-15) She shows her absolute disappointment to stay alive and her obsessiveness to suicides or Thanatos. She says like cat she has nine lives so she is left with few more attempts to reach death, “And like the cat I have nine times to die”. She further presents the ruthless attitude of people every time she comes back alive. She sees them as people who have gathered to see the suicide show.

The sense of frustration and anger lies behind this sarcasm. “The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see” (lines 25-27, Lady Lazarus). Seeing the crowd Plath realizes that she has again survived. At this moment Plath looks at her hand, knees, flesh and says, “These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bone.” (Plath, line 31-33) The near to death experience has not changed Plath, she is the same women who is obsessed with death. Sylvia even admits her second suicide attempt in the poem. She further says that she has mastered the art of dying. She has performed the act of dying so many times that no one can outstand her. In the next stanza the poet brings forth the reason for her fixation towards death. She discloses that she has lost the purpose of her life because of which being alive fells like hell. Thus she commits suicide. She proclaims in her poem that to die is a relief but to comeback and face the crowd is the hardest part. She is flustered with her objectification. She tells the heartless crowd that they will be charged to see her wounds, “And there is a charge, a very large charge / For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood / Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.” (Plath, line 61-63) Further, Plath draws comparison of the doctor that bought her to life to the Nazi doctor by using the German word “Doktor”. She does so because she consider the doctor to be her enemy. The doctor gave her life so that she has to go through all the sufferings again. The stress on the word “Herr” twice reveals that Plath consider all men as her foe.

CONCLUSION
Plath tells why she consider men as her rival. She believes that the men in her life has objectified her. They only saw her beauty but never peeped into her soul to look into her pains and sufferings. She says, “I am your opus, / I am your valuable, / The pure gold baby.” In one of the stanzas Sylvia finds herself powerless in front of patriarchal society. But due to continuous subjugation now she
has decided to take revenge. She tells the male folk to be aware of her as she will comeback immortal to take her revenge from them. She says that she will rise like phoenix. She creates the horrifying image of her to make the men in her life tremble with fear. Thus, at the end of the poem she says, “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.”(Plath, lines 82-84) 24 Plath was a young and victimised soul, she died at a very young age of thirty but she left her spectacular poem. Her poems are the reflection of her passion towards her love-hate relationship, failed marriage, birth, death and rebirth. Besides that her poetry also showcase the plight of the modern man who has lost all the centres to live for. Plath has made poetry the medium to explore her existence. She has centred her life to poetry and her poetry are centred round the theme of death. She is overwhelmed by the destructive force of death. Thus, alluding that death is her ultimate centre so she is obsessed about it. Death is an accomplishment for her as she see it as an escape from her dreary life. She sees death as an accomplishment and as an escape from her dreary life. This chapter has tried to interconnect psychology with literature with the help of Sylvia Plath’s confessional poems “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus”. The technique of psychoanalysis helps to trace Plath’s unconscious desire with the help of her poetry. Her poetry are the reflection of her internal traumas and are like suicide letters. She tried to sublimate her internal conflicts in the form of her poems. But it was not enough to provide her stability. She always see death as an escape from her dull and dreary life. Though Sylvia tried her best to sublimate her internal turmoil into her poem but, at the end she succumbed to her depression and committed suicide

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