

Plath's Daddy Essays: Language in Plath's Daddy

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Language in Plath's Daddy

The speaker of "Daddy" might be seen as our collective inner child, the voice of a world that has "fallen a long way." There is an implied gain in the poem -- of catharsis, liberation -- but "Daddy" is fundamentally a poem about loss. The speaker has finally and irrevocably disabused herself of the notion of a "recovered" childhood, the dream of "the waters off beautiful Nauset." There is no going "back, back, back" to some illusory idyllic existence, no way to make whole that "pretty red heart": the first oppressor in this poem is the unrealized past ("You died before I had time--"). The poem exemplifies this in its form, the [nursery](#)-rhyme sound, the ooh, ooh, ooh of the end rhymes, so jarring in contrast with its substance, its images of stark brutality. Childhood and innocence are corrupted herein by the inescapable internalization of "wars, wars, wars." Conventional images have undergone a desecration: "Not God but a swastika"; not father but devil; not husband but vampire. Language, rather than a means of connection, has become an obstacle, confining the self ("The tongue stuck in my jaw. / It stuck in a barb wire snare. Ich, ich, ich, ich . . . ")

Language, as a conveyor of images, is itself the subject of this poem -- the "[foot](#)" in line

three is as much metrical as it is metaphorical, one could argue. Plath's "Colossus," her apprenticeship in the Western poetic tradition, with this poem is junked in the "freakish Atlantic," just another thrown off oppressor. The language of this world has conveyed the speaker to a place of horrors: "obscene," it is "An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." In this sense, Plath's appropriation of Holocaust imagery, much castigated, must be seen as subsequent to that imagery's appropriation of her -- and, by [extension](#), of us all. Plath demonstrates in this poem that the horrors of history are fundamentally personal, that human history is simply personal! history writ large, that the brutalities of the age inform every childhood, that the notion of innocence is a sham, a game of cowboys and Indians, to use a less highly charged analogy, against a backdrop of the Trail of Tears.

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