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NOTES

“Daddy”: Sylvia Plath’s Debt to Anne Sexton

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“DADDY” is one of Sylvia Plath’s most anthologised poems, and, some might say, one of her most quintessential; yet this seemingly original and idiosyncratic work is deeply indebted to an early, virtually unknown, confessional poem by Anne Sexton:

“My Friend, My Friend”

*For M. W. K. who hesitates each time she sees a young girl
wearing The Cross.*

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
With no special legend or God to refer to,
With my calm white pedigree, my yankee kin,
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

I forgive you for what you did not do,
I am impossibly guilty. Unlike you,
My friend, I can not blame my origin
With no special legend or God to refer to.

They wear The Crucifix as they are meant to do.
Why do their little crosses trouble you?
The effigies that I have made are genuine,
(I think it would be better to be a Jew).

Watching my mother slowly die I knew
My first release. I wish some ancient bugaboo
Followed me. But my sin is always my sin.
With no special legend or God to refer to.

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
To have your reasonable hurt to belong to

Might ease my trouble like liquor or aspirin.
 I think it would be better to be a Jew.
 And if I lie, I lie because I love you,
 Because I am bothered by the things I do,
 Because your hurt invades my calm white skin:
 With no special legend or God to refer to,
 I think it would be better to be a Jew.¹

“My Friend, My Friend,” appeared in the *Antioch Review* during the summer of 1959. However Plath may have seen the poem some months earlier, late in 1958 or early in 1959, during one of Robert Lowell’s workshops at Boston University, or after one of his classes when Plath, Sexton, and George Starbuck customarily retired to the Ritz Bar to continue their discussion of poetry informally over martinis.²

During this time Sexton was assembling her first book of poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). She set Plath an example by tackling private and deeply personal material in an outspoken and colloquial fashion in the first person. Plath later acknowledged the liberating influence that Sexton and Lowell had on her poetic development:

I’ve been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* [1959], this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. . . . I think particularly . . . Ann Saxton [sic] . . . is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting.³

Both this statement, made in the course of a BBC interview on 30 October 1962, and “Daddy,” written on the twelfth of that month, date from the most intensely creative period of Plath’s brief life. During October and November 1962 she wrote over

¹ Anne Sexton, “My Friend, My Friend,” *Antioch Review*, 19 (1959), 150. Copyright © 1959 by Anne Sexton. Reprinted by permission of the Sterling Lord Agency, Inc.

² See Anne Sexton, “The Barfly Ought to Sing,” *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), pp. 174–81.

³ Sylvia Plath, *The Poet Speaks*, ed. Peter Orr (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 167–68.

half of *Winter Trees* (1971) and *Ariel* (1965). It is for the poems of this period that she is best remembered, and perhaps for none better than "Daddy," the work that draws so extensively upon "My Friend, My Friend."

Sexton's poem is dedicated to M. W. K., making it plausible to say that it is addressed to Sexton's friend, Maxine Winokur Kumin. This is reinforced by the fact that, similar to Kumin, the friend in the poem is Jewish. The speaker claims to be without religion, "With no special legend or God to refer to," yet she is burdened by her sense of guilt. It pervades her life, coming to its fullest expression in her account of her mother's death, and crucially in the speaker's attendant feelings of liberation and "release." It is the awareness of her inescapable guilt that creates the poem's focus and accounts for the speaker's deep need to forgive and in turn to be forgiven.

"Daddy" is also addressed in the first person to someone close to the speaker. Undoubtedly Otto Plath and Ted Hughes inspired "Daddy," but they are no more a Nazi Daddy nor "a man in black with a Meinkampf look" than Plath is a gipsy Tarot mistress who feels herself to be Jewish. Plath used and distorted autobiographical facts to portray a sado-masochistic and, ultimately, mutually destructive relationship. In so doing, she found Sexton's model useful.

For its own purposes "Daddy" borrows and slightly alters rhythms, rhymes, words, and lines from the early Sexton poem. "My Friend, My Friend" has an AABA rhyme-scheme throughout its six stanzas, with the exception of the last stanza which adds a line with an A-rhyme to the basic quatrain. These A-rhymes repeat and echo in "Daddy." Plath borrows Sexton's "do," "you," and "Jew," adding ingenious variants of her own: "shoe," "Achoo," "blue," "du," "true," "through," "who," and "glue." Of particular note is Plath's "gobbledygoo" to Sexton's "bugaboo."

Sexton's quatrains end in alternate refrains, the second and fourth lines of the opening stanza: "With no special legend or God to refer to" and "I think it would be better to be a Jew." The second of these refrains is twice reworked by Plath, becoming in "Daddy": "I think I may well be a Jew" and "I may be a bit of a Jew." Furthermore, "With my calm white pedigree, my yankee

kin, / I think it would be better to be a Jew," from the first quatrain of "My Friend, My Friend," clearly serves as the model for the lines leading into Plath's second variation on the "Jewish" refrain:

With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

Here Plath's alterations are exotic and expansive, allowing the speaker to chant about her dark arts.

Another similarity is the concern with the death of, and subsequent release from, a parent. In "Daddy" however it takes twenty years of suffocating suffering and finally an exorcism and an elaborate ritual—the stake in the heart of vampire-like Daddy—to make him lie still enough, the persona hopes, to allow her to get "through" to personal freedom. Daddy's death is far more drawn out, dramatic, tortuous, and sinister than that of the mother in Sexton's poem. The death brings Plath's poem to its close, as the persona gasps her valediction, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," and collapses, exhausted by her efforts, into a world without Daddy. On this disturbing threshold the poem ends, leaving the reader teetering and searching for a foothold on the final and troubling word "through." In contrast, Sexton's poem turns back on itself, taking the reader back through the poem's closed circuit of guilt. This process is nicely captured in the closing couplet, which brings together the poem's alternating refrains.

It is in such differences in treatment that Plath reveals her true artistry. Clearly she drew upon her former classmate's poem as she wrote "Daddy," and her debt to Sexton is considerable. Acknowledging the debt, however, is not to detract from Plath's achievement. Whereas "My Friend, My Friend" is an unexceptional, early example of Sexton's confessional poetry, "Daddy" is a brilliant act of exorcism from Plath's glittering late period. Despite Plath's use of a source in the composition of "Daddy," the poem remains distinctly and uniquely hers.