

Father Symbol in Dreams of Poetess Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath, American poetess of the mid-twentieth century who committed suicide at age 30 had many archetypal and personal themes in her dreams. Here we look at those pertaining to the father and his effect on a daughter's masculine images and complexes. The perspective of Jungian analytical psychology affirms the significance of the unconscious, its symbols and archetypes and the reality of the psyche. It reveals sources of creativity as well as destructiveness.

Dreams show the personal and collective issues, the situation of the psyche currently, the past and future through their symbols and images. The use of another person, from another time, shows the timeless nature of dreams expressing thoughts, feelings, ideas, behaviors. Dreams are part of what Sylvia Plath called the "forging of a soul" (Kukil, 2000, p. 230).

Dreams help liberate showing our complexes, strengths, values and life trajectory, adding information and guidance. The dreams of Sylvia Plath reveal her inner world and the conflicts plaguing her. They contain themes of loss, rejection, mourning and grief. Those selected here express anxiety and lack of security, a father not there. They picture impenetrability and focus attention on a painful father complex, personified by destructive inner male figures. She wrote in her journal, "I do not love; I do not love anybody except myself....I am capable of affection for those who reflect my own world. How much of my solicitude for other human beings is real and honest, how much is a feigned lacquer painted on by society. I do not know. I am afraid to face myself" (Kukil, 2000, p. 98).

After this entry a dream is recorded: “Sogged with bad dreams: diabolically real: Haven House, the feet of Smith girls past the room which becomes a prison, always giving out on a public corridor, no private exits. The leer: the slow subtly faithless smile, and the horror of the worst, the dream of the worst, come at last into its own. Waking is heaven, with its certainties. Why these dreams? These last exorcisings of the horrors and fears beginning when my father died and the bottom fell out. I am just now restored. I have been restored for over a year, and still the dreams aren’t quite sure of it. They aren’t for I’m not. And I suppose never will be” (Kukil, 2000, p. 283).

The dream reveals the situation of Sylvia Plath’s psychological system as anxious, de-stabilized and feeling trapped. (Samuels, 1988, p., 223) The dream occurred a year or so after her first suicide attempt. It expresses fears, insecurity, the self too public and the need to perform as the best. She suffered at the hands of inner relentless critics, portrayed by the methodical pounding feet of the Smith girls, the pressure to get attention and love through achievement from her college professor father.

“The personal father inevitably embodies the archetype, which is what endows his figure with its fascinating power” (Jung, 1961, par. 339). Here Jung recognized the father-ideal as a potentially dangerous object of a child’s fantasy. When this is the case, attachment problems can result, divorce from the body, a distorted self-image and a sense of emptiness and restlessness. Driving her compensatory behaviors was the wounded self, diminished at an early age partly from sufficient endorsement from her father.

On the theme of what she called lousy dreams is the following. “The other night it was men in costume, bright cummerbunds, knickers and white blouses, having a penalty given them, and not carried out, and suddenly forty years later they were lined up, I saw

them small in the distance, and a man with his back to me and a great sword in his hand went down the line hacking off their legs at the knees, whereupon the men fell down like ninepins with their leg stumps and lower legs scattered. I believe they were supposed to dig their own graves on their leg stumps. This is too much. The world is so big so big so big. I need to feel a meaning and productiveness in my life” (Kukil, 2000, p. 470).

“The voice of the true self...her profound melancholy. The ‘tortured and massacred’ are never far from Plath’s thoughts” (Malcolm, 1995, p. 65). The dream men legs hacked to stumps represents loss of potency and her diabetic father with a gangrenous foot from which he died. They also can be the destruction to self, noted until forty years hence. They present cruel inner authority and lack of protection arising from a mostly absent father, a strict and disciplinarian who spent little time or play with her.

The dream image is gruesome and she associates the dream men to the rejections of her writing, one after the other by the male dominated publishing world. Legs represent strength yet she, like the dream men, was helpless against the aspects within brutally attacking. The oppressive, dangerous and coldness in the dream brings up themes Sylvia Plath wrote about that include prison, concentration camps and oppression at the hands of men. And, she married a man who dominated, to whom she deferred, supporting his career, often before hers.

In her Journal she writes: “I am jealous of men—a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening...I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter it is there, insidious, malignant, latent” (Kukil, 2000, p. 98)].

The lack of healthy connection to a father creates anxiety and unease, draining energy, keeping body and psyche dismembered. In classical Jungian psychology the animus or the masculine parts of a woman appear in dreams and in life. “When women succeed in maintaining themselves against the animus, instead of allowing themselves to be devoured by it, then it ceases to be only a danger and becomes a creative power...to fulfill her individual human destiny” (Jung, E., 1978, p. 42).

In her Journal Sylvia Plath recounts a dream: “I dreamed the other night of running after Ted through a huge hospital, knowing he was with another woman, going into mad wards and looking for him everywhere: what makes you think it was Ted? It had his face but it was my father, my mother. I identify him with my father at certain times, and these times take on great importance: e.g., that one fight at the end of the school year when I found him not-there on the special day...Isn’t this an image of what I feel my father did to me?...Images of his (Ted’s) faithlessness with women echo my fear of my father’s relation with my mother and Lady Death” (Kukil, 2000, p, 447).

Was the dream prophetic of the increasing madness? The dream implies that the loss of Ted affected her sense of self and her emotional development reaching back to the separation from her father. It brings up grief, confusion and melancholia as well as death.

In a symbolic reinstatement of the absent father, the dream focuses attention on the painful complex personified by elusive inner male figures that shape shift. Like the exit of her husband aroused earlier feelings of abandonment following her father’s death. Then she also was abandoned, bewildered and bereaved and the family declined. The previous distress came flooding back. The dream portrays the relationships missed and longed for, desires unmet and connections unable to be sustained. The dream ends with

her father in union with her mother as well as Lady Death while she is excluded from the embrace.

The negative father-complex unconsciously dominates and she in turn acts unconsciously. Identifying with a father who she could not understand or get close to shaped Sylvia Plath protests against this psychological situation. “Such a dark funnel, my father,” she wrote in the poem “Little Fugue”. She feels insecure and waylaid by the chaotic forces inside of her. Paradoxically, an answer comes in another dream: “Dreamed last night I was beginning my novel...to ‘set’ the scene: a girl’s search for her dead father—for an outside authority which must be developed, instead, from the inside” (Kukil, 2000, p. 416).

The father’s distance appears in the dreams showing unconscious guilt, obsessive manifestations, tormenting feelings, unease with authority. (Kohon, 1999, p., 42) Mourning a father is difficult when he is not linked to enough memories, representation or perception. Sylvia Plath resonated with Jungian psychology and her dreams are examined from this viewpoint. They reveal the longing for father, the torturous masculine elements that developed mixed with the desires for life and the need for self-expression.

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