

The Depths of Fictional Fathers and the Sea for Sylvia Plath:

A Portal to the Afterlife

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Born in 1932, Plath and her family moved to Winthrop, Massachusetts in 1936 where they resided for six years. It was there that she frequented the ocean like many young children, gradually developing a personal connection with the sea. After the unexpected death of her father in 1940, everything about Plath's youthhood changed, quite possibly altering the outcome of her life. An integral aspect of Plath's relationship with her father Otto shone through in their shared connection to the ocean, later becoming one of the most influential components in her work. In numerous accounts of her own life, Plath spoke of the sea and its genuine appeal to her. This fixation stemmed from the profound connection between the water and her father. The loss of Otto Plath was a driving force behind the fictional fathers who she created and their correlation to the sea.

Literary critics offer many interpretations of Sylvia and Otto Plath's relationship on and off the page. It is shown that Otto was her idol, as many fathers are to their daughters. Scholar John Reitz writes in "The Father as Muse in Sylvia Plath's Poetry," "By all accounts, including her own, Otto Plath was a kind, loving father..."

(417). Though some researchers on Plath's life believe that she may have grown to despise her father for leaving her at the age of eight via his death, most conclude that Plath always held him near her heart for his strong affection towards her. For instance, Plath's fictional surrogate of herself in "Among the Bumblebees" – Alice Denway – feels an unbreakable bond with her father even after his death: "She did not know then that in all the rest of her life there would be no one to walk with her, like him", suggesting that only the father would ever inhabit that place in her heart (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 327). Alice's father and Plath's father become one, so close together that readers cannot clearly distinguish between fiction or reality. For Sylvia Plath and many of her fictional characters, the sea becomes a pivotal aspect of their lives, resulting in a consistent portrayal of fathers as irrevocably connected with the sea.

Sylvia Plath's life with her father was not distinguishable from that of other children her age. She and her family lived in Winthrop, Massachusetts up until a few years after her father's death. It was there that she lived like most of her peers, collecting treasures found on the beach and

often getting into mischief. She recounts in her essay "Ocean 1212 – W" that her "childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land – the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic" (*Johnny Panic...* 21). The sea and shoreline of her home were places she spent time with her father; these experiences with him would continue to be a factor throughout her life. Susan E. Schwartz wrote that, "...the daughter takes a look around and sees herself reflected back in the eyes of her father so that what she looks like in part is related to what she sees from him" ("Parallax" 300). Many of Plath's biographers make it apparent that as a child she doted on her father as much as he showed affection for her. In "Ocean 1212 – W," Plath writes of a moment when she, as a small child, crawled toward the sea. Though her mother catches up with her before she crawls into the water, she wonders, "what would have happened if [she] had managed to pierce that looking-glass" (*Johnny Panic...* 21). As Schwartz had noted that the eyes of the father reflect the daughter, Plath has acknowledged a similar notion by stating that the ocean is like a mirror showing her true self in its reflection.

She explains an inherent desire to reach the sea in her essay "Ocean 1212-W." The water beckoned to her: "I crawled straight for the coming wave..." (*Johnny Panic...* 21). The magnetism of water was undeniably apparent in her as a small child. Ronald Hayman states in his essay of the importance of the sea to a young Sylvia: "To [Plath], the sea seemed a huge, radiant animal, breathing and reflecting light" (143). For her, the ocean was a magical place she could float into where the world outside would be unable to claw its way in. The sea was also filled with numerous gifts that sparked a never-ending imagination for Plath long into her adult life. Edward Butscher comments in his biography of Plath that "The sandy beach was a constant source of unexpected treasures, shells, petrified wood, starfish relics, crab husks, and the like"

(10). For Sylvia this realm was unlike any on land and encapsulated the brightness of youthhood, forever kept on the shores of Winthrop.

It is important to note that the ocean was not just a peaceful world of newfound joys for Plath prior to her father's death. The ability of mother ocean to turn into a malevolent being also impacted the writer. For Plath, the ocean was proven to be a dichotomous raging being of both happiness and "the discovery of death" (Butscher 10). As she mentions in "Ocean 1212-W," a destructive hurricane hit the coast of Winthrop when she was about six years old. This menacing creature brought to the surface how something entirely pure could also serve as a bringer of death, too: "The hurricane was nature without her maternal mask on and it revealed the other side of the sea, the womb as a grave" (12). After witnessing the unforeseen anger of a raging sea as a small child, Plath became aware that death was a possibility even among the most beautiful of landscapes, including her childhood with Otto. The turn from a naïve life into one with the knowledge of annihilation changed Plath after the loss of her father. This melancholic shift in the water's nature served as a prelude to what was to come in her understanding of a peaceful childhood with her father. Her time with him vanished as quickly as the beauty of the ocean. The view of the world as all-good became tarnished by the realization that the joys of life, and of the sea, are not everlasting.

On land, her experience became very different after the passing of Otto in 1940. In "The Parallax Between Daughters and Fathers," Susan E. Schwartz suggests, "Her father's premature death...haunted her with fluctuating psychological symptoms. His death brought destruction to the childhood attachment prior to the natural separation between daughter and father" (305). According to Schwartz, Plath suffered the loss of someone that is not supposed to happen

until much later in life, once an individual matures. This loss impacted her more severely as a child than it would have as an adult, leading to her constant search for Otto among one of the places she felt the most connected with him: the sea.

Another conflicting aspect occurring on land after her father's death was the sudden marriage of Aurelia Schober Plath's sister. Sylvia witnessed how quickly something sad like a funeral could morph into the happiness of a ceremony for marriage – she saw the sorrow of death become joy, as well as the beauty of nature evolve into a monster (Butscher 15). While seeing how fast the world could change its focus, Plath was enlightened at far too young an age with "...a continual awareness of mortality, a dark stain on the brightest day, which would evolve into a fundamental perception of universal process as death in birth, endless images..." (15). This would forever leave its mark on her in youth, stunting her growth away from it in later years. In "The Parallax Between Daughters and Fathers" Schwartz suggests that Plath was forced to create a "phantom relationship" with Otto due to his departure from her at an untimely age (304). This comes through in many of her poems and prose expositions – which will be discussed further on – where she tries to reconnect with someone no longer living.

The ocean also changed for Plath after Otto's passing, becoming a relic of her father in a way that someone would keep a beloved necklace of someone they lost. For Sylvia, the sea held everything that her father was and ever would be "because [of] its emotional value [which] is inherently linked to its associations with her dead father, and the loss of the one is inextricable from the loss of the other" (Lowe 23). The sea off the coast of Winthrop in particular would never fade from her memories of Otto. They were connected in many ways and through her writing she was able to keep that bond with the

man she idolized as a child. A few years after her father's passing, Plath's family moved inland away from the sea. This caused an emotional loss much like that of her parent; it was like she had lost him all over again. Peter J. Lowe describes how childhood ended for Plath, as did her direct association with Otto, though their relationship continued symbolically throughout the entirety of her career:

Childhood happiness ends with the death of the father, prompting a move, both physical and emotional, away from the location in which such happiness was found. These early summers remain happy memories for Plath, but the self that figures in them is crucially distinct from the person she becomes. (22)

This move away from the place where she so fondly remembered her dead father prompted in her mind a change she was somewhat aware of. Plath establishes the need to facilitate their father-daughter bond through the seascapes in her work and with the fictional fathers she created alongside their shores.

A particularly compelling correlation to Plath's life is discussed in great detail by researcher Bradley K. Shewaga. He delves into the impact that children's books like "The Little Mermaid" had on her belief in the magic of the sea. He suggests that the character may have been a model for Plath to follow later in life, especially in regard to how she viewed her relationship to Otto after his death (106). One researcher found an old version of "Ocean 1212-W" in which Plath wrote about her affection for the tale of the mermaid – this later led to her love for drawing the character as well (106). The tale of "The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen depicted a mermaid who is threatened to forever remain on land if she does not murder

the man she loves. The mermaid refuses to do so and instead “threw herself from the ship into the sea, and thought her body was dissolving into foam...” (112). The mermaid chooses to keep the man she adores alive, rather than kill him to become a mermaid once more. In doing so forgoes her ocean life knowing she will no longer be able to live amongst her people.

Plath was much like the title character in Andersen’s children’s story she found herself drawn to as a young child. Peter J. Lowe offers that, “In ‘Ocean 1212-W’ she pondered whether she could have become a mermaid if she had succeeded in reaching the sea; now, her desire to enact this wish is strongly linked with a desire to regain union with a father figure” (30). Plath had often dreamed of being a mermaid, though she decided to deny herself this joining with the sea she has always longed for to keep Otto alive. Rather than letting her father die, Plath thrusts herself into the oceans on the pages of her works where Otto lives permanently in the lives of her readers.

There are many works of hers to be considered when weighing the possibility of fictionalized fathers and the sea becoming one. These pieces include: “Ocean 1212-W,” “Among the Bumblebees,” “The Colossus,” and “Full Fathom Five.” To first examine “Ocean 1212-W” it is important to note that this essay presents Plath’s own feelings about her relationship with Otto, the ocean, and how it felt to move inland. This was perhaps a further separation from him than in his death. In particular, the work demonstrates how Plath’s childhood innocence shifted to one aware of death in its many forms. Speaking directly of the hurricane mentioned previously, Plath writes, “My final memory of the sea is of violence...” (*Johnny Panic...* 27). For her, this beautiful ocean became a symbol of danger, much like her beloved father’s death resulted in her understanding that those we love can leave us at any moment.

I. When illustrating her family’s move inland, Plath composes her thoughts on it directly after the hurricane’s departure. It is no coincidence that as an adult in 1962 while writing the essay she remembers the two experiences – the hurricane and the move – as separated merely by a paragraph break:

And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth. (27)

That part of her life remained by the sea and did not follow her when she, her mother, and Warren moved inland. She tried to access these moments by bringing them to life in her work. Hayman notes in his article how “her father’s death and the move inland are separated only by a comma; in fact the family didn’t leave Winthrop until two years after he died, but she associated losing him with losing the sea” (144). The loss of both her father and later the loss of the place where she remembered him the most joyfully proved to be impactful on Plath. It was like she buried him twice, once in the ground and then in the sea. She spent much of her career depicting fathers and the ocean as two creatures that needed to be resurrected, but only together could they be as great as they once were.

II. The second work to consider is fictional. In “Among the Bumblebees” written in the early 1950s there are many nods to her life experience with Otto and the ocean in her eight years with him – including the fictional father’s death which is a replica of Plath’s own father’s demise. The story follows a girl much like Plath herself named Alice Denway whose relationship with her father is reflected upon. This work in particular remarks on the immense greatness of the

fictional father to Alice:

...[he] had been a giant of a man...the blue blaze of his eyes...when he laughed, it sounded as if all the waves of the ocean were breaking and roaring up the beach together. Alice worshiped her father because he was so powerful, and everybody did what he commanded...
(*Johnny Panic...* 320)

It is important to note that the color of Alice's father's eyes is the same as the ocean itself, and that his laugh boomed much like the crashing of waves onto the shoreline. He remained powerfully in charge of everyone and everything around him, including the ocean which seemed to be at his mercy. Throughout the work, the fictional father is shown in the ocean and as an overpowering force among nature. While the father swam, "Alice would stand...watching him admiringly...cleaving the water ahead with the powerful propellers of his arms" (323 – 324).

Demonstrated in this excerpt is the fictional father's strength and command of the water. This continues all throughout the text.

i. Another aspect of "Among the Bumblebees" which exemplifies the power of the fictionalized father is how he takes away all the fear in the world for his daughter. When Alice would ride on her father's back while he swam for them both, the "fear would leave her, and the water, black and deep beneath her, would seem calm and friendly, obeying the skillful mastery of her father's rhythmic stroke..." (324). She felt safe with him, despite her panic at being in the water before going out. The giant-ness of the ocean was no match for her father's strength – he was always able to overpower its waves and she felt he could conquer anything set before him. A direct pull from Plath's own life appears when Alice explains how her father stood up against raging thunderstorms. He feared nothing and

when the thunder would rumble in the gloomy darkness, he "would roar with laughter" in the face of such a menacing foe for a child. Later in the story, Plath writes that:

Alice learned to sing the thunder song with her father: 'Thor is angry. Thor is angry. Boom, boom, boom! Boom, boom, boom! We don't care. We don't care. Boom, boom, boom!' And above the resonant resounding baritone of her father's voice, the thunder rumbled harmless as a tame lion. (324)

This chant is one that Sylvia and Otto shouted in actuality when a major storm would shake the house. It also appears in her 1957 poem "The Disquieting Muses." Like the ocean, the storm was no match for Alice's father. She feared the storms but as soon as he started to chant, the storm's power seemed to lessen and submit to his rule.

ii. His ruling power is true for one other aspect of nature – bumblebees. The father is the commander of their lives as well in that "he could catch bumblebees. That was something no one else's father could do" (325). Otto Plath was also known for being a conductor of the bees because he could tell which ones would sting him and those that were safe to hold. For a young girl like Sylvia – and for her fictional surrogate Alice – this was like having a superpower no one else had. Throughout the text, the fictional father takes on the god-like role that Otto had in real life. Through Alice's father's power and command over the natural world readers get a grasp on how Plath herself felt about fatherly figures, a notion she derived from her own who was her idol in many regards.

iii. Alice's father becomes bedridden like Otto Plath was at the end of his life and loses his

god-like gifts of holding control over all among him. On his deathbed, the man is unable to portray himself as the powerful father he once had been: "Alice stood looking down at her father's gaunt face...listening to the slow thread of his breathing...she could hear the weak pulsing of his heart, like the fading throb of a distant drum" (327). This shows how after all, he was not the "god" Alice thought he had been all her life, he was just a man who couldn't withstand the blows of death. This, too, was a realization a young Plath struggled with while witnessing the decay of her idealized father Otto. For Alice, no other person could ever fill the shoes of her father's strength and command of the world around him, like Otto for Sylvia. Plath tried to bring this father back to life – in all his glory – through her various works which portray strong god-like fathers similar to her own.

III. Another piece that conveys the idea of fathers and the ocean as creatures that go hand in hand is her 1959 poem "The Colossus." From the start, Plath depicts her speaker's frustration with never being able to resurrect the father – Otto – through her work, despite her many attempts to do so: "I shall never get you put together entirely..." (*The Collected Poems*, 129, 1). Plath tries throughout the poem to put the pieces of her speaker's father – who symbolizes her own – back together but realizes she cannot. She then refers back to some similar ideas that Alice's narrative had remarked upon. For instance, Plath notes again the deity qualities of a fictionalized father in the following lines, "Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle, / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other" (6 – 7). The speaker's father in the poem was like Alice's father and Plath's own in that he had the all-powerful presence of an overseeing figure of all of creation.

i. Plath also writes about the assumed father's intense presence on the shore. In "The Colossus" she writes, "Your fluted bones and acan-

thine hair are littered / In their old anarchy to the horizon-line" (130, 20 – 21). These lines can be compared with those from "Among the Bumblebees" in which Alice's father is a part of the ocean. In these lines, the pieces of the father are scattered among the waters which approach the horizon – the pieces cannot all be recovered to be put back into place in order to recreate his image. Plath goes on to write, "It would take more than a lightning-stroke / To create such a ruin" (22 – 23). Old anarchy is like the father's power and command over the natural world, particularly the ocean itself which many people fear due to its mystery. Also, the lightning-stroke relates directly back to the chant from "Among the Bumblebees" where the storm was presumably afraid of the father, reiterating his booming strength.

IV. The last example of Plath's work to consider when thinking about how she portrays fictional fathers and the ocean together is her poem "Full Fathom Five" which was composed in 1958. Immediately, Plath's speaker remarks a father's presence:

Old man, you surface seldom.
Then you come in with the tide's coming
When seas wash cold, foam-Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,
A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves
Crest and trough. (92, 1 – 6)

Here, there is a direct line to the speaker discussing how her father comes alive only with the waves rolling in. His hair and beard are white like the ocean's tides rolling onto the shoreline. She remembers him only at times when the sea brings him to life. Like this fictional father, Plath's own is revived through the life of the water and is brought back from the dead repeatedly throughout the poem.

i. The father's power is mentioned again in this piece and his resting place – the ocean for this fictional man – is where the speaker desperately wants to be. The following lines depict this idea:

...You defy other godhood.
I walk dry on your kingdom's
border
Exiled to no good.
Your shelled bed I remember.
Father, this thick air is murderous.
I would breathe water. (93,
40 – 45)

For the speaker, who resembles Plath in many regards, the father is just out of reach from her grasp. Like Plath's childhood with Otto, the fictional father portrayed in these lines remains lost to the depths of the ocean – where Plath felt her father's memory was laid to rest. For her, Otto was lost at sea among a world of never-ending waves. The kingdom that the father resides in is the afterlife, here depicted metaphorically as the ocean. The speaker cannot manage to live on land any longer among the "murderous" air of the land dwellers. She pleads to join her father in death, though here that is illustrated as a serene reunion. If the reunion is to be considered from her perspective, Plath conveys that she herself would survive in water rather than land. The sea is her salvation – her rebirth into the child she once was when Otto lived.

Critics have a lot to say about how Sylvia Plath's poetry brought to light her own need for Otto's presence. She longed to be reunited with the man she idolized as a young girl and who would save her from any foe that crossed her path. Scholar John Reitz writes that "In much of her poetry, the father, who usually bears a striking resemblance to Otto Plath, dominates the speaker's psyche..." (417). This is indeed true based on the examples discussed. The fictionalized father is not unlike Sylvia's deceased

father, powerfully in tune with nature and found where he remained throughout her life – in the depths of the beautifully monstrous ocean.

Susan E. Schwartz writes in another essay that, "Plath's poetry is a character study of loss and mourning, the reactions of a daughter toward her father...she could not talk to him due to his death. His silence became a factor in her writing..." ("Sylvia Plath: A Split in the Mirror" 61). Many of her works were a reflection of what she felt was an unfair loss of Otto. Plath's poetry is known for its uncanny ability to pull the father by his collar from the fathoms of the ocean into the world of the living once more.

Otto Plath was a driving force for his daughter's life's work in many ways. Plath acknowledged her use of personal connections within her works, remarking in *The Journals* that Otto was a "father-sea-god muse" (244). In her own words the renowned poet provides concrete evidence of her focus on her deceased idol. He had become interwoven in a variety of literary pieces such that it became difficult not to read her works autobiographically. In Schwartz's "The Parallax Between Daughters and Fathers," she discusses how Plath's writing was her mechanism of coping with the loss of her father at such a young and impressionable age (303 – 304). Schwartz goes on to say that her work "was an attempt to deal with the pull toward the death and destruction she associated with her father" (303 – 304). Given the depictions of the ocean and fictional fathers as dangerous, yet enticing, this is a reasonable explanation for Plath's choice in topic. Throughout her life she would spend much of her creative energy on reviving Otto through the fictionalization of paternal figures. The depths of the water served as a portal through which she could see the reflection of her childhood and of her father. Though his image was often distorted and broken into pieces, Otto Plath is in countless aspects the living, magical roll of the tide.

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