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Female Submissiveness: The Inability to Escape Male Authority in *Rebel Without a Cause* and “Daddy”

In Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* as well as “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath, we are confronted with two daughters who feel failed by their fathers. Judy from *Rebel Without a Cause* suffers from feeling emotionally abandoned by her father because of the attention that he does not give her, while the speaker of “Daddy” deals with feeling literal physical abandonment after her father's death. Despite the different types of abandonment that they feel, both Judy and the narrator in “Daddy” seek to replace the fatherly figure that they feel is missing in their lives by connecting to another person. Judy and the narrator in “Daddy” feel controlled by their fathers, but their mode of escape from their fathers' dominance differs. In addition, they both become ambivalent towards freeing themselves from male dominance, causing them both to ultimately become unsuccessful in their attempt at becoming autonomous individuals.

Judy feels completely abandoned by her father emotionally. In the beginning of the film we are presented with a scene in which Judy and her father are about to sit down to what seems like a typical family dinner. Judy is looking up at her father, showing the admiration she has for him. When he sits down at the dinner table she says to him, “Daddy haven't you forgotten something?” and leans down and kisses her father on the lips (Ray). Her father responds to this saying, “What's the matter with you? You're getting too old for that kind of stuff kiddo” (Ray). Judy's father outwardly contradicts himself as well as conveys an unclear message to Judy regarding what is acceptable, age appropriate behavior. By calling Judy a kid right after he had told her that she was too old to kiss him, her father gives her the idea that perhaps in reality she is

not too old. She decides to test the limits that her father has set, and sees if it is possible to show affection to her father and receive it in return. Judy therefore says, "I don't want to stop" and leans in and kisses him on the cheek. This time her father slaps her. Judy is clearly trying to force an emotional connection to her father, which he not only refuses to reciprocate, but refuses to accept. She wants him to love her and so she tries to see how far she can push him by kissing him after he has already told her that she is too old for kisses. Judy meets her limits when she is slapped after pushing her father too far.

This is not the only time that Judy's father sends her mixed messages regarding what constitutes age appropriate behavior. In the very beginning of the film Judy is speaking to a police officer about her father. As she is crying she tells the police officer about how her father had rubbed off her lipstick and called her a tramp. She then proceeds saying, "he hates me... I don't think, I know. He looks at me like I'm the ugliest thing in the world" (Ray). Judy is crying so hard to the point that she can barely breathe. The police officer then responds by saying, "Maybe it's one way of making him pay attention." Judy starves for her father's love and approval, but instead feels unloved and abandoned by him. She is confused and unsure of how to behave around him because by smearing off her lipstick, her father implies that she is too young to wear lipstick and therefore is still a child, while when she kisses him he tells her that she is too old to do that. Judy is once again unsure of how she is allowed to behave according to her father's standards.

While Judy is stuck in the in-between of being a child and an adult, unsure of which she is supposed to be, so too is the narrator of "Daddy." She is writing the poem as an escape from her father's dominance over her. She wants to be an independent adult, free from his control, but yet the style of the poem alone prohibits her from doing so. She uses immature vocabulary such

as the word “daddy” and the “oo” rhyming scheme. According to Susan R. Van Dyne, “The language of the poem... teeters precariously on the edge of a preverbal abyss-represented by the eerie, keening “oo” sound with which a majority of the verses end” (Qtd. in Platizky 105). Furthermore, she goes on to consider this a “form of manic defense” (Qtd. In Platizky 105). Van Dyne is trying to convey the point that throughout the poem, the narrator is trying to separate herself from her father, however, she is afraid to completely do so. She is ambivalent about becoming completely free of him, and so her childish tone and use of simple language is a way to subtly keep her connected. She wants to let go of him, but the nursery rhyme form of the poem prevents her from doing so.

Not only is Judy in *Rebel Without a Cause* sent mixed messages from her father regarding how she is allowed to behave, but she also feels controlled by him because of the attention that he denies her. When she walks back in her house at night after the chicken-fight, her parents bedroom door is open, but yet it is her little brother who comes out to greet her. Her father even walks to the door, but does not say anything to Judy at all. There is a brief moment of eye contact between Judy and her father, but when he does not proceed to walk out of his room and verbally recognize her presence, it becomes clear that he cannot be there the way Judy wants him to be. Judy therefore goes in her room and closes the door, shutting herself off from him.

Similarly, the speaker in “Daddy” feels controlled by her father as well. She begins the poem saying, “You do not do, you do not do/ Any more black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot” (Plath 1-3). Throughout the majority of the poem the speaker complains about her feelings of powerlessness and submissiveness to her father. However, by comparing herself to a foot, [essentially what dictates where a shoe can move], and her father to the shoe, the speaker is trying to convey the point that her father no longer has power over her. In addition, by saying

that she has “lived” in the past tense, the speaker implies that she has in fact been the shoe and had control over her own life all along.

While the speaker may be arguing that she has had the ability to direct and control her own life by comparing herself to a foot, it is a shoe that covers a foot as a means to protect it. However, she refers to the shoe as black, a color that implies darkness and thus lack of protection. And so, the speaker is implying that she has been unable in the past to dictate the course of her life, because her father, the shoe, has not protected her but rather metaphorically covered her to the point of suffocation, and prevented her from doing so.

The speaker further exemplifies her feeling of powerlessness when she says, “I never could talk to you/ The tongue stuck in my jaw” (Plath 22-24). Unlike Judy, the narrator does not test her waters on what her level of appropriate behavior is. Instead, her tongue is stuck in her jaw and she does not speak. She is so submissive to her father that she does not even allow herself to say or do anything. While Judy sees how far she can push her father, the narrator does not even attempt to transgress her father’s limits.

When Judy realizes that she has surpassed the limits that her father set, she reacts to it by running away to an abandoned house. She has an undying need to connect with someone, and so she quickly falls in love with Jim. Jim is everything her father is not; affectionate and loving towards her. Ironically, she sees him for the very first time by looking at her lips in a compact mirror, a scene which is in exact opposition to when her father rubbed the lipstick off her lips. The first evening of being with Jim, Judy says, “I love somebody. All the time I’ve been looking for someone to love me. And now I love somebody. And it’s so easy. Why is it so easy now?” (Ray). It seems so easy to Judy because she thinks she has completely extricated herself from her father’s control. In reality, however, Jim is just a replacement of Judy’s father. She is in love

with the idea of having a man in her life who will kiss her and let her kiss him. According to Peter Biskind, “Jim and Judy suffer from adolescent angst; they are lonely. They just want love... the abyss of personal isolation is bridged...” (Biskind 34). Judy finally has the feeling of mutual love which makes her feel satisfied and makes her feel as if she no longer needs her father.

Judy runs away from her father in order to literally erase him from her life. On the contrary, even though the narrator’s father in “Daddy” is physically and literally gone from her life, she needs to figuratively escape his control. As she says, “Daddy, I have had to kill you./ You died before I had time-“ (Plath 6-7). By saying “have had,” a phrase both in the present and the past, the narrator proposes the possibility that a figurative death is not as final as a physical death. While her father may be physically gone from her life, his figurative presence as well as influence is not. Thus like Judy, she wants to escape from her father’s dominance as well.

While the speaker wants to cut off her emotional ties from her father and gain back control over her life, she shows ambivalence towards gaining this type of power. When she says, “I used to pray to recover you,” the word “recover” can have multiple meanings (Plath 14). In one sense it can mean that even though her father is dead, the narrator wanted him back in her life and so she prayed for him to return. The speaker could also mean that she prayed to recover her father’s reputation and remake who he was as person and how he treated her and others. However, recover could also mean that she wanted to cover her father again. While his death may have brought about the end of his physical existence, figuratively he is still very much alive. Her father was literally covered and buried by the earth after his physical death, and so, when the speaker prayed to *re*-cover him, she prayed to metaphorically kill him again and end his

figurative influence over her life. Using the word “recover,” further exemplifies the speaker’s ambivalence and conflict between pushing her father out of her life and pulling him back in.

On the other hand, Judy deals with a metaphorical *recovering* of her father by running away. Judy attempts to “*re-cover*” her father by using Jim as a means to replace him. When we see Jim and Judy lying together in the abandoned mansion to which they have run away, Judy asks Jim what kind of person he thinks a girl wants. When Jim replies saying, “a man,” Judy corrects him by saying, “Yes, but a man who can be gentle and sweet like you are” and “someone who doesn’t run away when you want them” (Ray). The fact that Judy does not say she wants a father who can be gentle and sweet, but rather a man shows that Judy does not need her father to fulfill the type of affection that she longs for. She is able to transfer her longing for affection to Jim as she says, “He [Plato] needs you maybe- but so do I Jim” (Ray). While Judy no longer needs her father to show her affection in order to make her feel worthwhile, she still needs a man to do so. Judy may have been successful in overthrowing paternal authority, but she is still very much a subject to patriarchal authority.

Unlike Judy who runs to Jim, someone opposite her father, the speaker in “Daddy” runs to someone who is exactly like her father: “I made a model of you/ A man in black with a Meinkampf look” (Plath 64-65). While she is trying to escape her father’s control, she once again surrounds herself with someone who is exactly like him. Because she made a model of him, it proves that the narrator cannot truly escape her father or his influence because she will not let herself. She willingly chooses to marry someone like her father, showing that she does not want to escape her father’s dominance over her.

Although both Judy and the narrator’s reactions to their conflict differ, their resolutions to the conflict are the same; they are ultimately both failures at becoming autonomous individuals.

While Judy in *Rebel Without a Cause* realizes that she does not need her father's affection, she still looks to Jim, another male, to fulfill her need for this type of connection. She says she "needs" him, stressing the fact that while she can escape her father's control over her, she still needs a dominant male in her life. Conversely, the narrator in "Daddy" still seems confused about whether or not she wants her father in her life or not. She seems as if she wants to escape her father's control when she says, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," however by saying "Daddy, daddy" she indicates that she is still longing for her father (Plath 80). In addition, the use of the word "bastard" is very charged. If she did not care about him anymore she would not use such strong language. She is not successful in finally cutting off the figurative death of her father, because she is lying to herself. While she wants to be through with his control over her, she cannot be, because she still longs for him.

Both in *Rebel Without a Cause* and in "Daddy" we see that Judy and the speaker cannot become autonomous individuals. However, this is not because men hold them back, but rather because they hold themselves back. Judy is not autonomous at the end of the film because she does not allow herself to have her own identity. Instead, she once again looks to another male to define who she is. Similarly, the narrator in "Daddy" marries a man just like her father, once again choosing to have a dominant and controlling person in her life. Both Judy and the narrator exemplify the fact that it is women who hold themselves back and not the male figures who shoulder the blame for this lack of autonomy.

In addition, what is even more problematic about both women is that they make it seem as if they must partner with a man, and do not have a choice otherwise. Once their relationship with their fathers fail, they immediately redefine themselves through a partnership with another male. *Rebel Without a Cause* and "Daddy" show that women do not have to partner with men in

order to give their lives meaning. Both works caution women that those who do depend on men to define who they are will never become the autonomous, self-dictating individuals who they long to be.

Works Cited

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