

“Daddies” in Controversial Memoirs and Confessions: Laurie Sandell and Sylvia Plath

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ABSTRACT

*Autobiographies, memoirs and confessions are widely read genres of non-fiction which have captured the attention of a wide readership for centuries. In recent decades such texts have become more open and intimate, resulting in many controversies, mainly over their fidelity to actual events. Based on an analysis of two texts dealing with the image of a father - the comics memoir *The Impostor's Daughter* (2009) by contemporary artist Laurie Sandell and the confessional poem “Daddy” (written 1962, published in 1965) by Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) – this paper explores the nature of memoir, confessional writing and the main features thereof including objectivity and distancing and the emphasis on factual fidelity. Both writers developed an Electra complex and in their works they capture the changing relationships with their fathers from childhood to adulthood, their failing relationships with other men, suicide attempts, and depressions. Even though the comics memoir and confessional poetry differ on the level of genre and form, Plath and Sandell’s attitude and the depiction of their fathers follows similar patterns, as both texts cover a certain limited period of time and closely follows the influence of their fathers on the authors’ mental development.*

KEYWORDS

comics memoir, confessional poetry, memoir controversy, Laurie Sandell, Sylvia Plath

Stories concerning the inner life of the author have captivated the interest of a wide spectrum of readers for centuries. Autobiographies, memoirs and confessional writing have enjoyed an immense popularity that has been rising in recent decades as these texts have become more open and intimate. Even though this genre is associated with prose, the intimate exploration of one’s identity within a larger social and cultural context is also a predominant occupation of poetry, especially within the context of postwar American culture. The works of Robert Lowell (1917–1977), John Berryman (1914–1972), Anne Sexton (1927–1974) and Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) openly express what has been for centuries considered private: the representation of personal anxieties, depressions, insanity and obsession with death. The reception of these kind of works was often mixed, as Elizabeth Bishop indicates in “On ‘Confessional Poetry’”:

[R]eally something new in the world. There have been diaries that were frank – and generally intended to be read after the poet’s death. Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world. [. . .] The tendency is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they’d keep some of these things to themselves.¹

Bishop thus rightly sees confessional poetry as allegorical, not directly representative. The “I” of the confessional poets is therefore less personal than that of

1 Elizabeth Bishop, “On ‘Confessional Poetry’”, in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, eds. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 303.

memoirists, creating a fusion of both the Romantic self of frustrated, misunderstood heroes and modernist feelings of chaos, self-inspection and paranoia.

The confession boom infiltrated also the comic book industry, as literary critic Rocco Versaci remarked: "Imagine that you are an aspiring young author who also happens to be a recovering addict and alcoholic. Because you have a somewhat checkered past and because you can read a bestsellers chart, you decide to pen a memoir."² Yet these forms are subject to careful fact-checking and close reading by editors, critics and readers.

Memoir covers a certain limited period of time or follows a trait in the author's life. As the form is by its nature retrospective, it is thus simultaneously interpretative. Events are selected to correspond with the author's present view of the past, which necessarily brings coloring to the narrative. The author – even more so in the comics format – presents readers with images reflecting both his/her intellectual and emotional response to the events described. Yet memoir is less immediate than confessional poetry due to its retrospective character and longer distance of time from the narrated events.

The theme and motifs of Sandell's memoir *The Impostor's Daughter* are closely linked to Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy," as both writers depict the trauma of their daughter-father and woman-man relationship which led to depression and mental instability. The memoir is in fact more confessional than the poem, as it depicts the events in a more realistic and autobiographical manner. Sandell uncovers her privacy in writing, even filling in missing details on her website and Facebook page, whereas Plath discloses her intimate thoughts and emotions only in her diaries.³

Still, in the case of the above mentioned confessional poets critics tend to overemphasize the extent of autobiographical features. Even American poet and editor Macha Louis Rosenthal in his book *The New Poets* (1967) claims that confessional poetry directly points to the life of the author,⁴ yet it must "merge the private and the symbolic to acquire aesthetic qualities and reflect the state of culture."⁵ Confessional poetry therefore should not be read as a realistic account of events, but rather as an interpretative generalization of events or periods in the poet's life and reflecting the sociocultural climate of the time, while the memoirist typically discloses events without adding allegorical or symbolical references into the narrative.

The Fidelity Witch-Hunt

The memoir is the one of the most popular literary forms in America, yet at the same time it also ranks among the most controversial, as life-based stories are often measured by their perceived objectivity and fidelity to actual events. The extent of the insistence on accuracy has been demonstrated on the case of a young American writer James Frey (b. 1969) and his debut *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). The book, which was advertised as memoir, proved to be a major popular success and Frey's work was selected for the American talk show discussion group Oprah's Book Club. Astute readers, however, discovered discrepancies between the content of the book and actual events; Winfrey felt he had betrayed the public trust and was determined to find out what was really

2 Rocco Versaci, *Comics as Literature* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 34.

3 See *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

4 See Macha Louis Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 82.

5 Rosenthal, *New Poets*, 15.

true in the narrative.⁶ Since then more cases of “memoir controversies” have arisen. In 2008 Jewish Holocaust survivor of Polish origin Herman Rosenblat (b. 1929) wanted to publish the Holocaust memoir *Angel at the Fence*, which also attracted the attention of Oprah Winfrey. This time, however, the publishers were determined to secure the authenticity of the work. After discovering fictional elements, Rosenblat was called a “literary fake.” Even though his agent defended the author, calling it “a work of memory,” Ken Waltzer, director of Jewish Studies at Michigan University dismissed it as “not Holocaust education but miseducation.”⁷ These cases served as a warning to all potential memoir writers and led to a re-consideration of the importance of factual accuracy in connection to this genre.

Sandell’s *The Impostor’s Daughter* has proven to be factually accurate. The memoir immediately won critical acclaim and was nominated for the prestigious Eisner Award in “Best Reality-Based Work” category. As Sandell mentions on her web pages, only a few names and events have been changed, yet that is not considered a serious flaw as it is mainly done to avoid potential harm caused to those involved in the narrative as well as for the sake of fluidity.

This heightened emphasis on accuracy could be one of the reasons Sandell added the word “true” into the title by using the insertion mark, as if she tried to assure the publishers, critics and readers that her book was a real non-fiction memoir. Yet concerning the nature of the genre, such an insertion seems unnecessary, as if Sandell, not being sure how *true* her work would come out, added it as an afterthought.

What should not be forgotten, however, is that if memoir (even if considered nonfiction) should still have artistic qualities, the authors have to treat their subject at least partly figuratively. As Judith Barrington has observed:

After all, not everything in a memoir is true: who can remember the exact dialogue that took place at breakfast forty years ago? And if you can make up dialogue, change the name and hair color of a character to protect the privacy of the living, or even—as some memoirists do—reorder events to make the story work better, how is that different from fiction?⁸

Critics who conduct this type of witch-hunt of memoirists and authors of autobiographies regarding factual accuracy have not fully taken into account the role and scope of memory and the use of language in art, especially when contrasted to spoken common language. Yet, unlike in fiction or poetry, the narrator of the memoir should not deliberately attempt to mislead the reader about actual events and their consequences.

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- 6 See James Frey, Interview with Oprah Winfrey, “Oprah’s Questions for James,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, January 26, 2006, <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Oprahs-Questions-for-James>. Winfrey even invited journalists to carry out a thorough investigation and provide evidence of Frey’s transgressions. Richard Cohen, a columnist for the *Washington Post* blamed the publishers for not making sure the data was valid. The only person that took into account the quality of the book as a whole was Joel Stein, staff writer of *Time* magazine: “But the more I thought about it, I still loved the book. When I found out a lot of it had been made up, it didn’t really change how I felt about the text. But it certainly changed how I felt about the author.” As Maureen Dowd, *New York Times* columnist remarked: “[R]eaders don’t care. It’s gone to the top of the bestseller list. But somebody has to stand up for truth.” “Journalists Speak Out”, 26. 1. 2006, <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Journalists-Speak-Out/2#slide>.
- 7 Hillel Italie, “Angel At The Fence, Holocaust Memoir, Publication Canceled,” *The Huffington Post* Dec 27, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/12/27/angel-at-the-fence-holoca_n_153740.html.
- 8 Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 26. Original emphasis.

Confession and Form

The emphasis on factuality is even more controversial in connection with the comics medium. According to Versaci, “the comics form – impressionistic illustrations of people, places, and things – remind us at every turn (or panel) that what we are experiencing is a representation.”⁹ In other words, when reading comics the reader clearly sees that these pictures are photographic reflections of reality. This could be one of the reasons why Sandell inserted in her memoir an original drawing she created as a child (18). Moreover, unlike the uniformity of text arrangement in most published prose, Sandell uses hand-lettering, which highlights the subjectivity of the presentation and points vision of reality. The illustrations and lettering establish a more personal and specific voice from the author, an effect which is in prose generally achieved by the use of a first person narrator and other stylistic devices.

Sandell had originally written her story in prose, but after completing 350 pages she turned to comics, feeling that with this form she could be more honest and capture her vision more precisely: “[Writing in prose] made it difficult to have the proper perspective. It made it difficult to have the emotional truths and that was why I turned back to cartooning, because I’d always cartooned about my dad, and I discovered this box of childhood cartoons.”¹⁰

Similar issues also arise regarding autobiographical poetry. Even though most poets do not use handwriting or photographs to convey their message, they do create images and use other literary devices, which even when meant to reflect a universal truth must be to a certain extent subjective as far as the expression of emotions is concerned. The richness of poetic language can thus compensate for the visual features of the comics medium.

The age and mental state of the narrator can be presented either by appropriate style of narration as well as by the level of sophistication in illustrations. Sylvia Plath starts her poem as a nursery rhyme: “You do not do, you do not do / anymore, black shoe;”¹¹ while Sandell’s panels at the beginning of *The Impostor’s Daughter* seem as if they were drawn by a child: the lines are not straight and the colors do not fill in entire areas, leaving empty white spots. Moreover, the spaces among individual panels imply the selectiveness of the narrative and active attitude of the memoirist. Empty spaces also serve in poetry as time distance markers; in “Daddy” each stanza indicates a time shift.

In a comics memoir the reader can simultaneously see and hear the author, who in this case is also the narrator. Moreover, the illustrations often correspond with the real look of the memoirist; the readers thus actually see who is talking. The graphic memoirist presents complex images which can include the speech of the narrator and, at the same time, his thoughts or after-thoughts. As a result, a more intimate relationship with the readers is established, especially when Sandell directly addresses the readers: for this purpose Sandell uses speech boxes, which are distinct from the balloons that present direct speech. This device enables her to retrospectively comment, explain or alter what is being said or presented in the images, as in a scene where she depicts her turn to religion. Laurie kneels at her bed praying, when Jesus enters her room. She is shocked not because she sees a supernatural figure but because of the type of religion

9 Versaci, *Comics*, 6.

10 Laurie Sandell, interviewed by Doree Shafrir “*The Impostor’s Daughter*: How Ashley Judd & A Con Artist Dad Sent Laurie Sandell To Rehab,” *Jezebel*, April 8, 2009, <http://jezebel.com/5329712/the-impostors-daughter-how-ashley-judd-a-con-artist-dad-sent-laurie-sandell-to-rehab>.

11 Sylvia Plath, “Daddy”, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 222.

she is trying to profess: "But I'm Jewish!" "So am I,"¹² Jesus replies. On the next page she inserts her comment in a text box: "OK, it didn't exactly happen like that. But after a while, I did start to feel a spiritual connection to something – nature, a higher power, call it what you will. It was something greater than my father and greater than me"¹³ Even though the readers know that it is obvious that the situation is fictional, Sandell assures the readers that the scene was not meant to reflect reality but her state of mind. While bearing in mind that the memoir, especially its dialogues have been presented the way she remembers them, she nevertheless insists on the uppermost factual accuracy to avoid any disregard both from critics and readers. This might a consequence of the memoir witch-hunts that have forced many writers into a careful re-examination of their work out of fear of rejection.

Another advantage of the comics memoir over prose is the possibility to change the style of illustrations or show visual marks of ageing without a substantial change of narrative approach. Throughout the text Sandell shifts her perspective by adjusting the bodily features of her father. Once she stops seeing him as a God-like figure, she presents him as smaller and growing bald and fat within a few panels.

"Daddies": The Electra Confessions

A strong emotional link of a daughter towards her father, resulting in competition with her mother was termed the Electra complex by Carl Gustav Jung. Derived from the corresponding Oedipus complex in men, this theory was significantly challenged by feminists, who pointed out its inadequacy. According to Simone de Beauvoir: "Freud never showed much concern with the destiny of woman; it is clear that he simply adapted his account from that of the destiny of man, with slight modification."¹⁴ Still, many potential consequences in the form of mental disorders and depressions have been documented, as family relationships significantly affect the process of identity formation.

It is therefore no coincidence that a large body of female autobiographical writing (be it memoirs, poetry or autobiographies), concentrates on family relationships, which in postwar America represented the core of American society and were subjected to substantial re-examination. According to professor of communications William Douglas, the media presented the traditional family as fostering "a wide range of unrealistically positive outcomes, including high relational satisfaction, family stability, and individual and family achievement."¹⁵ As a result the contrast between ideal and reality often led to frustration, depression and other mental issues.

Sandell and Plath use their art to release frustrations stemming out of their unstable and destructive relationships with their fathers. The inability to cope with unrealistic family expectations represents the main theme both of "Daddy" and *Impostor's Daughter*. Both works are retrospective, examining the daughter-father relationship from an early age, a view that is already indicated in the titles "Daddy" (not the more formal and detached term "father"), and *The Impostor's Daughter*. Both daughters admire their fathers and view them as almighty figures. For Laurie her father was a God, one who knew and

12 See Laurie Sandell, *The Impostor's Daughter* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010), 217.

13 Sandell, *The Impostor's Daughter*, 218. Original emphasis.

14 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H. M. Parhley (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), 34.

15 William Douglas, *Television Families: Is Something Wrong With Suburbia?* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 68.

understood everything; whereas Sylvia depicted her father as “[m]arble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue.”¹⁶ The man they both represent in their writing is a powerful and enigmatic god-like figure who nevertheless betrayed them and controlled their lives.

One crucial fact is that both daughters become critical towards their fathers only after they lose their privileged position in the family and they start feeling neglected. Both express their anger and frustration that they had trusted men who, as they believe, had misused them. When they cannot establish functional relationships with their fathers in the present, they decide to find out the truth about their past, as if understanding their life events and valuations of their father figures would illuminate their own character and place in the world. The figure of the father thus continues to have a considerable influence as both women define their identity only in comparison and contrast to it.

Yet this issue proves to be more complicated. Both of these authors’ fathers were immigrants who had come to America in search of a new life. Sandell’s father came from Argentina but his father was German, yet she never found out why he left his native country; While “Daddy” came from Grabow, a place that cannot be easily identified, as there are many towns of the same name in the region: “So I could never tell where you / Put your foot, your root;”¹⁷. The lack of knowledge of their father’s roots and motivations resulted in frustration, self-underestimation and guilt. While Laurie knew that her father came from Argentina, he obscured his immigration experience with so many multiple stories that she did not know which to believe, what is more, the fictional accounts stretched to all aspects of her father’s life. Laurie thus did not know what exactly her father did, if he had any job or what was the reason of the family’s frequent moving from town to town. Seemingly losing a solid basis that would enable both Plath and Sandell to trace their origin and family histories, they start creating wild and destructive fantasies, while the conflict between their fictions and reality is growing.

Unable to face unexpected neglect, both women self-destructively adopt identities that represent the opposite of what their models would approve of. Laurie starts creating multiple personae, like her father: “The next four years were an exercise in self-destruction. I travelled relentlessly. I told many lies. I was willing to be anything, try anything. As long, as it didn’t resemble the life I was leading before.”¹⁸ Yet, without realizing she tries to live the lives her father was inventing in his stories. By creating alternative personalities and lying, she was more like her father than before; while Plath identifies with Jews and gypsies, i.e., ethnic groups that were tortured and persecuted, yet maintained their specific culture and world view, contrasting with the German sense of order.

As this phase of extreme opposition does not bring them the desired peace of mind, both narrators start searching for an equally extreme alternative therapy “to make a model of [their fathers].”¹⁹ Sandell and Plath search for other men that would grant them both freedom and power, yet not, as Freud believed, for the comfort of being subjected to male authority, but for their own sense of power and status. The image of the almighty fathers merges with men they were meeting: Plath found the “man in black” in Ted Hughes, and Laurie met Ben, a film director. What both couples shared were attempts “to make art out of the tragedies of our family lives;”²⁰ moreover, Ben even had “clef in [his] chin” like the father in “Daddy.”

16 Plath, “Daddy”, 222.

17 Plath, “Daddy”, 222.

18 Sandell, *The Impostor’s Daughter*, 53.

19 Plath, “Daddy”, 222.

20 Sandell, *The Impostor’s Daughter*, 100.

Such displacement would be considered not only common but even desirable by Freud whose understanding of the complex reflects his view of a female who is defined by a lack:

[I]t is their lack of a penis that forces them into their Oedipus complex. It does little harm to a woman if she remains in her feminine Oedipus attitude. [. . .] She will in that case choose her husband for his paternal characteristics and be ready to recognize his authority. Her longing to possess a penis, which is in fact unappeasable, may find satisfaction if she can succeed in completing her love for the organ by extending it to the bearer of the organ.²¹

As Freud believed, a man should provide not only physical completion but also compensation for the weaker female Super-Ego, which requires external confirmation and support. Such a claim, though unpopular with feminists, seems fitting for Laurie, as she later admitted: "I was drawn to compelling, larger-than-life personalities."²² Yet when it comes to mental balance, the consequences of relying on the male figure are not as harmless as Freud believed.

While gathering material for her memoir, Laurie tries to get even with her father by anonymously publishing an article "My Father the Fraud" and "The Lives of Men," whereas Plath's poem describes her first documented suicide attempt: "to get back, back at you, I thought even the bones would do."²³ After her recovery she involves the whole village and the readers in the ritual murder of both the destructive men in her life:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.²⁴

Both women turn away from the paternal authority and for a long time overshadowed their own selves. In "Daddy" the speaker is using a metaphor of a life-sucking vampire that has to be killed not to endanger the natural balance of the speaker and the whole community.

Neither protagonist realizes that what they seek is protection and privileged status within the family they enjoyed as children. However, when such access to power is denied, the effect can potentially become destructive, confirming Carl Gustav Jung's claim that the female variant of the complex is as equally destructive as it is in men: "If the sexual libido were to get stuck in this form the [. . .] Electra conflict would lead to murder and incest."²⁵ Contrary to Freud, who understood the complex strictly within the sexual sphere, neither Plath's "Daddy" nor Sandell's "The Impostor's Daughter" seem to affirm it. The daughters do not desire their father on an erotic level but rather on emotional and intellectual one.

One of the functions of both confessional poetry and this memoir is a therapeutic process that concerned not only the writers but also the members of their audience

21 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1969), 51.

22 Sandell, *The Impostor's Daughter*, 16.

23 Plath, "Daddy", 222.

24 Plath, "Daddy", 222.

25 Carl Gustav Jung, *Freud and Psychoanalysis: Volume 4*, in *The Collected Works of Carl Gustav Jung* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 154-5.

who have lived through a similar experience. Art, both its creation and reception, often provides a creative outlet for self-destructive desires, as the representation of frustrations and sorrows provides distance, at least the aesthetic distance needed for potential reevaluation of the authors'/readers' identities.²⁶ As the Electra complex is a part of the unconscious, it can be only detected in others; by externalizing the complex by means of artistic representation, the text enables both readers and artists to achieve a more objective and outside view of their personal issues. Moreover, according to Jung the hysteria accompanying the loss of attention of the father is a mere regression into infantile states.²⁷ That itself, however, need not be seen in a purely negative light, as long as it is recognized and used as a starting point for a new self-acceptance.

Unlike Plath, who committed suicide soon after the completion of the poem, Sandell underwent therapy, which helped rid her of her obsession with her father's personality and her need for approval and attention. In her memoir she attempts a realistic depiction of her unhappiness and unfulfilled desires that would not only help her to establish her own sense of identity, but at the same time radically depart from the fictional personal histories her father was creating. This is one of the reasons she decided to pen a non-fiction memoir and insisted on its overall adherence to actual events. Moreover, the very fact that the comics medium highlights its representational character proved to be a valuable aspect of therapeutic function many modern memoirs share.

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²⁶ Many readers related to Sandell's story on blogs, confirming that their fathers are very similar. See Sandell, Interviewed by Doree Shafrir, "The Impostor's Daughter".

²⁷ See Jan Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life: Durations of the Unconscious Self* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 27-8.

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