

Sylvia Plath: Analysis of "Daddy"

"Daddy," consisting of sixteen five-line stanzas, is a harsh and toxic poem that is generally believed to be about Plath's dead father, Otto Plath. The speaker begins by stating that he "does not do anymore," and that she feels as if she has been a foot living in a black shoe for thirty years, too afraid to either breathe or sneeze. She states that she had to kill him (she calls him "Daddy"), but that he died before she could get around to it. She calls him heavy, like a "bag full of God," like a statue with one big gray toe and his head stuck in the Atlantic Ocean. She recalls how she once prayed for his return from death, and lets out a German cry of sorrow. She knows that he is from a Polish town that has been invaded by "wars, wars, wars," but one of her Polack friends has told her that there are several towns with that name. Thus, she is unable to discover his hometown, where he planted his "foot" and "root."

She also talks about how she could never find a way to communicate with him. Even before she could talk, she knew that every German was him, and she found the German language "obscene." In fact, she felt so different from him that she knew she was a Jew being sent to a concentration camp. She began to speak like a Jew and to think like a Jew in several different ways. She even wonders if she might not actually be a Jew, because of her similarity to a gypsy. To further illustrate her fear and difference, she refers to him as the Luftwaffe, with a neat mustache and a bright blue Aryan eye. She refers to him as a "Panzer-man," and says he is less like God than the black swastika through which nothing can pass. In her mind, "Every woman adores a Fascist," and the "boot in the face" that comes with such a man.

When she thinks of Daddy, she pictures him standing at the blackboard, with a cleft chin instead of a cleft foot. But this substitution does not turn him into a devil. Rather, he is like the black man who "Bit [her] pretty red heart in two." He died when she was ten, and she attempted to join him in death when she was twenty. When that didn't work, she was put back together. It was at this point that she knew what she had to do - she built a model of Daddy and gave him both a "Meinkampf look" and "a love of the rack and the screw." She tells him that she is "finally through;" the telephone is no longer connected, and the voices cannot reach her.

She believes that if she has killed one man, then she has actually killed two. She compares him to a vampire when she remembers how he drank her blood for a year, but then realizes that it was more like seven years. She tells him that he can lie back now. There is a stake in his heart, and the villagers who hated him are now celebrating his death by dancing on his body. She ends by saying, "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

"Daddy" is arguably Sylvia Plath's most famous poem. It has inspired a range of very different reactions, from admiration for its pure anger at male domination, to concern about its appropriation of Holocaust imagery. It has been analyzed and criticized by hundreds and hundreds of academics, and is cited as one of the greatest examples of confessional poetry.

It is, of course, a difficult poem for some people: the violent imagery, the allusion to Jewish suffering, the bitter tone, which can make for a very uncomfortable reading experience. Nevertheless, the poem is Plath's own struggle to come to terms with her father's presence in her

life; he died when she was eight years old. She positions herself as the victim and her father as various figures, a Nazi, a vampire, a devil, and ultimately, as a resurrected figure, her husband, whom she has also had to kill.

This sense of contradiction is also apparent in the rhyme scheme and rhythm of the poem. It has a sort of nursery rhyme, singsong quality of speech. There are hard sounds, simple sentences, and a regular rhyme scheme (as in "Jew," "through," "do," and "you"). This distinguishes and defines her as a child in contrast to her mighty father. This contrast is also apparent in the name she chooses for her father, "Daddy," and in the use of "oo" sounds and a childlike rhythm. But this childlike rhythm also has an ironic, negative undertone, as if the chant-like, primitive rhythm is almost like a curse. One critic has observed that the poem's "simplistic, insistent rhythm is one form of control, the obsessive rhyming and repeated short phrases are others, means by which she attempts to charm and hold off evil spirits." That is, the childlike aspects are clearly necessary, and not innocent.

"Daddy" can also be read as a poem about the individual who finds herself torn between herself and society. Plath weaves together the patriarchal images of father, Nazis, vampire, and husband, and then blames them all for the atrocities of history. Like "The Colossus," "Daddy" also asserts the presence of the larger-than-life patriarchal figure, but with a definite social and political undertone. Even the vampire is referred to in terms of its tyrannical control over a village. In this interpretation, the individual realizes that she must kill the father figure in order to free herself from the limitations that the father figure imposes upon her. These limitations are specifically patriarchal in nature, and impose a strict gender divide. It is an exorcism, a purification ritual. But it is not an easy task. She knows what she must do, but she must do it in a state of hysteria. In order to emerge victorious, she must have her hands fully on the reins, because she knows that she will be destroyed unless she fully annihilates her adversary.

The question about the poem's confessional, autobiographical content is also worth exploring. The poem does not exactly conform to Plath's biography, and her above-cited explanation suggests it is a carefully-constructed fiction. And yet its ambivalence towards male figures does correspond to the time of its composition - she wrote it soon after learning that her husband Ted Hughes had left her for another woman. Further, the mention of a suicide attempt links the poem to her life.

However, some critics have suggested that the poem is actually an allegory for her fears of creative paralysis and her need to overcome the "male muse." Stephen Gould Axelrod has written that "on a simple level, 'Daddy' is about its own violent, transgressive act of birth as a text, its emergence from a culture that finds it to be illegitimate – a judgment the speaker turns back on the patriarch himself when she calls him a bastard." The father is an object and a mythological figure (several of them, actually), and never quite reaches a kind of real-life flesh-and-blood quality. It is more of a suffocating presence that plants its foot in her face to shut her up. Even this interpretation, however, requires a kind of autobiographical reading, in that both Hughes and her father were figures of that world.

The use of Holocaust imagery in Plath's work has been the subject of a vast amount of critical interest. Plath was not Jewish but was actually German herself, and had an obsession with Jewish history and culture. There are a number of poems that use Holocaust imagery, but this one uses the most striking and frightening examples. She finds herself being led away on a train to "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen," and begins to speak like a Jew and feel like a Jew. She speaks of her father as a

"panzer-man," and his Aryan features and "Luftwaffe" brutality. One of the most prominent articles on this subject, written by Al Strangeways, finds that Plath was using her poetry to explore the relationship between history and myth, and to emphasize the voyeurism that is implicit in remembering. Plath had studied the Holocaust in an academic capacity, and felt a connection to it; she also felt as though she was a victim, and wanted to blend the public and private in her poetry to get past the stale double-talk of Cold War America. Plath does use Holocaust imagery, but she also uses other violent myths and histories, including Electra, vampirism, and voodoo.

Strangeways observes that, "the Holocaust took on a mythic quality because of its extremity and the difficulty of comprehending it in human terms, because of the mechanical efficiency with which it was accomplished, and because of the staggering number of victims." That is, the shocking content of the Holocaust is not an accident, but is instead a way of thinking about how the great atrocity of the 20th century is a reflection and escalation of a certain quality of humanity.

It is, of course, difficult to imagine that any of Sylvia Plath's poems could be read without being moved. "Daddy" is clearly a reflection of her deep talent, some of which lay in her willingness to confront her own personal history and the history of the age in which she lived. That she was able to write a poem that reflected both the personal and the historical is clear in "Daddy."