

# Sylvia Plath "Daddy"

## Central Argument, Historical Context

Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" remains one of the most controversial modern poems ever written. It is a dark, surreal, and at times painful allegory that uses metaphor and other devices to carry the idea of a female victim finally freeing herself from her father. In Plath's own words:

Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.

"Daddy" was written in 1962, a month after Plath had separated from her husband and moved—with their two small children—from their home in Devon to a flat in London. Four months later Plath was dead, but she wrote some of her best poems during that turbulent period. Plath's usage of Holocaust imagery has inspired a plethora of critical attention. She was not Jewish but was in fact German, yet was obsessed with Jewish history and culture.

"Daddy" is an attempt to combine the personal with the mythical. It's unsettling, a weird nursery rhyme of the divided self, a controlled blast aimed at a father and a husband (since the two conflate in the 14th stanza). The poem expresses Plath's terror and pain lyrically and hauntingly. It combines light echoes of a Mother Goose nursery rhyme with much darker resonances of World War II. The father is seen as a black shoe, a bag full of God, a cold marble statue, a Nazi, a swastika, a fascist, a sadistic brute, and a vampire. The girl (narrator, speaker) is trapped in her idolization of this man. She is a victim trapped in that black tomblike shoe, in the sack that holds the father's bones, and—in a sense—in the train as it chugs along to Auschwitz. "Daddy" is full of disturbing imagery, and that's why some have called "Daddy" "the Guernica of modern poetry." As the poem progresses, the narrator identifies herself with the plight of the Jews during the Nazi regime in Germany. There are many direct references to the Holocaust in the poem.

The poem is ironically depersonalized and taken beyond mere confession into archetypal father-daughter pathos. Sylvia Plath has risked all by introducing the holocaust into the poem; only her astute use of rhythm, rhyme and lyric allows her to get away with it. "Daddy" can also be viewed as a poem about the individual trapped between herself and society. Plath weaves together patriarchal figures – a father, Nazis, a vampire, a husband – and then holds them all accountable for history's horrors. "Daddy" imagines a larger-than-life patriarchal figure, but here the figure has a distinctly social, political aspect. Even the vampire is discussed in terms of its tyrannical sway over a village. In this interpretation, the speaker comes to understand that she must kill the father figure in order to break free of the limitations that it places upon her. In particular, these limitations can be understood as patriarchal forces that enforce a strict gender structure. It has the feel of an exorcism, an act of purification. And yet the journey is not easy. She realizes what she has to do, but it requires a sort of hysteria. In order to succeed, she must have complete control, since she fears she will be destroyed unless she totally annihilates her antagonist.

Plath's "Daddy" offers the glimpses of her real life bubbling up through metaphor and allegory, but she never makes it fully confessional. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that any of Sylvia Plath's poems could leave the reader unmoved. "Daddy" is evidence of her profound talent, part of which rested in her unabashed confrontation with her personal history and the traumas of the age in which she lived. That she could write a poem that encompasses both the personal and historical is clear in "Daddy."