

Notes on Daddy by Sylvia Plath:

When Sylvia Plath, at age eight, was told that her father had died, she said, "I'll never speak to God again" (source).

When Plath was four years old, her father Otto, a professor of German and biology at Boston University, became ill with what he would later find out was diabetes. By the time he sought medical care four years later, it was too late. One of his legs had to be amputated and he eventually died of complications from his long hospitalization.

His death threw the family into economic and emotional turmoil. Throughout the rest of her life, which she ended herself in 1963, Plath struggled with depression. Though she was a prolific poet, she published only one book of poetry, *The Colossus*, and one novel, *The Bell Jar*, while she was alive.

"Daddy" was written shortly before Plath's suicide in 1963, along with many of the other poems that ended up in her book *Ariel*, which was published after her death. Plath wrote these poems after her husband, poet Ted Hughes, left her for another woman. This already difficult change for Plath became more difficult as she was left to care for their two young children during a particularly harsh London winter. "Daddy" is disturbing on its own, but it becomes simply haunting the moment we picture Plath writing early in the morning before her children were awake, growing closer and closer to self-destruction.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Like all human beings, you have a father. You may love him, you may hate him, or maybe you've never even met him, but he is a part of you.

So, by nature, you're connected to the people who, for centuries, across continents, and spanning all genres of literature and entertainment, have written and made art about their relationships with their fathers. Shakespeare's plays often deal with father-child relationships. The pop culture epic *Star Wars* culminates with the discovery of an absent father. Even the Bible tells the story of an entire people whose "father" is far away.

Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" is part of this tradition, but it's not just about Plath's relationship with her father. It's also about topics such as death, love, fascism, brutality, war, marriage, femininity, and God – to name a few.

"Daddy" is a disturbing – but artful – howl from a woman who has lost her father and her husband. Be warned, Plath's language is as playful as it is scathing.

The speaker creates a figurative image of her father, using many different metaphors to describe her relationship with him. He's like a black shoe that she's had to live in; like a statue that stretches across the United States; like God; like a Nazi; like a Swastika; and, finally, like a vampire. The speaker, faced with her father as a giant and evil Nazi, takes the part of a Jew and a victim.

Yet, with this poem, the speaker gets her revenge, claiming that she's killed both her father and the man she made as a model of her father – her husband. This poem shows her struggle to

declare that, no matter how terrible her father was and how much he remains in her mind, she is now through with him.

Lines 1-5

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

The poem starts with the speaker declaring that she will no longer put up with the black shoe she's lived in, poor and scared, for thirty years.

She uses the second person throughout the poem, saying "you," who, as we find out, is "Daddy." So that means that she's comparing her father to a shoe that she's been living in very unhappily – but she's not going to put up with it anymore.

This stanza reminds us of a nursery rhyme – the old woman who lived in a shoe. The repetition of "you do not do" in the first line even makes this stanza sound a little singsong-y. But this is no happy nursery rhyme – the speaker is poor, and won't dare to breathe or sneeze, meaning that she feels trapped and scared.

Lines 6-7

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time –

The poem no longer seems like a nursery rhyme in this stanza. In line 6, the speaker tells her father that she has had to kill him, as if she's already murdered him.

But then in line 7, the speaker says that he died before she "had time," though she doesn't make it 100% clear if she means to say "before I had time to kill him." It could mean something like, "before I had time to get to know him," or "before I could make him proud." Either way, it's shocking that our speaker claims she had to kill her father. After hearing this violent sentiment, we're not sure if she's sad that he died, or if she's angry, or what.

Line 8

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

After we hear that the speaker's father is dead, the phrase describing him, "Marble-heavy," helps us imagine the stiff heaviness of a corpse, or even a marble gravestone.

The "bag full of God" could refer to a body bag, or the speaker could be saying that the skin around our bodies is nothing but a bag.

Either way, the image of her father as a bag full of God shows her conflicted feelings about him.

Maybe her father died when she was young and he controlled her world – a sort of God over her life. Perhaps his death caused memories of him to have more control over the speaker's life – so he seems, to her, to be as powerful as God.

What is the speaker's view of God anyway? Is it positive or negative?

Lines 9-13

Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.

These lines show us that the phrase "Marble-heavy" was partly meant to set up an image of the speaker's father as a statue. But he's no normal statue – he's ghastly, like a gargoyle.

Then Plath shows us that this statue is humongous. One of its gray toes is as big as a "Frisco" (as in San Francisco, California) seal (as in the blubbery animal – here's a picture). But its head is all the way across the United States in the Atlantic

The speaker describes the Atlantic as "freakish," but it sounds pretty, pouring its water, green as a bean, over the blue of the ocean. The speaker even comes right out and says that Nauset, a region on the shore of Massachusetts, is beautiful.

These lines show us that the statue stretches from coast to coast of the United States, with a toe in the Pacific and a head in the Atlantic. But, remember, the statue is actually the image of the speaker's dead father in her head.

Lines 14-15

I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

After we've gotten the image of the father as a statue, stretching across the US, the speaker says that she used to pray to "recover" him. "Recover" seems to mean "regain," but could also imply a second meaning of "get healthy again."

Knowing our speaker, "used to" is the important part of our line. She doesn't pray to get her father back any more.

Then we get down to line 15...and we're not speaking English anymore. Even not knowing German, we can get a pretty good sense from the small sounds of these words that it's a sort of sigh. The phrase in German actually means "Oh, you."

Plath's father was a German immigrant, which probably explains why she's writing this little sigh in his language when she thinks of praying to get him back from the dead. We don't know yet if it's a sad sigh or an angry sigh.

Lines 16-18

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.

Now we get more about Germany than just an exclamation in the language. The speaker is talking about the German tongue, or language, but in a Polish town that has been destroyed by war.

But the speaker doesn't just say something like "destroyed by war" – she says it has been "scraped flat by the roller of wars," which makes us think a bulldozer and also of rolling out cookie dough until it's flat.

Then, she repeats the word "wars" three times, giving us the idea that this place has been flattened by more than one war.

Lines 19-23

But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,

Now we find out more about this town – its name is common. The speaker's Polish friend says there are a bunch of town in Poland with the same name.

Because there are so many towns with the same name, the speaker will never know where "you," her father, has "put [his] foot, [his] root" – this probably means that she is wondering where he immigrated from, but will never be able to tell.

Lines 24-28

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.

The speaker also laments that she could never talk to her father, because her tongue always stuck.

Even worse, the area where her tongue got stuck was like a barb wire snare. Barbed wire is pretty nasty stuff, and would rip a tongue to shreds.

The speaker demonstrates her tongue getting stuck in German, repeating "Ich," the German word for "I." Her tongue seems to get stuck so badly that she can only stammer, "I, I, I..."

Why did her tongue stick? We're not sure. Maybe her father made her nervous or scared.

Maybe she's not very good at speaking German. What do you think?

She then repeats that she could hardly speak, but the context of this line seems to be more general – earlier, she said she could hardly talk to her father but, now, she can hardly speak at all.

Lines 29-30

I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

Our tongue-tied speaker is telling us that she thought every German was her father, and that she found his language dirty and offensive.

Maybe her tongue only got stuck when speaking German. Perhaps she got nervous speaking the language of her father to other Germans, who all seemed like her father.

These lines show us that the speaker is deeply disturbed by memories of her father. She sees him in every German person she comes across, and the association is unfortunately a negative one.

Lines 31-33

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

There was no period ending line 30, which said that the German language was obscene, so the engine is probably a metaphor for the German language.

Then the speaker takes the engine metaphor further, saying that the language, like a train, is "chuffing" her off like a Jew. "Chuffing" is an example of onomatopoeia, it uses words to mimic the sound of a train.

The significance of being taken by train, like a Jew, is that during the Holocaust the Germans took Jews to concentration camps by way of train. The speaker even lists some World War II concentration camps, saying that it's like she's being taken to Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen. Dachau and Belsen were in Germany, and Auschwitz was in German-occupied Poland.

The speaker is so terrified by the German language that it feels like it is a train taking her to a horrible, mass death.

Lines 34-35

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.

The speaker is so opposed to the German language that she begins to talk like a Jew, perhaps in Yiddish. She even thinks that she may be Jewish.

These lines explain that the speaker associates the fear and terror of her father with the struggle of the Jewish people against the Germans – it's a vivid and disturbing metaphor.

Lines 36-37

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.

The Tyrol is part of the Alpine mountain region, with many snow-capped peaks. It borders Germany, in part, but is mostly between the Italian and Austrian border. Many different languages are spoken there, and its nationality is a little muddled.

One might pass Tyrol while riding a train through Germany, like the train the speaker imagines she is on.

Vienna is the capital of Austria. Vienna beer, though it is Austrian in origin, surely could be found in nearby Germany. So the speaker is imagining things that could be found in Europe.

These lines might seem a bit confusing, but try to think of these lines in the context of some of the Holocaust imagery we encountered earlier. The purity of snow in Tyrol and the clear look of Vienna beer are in stark contrast to the dark horrors that took place nearby in Nazi Germany.

Also, purity in the context of the Nazis means horrible things – like genocide and the quest for "racial purity."

Lines 38-40

With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

Here, the speaker talks about a gypsy ancestress. This means that one of her female ancestors was, at least figuratively, a gypsy.

Then she talks about her "weird luck," which could relate to the mysticism of being part-gypsy, as does the Taroc pack – her pack of Tarot cards, which are used to tell fortunes. The repetition in line 39 keeps the rhythm of the line moving.

But then she ties these lines to her suspicions that she may be part Jewish. This doesn't seem to make very much sense, but it's important to remember that gypsies, like Jews, were killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust because they were considered to be "impure." (Learn more about the persecution of the gypsies by the Nazis [here](#).)

So, if the Nazis killed gypsies and Jews because they thought those people weren't pure, the speaker seems to sarcastically suggest that they should have killed the snows of Tyrol, or the beer of Vienna, for being impure as well.

Lines 41-42

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

Now the speaker switches back from describing herself as a victim to addressing her father, saying that she's always been scared of him.

Then she goes on to describe her father's German characteristics. "Luftwaffe" is the German word for air force, and is specifically used to refer to the German air force of World War II.

"Gobbledygoo" follows "Luftwaffe," masked as something of significance, but it's actually a nonsense word. Yet it probably refers to the strangeness of the German language to an English-speaking listener.

Lines 43-44

And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

The "neat mustache" and blue "Aryan eye" describe the father physically, and make him seem very German.

The mustache aligns her father with Hitler, whose toothbrush-shaped mustache was emblematic.

"Aryan" is a term that, during the Nazi rise to power, referred to Hitler's "perfect race" of blond and blue-eyed people who were seen as "superior" to Jews and gypsies.

So the speaker's father is now like the German image of terrible perfection – with Hitler's mustache and idealized bright blue eyes.

Line 45

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –

"Panzer-man" refers to German tank drivers, and continues the image of the speaker's father as scary and terrible.

Then, again, we get the phrase "O You," but this time it's in English. The poem has gone a long way since we heard the "Ach, du" (line 15). This "O you" follows not a prayer to recover him, but an invocation of his horrors.

Lines 46-47

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.

Now that the speaker has returned to her sigh of "O You" from earlier in the poem, she also returns to the concept that her father seemed like God to her. Now he appears to her to be a swastika, the Nazi symbol that has come to be associated with evil.

But he's no normal swastika; he's so black that he blocks the sky. Just like when the speaker described him as a statue that stretches across the United States, when he is a swastika, he's rather extreme.

Lines 48-50

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

The speaker here says that every woman loves fascist men. Fascism is an extreme authoritarian type of government that we associate with cruel dictators. Hitler and the Nazis were fascists.

She then goes on to describe what women love about Fascist men: the man's "boot in the [woman's] face," a rather cruel gesture to establish dominance and power. It's not hard to imagine someone like Hitler stomping on someone's face.

She connects the boot in the face with "brute" hearts of "brute" men like her father. This use of internal rhyme and repetition really intensifies the accusation that her father was a cruel Fascist. So the speaker has connected her father with Fascists, and with their brutality. But she's saying that women love all this cruelty and brutality.

Perhaps she has seen herself love a cruel man – like she claims her father is – and perhaps she's seen other women fall in love with unkind men too. She may be commenting on women allowing themselves to be dominated by men. This statement may also be more bitterly sarcastic than true. If it is meant as a statement of fact, it's criticizing women as well as the brutes they love.

Lines 51-52

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,

These two lines are pretty clear-cut. The speaker is looking at a picture of her father, and in the picture he's standing at a blackboard, probably in a classroom, teaching.
An interesting fact: Plath's father was a professor.

Lines 53-54

A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not

These lines get a little more complicated.

The speaker says that her father has a cleft in his chin, which still sounds like a pretty normal physical description, but then she says that this cleft is in his chin instead of his foot. What kind of person has a cleft in his foot?

Well, in the next line, we find out that she's not comparing her father to a person – but to the devil. The devil is often depicted as some sort of animal, like a goat, that has hooves and not feet. There's often a signature cleft, or indent, in the devil's feet.

The speaker has moved from calling her father a Nazi, to calling him a devil.

The "no not" at the end of this line is an example of enjambment, a poetic device in which an idea is split between two lines.

Lines 55-56

Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.

These lines continue the idea that was started in the previous line. Just like the cleft in the wrong place didn't make the speaker's father any less a devil, it didn't make him any less the cruel man who the speaker says bit her heart in two.

The speaker says that her father is a black man, but she's probably not talking about his skin color. Instead, she's referring to him as a dark and evil person.

The color black also contrasts vividly with the red of her heart. Again, he probably didn't actually bite her heart in two. That's just a more vivid, vicious way to say that he broke her heart.

These two lines continue the contrast of the father to the speaker. The father is huge, evil, and black, while the speaker, like her heart, is a pretty, red, and a victim.

Lines 57-60

I was ten when they buried you.

At twenty I tried to die

And get back, back, back to you.

I thought even the bones would do.

After we're told that the speaker's father, whom she is comparing to the devil, has broken her heart, we're shown a little more how he otherwise affects her.

He died when the speaker was ten years old, and ten years later, when she was twenty, she attempted to die as well.

She says that the reason she attempted suicide was to get back to her father. She repeats the word "back" three times, showing that she's distressed.

We can remember from earlier in this poem that she used to pray to "recover" her father. When she was twenty, she took this further, and tried to die to see if she could be reconnected with him.

She says she thought that "even the bones would do." Maybe she thought when she died she'd be buried near her father, or that once she became only a skeleton, she would be back with him.

Mostly, this line shows how disturbed the speaker is by her relationship with her dead father – so disturbed that she would try to kill herself so that she could come closer to him.

Lines 61-62

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.

Read together with line 58, these lines tell us that the speaker tried to die, but did not succeed. They (whoever "they" is) rescued her from killing herself by pulling her out of the sack of death and gluing her back together.

We can imagine that someone who has been glued back together wouldn't ever feel quite right again.

The idea of the speaker being pulled out of a sack after she has tried to kill herself reminds us of when she said that her father was a "bag full of God" in line 8.

Lines 63-65

And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

After the speaker has been rescued from her suicide attempt and glued back together, she seems to have found a new direction in life – now, she "kn[ows] what to do." Her new direction in life is to make a model of her father, the man she claims is a Nazi and a devil.

Of course, she's not actually making a model of this man physically, like creating a clay model. She's creating a substitute for her father, probably by finding a real man whom she imagines is like her father.

She doesn't call the model a "black man" as she did with her father, but she does say the model's a man in black. And she doesn't say that this man has a mustache, but says that he is like Hitler in perhaps an even more direct way: Mein Kampf means "My Struggle" in German, and is the title of a book that was written by Hitler.

It doesn't make much sense that a person would have a "My Struggle" look. But if you take Meinkampf to mean Hitler, a "Hitler look" does make a little more sense.

Lines 66-67

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.

So now we know this man, modeled after the speaker's father, wears black and looks like Hitler. Doesn't sound very appealing so far.

But line 66 makes it even worse – the rack and the screw are both gruesome torture instruments. This man sounds like the epitome of evil – he's like Hitler and loves gruesome torture.

So what does our speaker do? She marries him, confirming her wedding vows, "I do." She set this up earlier, when she claimed that every woman loves a fascist in line 48. Here, the speaker is definitely showing herself in love with a fascist.

By marrying the man she modeled after her father, the speaker is fulfilling the Electra complex, which is like the female version of the more well-known Oedipus complex. Basically, the Electra complex is a theory that women seek men who are like their fathers, and the Oedipus complex theorizes that men seek women who are like their mothers.

Line 68

So daddy, I'm finally through.

Now that she has this model of her father, she's through with her actual father. She doesn't need him anymore.

Wait, we think – isn't her father dead? How can you be through with someone who is dead? As we can see in this poem, even though he is physically dead, her father is still very alive in the memories of the speaker. She's through with her memories of him, and their effect on her daily life.

We've seen her dangerous obsession with her father throughout this whole poem, so we'd expect to find her relieved upon declaring that she's through with her father. But she's not relieved enough to end the poem here.

Lines 69-70

The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

Now that she's declared that she's through with her father, the speaker details how she is through with him. It's as if they've been in contact over a phone, which is now "off at the root."

Of course, the telephone that she used to talk to her father, whom she called a "black man," is also black. This makes it seem mystical – any telephone that you could use to talk to a dead person would, naturally, be black.

The speaker signifies that she's "through" with her father by saying the phone is "off at the root" – which, for a normal phone, would probably mean something like "it's unplugged."

The telephone having a root makes the idea that voices can't "worm" through make more sense. We can imagine a black telephone, growing like a plant, from the speaker's father's grave. The voices coming through the phone would be like worms in the soil.

But now, the phone is cut off – no voices can get through, so the father and daughter can no longer communicate.

Line 71

If I've killed one man, I've killed two –

Here we are, back to the speaker's claim from line 6 that she killed her father. We know from that stanza that he died before she actually killed him. But here she is again, claiming that she's killed not one man, but two.

We can guess that the first man she claims to have killed is her father, and since the only other man in this poem is the model of her father, we're guessing that's the second man. But we're also guessing she hasn't actually killed these men, except in her head.

Lines 72-74

The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.

Now we get more indication that the second man the speaker has killed is, as suspected, the man that she modeled after her father and married. We're guessing this because that man, whom she's calling a vampire, "said he was you," so is very similar to her father.

She's already made this man out to be like Hitler, and now he's a vampire too. He's such a vampire that he actually drank her blood. She starts by saying that he drank her blood for a year, but then changes her mind and says he's been drinking it for seven.

Drinking blood could be a metaphor for the speaker's relationship with this man, which, as we found out earlier, was marriage. It sounds like this man has been draining her life away, like a vampire would drain his victim's blood.

We're not sure why she changed her mind on the time span. Maybe she was only married to the man for one year, but knew him for seven. Or maybe she thought he was only cruel to her for one year, but upon further thought, she realizes that he's really been cruel for seven, which could be the totality of their marriage.

(Interesting fact: In real life, Plath was married to Ted Hughes for about seven years.)

The speaker adds the "if you want to know" at the end of this line in what seems like a jab to her father, who could be either disinterested in or hurt by his daughter's distress.

Line 75

Daddy, you can lie back now.

After the speaker has asserted that she's killed both her father and the man she married (who reminded her of him), she tells her father to lie back.

Normally you'd think of this as something comforting – like lying back and relaxing. But it's kind of weird that our speaker is telling her dead father, whom she seems to hate, or at least be angry at, to lie back and relax.

It's also a little strange that she calls him "Daddy," which is an affectionate name for someone she has aligned with so much evil.

Line 76

There's a stake in your fat black heart

As suspected, the speaker isn't telling her father to lie back so that he can relax. She's telling him – or perhaps telling the part of him that is in herself – to lie back because he's dead. But he hasn't died a merely human death. Because memories of him, like a vampire, have lived past his physical death, sucking blood (or at least the will to live) from our speaker, he must be killed like a vampire – with a stake to the heart.

His heart, here, fits with the rest of the descriptions of him – big and black (as in evil). It's the opposite of the speaker's heart, described in line 56 as pretty and red.

Lines 77-79

And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.

Not only is the speaker's father dead, slain like a vampire, but the villagers never liked him anyway.

This seems like a reference to vampire lore. We're not talking Twilight here, but older literature like Bram Stoker's Dracula, in which vampires lived near little villages.

The poem shows us that it's kind of an understatement that the villagers never liked the speaker's father – they're so happy that he's dead that they're brazenly dancing and stomping on his dead body.

They're doing this because they always knew "it" was you. Given the vampire references, this probably means that they always suspected that the speaker's father was the vampire, causing all sorts of problems and mysterious disappearances in the village.

It's important to remember, as the metaphor grows wider, that this vampire is really just in the speaker's head. While the villagers could be a metaphor for the real, living people who surround the speaker, they're probably not actually villagers. And there's a good chance that the villagers are just in the speaker's head.

Line 80

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

The poem reaches its crescendo with this line and, if it was a rock concert, this is where the guitars would be smashed.

The speaker has threatened that she's through with her father before, in line 68. But the repetition of the word "Daddy" here, and the addition of the word "bastard," makes this condemnation final.

Before this, the speaker has used the word "Daddy" only four times in an 80-line poem, not counting the title. Using this affectionate term for father twice in the last line makes it sound almost like she's beating on his chest to get her point across.

The use of the word "bastard" seems to be what this poem has worked itself up to. The speaker has tried out every way possible to criticize her father – he's a Nazi, the devil, and a vampire. But, in the end, she just wanted to get out a good verbal punch, calling her father a bastard.