

Killing Daddy: Sylvia Plath's Final Exorcism of the Patriarch

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Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy", written in October 1962 and published posthumously in her collection *Ariel* (1965), stands as one of the most explosive and controversial works in modern confessional poetry. Composed during a period of intense personal turmoil—following her separation from husband Ted Hughes and amid her struggles with mental illness—the poem serves as a ferocious declaration of independence from the suffocating shadow of patriarchal authority. Through raw, incantatory language, Plath transforms her grief over her father's early death into a ritualistic "killing" of his lingering influence, extending the critique to broader structures of male domination.

The title itself is deliberately provocative: "Daddy" evokes childish affection and dependency, yet the poem subverts this innocence into rage. Plath addresses her deceased father directly, blending nursery-rhyme rhythms with violent imagery to expose the trauma of oppression. The poem's power lies in its unflinching confrontation with memory, turning personal pain into a universal cry against patriarchal control.

Summary of the Poem

The poem unfolds in 16 stanzas of five lines each, with a repetitive, chant-like quality that mimics a child's rhyme while delivering devastating emotional blows.

It opens with the speaker rejecting her father's hold: "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 "black shoe" symbolizes the oppressive, confining presence of her father, in which the speaker (representing Plath herself, aged 30) has been trapped since childhood, stifled and colorless.

She declares, "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time——" acknowledging that her father, Otto Plath, died when she was eight (from complications of diabetes), before she could fully rebel or resolve their relationship. He is depicted as a colossal, god-like statue: "Marble-heavy, a bag full of God," with

a "ghastly" gray toe "Big as a Frisco seal" and his head submerged in the Atlantic off Nauset Beach (referencing their Massachusetts home).

The speaker recalls her childhood worship—"I used to pray to recover you. / Ach, du."—shifting into German to evoke her father's heritage (he was of German descent, born in Poland). She identifies the family origins in a "Polish town / Scraped flat by the roller / Of wars, wars, wars," blending personal history with World War II devastation.

The central metaphor escalates: the speaker portrays herself as a Jewish victim and her father as a Nazi oppressor—"An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." She fears him with his "Luftwaffe" (German air force) and "gobbledygoo," and calls him a "Panzer-man" (tank commander). Yet she admits fascination: "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you."

Unable to fully escape, she tried to recreate him: "I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw." This "model" is widely interpreted as Ted Hughes, whom she married after her father's death. The husband becomes a "vampire" who "drank my blood for a year," draining her life (mirroring seven years of marriage).

The poem builds to catharsis: the speaker drives a "stake in [his] fat black heart" and scatters villagers to dance on his grave. In the final stanza, she proclaims liberation: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

This "killing" is symbolic—an exorcism of the internalized patriarch, freeing the speaker from cycles of oppression.

Major Themes

Patriarchy and Gender Oppression

The poem critiques how male authority crushes female autonomy. The father embodies the patriarchal figure whose shadow infantilizes and silences women. The speaker's entrapment in the "black shoe" and her tongue "stuck in my jaw" illustrate suppressed expression under male dominance.

Trauma, Memory, and the Haunting Past

Even after 20 years, the father's death haunts the speaker. Plath explores how unresolved grief morphs into obsession and resentment, with the past "haunting" like a ghost or vampire.

Holocaust Imagery and Historical Analogy

The controversial Nazi-Jew metaphor dramatizes absolute power imbalance and victimhood. While criticized for trivializing the Holocaust, it powerfully conveys feelings of persecution and dehumanization under authoritarian control.

Ambivalence and the Love-Hate Dynamic

The speaker oscillates between adoration ("a bag full of God") and hatred ("you bastard"). This reflects the Electra complex—Freudian attraction to the father combined with rage at his dominance—extended to marriage.

Liberation and Female Empowerment

The poem culminates in defiance: by "killing" Daddy and the vampire-husband, the speaker achieves psychological freedom, rejecting cycles of subjugation.

Confessional Identity and Psychological Depth

As confessional poetry, it blurs autobiography and art, using personal pain (Plath's father's death, her marriage breakdown) to explore identity, mental anguish, and suicide ideation.

Key Exam Points and Analysis Tips

Structure and Form: Irregular rhyme (ABABB-like) and nursery-rhyme rhythm create ironic contrast with dark content—childlike form for adult rage. Repetition ("Daddy," "you do not do," "wars, wars, wars") builds incantatory power, like a spell or exorcism.

Imagery and Symbolism: Black shoe (oppression), statue (overwhelming presence), vampire (draining relationship), Nazi/Jew (extreme power dynamic), stake (final rejection).

Tone: Shifts from childish ("Achoo") to furious and declarative—mirrors emotional progression from suppression to empowerment.

Controversy: Holocaust references—seen as hyperbolic or inappropriate by some, but defended as metaphorical expression of extreme emotional truth.

Biographical Context: Otto Plath's death at age 8 profoundly affected Sylvia; poem written amid marital breakdown and shortly before her suicide (February 1963).

Feminist Reading: Landmark text for second-wave feminism—illustrates internalized patriarchy and the need for women to "kill" symbolic fathers for independence.

Literary Devices: Metaphor, simile, alliteration, assonance, hyperbole, anaphora—create visceral impact.

"Daddy" remains a masterpiece of raw emotion and bold metaphor, a final, furious exorcism where Plath slays the patriarch to claim her voice. In declaring "I'm through," she not only buries her father but rejects the entire oppressive framework he represents— a liberating, if tragic, act of self-assertion.