

Sylvia plath's "daddy": a cry for help



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Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" is considered by some to be one of the best examples of confessional poetry ever published. In the poem, Plath compares the horrors of Nazism to the horrors of her own life, all of which are centered on the death of her father. Although autobiographical in nature, "Daddy" gives detailed insight into Sylvia Plath's conflicting emotions by intertwining fact and fiction into an alternate reality through the use of metaphors and symbolism. The poem ultimately reveals the underlying anger and resentment Sylvia Plath feels toward her father for leaving her life so early. Divided by a couple of years of limbo surrounding her father's death, Sylvia Plath's childhood was broken up into two parts: innocence before the death of her father and the harsh reality of life after his death. Until she was eight years old, life was kind to Sylvia. She had a brother two years younger than she, and the family lived near Nauset, Massachusetts. That year tragedy struck the family: Otto Plath, her father and a professor of Zoology and German at Boston University, died from complications of untreated diabetes. Sylvia Plath was never able to fully accept the loss of her father and was conflicted in her feelings about her father for the rest of her life. For almost a year before his death, Otto had been growing increasingly weak but refused to visit a doctor because he feared that the diagnosis would be cancer. It was not until he ran into a dresser one morning and his toe turned black and swelled that he finally went to the hospital. While at the hospital, Otto's ailment was diagnosed as diabetes, and had he taken care of it sooner, it would have been manageable. Aurelia Plath, Sylvia's mother, visited Otto daily while he was recovering. One afternoon after she got home from the hospital, Aurelia received a call informing her that an aneurysm had reached Otto's lung and he had passed away. Sylvia specifically references <https://assignbuster.com/sylvia-plaths-daddy-a-cry-for-help/>

the incident leading to her father's death in stanza two of "Daddy": "Ghastly statue with one grey toe / Big as a Frisco sea!" (9-10). As one specialist put it: "'How could such a brilliant man be so stupid?'" (Stevenson 10). For the next two years after Otto's death, the family continued to live in the same house near the beach. This only made it more difficult for Sylvia to put the death of her father behind her and try to continue living a semi-normal life. One day after her tenth birthday, the Plaths moved inland and started a new chapter in their lives. Plath compares the move inland to actually burying her father: "I was ten when they buried you" (57). In high school, Plath was a very strong student and received a full scholarship to Smith College from novelist Olive Higgins Prouty. Her junior year in college, Plath unsuccessfully attempted suicide with pills and was treated with electroshock therapy, also paid for by Olive Prouty (Napierkowski 65). Plath references this event in the line: "But they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue" (62-63). She subsequently returned to school and ultimately graduated magna cum laude five years after starting. When college ended, Plath decided to travel to England, where she met the English poet Ted Hughes, her future husband. The pair courted for a year before they decided to tie the knot and got married. Happily or not, they were together for seven years and were in the process of getting a divorce when Plath committed suicide. She had found out that Hughes had been cheating on her. The loss of a second man in her life finally pushed Plath over the edge, and she committed suicide in her home in London on February 11, 1963. The emotional wear that the death of Otto Plath had on Sylvia greatly influenced her poem "Daddy" and eventually led to her demise. Plath shows her conflicting emotions toward her father in "Daddy"

by starting the poem praying to see him again. She is trying to get to him in any way, even describing her father as Hitler and saying she is through with him: " In the waters off beautiful Nauset. / I used to pray to recover you. / Ach, du. ... At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do" (13-15, 58-60). In that passage, Plath refers to her childhood home, where all her memories of her father linger. She references her attempted suicide during her junior year in college as a way to possibly see her father again. Throughout the poem Plath uses German words and phrases to bring up references to Hitler and Nazism, especially using the death camps as a way to instill specific emotions: " Not God but a swastika ... / I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look ... / Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (46, 64-65, 80). This same effect can be seen in the passage: " Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" (34-35). Lack of communication also presents itself as an underlying theme of " Daddy;" in the poem, Plath uses the sounds of words to give the reader the feeling of having difficulty communicating and repetition to show the importance of a message (Napierkowski): " 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" (24-28). Without communication, it is impossible to fully know a person. Plath feels that she was unable to fully communicate with her father while he was alive; therefore, she has a very limited memory of what he was really like, and in her anger, she compares him to Hitler and looks at herself as a Jew who has been cut off from the outside world and put into a concentration camp. Along with many of her other works, death is a recurring topic of " Daddy." Death is most likely a recurring theme because it is the one thing that haunted

Sylvia Plath for the majority of her memorable life. Between the death of her father, her own miscarriage, and multiple attempts at suicide, death was the one constant in Plath's life and willingly lends itself as the topic of many of her poems. All critics have their own opinion on the poem "Daddy," but most seem to agree with each other in some way. Most critics believe that "Daddy" was written in a negative view of Otto Plath, but one critic, A. Alvarez, believes that the poem is actually a "love poem": "There is a kind of cooing tenderness in this which complicates the other, more savage note of resentment. It brings in an element of pity, less for herself and her own suffering than for the person who made her suffer. Despite everything, 'Daddy' is a love poem" (Alvarez 383). Although he considered it a "love poem" to her father, Alvarez also states that "she seemed convinced... that the root of her suffering was the death of her father, whom she loved, who abandoned her and who dragged her after him into death. And her father was pure German, pure Aryan, pure anti-Semite" (Alvarez 382). It seems that "Daddy" can be read many different ways by the same person and somehow have different meanings each time it is read. Plath may be declaring her love for her father in "Daddy," but by using so many references to the evils of Hitler and Nazism, she is also throwing it in her father's face that she is her own person and can make her own decisions. Plath is saying that she no longer needs the crutch of the memory of her father to hold her up. "Daddy" is Plath's way of finally coping with her loss and allowing herself to grieve for the first time. Writing from an autobiographical standpoint, "Daddy" reveals the underlying anger and resentment Plath feels toward her father for leaving her life so early. Plath is able to twist her anger and isolation into words and convey her feelings of

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loss from her childhood to the masses. "Daddy" blends the facts from her own life with incidents from the reign of Hitler and pushes the reader to compare life to war. After growing up with a life surrounded by tragedy, it is no surprise that Plath suffered long-term emotional difficulties and felt that she could only be understood through the horrors of war.