

Learning to Appreciate Poetry

Presented by Paul Rogers

Sylvia Plath



Daddy

A few words in advance

Sylvia Plath is one of the most original and powerful poets of the mid-20th century. Born in Boston in 1932 and dying by her own hand in London in 1963, hers was a major talent that had yet not reached its peak. Dogged by depression and several suicide attempts, she died in London after her husband, fellow poet Ted Hughes, had left her for another woman. It was one of the coldest winters on record and it could be that the weather, too, played a part in her decision to end her life.

She and Hughes met at Cambridge where she was a Fulbright scholar. Prodigiously talented, she had excelled at school, despite bouts of mental illness. She had two children with Hughes and was on the cusp of a breakthrough with her poems receiving great critical acclaim, while her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* was both a popular and critical success.

Plath will always be remembered as a talent that was never fully realised. She has become something of a feminist icon. Hughes has often been vilified by her more vocal supporters, but he kept a dignified silence about their relationship because of their children. Only after they had become adults did he release a book of poems called *Birthday Letters*, (1998) in which much of the depth of their feelings for one another was revealed. He died shortly after its publication.

The Poem

<p>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.</p> <p>Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time— Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, Ghastly statue with one gray toe Big as a Frisco seal</p> <p>And a head in the freakish Atlantic Where it pours bean green over blue In the waters off beautiful Nauset. I used to pray to recover you. Ach, du.</p> <p>In the German tongue, in the Polish town Scraped flat by the roller Of wars, wars, wars. But the name of the town is common. My Polack friend</p> <p>Says there are a dozen or two. So I never could tell where you Put your foot, your root, I never could talk to you. The tongue stuck in my jaw.</p>	<p>It stuck in a barb wire snare. Ich, ich, ich, ich, I could hardly speak. I thought every German was you. And the language obscene</p> <p>An engine, an engine Chuffing me off like a Jew. A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen. I began to talk like a Jew. I think I may well be a Jew.</p> <p>The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna Are not very pure or true. With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack I may be a bit of a Jew.</p> <p>I have always been scared of you, With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo. And your neat mustache And your Aryan eye, bright blue. Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—</p> <p>Not God but a swastika So black no sky could squeak through. Every woman adores a Fascist, The boot in the face, the brute Brute heart of a brute like you.</p>	<p>You stand at the blackboard, daddy, In the picture I have of you, A cleft in your chin instead of your foot But no less a devil for that, no not Any less the black man who</p> <p>Bit my pretty red heart in two. 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.</p> <p>But they pulled me out of the sack, And they stuck me together with glue. And then I knew what to do. I made a model of you, A man in black with a Meinkampf look</p> <p>And a love of the rack and the screw. And I said I do, I do. So daddy, I'm finally through. The black telephone's off at the root, The voices just can't worm through.</p>	<p>If I've killed one man, I've killed two— The vampire who said he was you And drank my blood for a year, Seven years, if you want to know. Daddy, you can lie back now.</p> <p>There's a stake in your fat black heart And the villagers never liked you. They are dancing and stamping on you. They always knew it was you. Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.</p>
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Rhyme Scheme & Imagery

<p>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.</p> <p>Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time— Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, Ghastly statue with one gray toe Big as a Frisco seal</p> <p>And a head in the freakish Atlantic Where it pours bean green over blue In the waters off beautiful Nauset. I used to pray to recover you. Ach, du.</p> <p>In the German tongue, in the Polish town Scraped flat by the roller Of wars, wars, wars. But the name of the town is common. My Polack friend</p> <p>Says there are a dozen or two. So I never could tell where you Put your foot, your root, I never could talk to you. The tongue stuck in my jaw.</p>	<p>It stuck in a barb wire snare. Ich, ich, ich, ich,</p> <p>There are 80 lines and 16 stanzas. There is a repetitious use of the vowel sound “oo,” as in do, you, achoo, blue, two, Jew, true, who, glue, screw and through, rather than any formal rhymes.</p> <p>The rhythm (and even some of the words) are in the form of a quasi-nursery rhyme – making the subject matter more horrific.</p> <p>There are recurring metaphors such as black for evil, together with vampire and devil. Even voices on the telephone can’t “worm” through. Similes such as “Big as a Frisco seal” suggest the location of the poet is the US, but then we have “Chuffing me off like a Jew” suggesting the trains that carried Jews to Nazi concentration camps.</p> <p>We believe the father figure is dead because he can “lie back now,” presumably in his tomb, while local people are dancing on his grave.</p> <p>And your neat mustache And your Aryan eye, bright blue. Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—</p> <p>Not God but a swastika So black no sky could squeak through. Every woman adores a Fascist, The boot in the face, the brute Brute heart of a brute like you.</p>	<p>You stand at the blackboard, daddy, In the picture I have of you,</p> <p>So daddy, I’m finally through. The black telephone’s off at the root, The voices just can’t worm through.</p>	<p>If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two— The vampire who said he was you And drank my blood for a year, Seven years, if you want to know. Daddy, you can lie back now.</p> <p>There’s a stake in your fat black heart And the villagers never liked you. They are dancing and stamping on you. They always knew it was you. Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.</p>
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Basic Meaning

<p>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.</p> <p>Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time— Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, Ghastly statue with one gray toe Big as a Frisco seal</p> <p>And a head in the freakish Atlantic Where it pours bean green over blue In the waters off beautiful Nauset. I used to pray to recover you. Ach, du.</p> <p>In the German tongue, in the Polish town Scraped flat by the roller Of wars, wars, wars. But the name of the town is common. My Polack friend</p> <p>Says there are a dozen or two. So I never could tell where you Put your foot, your root, I never could talk to you. The tongue stuck in my jaw.</p>	<p>It stuck in a barb wire snare. Ich, ich, ich, ich, I could hardly speak. I thought every German was you. And the language obscene</p> <p>An engine, an engine Chuffing me off like a Jew.</p> <p>Critics have puzzled over <i>Daddy</i> since it first appeared. We know that Plath's father was a German immigrant and an autocratic figure of her childhood, but since she was born in the 1930s in the US, her father can't have been an active German participant in WW2.</p> <p>More likely, she is imagining what it must be like to be the daughter of a war criminal and how, if ever, you come to terms with that.</p> <p>I may be a bit of a Jew.</p> <p>I have always been scared of you, With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo. And your neat mustache And your Aryan eye, bright blue. Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—</p> <p>Not God but a swastika So black no sky could squeak through. Every woman adores a Fascist, The boot in the face, the brute Brute heart of a brute like you.</p>	<p>You stand at the blackboard, daddy, In the picture I have of you, A cleft in your chin instead of your foot But no less a devil for that, no not Any less the black man who</p> <p>Bit my pretty red heart in two. I was ten when they buried you. u. d do.</p> <p>sack, ith glue.</p> <p>A man in black with a Weimkamp look</p> <p>And a love of the rack and the screw. And I said I do, I do. So daddy, I'm finally through. The black telephone's off at the root, The voices just can't worm through.</p>	<p>If I've killed one man, I've killed two— The vampire who said he was you And drank my blood for a year, Seven years, if you want to know. Daddy, you can lie back now.</p> <p>There's a stake in your fat black heart And the villagers never liked you. They are dancing and stamping on you. They always knew it was you. Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.</p>
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Concluding Remarks

The raw power and emotion in *Daddy* is pretty strong stuff. Some critics have accused Plath of melodrama, even hysteria and have likened her fragile mental state with the extremes of the poem.

I think this completely misses the point. The unnamed narrator is meant to be emotional and angry – that's why she's speaking as she does. We know that the poem itself is not, and couldn't possibly be, autobiographical, so instead we are asked to see inside the mind of a deeply troubled woman whose late father may have been a war criminal.

Poets like Plath, born in the middle or late 1930s, were too young to experience WW2 at first hand, but grew up during it and its aftermath. As a child of two parents who saw service in the same conflict, I can well understand the home environment she experienced at the end of the war and the debate that followed regarding how to deal with its perpetrators. It may not make comfortable reading, but *Daddy* forces us to confront the inhumanity of war and its legacy. I believe it succeeds magnificently.

End of Course Comments

We have come to the end of a poetic journey that began 500 years ago, and ended (for me at least) within living memory. Selecting only ten poems has been very difficult. How could I have omitted Milton, for example, or Coleridge, Shelley and Keats? And what about poets who are writing today?

My only defence is that firstly I needed to keep them to a suitable length (*Daddy* being the longest and hardest to fit onto a single screen). I don't feel I would have done you any favours quoting bits of, say, Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Secondly, in order to do the poems justice (and consequently, not short-changing you) I needed to choose poems with which I am intimately acquainted, but there are huge gaps in my knowledge, nonetheless.

Above all, this course was designed as an introduction to the analysis of poetry – not a full-blown academic programme. I hope you have managed to learn something from it and will be keen to explore things further for yourselves.