

**English & Cultural Studies 1G03: Study Notes**

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## **Sylvia Plath, "Daddy" (1962)**

*Look upon me! I'll show you the life of the mind!*

--Barton Fink (1991)

You will recall that I began the class by inviting everyone to watch and to listen to a "slam" performance of Plath's memorable poem by an American poet and high school senior, Alyssa Paul.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otRo3y-71Oo>



Sylvia Plath in an undated photo.

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was raised by loving parents who had high expectations of her. She grew up in a home steeped in literature, the arts, and science. Her father, a noted entomologist, passed away when

she was eight years old but her mother, who was a teacher, ensured that she had the very best education. From an early age she excelled at writing poetry and fiction. Like all of the other writers on this course, she was keenly observant, her highly sensitive antennae always out, feeling her way through the world as well as thinking carefully and imaginatively about its wonder, its strangeness, its heartbreak. Although her circumstances were very different from Coates's, she too lived in a "terrible and beautiful world," negotiating that outlandish space by plumbing the depths of language, by bringing a writerly intelligence to bear on the nature of things. Although she lived with bouts of severe clinical depression beginning in her late teens, she thrived at university, first attending the prestigious private university, Smith College (current costs for tuition, meals, and residence, \$123,000 CDN/yr), and eventually making her way to the University of Cambridge. It goes without saying that although she lived with mental illness (for which she sought and got treatment), she was a very great deal *more* than her mental illness. Her poems are in some sense an affirmation and a testament of the fact that she was not reducible to her illness.

In England she met and married the already renowned poet, Ted Hughes. They had two children but a very unhappy marriage, mostly because Hughes treated Plath abominably, physically and emotionally abusing her. While raising very young her children—they were but two and one year old at the time of her death—and working part-time, Plath returned to her craft, writing vividly realized and frank poems that captured her refined intelligence, her curiosity about the world, her broad and deep reading, her unusual candidness about her passionate and volatile emotional life, her ability to create personae or speakers that expressed important parts of herself but were *not*, strictly speaking, herself. Plath brimmed with tumultuous desires: not only sexual desire but also the desire to know, the desire to write and to be heard and struggled with on her own terms. To her great dismay, she discovered that she lived in a culture that was hardly prepared to hear and understand a brilliant and desirous young woman. Late 1950s and early 1960s Britain proved to be a profoundly constricting and suffocating place that continued to infantilize smart young women, treating them as lovely creatures to be seen but not heard: creatures with "pretty little hearts" and little else. The devastation of the Second World War had seemed to lay the groundwork for the culture to break out of its old, conventional, and creaky ways . . . but as often happens after wrenching social and political cataclysms, British society instead retreated into conservative values. (I saw this in my own parents: each had survived unimaginable deprivations because of the Second World War, yet not even ten years later, as young parents of the 1950s, they embraced a very conservative values.) As the speaker of "Daddy" says, she's lived "For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breath or Achoo." That is, the speaker or voice that Plath adopts feels so constricted that she feels unable even to breath much less let her body express itself loudly, forcefully, the way that happens when you might sneeze in public. Consider the different ways in which the speaker captures that condition of suffocating restriction, all the different metaphors she puts to work. What does living life this way feel like? It feels like dying and then having your bones glued back together; it feels like being transported by cattle car to the Nazi death-camps; it feels like having your "pretty little heart" bitten in two; it feels like being bombarded by an air-assault; it feels like facing the devil, except this devil doesn't have a cloven hoof, like they do in the movies. The poem is paced by these startling and startlingly different versions of the speaker; and for every different version of the speaker, there is a different version of "Daddy." As you read the poem, track these parallel but separate

avatars. Consider the state of mind of the speaker and the state of a culture that leaves a speaker struggling to find the most apposite metaphor with which to describe herself, and the most apposite metaphor with which to describe what wounds her and women like her. Plath invites us to imagine a woman who has been unjustly *overlooked*: she responds with very energetically, shaping language, using her creative energies, her writerly instincts, to make herself seen and heard, herself in all of her agonies, struggles, desires, laying bare the contortions of her own mind or psyche. When I read this poem I like to recall a memorable moment in the 1991 film, *Barton Fink*, in which a misunderstood character named Charlie Meadows (played perfectly by John Goodman), bellows this line: *Look upon me! I'll show you the life of the mind!*

A note about looking for a cloven hoof and not finding one: you'll recall that I said in class that that image is an adaptation of a scene in Shakespeare's great play, *Othello*, in which Othello, who murders his wife, Desdemona, grasps that Iago, the destructive friend who has manipulated Othello, activating a misogynistic—woman hating—violence that was always inside of him, doesn't have a cloven hoof either. Othello is surprised, or at least says he is: should a devil look like a devil? The lesson here: the worst and most destructive people don't look like horror movie villains. They are often outwardly benign, well-dressed, and well-spoken—they can look like a professor at a blackboard, or a man with a cleft in his chin (a facial feature that is often associated with a certain notion of male beauty, male masculinity), as Plath's speaker says. It's worth recalling that Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi murderer whose trial in Jerusalem in 1961 for crimes against humanity—committed twenty years earlier—is an important backdrop for this poem, told prosecutors that he was a loving father and effective bureaucrat who was only doing his job when he ordered the execution of many hundreds of thousands of Jews, among others. What stunned people in the globally televised courtroom was how utterly ordinary he looked, even though he had committed such monstrous crimes.

Plath experiences this culture as a kind of ambient violence, and "Daddy" is a poem whose speaker responds with a kind of counter-violence, searching for the "right" spell, the right combination of words and sounds, to try *forcefully* to ward off that assault. An infantilizing culture activates ancient fears and losses in her, by which I mean deeply felt emotions (love, hate, attachment, worry) that had shaped her as a girl and that now resurface in disturbing ways. Among the many insights that the poem gives us is the *immortality* of these early emotional experiences, the ways in which they lay a kind of groove in the psyche that remains with us for life. So the poem is not about a speaker who has endured a personal psychological trauma or wounding; it is about a speaker who wrestles with the distressing alignment of a personal trauma *with* the trauma of trying to find her way as an adult in a wreck of a culture that wounds women who possess incandescent imaginations, speak their mind, want to tell their own stories, and have a poet's command of the language. As the poem tells us in its own way, the speaker of "Daddy" lives a life trapped in the land of the fathers, "fathers" here meaning not her actual father but a *paternalistic* culture that at best patronizes a woman like Plath and at worst characterizes them as consumed by their neuroses, as "mad," as speaking "too loudly" or "out of turn." The poem's speaker in effect throws those demeaning and paternalistic stereotypes of the "angry" woman back in the face of the kingdom of the fathers. *I'll show you the life of the mind!*

Plath forms a central part of a small but disproportionately influential group of writers who wrote what was called, in 1959, *confessional poetry*. These poets surfaced in the 1950s and early 1960s.

"Confessional" is a curious term, and doesn't perhaps quite describe what sort of poems these poets were actually writing. Confessional practice has a long history, and conventionally it means a person reveals their sins and errors to someone in authority—a priest or cleric, for example—with the object of being forgiven or absolved or, to use an old-fashioned term, *shriven*. The confessional poets wrote poems that did *not* seek any kind of absolution or forgiveness. If anything, they ask readers to, in sense, "forgive" them if by "forgiveness" we mean learning to tarry with, sit with, the frank descriptions of their tumultuous lives, refusing the temptation too quickly to judge these lives and instead to seek to understand and explore them. These poems, "Daddy" especially, are *provocations* to thought. Plath, like other confessional poets (which included Robert Lowell, her teacher at a course she took at Boston University, where her father was a professor, and her close friend, Anne Sexton), wrote poems that revealed matters that were often thought to be forbidden to talk about in public. These include: living with mental illness and trauma and inexpiable loss; being overcome with a sense of powerlessness, unworthiness, diminishment, littleness, and subjection, feelings you might have quite naturally experienced as a child yet feelings that somehow live on in adulthood; the mixed nature of desires, for example, how we sometimes form powerful bonds with those who hurt us (why, in certain cases, does someone end up "adoring" their oppressor? Why am I angry at the loss of the loved one? Why do rather primitive or infantile ways of living in the world survive and indeed thrive in my adulthood? These are awful and difficult questions that Plath asks you to ask yourself in "Daddy"), or who seem to hurt us; the complexities of family relationships, brimming with mixed feelings; the strange familiarity and insistence of our fantasy life, the sorts of seemingly random things we dream about or imagine or conjure up in our minds throughout the day that can be shockingly at odds with our reality; and all the array of needs and wishes that conflicted with the conservative expectations of the day. For Plath it is especially important to remember that her confessional poems are not a confession *by her and about her*. These poems are not, strictly speaking, autobiographical; she is not speaking about herself, although she sometimes freely borrows certain details from her own life, her own biography, transmuting them into her confessional poems. No, the voice we hear in her poems is a *speaker*, a *persona*, a complex character or voice that she has invented and into which she has invested her considerable creative energies. The other thing to note about her confessional poetry is that it isn't simply the uncontrolled overflow of powerful feelings, i.e. her poems are not a place to "dump" anger, love, fear, desire, loss, amid other emotions; her poems vividly embody these emotions but they do so in carefully crafted and highly patterned creations that fully exploit the powers of the English language. So in the hands of Plath, confessional poetry is a very complex thing.



Studio photograph of Sylvia Plath by Warren Kay Vantine, 1954. Courtesy of College Archives, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts

So, "Daddy" is a ferocious poem that burns white hot, but it is not a mess. Consider the work that it takes to accomplish both—to write in a fiercely passionate and angered voice but to putting the resources of the mother-tongue to very good work, carefully molding the language to suit your purpose. Written in sixteen stanzas, each identically composed of five verses, the poem works in part because Plath plays the speaker's palpable anger and sorrow against the poem's orderliness--a tactic that we will see in other poets on this course, including John Keats, who deliberately adopts the stately formality of the "ode"—an ancient form of poetry, older than the form called the Petrarchan Sonnet, so as to throw into relief the searching restlessness of his speakers. "Daddy" also has its own internal clock, so to speak, timed around the speaker at 10, 20, and 30 years of age. Orderliness and a searching after order competes with unruly feelings in this poem, giving it a kind of tense incandescence. This poem reminds us that poems are not spontaneous eruptions by the poet, but extraordinarily crafted things. Plath crafts a speaker, invents her, and creates a space in which to explore what it means simultaneously to feel throttled by a paternalistic culture and to be at the mercy of one's earliest memories of loss. The speaker is not without certain resemblances to Plath, but it is, finally, *not* Plath.

The loss of the father at an early age triggers a vivid emotional response in the speaker. The child-part of the speaker, which has survived into adulthood unbowed, responds to that loss with sadness, to be sure,

but also with anger and aggression. She loves the father, but precisely *because* she loves him so, and is so deeply attached to him, she hates the father for "abandoning" her, and hates the seemingly unlimited power that he has over her by dying. His death brings out how completely vulnerable she is, how she is powerless in the face of something over which she cannot have any control. She hates him . . . and, with a child-like logic, she conscripts others in the same campaign of loathing. "The villagers never liked you," she says, as the poem comes to its inconclusive conclusion. The speaker so hates the father for dying and for inflicting a wound on her psyche that she wishes she had had the chance to kill him before he died—"You died before I had time," she says, very early in the poem—meaning, metaphorically, she wishes she had as much authority over him as his untimely death has over her. *Better to have murdered him than him murder me:* such is the cruel logic of the child's psyche at work in the speaker that Plath invents for the purposes of this poem. But as Hammad's spoken-word poems remind us, answering violence with violence is intrinsically self-destructive and sterile.

Hating the father for dying, and, in death, for compelling her to experience her own powerlessness, the speaker endures something strange. The loss of the father binds the speaker ever more tightly to him. Or rather, the loss binds her to an unstable and morphing series of *projections* of him. Whoever the father was in real life is now no longer relevant. What remains is the *figure* or, as the speaker says, the "model" or "picture" of the father that she folds in the depths of her psyche, where his memory is at once sheltered, cherished, and loathed. The father becomes "Daddy," the ghost or phantasm that the speaker can, in one breath, denounce as a vampire or a Nazi murderer, and, in the next breath, sigh, longingly, "O You---." The speaker's suicide attempt at twenty years of age is characterized as an attempt to return to her father ("back, back, back to you"), and a kind of gift or supplication to him: "I thought even the bones would do." Aggression and love mix thoroughly together in this poem. Plath had the presence of mind to remind us how, in the strange inner life of the psyche, the two kinds of impulses can and do blend one into the other. Under these complex psychological conditions, "Daddy" is a monstrous simplification of the father, a projection or mournful invention of an injured and aggrieved psyche. So the struggle that the poem enacts for us is a struggle between an adult speaker, her childhood projections that rear up in her, and the culture that few viable resources for a woman like Plath to tell her story. One of the ways in which the poem tells us that it isn't simply about the speaker's private fantasies is that the "daddy" figure moves restlessly between the father, the husband, and then, by implication, all men, i.e., all those who are the soldiers and generals in the land of the father.

The speaker struggles to speak the mother-tongue, her own tongue, in the fatherland. In the poem's world, the land of the fathers is, metaphorically speaking, "Germany," indeed a very particular "Germany," namely the Germany of the Nazi era, the Third Reich. Plath's real father was indeed German, but he loathed Nazism. But in the child-part of the adult speaker's mind, Nazism and the father's German ancestry are mysteriously conflated; it is the way that the speaker transforms the father into the monstrous form of "Daddy." It is interesting to note that Plath's father died in 1940, as Nazi Germany grew into its greatest power. And when Plath wrote the poem, in 1962, Adolph Eichmann, one of the principal architects of the Holocaust, the murder of the European Jews, had just been tried (a trial, set in Jerusalem, that was broadcasted world-wide on television) for crimes against humanity. He was executed for those crimes only a few months before Plath wrote this poem. Nazism's cruelty is the

metaphorical bridge that connects the time of the death of the actual father to the time of the writing of the poem about the projected or mythical "daddy."

The poem brings itself to an end with the image of the adult speaker murdering "daddy," now appearing in the form of a B-movie vampire. She says:

There's a stake in your fat black heart.

Notice how the line brims with single syllable words: "in" "your" "black" "heart." The line slows to the rhythm of these syllables, as if repeating the stabbing motion of that stake. But something else is happening too. At the precise moment in the poem in which we expect that the speaker might finally succeed in striking the fatal blow against her own projections, she is missing in action. We might expect to read "I drove a stake in your fat black heart," but what we get is very different: a stake just appears in that heart, without any substantial sense that the speaker is responsible for sticking it there. The speaker has absented herself, stepped away from her own poem at the moment she might well need to be most present, to feel that she was the one doing the stabbing. There are other moments in the poem in which something similar happens. Where?

The projection she repeatedly names "Daddy" is very hard to kill. He's very hard to locate too, always shape-shifting, always appearing and reappearing in the speaker's mind in new and strange guises: "Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one gray toe," the professor at the blackboard, the Nazi, the vampire, among other avatars. It's not clear where he comes from either. As the speaker notes, "I could never tell where you / Put your foot, your root." And he's impossible to address directly: "I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw." Each of these richly suggestive images and metaphors combine to remind us that "daddy" is a creature who dwells inside the folds of the speaker's memory and psyche, and thus in a location that can't be determined and in a form that can't be pinned down. "Daddy" sees her and addresses her, but she discovers that she is barely in a position to see him and address him, except in the indirect form of the poem itself.



Triple-Face Portrait by Sylvia Plath, Tempera on paper, c. 1950-1951  
Courtesy The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana,  
© Estate of Sylvia Plath

At the end of the poem, the speaker finds it difficult if not impossible even to say "I." That's a problem she encounters elsewhere too. Consider, for example, the verse: "Ich, ich, ich, ich." Here the speaker reverts to German, the language of her father and the language that she associates metaphorically with the land of the fathers, the land of paternalism that thwarts her and strangles her. Translated into English, which is Plath's own language, the verse reads, "I, I, I, I." The fact that she must keep repeating that pronoun, robotically saying it again and again, reminds us that no matter how many times she says "I," no matter how many times she asserts herself against the fathers in the land of the fathers, it will never be enough. The more times she says "I," the more we see that it won't "stick," so to speak. And indeed, here, when she tries to say "I" what actually comes out is something else entirely, namely "Ich." She can only speak of herself through the foreign language of her father and of the land of the fathers. She has been "chartered"—as Blake might say—by that foreign language, overrun and over-written by it, unable to say "I" except in the language of someone else and from somewhere else. She doesn't speak as much as she is spoken *through*. We've seen a bit of this before: recall that last line of Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" poem in which the speaker mouths a cliché about doing one's duty, as if not willing or able to get behind what they are saying, as if compelled to repeat words of advice that the speaker can hardly believe themselves..

The language that overtakes the speaker, namely German, is "obscene." And much worse, it is metaphorically speaking,

An engine, an engine,

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

Being the "daughter" of these coarse projections, and feeling powerless and frightened before them, feels to her like being a Jew transported to the Nazi concentration camps and death camps. (Dachau was a concentration camp, while Auschwitz and Belsen were both concentration camps and death camps, i.e., camps to which the Nazis transported Jews, often by trains, either to be murdered upon arrival or worked to death. All three camps were purpose-built to destroy those who were deemed by the Nazis to be disposable, as living "life unworthy of life" (*Lebensunwertes Leben* is the German phrase that Nazis and indeed Nazi affiliated physicians used to describe those they felt did not deserve to thrive).

The speaker's comparison of her wounded life to the suffering of the murdered Jews of Europe has sometimes elicited alarm. It is an outrageous metaphor, to be sure! How to compare the slaughter of millions to the violence the speaker of the poem endures, strangled by a culture that hardly has a place for her. In the context of the poem, its outrageousness is a sign of the depth of the speaker's derangement, her struggle to pluck from the culture whatever fragments she can to give voice to her fears . . . and to strive to take command of them, to shape them into poetry. There's no question that the comparison here is unseemly, as if the sorrows of a young woman could be spoken of in the same breath as the mass murder of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis. But it's important to recall that it is not Plath who makes this lurid and atrocious comparison, but her beleaguered and angry speaker, driven to a kind of madness, who, after all, is combing the culture for bits and pieces of material to try to make

sense of her strangled life. Plath is careful to note that the speaker is not a Jew transported to a camp but "like a Jew." The simile here reminds that the speaker at some level understands that her sense of herself as a transported Jew is a projection, an invention, a *likeness*. (Remember that similes say that something is like something else, not that something *is* something else, which is what happens in a metaphor. When Blake says that "marriage *is* a hearse" he is saying something different than if he said "marriage is *like* a hearse.) It's telling too to note that the comparison between "daddy" and the Nazis and the speaker and the murdered Jews of Europe is suddenly abandoned in the poem for other comparisons. The comparison to the Nazis is arguably the most lurid one in the poem but it is hardly the only comparison.

"Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," the poem's last verse reads. But the poem effects its own closure in the most ambiguous way, since that verse can mean opposite things. It can mean, "Daddy, I'm through with you" or it can mean "Daddy, I'm finished, you have finished me off." Do you see the difference? Plath has the courage to create a speaker for whom both things can be true at the same time, a speaker trapped between believing for a moment that she is done with her projections of the father while also grasping that the land of the fathers is not yet done with her, not while she still lives and breathes.

One of the many ways that the poem registers the survival of the child's attachment to the father in the adult's life are the childish sounds and words that bubble up to surface:

I have always been scared of you,

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

Notice how the second verse makes "your Luftwaffe" [the German air force under the Nazis] and "your gobbledygoo" equivalent somehow. An adult's reference, the kind of image that might float around in the mind of an adult, is placed side by side with a nonsense word, reminding us of how closely the two worlds exist in the speaker's psyche. Other traces of the child's point of view are audible in the poem's unusual reliance on simple rhyming sounds: you, who, do, Jew, through, *du* [German for "you"]. By some counts, these repeated sounds happen 60 times in the poem, and is an example of a kind of baby-talk or baby-sound that also helps "glue" the poem together. Go back through the poem underlining how many times this sound is repeated. There is a way in which these chiming sounds ("ooo") combine together are unfurled like a spell, as if the magic of saying certain words aloud, sounding them out, might be all the speaker has left to ward off the predations of "daddy" and the land of the fathers. Perhaps an important part of poetry is precisely that: creating and casting a spell of words, and a spell of the sounds of words. The musicality or mellifluousness of words is a central part of what makes poetry *poetry*. Perhaps poetry is a kind of counter-spell that brings you to your senses.

Because Plath completed this poem shortly before her suicide at 30 years of age, it is tempting to view it as autobiographical, indeed as a kind of suicide note. The poem does contain richly suggestive autobiographical references: the disastrous "seven years" of marriage to Ted Hughes (although when she wrote the poem she had been married for six years, and in fact had separated from him); an earlier suicide attempt ("At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you"); even the poem's opening

image of "daddy" with "one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal" remembers a detail from Plath's childhood: her father developed an infection in a toe that led to the hospitalization that marked the decline of his health ending in his death. But these autobiographical references are re-worked in a poem that isn't, in the end, the story of Plath's life but the voice of a persona or speaker that she has invented so as to create a space to express dangerous feelings and thoughts and to pose very difficult questions about love and loss. (One quiet way in which the poem says to us that it can't be reduced to an autobiography is legible when the speaker says her father died when she was "ten," when in actual life he died when she was eight years old. Plath shifts from eight to "ten" because "ten" is so much more symmetrical with the other ages that clock this poem, namely "twenty" and "thirty." A work of art calls for such pleasing symmetries; for the most part, real life isn't symmetrical that way.) If it is an autobiographical poem, it is a poem about what it means to be a resourceful and creative poet trapped in a culture that is impoverished when it comes to providing women with the means to tell their own stories—write their autobiography--on their own terms. Mary Prince surely experienced an analogous problem: how to tell her own story when she had for so long been treated as someone without a story. --So, what we have here is an autobiography written under conditions that thwart autobiography. (The setting here is a bit like Keats's, who deliberately adopts the form of the "ode" knowing that it is an exhausted form.) Plath lives under the aegis of a book of myths--to remember Rich's vivid metaphor from "Diving into the Wreck"--that is missing her own name. She responds with a poem that ensures that we will never forget her name. In what specific ways does this poem give voice to that difficulty, that challenge, that contorted cultural context?

Plath's poem was published only several years after her death. Publishers and readers initially struggled to understand its importance. But just prior to her death she recorded a reading of the poem for the BBC. She did so so that we would remember that very particular voice, so distinctly and irrepressibly her *own* voice, so coolly and calmly in command of her own poem, her own vision, her own imagination, her own tumultuous life, regardless of what came next?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hHjctqSBwM>



Sylvia Plath, "Self-Portrait" (1951), while attending Smith College