

Thematic Analysis of "Daddy"

The title of this poem sets its tone from the outset. "Daddy" typically is a name that a child first calls her parent. It is colloquial, lacking the formality and implied respect of "Father." The poem's first line is insistent, frustrated, and full of repetitive sounds, all of which are sustained to the poem's end. It is what one might expect from an angry child or in an incantation—single-syllable words repeated with a single-minded purpose. The "Achoo" at the stanza's end also is a word that a child might use instead of the word "sneeze." Critics have commented on the poem's nursery-rhyme-like sound, some believing it marvelously appropriate in light of the childhood reflections, others deeming it a disaster in light of the poem's horrific rage. The poem begins:

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.

At the beginning of the second line there is a switch, which can easily be missed because it is so short and easily rushed over due to the quickness of the poem. But this switch is an early indication of the narrator's own shifting perspectives. "You do not do, you do not do / Any more," the author says. The words "Any more," reveal that this narrator's Daddy was, at some point, acceptable to her.

Now we see that, at the age of thirty (in fact, Plath wrote this just before turning thirty), the narrator is rejecting the life her father made for her, wherein she had no chance to enjoy its riches and was barely able to live. She sees him as black and herself as white; on a basic level they can be no further apart. At the same time, the narrator is saying she no longer wants to be poor, barely able to breathe and, seemingly, white. But if she doesn't want to be white, the alternative, then, is to be less white and more like him. As the poem progresses, such conflicts grow fierce. Some critics have questioned whether the intenseness of the daughter's raw anger at her father actually can coexist with her need for him. Freud and many observers of humanity have answered yes.

Already by the second stanza, the narrator rejects her role as victim and asserts violent revenge. “Daddy, I have had to kill you,” she says, and the rather sickeningly controlled, matter-of-fact line sits by itself as a complete sentence on top of the rest of the stanza. Yet the daughter cannot have her way, for, she says, “You died before I had time—.” It is almost as if, even with his death, the father has tricked his daughter. Similarly, the reader is tricked here too. For after reading this first sentence, we assume the daughter has killed her father, since she doesn’t say “I *wanted* to kill you” or “I *wished* I could kill you” but “I *have had* to kill you” (emphasis added). Only in the next line do we find out that she did not literally kill him. Now we see that “I have had to kill you” was partially a wish and partially means that she has had to kill his remaining presence in her life.

There are numerous autobiographical elements in the poem. Plath’s father did die when she was young, from a complication as a result of an operation for a gangrenous toe. The toe is referred to in the poem, as is Nauset, the old name for a town on Cape Cod where her father originally arrived in America from Germany. This section of the poem is one of its few calm spots, both literally and aurally:

In the waters of beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du. [translated from German as “Oh, you.”]

In attempting to “recover” her father, the speaker says she looked for his history in war-torn Europe but could not find his roots. From this it follows that she herself lacks roots. She speaks not just of never having been able to talk to him, but when she did try, she says, her tongue got stuck in her jaw, “a barb wire snare.” This is one of the poem’s first Holocaust illusions. The imagery quickly intensifies:

I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

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.

If the narrator’s father is a horrible German, she surmises that she must be the helpless Jewish victim. (This obscures the fact that if her father is German, she too is part German.) Even the German lan-

guage is obscene and has overwhelming power to the narrator. It takes on the power of an engine. But this is not any engine; it is the engine pulling its train-load of victims to the death camps. As the narration continues, however, even though the daughter says she has always been "scared of *you*," she is less of a victim and more of a chastiser. She starts name-calling, taunting like a girl in a schoolyard who knows she can just run away: "Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—" ("panzer" originating from the German word meaning "armored"). Then she jeers: "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." She mocks him as well as sadistic male/female roles overall and their propaganda.

Next she calls her father a devil, and her personal pain returns as she explains that he "Bit my pretty red heart in two." It could be that his evil is what destroyed her heart, or that the pain of his early death is what destroyed it. The poem returns to the autobiographical elements. The narrator says she was young when her father died, and that at twenty she tried to kill herself to "get back, back, back to you." In light of the anger that comes before this point, as one reads this line one almost anticipates that it will say "get back, back, back *at* you," in which case the act of suicide would become twisted revenge. The repetition and the harsh "ack" sound are still violent and desperate, but this time from the daughter who misses her father and needs to return to him; the violence is directed more at the source that has taken him away. The slowness and quiet of the next line reinforces her sad anguish in trying to be near him, even if it meant her own death—"I thought even the bones would do."

After being brought back from death at twenty and prevented from uniting with her father, the narrator is again viciously angry. Out of her need for a paternal figure and as a result of her unresolved issues because her father died when she was so young, she is now connected to a new man who is just like him. She tells her dead father that her husband is "a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw."

Again she is confronted with a lack of communication, symbolized by the telephone that will not let voices through. The poem is written just after Plath split up with her husband because of another woman. But as much as this man is evil too, she is not a helpless victim here now. While she lived with this "vampire" of a husband

for seven years, she has “killed” him, just as she killed/removed her father. She appears triumphant, as she addresses her father, now that he is exorcised from her life: “There’s a stake in your fat black heart.”

The narrator has removed the horror in her life, and the last line proclaims finality—“Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” It is as if she is overwhelmingly relieved to be done not only with him but with her husband and with the whole Freudian scenario she was forced to play out. At the same time, the final “I’m through” can mean that she’s done in, especially in light of Plath’s suicide a few months later. ❀