A Picture of Otto

SUMMARY

You, Otto, are standing in front of a chalkboard in this photograph (which Sylvia Plath references in her poem "Daddy"). You're a failed church minister. Your religious beliefs were completely sidetracked by your study of honeybees and their communal way of living.

It must be a big surprise to as much of your stern Germanic character as can be evoked through poetry to realize that you're so mixed up with me. As you rise from your coffin, it must be a surprise to be suddenly face to face with me in this dark underground passage, where I've travelled in order to look for your daughter (Sylvia Plath). You'd figured that this dark passage was your family crypt. I never realized how much mysticism and mythology are attached to our guilt over what happened.

Your ghost and my shadow will remain inseparable so long people read Sylvia's poetry. By the end of her life, she practically thought we were the same person. In this photograph of you, you look just like my son.

I get it now—you could never have set Sylvia free. I came way too late, after a whole load of myth-making had already happened, to take your place. This underworld we are in now, my friend, is where Plath always wanted to be. You and I are stuck down here together.

We forgive everything, and have everything in common. I don't see Sylvia standing behind you; she's like Wilfred Owen (a World War I soldier and poet) in his frightening poem "Strange Meeting." Like Owen, Plath lies beneath the conflict, in the crypt.

She sleeps next to her own German—that is, you, Otto—as if she were alone.

THEMES

TRUTH, PERSPECTIVE, AND SUBJECTIVITY

"A Picture of Otto" is Ted Hughes's response to the poetry of his deceased wife Sylvia Plath, who painted a negative portrait of both Hughes and her father, Otto, in her work. In challenging Plath's portrayal of both Otto and himself, Hughes suggests that there is a gap between people's *perceptions* of each other and *reality*—that is, between how people *see or portray each other* and who people really *are*. In other words, the poem implies, there are two sides to every story.

Plath depicted her father as a cold-hearted, authoritarian figure, and Hughes feels her "words" showed him (that is, Hughes himself) in a similar light. "A Picture of Otto" actually begins by explicitly alluding to Plath's famous poem "Daddy," in which Plath likens her father to a Nazi and then lumps Hughes into the comparison.

Plath's poetry, Hughes says, treated the two men as interchangeable, in turn making Otto's "ghost inseparable" from Hughes's "shadow." In fact, Hughes feels that Plath "could hardly tell us [him and Otto] apart" towards the end of her life. This speaks to Hughes's idea that Plath wasn't seeing either of them as they really were. Instead, Hughes argues that she viewed both men through the lens of her own myth-making.

Hughes thus summons Otto onto the page here to offer an *alternative* perspective on Plath's father and, it follows, on himself (given that the two were lumped together in Plath's writing). Hughes descends into the underworld looking for Plath but first meets Otto "face to face in the dark." Instead of angrily confronting him, however, Hughes expresses sympathy for and solidary with Otto, feeling that both men have been presented in a negative, perhaps unfair light—and that this impression of them will remain so long as people read Plath's poetry.

Addressing "Otto" as his "friend," Hughes implies that Plath's perspective is, if not necessarily *wrong*, at least *limited*. Hughes softens the image of Otto, noting the visual similarity between him and Hughes's and Plath's son, and suggests that Otto couldn't help his daughter overcome her demons. He then conflates Plath with her depression, saying that "this underworld"—where he and Otto meet—is "her heart's home." Strongly implied, then, is that Plath's depiction of men in the life was the result her mental illness rather than objective truth.

Hughes then ends by alluding to a poem by WWI soldier Wilfred Owen, which depicts a British soldier coming face to face with the German enemy he'd killed the day before. In Owen's poem, the soldier and the German are united in death, all earthly squabbles rendered meaningless. But in Hughes's poem, death offers no consolation; Plath is alone "in the catacomb" (or crypt), despite being with *her* German (that is, Otto, her father). Depending on the reader's perspective, she is either at peace or forever cut off from her family.

Of course, none of this means that Hughes's perspective is any truer than his wife's! His confrontation of Otto, his doppelgänger, is possibly a means of grappling with his *own* guilt over his wife's suicide—a way of convincing himself that he's not who his wife made him out to be. In any case, the poem reveals the slippery nature of truth, and how difficult it can be to truly know another person—or for that matter, oneself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

You stand there ...
... the honey-bee's commune.

"A Picture of Otto" begins with a direct allusion to another poem: "Daddy," which was written by Hughes's former wife, the famous American poet Sylvia Plath. In her poem, Plath addresses her dead father, Otto, and accuses him of being a cold-hearted, devilish tyrant who brutally oppressed her:

> 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 [...]

In the same poem, Plath declares that she sought out a copy of her father in her husband—Ted Hughes, the author of this poem. Plath compares both men to Nazis and torturers:

> I made a model of you,
> A man in black with a Meinkampf look
> And a love of the rack and the screw.
> And I said I do, I do.

With this one simple allusion, then, Hughes conjures a huge amount of backstory—backstory that he will challenge and complicate throughout the poem.

This is likely to be the picture of Otto to which both poems refer. Hughes sets up the poem with a description of the picture, portraying Otto in his element as a professor and providing some biographical information:

- Otto had initially trained to be a Lutheran minister (Lutheranism is a branch of Protestantism that follows the teachings of 16th-century German Martin Luther), but his interest in biology was far stronger ("manqué" means failed or unfulfilled). He studied and wrote extensively about bees, as the rest of the stanza makes clear.
- This scientific study altered Otto's religious framework—his "idea / Of Heaven and Earth and Hell."
- The enjambment between line 3 and line 4—"radically / Modified"—dramatizes this shift from religion to science.

All of this detail isn't pointless poetic fluff, but rather an attempt to humanize Otto from the start. Hughes is subtly trying to undo Plath's depiction of her father by giving the reader an idea of Otto's life story.

There's also some important symbolism at work here:

- Honey bees behave as a community, one big family in which individuals are in service of a greater goal.
- They also prioritize the protection and well-being of the queen bee, so their mention here might subtly refer to Hughes's implication that Plath's portrayal of the two men lacks context or is somehow unfair (as in, it prioritizes her perspective ahead of theirs).

LINES 5-7

A big shock ...
... with me —

Lines 5 to 7 make another allusion to Sylvia Plath's work—and also comment on this very poem. Hughes, still addressing Otto, notes how the latter must be surprised to find himself "so tangled" up with him (that is, with Hughes) in poetry—both in *this* poem, and in Plath's writing.

Hughes is referring to the fact that Plath often "tangled" her father up with Hughes in her poetry, conflating the two men. Given that Otto died when Plath was only eight, Hughes might be saying it's a "shock" for this imagined version of Otto to be the subject of so much poetry, and to be so closely linked with Hughes.

- The verb "tangled" also implies a kind of wrestle, gesturing towards the idea that, on some level, the two men were locked in struggle in Plath's mind (even if the competition might have been for who was the worse of the two!).

The word "conjured," meanwhile, suggests that what both he and Plath are doing in their poetry—"conjur[ing] Otto—is like a magic trick, bringing someone back from the dead. And note how the sharp, bold alliteration, consonance, and assonance here call attention to the "poetry" of these lines themselves:

> A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone
> As can be conjured into poetry

The strong, hard sounds also hint at the toughness of Otto's character—at that "Prussian backbone" itself. "Prussian" here refers to Otto's German ancestry, and again recalls Plath's poetry (she likens him to a "Fascist" and a Nazi in "Daddy"). "Backbone" is a common metaphor for strength of character, but it's this same strength that becomes a kind of cold-hearted emotional distance in Plath's "Daddy."

And yet, Hughes says, only "so much" of Otto can be conjured

on the page. He thus suggests the limits of poetry—including his own—to capture the full reality of a person.

LINES 8-11

Rising from your ...
... your family vault.

Hughes describes an imagined meeting between himself and Otto Plath, the latter having been disturbed from the sleep of his death. The phrase "[r]ising from your coffin" makes Otto seem like a vampire or monster of sorts, which is in keeping with Sylvia Plath's depiction of her father in her own poetry.

Notice how the enjambment across the stanza break from line 8 to line 9 makes this moment all the more dramatic—it makes the "big shock" even bigger (emphasized, also, by the simple repetition of this phrase):

> Rising from your coffin, a big **shock**
> **To** meet me face to face in the dark adit

In some strange netherworld of the poetic imagination, Otto and Hughes come "face to face" as Hughes explains to Otto that he has "come looking" for his daughter:

- The diacope here ("**face** to **face**") hints at the way in which Plath's poetry—and public imagination—conflates the two men. That is, each man his meeting his doppelgänger—or even, in a sense, meeting *himself*.
- It's possible to read the poem as Hughes not simply confronting Otto on behalf of his daughter, but also to learn more about *himself*.

An"adit," meanwhile, is a kind of tunnel used in mining, perhaps symbolically referencing the way that Hughes digs into Plath's poetic memory for the purposes of this imagined meeting. But the tunnel image also suggests darkness and the inability to find clarity, which is in keeping with the poem's doubts about Plath's depiction of both Otto and Hughes.

Finally, in a somewhat comic moment, the poem suggests that Otto is surprised—he *thought* he was surrounded by the darkness of being dead, but actually he's now in Hughes's imagination. At the same time, the idea that this might also be a "family vault" foreshadows the poem's ending, in which Hughes *does* find Sylvia Plath reunited in death with Otto.

LINES 12-16

I never dreamed, ...
... my son's portrait.

Hughes expresses a sense of solidarity with Otto here. The two men have a shared "guilt" when it comes to Plath. This guilt has taken on "occult" (magical, mystical) properties because of the success of Plath's poetry and because of the mythology surrounding Plath in literary culture:

- Again, Plath presented both men as domineering and cruel in her work. Hughes also infamously left Path for another woman shortly before her death by suicide, leading to a common cultural narrative that blamed Hughes for her death.
- Their "guilt," Hughes argues here, has become something supernatural and mystical—the stuff of myth and legend.

Hughes continues that he and Otto, in the world of Plath's poetry (and in the perceptions she held when she was alive), are virtually indistinguishable. And this conflation of Hughes and Otto will exist for as long a Plath's "words can stir a candle" (line 14)—that is, for as long as there are people who want to read her poetry:

- Hughes thus presents Plath's words as capable of conjuring up long-lasting (and possibly false) myths about both Hughes and her father.
- The "candle" by which this reading is done provides the metaphorical light that *creates* Hughes's shadow—his dark side. Again, then, Hughes is saying that the perception of his relationship with Plath is based on her poetry, which is subjective.
- The assonance and consonance of "daughter," "words," and "stir" creates a sense of movement and force, evoking how Plath's words bring Otto and Hughes to life in the imaginations of her readers. The assonant sounds also link these three words together, tying Plath (Otto's daughter) to her ability to create people—or *versions* of people—through her writing.

Hughes then states plainly that Plath could "hardly tell" him and Otto apart towards the end of her life. Though Hughes seems to reject his comparison with Otto, it does provide the two men with a weird kind of brotherhood. That is, they are unified through Plath's portrayal of them, whether or not it's a fair one.

But Hughes is also keen to *humanize* Otto, perhaps in order to demythologize him (and, it follows, himself). He notices that Otto's face in the picture resembles that of his own son with Plath, Nicholas. The diacope of "portrait" links the two generations of men together, and it's worth noting that the young Nicholas often features as a beacon of hope in Plath's poems.

- The "here" in this line, carved out by caesura on either side, makes the poem feel very tender and immediate. All of this is in service of the attempt to revise and complicate the portrayal of Hughes and Otto in Plath's poems, and to argue that the truth

about what happened between them is more complicated than it's been made to appear.

LINES 17-19

I understand - ...
... her heart's home.

Hughes levels with Otto, who is depicted as the keeper or guardian of Plath in the afterlife:

I understand — you never could have released her.

This line is charged with meaning, which makes more sense when considering Plath's depiction of Otto in "Daddy":

- There and elsewhere, Plath presented her father as a tyrannical and oppressive force in her life, declaring that she'd "lived like a foot" in a "black shoe" for thirty years.
- Plath is implying in her poem that she somehow always was under her father's psychological imprisonment despite, or even partly because of, his death when she was eight.

Depicting Otto as a kind of gatekeeper to Plath's soul also frames the poem as an allusion to the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice:

- In this myth, Orpheus, a celebrated poet and musician, travels to the underworld to try and retrieve his love, Eurydice, who has died after being bitten by a snake.
- Orpheus plays his lyre for Hades, the God of the underworld, who releases Eurydice on the condition that Orpheus not look back at her until they've left the underworld. Unable to hear Eurydice walking behind him, Orpheus grows fearful and turns back just before exiting the underworld—and loses Eurydice forever in the process.

In Hughes's poem, Otto is like Hades in that he's the patriarch of the family, and was an authoritarian figure in Plath's poetry. And Hughes's own poetry brings Otto forward, just as Orpheus's music attracted Hades. Readers who understand the allusion will also understand that Hughes won't be able to bring Plath back from the dead—he won't be able to reach her. Hughes acknowledges this in line 18, saying that he came along a "myth too late" to "replace" Otto:

- This is a complicated and ambiguous line, but might mean that Hughes arrived too late in Plath's life to undo the image she held of her father. Otto was long dead before Hughes met Plath, and so Otto had already been transformed into a mythical figure in Plath's mind (he died when she was only eight).

Plath will thus remain in the "underworld," in the realm metaphorically ruled over by her father (again, mapped to Hades in the allusion here). The underworld, Hughes adds, is "her heart's home." In other words, Plath is more comfortable in the underworld than in the world of the living. The alliteration in "her heart's home" indicates a kind of perfect match between Plath's "heart" and this "home."

Finally, Hughes says this while addressing Otto as "my friend," implying a solidarity between the two men based on their shared understanding of Plath. (Readers may question, however, if this understanding is any truer or more objective than Plath's understanding of her father and husband.)

LINES 20-21

Inseparable, here we ...
... in common —

Given that Hughes can't retrieve Plath, he declares that all these must "remain" in this underworld, tied together forever. There's an air of resignation in these lines, suggesting that there is nothing that can be done about what happened during Otto's, Plath's, or Hughes's earthly lives:

- For one thing, it's all in the past. Two out of the three of these people are dead (and Hughes died soon after publication).
- What's more, Otto and Hughes are inseparable because of the power of Plath's poetry. Her subjective take on her life—and the characters within it—has taken on the role of myth, thus keeping Otto and Hughes "tangled" together in readers' minds. The two men are "inseparable," and they "must" remain inseparable—they have no choice.

But though what's done is undoubtedly done, the poem still seeks to add nuance to the stories surrounding Plath, Otto, and Hughes. In line 21, the tone expresses solidarity, understanding, and forgiveness, in what seems like a deliberate contrast with Plath's more charged and disdainful picture of Otto—or an Otto-like figure—in her poem "Daddy."

LINES 22-25

Not that I ...
... as if alone.

The poem continues its allusion to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in its final lines:

- Remember that Hughes is akin to Orpheus here, the husband travelling to the underworld to retrieve his wife; Plath is Eurydice, Orpheus's dead wife; and Otto is Hades, the god of the underworld.

- In the myth, as they exit the underworld Eurydice walks behind Orpheus, who turns around at the last moment to look back at Eurydice. Hughes suggests this turning back by saying that Plath is not "behind" Otto (perhaps, in a sense, actually conflating Otto with *Orpheus*, reinforcing the connection between Otto and Hughes).
- The fact that Plath *isn't* there reveals that she was never actually released from the underworld, from death—which is in keeping with Hughes's prior line that the trio must remain in "[t]his underworld." She was never walking like Eurydice back towards life.

Hughes then mixes in yet another allusion, this time to Wilfred Owen's poem, "Strange Meeting" (referred to as Owen's "dark poem" in line 23):

- In "Strange Meeting," a British WWI soldier travels to Hell, where he meets an enemy German he'd killed. The two are "friends" in death, and the enemy soldier tells the poem's speaker to let them both "sleep now"—to let things go, and put the wordly war behind them.
- The poem implies that people at war with one another have far more in common than they realize, which supports *this* poem's argument that there are—at least—two sides to every story.

Plath isn't behind Otto like Eurydice, but instead lies "under the battle" like Owen's soldier:

- This "battle" might refer to the confrontation between Hughes and Otto, or to the dueling narratives surrounding her life and relationship with Hughes in the world of the living. Either way, she's irretrievable and out of reach.
- She rests in death in the "catacomb" (a burial place—recalling that "family vault" Hughes mentioned earlier in the poem). And while Owen's speaker sleeps eternally with "his German," Plath has her German too: Otto.

The last three words are then especially ambiguous: Plath sleeps "as if alone." Plath *seems* like she's totally alone—cut off from both Hughes and Otto. At the same time, she actually has Otto for company (in the sense of being buried in the same tomb). This seems to refer to twin impulses found in Plath's poetry: an obsession with her father, and a desire to be rid of that same obsession.

There are some notable sound effects in these closing lines. The assonance and near internal-rhyme of "Owen" and "poem" links the two together, the poet with his work. Then, in line 24, the hard /t/ and /c/ consonance in "battle" and "catacomb" give the impression that there is a terrible noise (like a war) going on overhead in the real world, but it's so far away that it's reduced almost to inaudibility. This gives the ending a peaceful tone, more tied to the fact that Hughes's and Plath's relationship belongs to the past than any genuine sense of resolution. The more muted consonance in the last line gives the reader a sense of this tense peace:

> Sleeping with his German as if alone.

These are softer sounds that make the poem feel almost as if it is fading away. Everything is at rest, if not at peace. The poem perhaps also implies that Plath's figure is now more comfortable because she has what she wanted—her own death.

SYMBOLS

TUNNELS

The poem is set in a vaguely mythological underworld and makes multiple references to tunnels and underground passages. Aside from being a key part of the poem's literal setting, these also symbolically represent the murky nature of truth.

Tunnels are dark places, often maze-like, in which it's easy to get lost. The fact that Hughes meets Otto in such a dark, windy place speaks to the lack of clear, simple truth when it comes to who either man really is/was. The relationships between Otto and his daughter, and subsequently between Hughes and Sylvia Plath, resist clear-cut objectivity, this symbolism implies; instead, each angle on the story is limited by the perspective from which it is told, just as tunnels offer only limited, pre-defined possibilities for the direction travel.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-11:** "a big shock / To meet me face to face in the dark adit / Where I have come looking for your daughter. / You had assumed this tunnel your family vault."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to bring its images to life on the page. There isn't a ton of alliteration here, however, which makes the moments when it *does* pop up all the more memorable.

In line 2, for example, the shared /m/ of "Minister manqué" adds a little poetic flourish as Hughes describes the image of Otto as a lapsed Lutheran minister. The alliteration at the start of the second stanza is even more striking. Note the loud, percussive /b/, /p/, and /c/ sounds:

> A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone
> As can be conjured into poetry

The sharp sounds here add to the portrayal of Otto as a stern and proud individual (Plath's own poetry criticizes her father for this aspect of his personality). These sounds, in other words, bring that "Prussian backbone" to vivid life. (Also note that the consonance of this passage adds to the effect, via the hissing and sharpness of "shock," "Prussian," and "backbone.")

Of course, Hughes implies throughout that this isn't *really* Otto, and is instead a *version* of him that has been conjured into being on the page, a kind of phantom made out of poetry. The alliteration here thus subtly reminds readers that they're reading a *poetic* description of Otto, encountering the mythical idea of the man that Plath created in her work.

The other main example of alliteration comes in line 19, in which Hughes says to Otto:

> This underworld, my friend, is her heart's home.

This "her" refers to Sylvia Plath. The suggestion here is that the underworld—the kingdom of death—is where Plath longed to be in life. That alliteration suggests a melding between Plath herself and death.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Minister manqué"
- **Line 5:** "big," "Prussian," "backbone"
- **Line 6:** "can," "conjured," "poetry"
- **Line 14:** "can," "candle"
- **Line 19:** "her heart's home"

ALLUSION

The whole poem is an allusion in the sense that it responds to the cultural mythos surrounding Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath's relationship. Hughes, here, is very aware here of how he and Otto are depicted in Plath's poems, and what some people think about his "guilt" regarding her death.

Specific allusions ground this broader conversation. The poem explicitly alludes to Plath's famous poem "Daddy" in line 1, for example, which also references the same "blackboard" photograph. Plath writes:

> You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
> In the picture I have of you,

In sending himself down to the underworld, Hughes also draws on the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice:

- There have been many variations to the myth throughout history, but the basic story involves Orpheus, a great poet and musician, traveling down to the underworld to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, who has been killed by a snake bite.
- Orpheus plays his lyre for Hades, the god of the underworld, who then says that Orpheus can take Eurydice back to the land of the living. There's a catch, though: until they've left the underworld together, Orpheus must not turn around to make sure that Eurydice is still behind him. Unable to hear her footsteps, Orpheus eventually grows anxious and does just that—thus losing Eurydice for good.

It's easy to see how this maps onto Hughes's poem:

- Hughes is Orpheus, the artist traveling to the underworld "looking for" Plath, who here stands in for Eurydice.
- Otto is Hades—the patriarch of the family, who decides whether to "release[]" Plath.
- And in the end, Plath stays right where she is: "[s]leeping" in death.

In alluding to this ancient tale, Hughes does some myth-making of his own—despite having implicitly challenged the "myth" that Plath herself created surrounding himself and her father. But there are *differences* between the myth and the story of Hughes and Plath, too:

- Plath, unlike Eurydice, *wants* to stay in the underworld—it's "her heart's home" (line 9).
- And Otto, though he is depicted as an authoritarian figure in Plath's "Daddy," does not seem anything like the ruler of the underworld. In fact, he's completely silent, with Hughes expressing sympathy for him. He couldn't let his daughter go even if he wanted to, Hughes argues.

At the end of the poem, Hughes entwines this mythological allusion with a reference to a work by the WWI soldier and poet Wilfred Owen, titled "Strange Meeting":

- In this poem, a British soldier finds himself in "Hell," face to face with a Germany enemy that he'd killed.
- This dead German calls the British soldier "friend," however, with the implication being that the divisions of life have no meaning in death. The German soldier then asks the speaker to let them "sleep."

This is what Hughes is talking about when he mentions seeing Plath "like Owen [...] under the battle," a phrase that portrays life back on the surface—the events that took place during Hughes's and Plath's time together—as a kind of distant war. Yet, in Owen's poem, there's a strange kind of resolution

between the speaker and "his German" built on a shared understanding of war as absurd and futile. But Plath—whose "German" is her father—is silent and asleep, denying the poem resolution or closure.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You stand there at the blackboard"
- **Lines 5-7:** "A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone / As can be conjured into poetry / To find yourself so tangled with me —"
- **Line 10:** "Where I have come looking for your daughter."
- **Line 14:** "As long as your daughter's words can stir a candle."
- **Lines 17-19:** "I understand - you never could have released her. / I was a whole myth too late to replace you. / This underworld, my friend, is her heart's home."
- **Lines 22-25:** "Not that I see her behind you, where I face you, / But like Owen, after his dark poem, / Under the battle, in the catacomb, / Sleeping with his German as if alone."

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance sparingly, and the device works much like alliteration and consonance. Assonance may make certain images more vivid, link words/concepts together, or simply add a sense of rhythm and music to the poem.

One interesting moment of assonance comes in line 13. Addressing Otto, Hughes explains how his "shadow" and the dead man's "ghost" are tangled together. That long /o/ sound links the two men on the page. And this entanglement, Hughes continues, will last as long as people read Sylvia Plath's poetry. As long as Otto's "daughter's words can stir a candle"—that is, attract readers—then the myth of Hughes-as-Otto will live on. The assonance and consonance here adds intensity and emphasis to this moment.

While the poem has no steady rhyme scheme, assonance and consonance again combine towards the poem's final moments to create end rhyme: "poem," "catacomb," and "alone" all rhyme or mostly rhyme. This is like a musical crescendo, signaling that the poem has reached its climactic conclusion.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "coffin," "shock"
- **Line 9:** "meet me"
- **Line 13:** "ghost," "shadow"
- **Line 14:** "long," "daughter's ," "words," "stir"
- **Line 15:** "hardly," "apart"
- **Line 18:** "late," "replace"
- **Line 23:** "poem"
- **Line 24:** "battle," "catacomb"
- **Line 25:** "alone"

APOSTROPHE

The entire poem, arguably, is one long example of apostrophe! Through this device, Hughes addresses Sylvia Plath's father, Otto, who died when Plath was eight years old. Hughes, of course, didn't meet Otto in real life, and so the poem becomes a chance for him to respond to Plath's poetic depiction of him (and of Hughes, too). Apostrophe, in other words, allows Hughes to *speak* to someone who can't answer back.

- Of course, given that a fictionalized Otto seems to *actually be present* in the poem, it's debatable whether this really counts as true apostrophe.
- Either way, it's important to explore how Hughes uses poetry to speak to someone he was never able to address in reality.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" also relies heavily on apostrophe as it addresses Otto, perhaps explaining why Hughes uses the same tactic here. But Hughes's poem strives to express tenderness and solidarity towards Otto, rather than to portray him as a mean, authoritarian figure. Addressing Otto directly allows Hughes to comment on the way in which Plath's poetry "tangled" the two men up together, and, in turn, to humanize Otto. By treating Otto in this way, Hughes subtly undermines Plath's poetic vision of her father and, ultimately, of himself.

Overall, the apostrophe creates a sense of intimacy throughout the poem. It's almost like Hughes and Otto are old friends who are finally reunited, now given the chance to reflect on the tumultuous events of life on earth. Hughes likens Otto to his son, and addresses him as "my friend." This makes the poem much more emotional (think how different it would be if Hughes spoke of Otto in the third person). It's noticeable, too, that in the poem's imaginary world, Hughes *doesn't* address Sylvia Plath using apostrophe. She remains silent, reminding the reader that everything that *she* has to say about both men has already been said.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-25

CAESURA

At certain moments in the poem, caesurae add to the poem's meaning. Take line 8, for example:

> Rising from your coffin, a big shock

The comma creates a pause in the line, which then makes "a big shock" feel more like, well, a big shock! It's an almost cartoonish moment in which Otto is conjured into life on the page.

Sometimes caesura isolates a single word, lending it emphasis. This happens in line 16:

Your portrait, here, could be my son's portrait.

In pausing before and after the word "here," Hughes transforms this scene into a tender moment and reminds the reader that he's reflecting on a photograph of Otto. It suggests that Hughes has the photo in hand.

In addition to tenderness, caesura can suggest *tentativeness*. At the end of the poem (lines 22-25), notice how caesurae create a sense of hesitation and caution:

Not that I see her behind you, where I face you,
But like Owen, after his dark poem,
Under the battle, in the catacomb,

The commas above slow the poem's pace, as though Hughes is slowly zooming in on the sleeping Plath. The commas also set up the last line ("Sleeping with his German as if alone"), making it feel more significant and self-assured by having no caesurae at all.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "manqué. Your"
- **Line 8:** "coffin, a"
- **Line 12:** "dreamed, how"
- **Line 16:** "portrait, here, could"
- **Line 17:** "understand - you"
- **Line 19:** "underworld, my," "friend, is"
- **Line 20:** "Inseparable, here"
- **Line 22:** "you, where"
- **Line 23:** "Owen, after"
- **Line 24:** "battle, in"

CONSONANCE

"A Picture of Otto" is pretty light on consonance, but when it does appear, it works just like alliteration—drawing readers' attention to certain moments and bringing the poem's images to life. Take line 5, which, as previously noted in this guide, uses sharp consonance to bring the image of the stern Otto into focus:

A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone

The consonance of the poem's final lines is also striking, combining with assonance to add intensity to the image of Plath in her grave:

Under the battle, in the catacomb,
Sleeping with his German as if alone.

The spiky sounds of "battle" and "catacomb" evoke the distant patter of war, while the liquid /l/ and round /o/ sounds give the poem a sense of queasy, unresolved peacefulness in its final moments.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Minister manqué"
- **Line 5:** "big," "shock," "Prussian," "backbone"
- **Line 6:** "can," "conjured," "poetry"
- **Line 9:** "meet me," "dark adit"
- **Line 11:** "tunnel," "family vault"
- **Line 12:** "occult," "guilt"
- **Line 13:** "ghost inseparable"
- **Line 14:** "daughter's words," "can," "candle"
- **Line 15:** "could hardly"
- **Line 19:** "her heart's home"
- **Line 21:** "forgiven," " and in common"
- **Line 24:** "battle," "catacomb"
- **Line 25:** "Sleeping," "German," "alone"

DIACOPE

Hughes uses diacope in line 9 as he describes Otto rising from his coffin:

To meet me face to face in the dark adit

Here, the repetition dramatizes the imagined meeting between these two men in the underworld. Two men—two faces—are set side by side. Placing these identical words so closely together also reflects the fact that Plath conflated Otto and Hughes in her work; repeating the word "face" nods to the idea that Hughes is confronting not just Otto, but a version of himself.

Diacope pops up again in line 16:

Your portrait, here, could be my son's portrait.

Here, Hughes humanizes Otto by comparing him to Hughes own son. Plath's poem "Daddy" likens Otto to a Nazi, so here Hughes is trying to soften Otto's—and, in turn, his own—image. Nicholas Plath was often a beacon of light in his mother's work. Hughes is thus implying that Plath's oppressor looks like just her savior, thus undercutting her perception of both.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "face to face"
- **Line 16:** "portrait," "portrait"

ENJAMBMENT

"A Picture of Otto" uses enjambment throughout its first half, which reflects the mysterious nature of Hughes's journey into the underworld. This enjambment pulls readers down the page, much like Hughes seems to be pulled into the underworld in his

quest to confront the "truth" about himself and Otto Plath.

Given the slippery nature of such truth in the poem, it makes sense that the poem, on a formal level, is winding and unpredictable as Hughes undertakes this journey. Enjambment also creates a sense of anticipation, adding tension to the poem; readers don't know what's around the next corner.

In the first stanza, enjambment also subtly captures a kind of restlessness that echoes the biographical information offered about Otto's life. Otto switched from training to be a minister in the Lutheran church, and it's as though the lines here are also trying to find their place in the world. The break between "radically" and "modified" across lines 3 and 4 is, appropriately enough, a pretty radical place to break the line (between an adverb and its corresponding verb):

> Of Heaven and Earth and Hell radically
> Modified by the honey-bee's commune.

Much of the poem is end-stopped, especially in its second half. This end-stopping feels all the more emphatic for its *contrast* with the poem's earlier enjambment. It's as though, after actually confronting Otto, Hughes becomes more sure of himself and finds his footing, a truth to hold onto; the end-stops add a sense of authority to Hughes's take on Otto and his daughter.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Lutheran / Minister"
- **Lines 2-3:** "idea / Of"
- **Lines 3-4:** "radically / Modified"
- **Lines 5-6:** "backbone / As"
- **Lines 6-7:** "poetry / To"
- **Lines 8-9:** "shock / To"
- **Lines 9-10:** "adit / Where"
- **Lines 13-14:** "shadow / As"

METAPHOR

Arguably, the poem is metaphorical from its second stanza ("A big shock") right to the end. While the first stanza focuses on the picture mentioned in the title, and offers biographical information about Otto, the rest of the poem is one long metaphorical journey into the underworld in order to find both Otto and Plath.

But there are more specific metaphors dotted throughout the poem. The first appears in lines 5-6. Here, Hughes refers to Otto's "Prussian backbone"—as much of it as "can be conjured" into being through poetry:

- This "Prussian backbone" refers to the fact that Otto was German and, as portrayed in Plath's work, very stern and strict (stereotypically German traits).
- Hughes intimates here that Plath didn't capture the whole of Otto in her work; it's only possible to "conjure"—to bring to life, to bring forth—*some* of a person in poetry.
- The metaphorical language here speaks to Hughes's point that people's perceptions of each other are often subjective, and that the image of himself and Otto in Plath's work was limited or incomplete.

Later in the poem, Hughes puts forward his theory as to why Otto is a ghost and he is a shadow—and why they are forever inseparable. Plath's words, as long as they are read, create a myth out of the two men, joining them together as these dark, supernatural figures. The reading process is described metaphorically as the way in which "words can stir a candle." Plath's poetry, in other words, is the light that casts Hughes's shadow; her words are what *create* the impression that he treated her badly.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone / As can be conjured into poetry"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Your ghost inseparable from my shadow / As long as your daughter's words can stir a candle."

VOCABULARY

Lutheran Minister Manqué (Lines 1-2) - This is a reference to the fact that Otto Plath trained to be a minister in the Lutheran church. Lutherans follow the teachings of 16th-century German reformist Martin Luther. "Manqué" is an adjective that means having failed to become something, in this case a minister! Otto chose to be a scientist/teacher instead.

The Honey-Bee's Commune (Line 4) - This is a reference to the fact that Otto Plath became an entomologist and specializing in bees.

Prussian (Line 5) - A reference to Otto Plath's background; Prussia was a prominent German state until 1918.

Adit (Line 9) - A tunnel or passageway, as in those used for mining.

Your Daughter (Line 10) - Sylvia Plath.

Occult (Line 12) - Supernatural; related to witchcraft and mysticism.

Stir (Line 14) - Move, disturb, agitate. Hughes is referring to people continuing to read Sylvia Plath's poetry.

Your Portrait (Line 16) - A reference to a photograph of Otto Plath, which Sylvia Plath also mentions in her poem "Daddy."

Owen (Line 23) - Wilfred Owen, a famous British WWI poet and soldier.

Catacomb (Line 24) - An underground chamber and/or tunnel, typically used as a place for burial.

German (Line 25) - A reference to Wilfred Owen's poem "Strange Meeting," in which a British WWI soldier finds himself in "Hell" and meets the German soldier he'd killed the day before. After making a speech, the German soldier suggests they both "sleep." Plath's German, in this poem, is her father.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Picture of Otto" is made up of six quatrains (six-line stanzas) followed by a final line all on its own. That lonely final line evokes Plath's separation from Otto and Hughes.

More broadly, readers might consider the poem a work of ekphrasis—a piece of writing responding to visual stimulus:

- While ekphrasis *tends* to respond to artwork, it's also possible to write ekphrasis about a photograph.
- Hughes's poem does this, but only really in the opening line—"You stand there at the blackboard"—and in line 16, in which he compares Otto's face to his son's. The photograph is more of a launch-pad for Hughes's exploration of his subject, a way into a discussion of the mythology surrounding him and Otto (as constructed by Plath's poetry in poems like "Daddy").

A classic descent into-the-underworld work of literature is also technically known as *katabasis*:

- The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, to which this poem alludes, is a quintessential example of the form.
- Here, Hughes is a mythical traveler from the land of the living, who visits the underworld to find his wife (just as Orpheus does).
- Of course, this story *doesn't* conclude with the neatness of a myth, with everything left unresolved. When Hughes does find Plath, she is depicted in that single-line stanza as "sleeping"—both there and not there, both present and removed. This makes the ending uneasy, peaceful but also unsettling and tense.

METER

"A Picture of Otto" is written in free verse, with no steady meter. This makes the poem feel dynamic and responsive, as though the reader is witnessing this conversation in real-time. Hughes addresses Otto's ghost in the present-tense, so it makes sense that the language isn't overly formal or constrained by the demands of meter.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no rhyme scheme in the poem. The lack of a rhyme scheme makes the poem feel less formal and rigid, which is in keeping with its tone. That is, Hughes expresses sympathy for Otto, and talks slowly but freely as if they are having a heart to heart.

That said, the poem does turn to rhyme in a few moments towards its end:

> But like Owen, after his dark **poem**,
> Under the battle, in the **catacomb**,
> Sleeping with his German as if **alone**.

The rhyme/slant rhyme here adds a sense of building music and closure to the poem's final moments.

SPEAKER

The speaker is the poet himself, Ted Hughes, or at least a literary version of Hughes. And the poem would make little sense to readers without its biographical context!

Here, Hughes tries to address and complicate the mythology surrounding himself, Sylvia Plath, and Plath's father, Otto. As the poem's speaker, Hughes has misgivings about the way that Plath's poetry presented the two men, turning them into an inseparable "ghost" (Otto) and a "shadow."

But Hughes's criticism of Plath and her poetry remains fairly subtle, with Hughes primarily making his case by humanizing Otto—expressing sympathy for, and solidarity with, a man he never actually met. He addresses Otto familiarly (calling "my friend" in line 19, for example), and points out the visual similarities between Otto and Nicholas, Hughes's son with Sylvia Plath. This is a far cry from the comparisons between Otto and Nazism made by Plath in her poem "Daddy."

Hughes also brings his *own* mythological framework to his and Plath's story. In this poem, he takes on the role of the ancient Greek character Orpheus, who journeys to the underworld to retrieve his dead wife, Eurydice (and ultimately fails). This subtly casts Hughes as a more heroic figure (Orpheus was also, not coincidentally, a great poet!).

Though the poem offers no real comforting sense of resolution, Hughes does seem to express an attitude of resignation and/or acceptance. On the one hand, he wants to confront and complicate the (supposed) myth that Plath created in her poetry, while on the other he feels that "everything [is] forgiven and in common[.]" That is, there is no real use trying to change the past. All this speaks to the fact that there is no single, definitive account of Plath, Otto, and Hughes, only subjective perspectives.

SETTING

The poem takes place in the underworld—more specifically in a "dark adit," or tunnel, where Sylvia Plath and her father Otto are buried. Retracing the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Hughes descends to the land of the dead ostensibly to look for his lost wife (although his *real* intention, it seems, is to confront his doppelgänger, Otto, and to tell another side of the story regarding his history with Plath). The underworld is a murky setting, the darkness of which reflects the difficulty of uncovering the full truth in the poem.

In another sense, the setting of the poem is Hughes's own imagination as he responds to a literal picture of Otto Plath (the same picture referenced in Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy"). Poetry itself, here, becomes a kind of supernatural space in which myths and narratives are made—an arena in which vestiges of people long gone can be "conjured" (line 6).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ted Hughes published "A Picture of Otto" in *Birthday Letters*, his final collection. The book came out in 1998, shortly before Hughes's death, and focuses on his relationship with his former wife Sylvia Plath, the famous American poet who died by suicide in 1963. Hughes remained largely silent for much of his life when it came to Plath, but *Birthday Letters* tells the story from his perspective, starting with their first meeting and ending with a contemplation of her death.

Birthday Letters caused a sensation upon publication, reflective of the divide between pro-Hughes and pro-Plath readers. Hughes wrote the collection over a period of 25 years or so and revised the poems extensively. He knew they were a departure from his other work because of their autobiographical content, calling them "so raw, so vulnerable, so unprocessed, so naive, so self-exposing and unguarded." The poems were clearly intended to bring Hughes a sense of closure, if not necessarily for his readers: "I published it purely to get it off my chest and I'm indifferent to its fate," he once said.

"A Picture of Otto" is set apart from most of *Birthday Letters* in being addressed not to Plath but to her father, Otto. Otto died when Plath was only eight, but his death cast a long shadow over his daughter's life and poetry. "A Picture of Otto" is also in part a response to Plath's famous poem, "Daddy," in which Plath depicts her father as an authoritarian, cold-hearted figure and also equates him with Hughes. While Plath portrays Otto as a tyrant, Hughes seeks to humanize him (and thus, in turn, to humanize himself, given that the men were so "tangled" together in Plath's poetry). Hughes never actually met Otto; everything he knew about the latter man came through his relationship with Plath.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath first met in 1956 in Cambridge, England. Plath was in England on a grant and had wanted to meet Hughes after reading his poetry. Upon their marriage, they became one of the most high-profile literary couples of the 20th century. And initially, their marriage appeared happy and creatively fruitful. Together they had two children, Frieda and Nicholas.

In 1962, Hughes had an affair. Plath was already struggling with mental illness, and the subsequent break-up of the marriage caused her great psychological pain and trauma. She died by suicide in 1963; Hughes was devastated, writing to a friend that the rest of his life was now "posthumous."

But with the end of Plath's life came the beginning of decades of speculation about Hughes's indirect responsibility for her death. Many Plath readers blamed Hughes for her suicide; some of his readings were even disrupted by shouts of "murderer," and one 1970s visit to Australia found a crowd waiting in protest. Hughes's character was further tainted by accusations that he, in acting as Plath's literary executor, deliberately took out negative references to himself in Plath's collection, *Ariel*, which includes her most famous poems. Hughes remained mostly silent on the subject until the publication of *Birthday Letters*.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Stronger Than Death" — Watch a BBC program exploring Hughes's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFdOqovQduE)
- An Introduction to Birthday Letters — A short article exploring the historical context of the collection in which this poem appears. (https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-birthday-letters)
- Hughes's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Hughes via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)
- Hughes and Plath — Learn more about the "most notorious, politicized and doomed literary couple in history." (https://poetryschool.com/theblog/love-suicide-sylvia-plath-ted-hughes/)
- Sylvia Plath's Biography — Learn more about Sylvia Plath herself. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- Bayonet Charge

- Cat and Mouse
- Hawk Roosting
- Roe-Deer
- Snowdrop
- Telegraph Wires
- The Jaguar
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

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