Stabat Mater

SUMMARY

The speaker's mother used to call his father "Mr. Hunt" during the early years of their marriage, something the speaker discovered after finding an inscription his mother had left his father in a book. She'd addressed the note "To dear. Mr. Hunt" and signed it "from his loving wife."

His mother was self-conscious about this when the speaker brought it up. She explained that she'd struggled to call the speaker's father anything else when they first got together, given that he was older than her own father and she was intimidated by him.

These days, the speaker continues, his mother still seems girlish, but in a new way, as she calls his father all sorts of names. She looks after him as he navigates his old age, now and then giving her son a knowing look as though they were just playing around.

The speaker will have to learn from his mother's example and know when to walk away, understanding that he can't ever go back.

THEMES

TIME, AGING, AND RELATIONSHIPS

"Stabat Mater" illustrates how time alters family dynamics. The speaker describes how his father, who is decades older than his mother, shifts from being an imposing figure to a vulnerable old man; how his mother, once shy and timid, takes charge of the household; and how the speaker himself confronts the need to accept the challenges of adulthood. Time's passage is inevitable, the poem implies, and aging can drastically change the way people relate to each other.

At the beginning of their marriage, the speaker's father held a kind of authority over his wife because of their vast age gap. The speaker's mother used to call his father "Mr. Hunt"—an almost ridiculously stiff, formal form address for her own husband. It's not necessarily the case that she didn't care for her husband early on in their relationship; on the contrary, she referred to herself as "his loving wife," suggesting that she felt at least some tenderness toward him even if he intimidated her. The issue was that he was older than her own father, making it "hard" to "call him any other name." His age made her feel "so small," suggesting that there was a kind of parent-child dynamic between them.

But as both parents got older, their dynamic essentially flipped. The speaker's father became elderly and frail, and his mother began to take care of *him*. Now, she guides the speaker's father "as he roams old age." In other words, she shepherds him through the challenges of getting older and transitioning into a new, less independent phase of life.

Instead of calling him "Mr. Hunt," she now addresses him with "every other sort of name," sometimes turning playfully to her son "as if it were a game." It's not clear what these names are—perhaps they're gently chiding insults, perhaps they're terms of affection (like "dear"), or, most likely, a combination of both. The variety of "names" reflects the mother's increased boldness and the dramatic shift in their marriage as her husband grows more dependent and, indeed, childlike.

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker reflects on what he can learn from his parents' experience. He understands that a moment will come when he, too, will have to "learn" the same "game" that his mother now plays. This might mean that once he "stand[s] up straight," or accepts the reality of adulthood, he will need to learn to bear his own suffering with strength. More specifically, this line might mean that he'll need to learn to deal with the pain of watching those he loves inevitably grow old, knowing that "there's no return" to the way things once were.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LOVE AND SACRIFICE

The poem's title, "Stabat Mater," roughly translates to "The Mother Stood" and alludes to a Christian hymn that depicts Mary as the "suffering" or "sorrowful" mother standing before the crucified Jesus. Hunt's poem focuses on the difficult sacrifices his own mother has made for her family, becoming a tribute to her unconditional love and grace in the face of hardship.

The speaker presents his mother as a loving, supportive figure who accepts life's struggles with strength and humor. When her much older husband, the speaker's father, grows elderly and weak, she steps in to take care of him. Whereas she once was too timid to call him anything other than the formal "Mr. Hunt," she embraces her new role as the authority figure in the family, "guiding" her husband as he "roams" the difficult terrain of "old age."

Of course, this is a tough responsibility to take on. She has to watch her partner grow frail and closer to death, all the while remaining steady and dependable. She's more like a mother to her husband than a lover, but she accepts this, as far as the reader knows, with little complaint.

In fact, she maintains her good humor. She seems playful, "still like a girl," as she calls her husband "every other sort of name," which probably consist of both teasing insults and terms of endearment. Sometimes she even "turns" to the speaker as if her new role were a kind of "game." Again, this might suggest the way she tries to make light of a difficult situation and suffers without ever appealing for pity. Acting like the whole thing is a "game" might also be her way of shielding the speaker from both her own sorrow and the pain of watching his father deteriorate.

On that note, the poem's ending might represent the mother's call to her son to live his life rather than stay behind and worry about his aging parents. That he "too must learn / to walk away" is perhaps a reminder that loving a child means letting them go and encouraging them to become independent and live their lives while they can, even if it leaves you, the parent, more alone in your suffering. Read this way, the poem bears witness to the speaker's mother's strength and to her sorrow.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

My mother called ...
... his loving wife."

The title "Stabat Mater" means "the mother stood" and alludes to a Christian hymn dating to the 13th century. The opening line in the original Latin reads, "Stabat mater dolorósa juxta Crucem lacrimósa." Loosely translated, that means: "the sorrowful/suffering mother stood next to the cross, weeping." Before the poem has even begun, then, it nods to the noble suffering of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The title tells readers that the speaker sees a similarity between Mary's sacrifice and that of his own mother.

The poem itself then begins with the revelation that the speaker's mother used to call his father "Mr. Hunt" for the first few years of their marriage. The reader doesn't yet know *why* this is the case; the reveal of their age gap doesn't come until stanza 2. (As the father's name, "Mr. Hunt," suggests, the poem was inspired by the poet's own parents, who were 30 and 60 when Sam Hunt was born.)

For now, all readers know is that the speaker's mother doesn't seem all that comfortable with her husband. "Mr. Hunt" is very formal, the mode of address that a pupil might use with their teacher. Its usage here implies that there was a clear power dynamic at work in the "first few years" of this couple's "married life."

The meter of this opening line is iambic pentameter: five metrical feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllabic pattern. This feels a little stiff for a contemporary poem, conveying the formality of this relationship:

My mo- | ther called | my fa- | ther "[Mis- | ter] Hunt"

This line and the next also feature alliteration and consonance of the delicate /f/ sound: "father," "first few," "life." This sound is gentle and even a little feeble, perhaps evoking the mother's lack of confidence in those early years of her marriage.

Lines 3 and 4 then reveal how the speaker "learned" this curious fact about his mother. She'd written an inscription to his father in a book that read, "To dear Mr. Hunt, from his loving wife." The words "dear" and "loving" suggest some tenderness, but the inscription still reads very formally. The clear final rhyme between "wife" and "life" adds to that sense of formality and propriety.

"Stabat Mater" is a Shakespearean sonnet, its 14 lines divided into three quatrains and a closing couplet. Sonnets are traditionally love poems, making this a fitting form for a poem that will honor a mother's love for her family.

LINES 5-8

She was embarrassed ...
... seem so small.

When the speaker later asked his mother about the inscription he'd found, "she was embarrassed"—implying that she understood the strangeness of addressing her husband as "Mr. Hunt" as opposed to something more affectionate (or even just using his first name). But she goes on to explain that she did this because of their vast age gap: it had felt deeply uncomfortable "to call him any other name at first" because he was older than her own father. (Again, the poem is inspired by poet Sam Hunt's actual parents, who were 30 years apart.)

She felt "so small" around her husband, the implication being that he was an intimidating authority figure in her eyes. The sibilant alliteration of the phrase "seem so small" evokes the mother's initial timidness and deference toward her husband, the sounds of the line whispery and deferential.

The poem doesn't offer further details about how the speaker's parents met or the nature of their relationship—whether it was based on love or some other practicality. What is clear, though, is that the mother is no longer the timid young girl she once was. The mother's embarrassment implies that she doesn't call her husband "Mr. Hunt" anymore, while her willingness to explain things to her son suggests that she wants to defend, or at least help her son sympathize with, her younger self. She might be self-conscious about those early years of marriage, but she has compassion for the "small" girl trying to navigate life with a much older man.

LINES 9-10

Now in a ...
... sort of name;

At the start of the third quatrain, the poem shifts focus from the past to the present. Readers might think of this as a subtle *volta*, which refers to the moment in a sonnet marked by a sudden shift in tone or argument. (While voltas in line 9 are more typical of Petrarchan sonnets, they're not unheard of in the Shakespearean variety. That said, there's a very clear turn in the final couplet of this poem as well, as is more typical for Shakespearean sonnets.)

In line 9, the speaker describes how "Now," in the current day, his mother calls his father "every other sort of name." She's still "like a girl," this simile implying that she hasn't *entirely* changed; she's not a whole new person, but there is something "different" about the "way" she interacts with her husband.

In her younger days, the mother was "like a girl" in the sense that she saw her husband as a parent- or teacher-like figure and felt deference towards the authority of his advanced years. But children can also be playful, wily, and perceptive. Being "like a girl" *now*, then, is probably more of a compliment: the speaker admires his mother's youthful cheekiness.

The speaker's mother no longer calls the father by the formal "Mr. Hunt." Now, she uses "every other sort of name." This might mean that she addresses her husband with gently chiding insults, using humor as a survival mechanism to help her through a difficult situation. Or maybe these terms of affection like "dear" or "sweetheart." Perhaps both. Either way, she seems like a more confident figure than she did before.

LINES 11-12

And guiding him ...
... were a game...

In lines 11 and 12, the poem demonstrates just how much the speaker's parents' relationship has transformed over time. The speaker's father is now quite elderly, and his wife, not yet elderly herself, guides "him as he roams old age." This metaphorical roaming presents old age as a kind of vast, dark landscape that's difficult to navigate alone. The speaker's mother has become the authority figure in this relationship, tasked with looking after her husband as he grows more feeble and less independent. Their roles have essentially reversed: now he is more like the child in the relationship.

"Sometimes," the speaker continues, his mother will "turn to" him while "guiding" his father. She'll pretend the whole thing is "a game." That is, she acts like the situation isn't all that serious. This might be her own way of coping with the pain of watching her husband deteriorate. At the same time, this simile illustrates how much confidence she has gained over the years. She's comfortable enough with herself and her relationship to gently make fun of her own situation—though, again, this playfulness might be her way of masking her suffering. Perhaps her humor is also her way of trying to prevent her son from worrying too much about his father.

Note the ambiguous ellipsis at the end of line 12, which might hint that all is not quite as it seems. That final "..." might hint that the mother suffers more than she lets on.

LINES 13-14

That once I ...
... there's no return.

The poem's final two lines create a rhyming couplet. This is the sonnet's true volta: it abruptly switches focus from the speaker's parents to the speaker himself. The "That" at the start of line 13 refers to the "game" from line 12. That is, this "game" is one "That" the speaker, like his mother, "must learn." He says he must do this "once I stand up straight," which likely is a metaphor for growing up and/or taking responsibility for his own life/facing the realities of adulthood head-on.

Once he's an adult, emerging from his parents' shadow and the timidity of youth, he needs to "learn" to play the same "game" his mother does: to bear his suffering with strength and humor.

Yet that learning applies to the following line as well. He doesn't just need to learn to play this game, but also to "walk away and know there's no return." His mother might be calling for him to set out and live his life while he still is young enough to do so—to walk away from his parents, even though he knows that he can never go back. Time only flows in one direction, and there will be "no return" to his childhood. Ultimately, his mother's acceptance of life as it has been dealt—the way she handles her situation with grace even while suffering—instructs the speaker to face his own life bravely.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Stabat Mater" features subtle alliteration that makes the poem more lyrical and brings some of its images to life. For example, listen to the soft /f/ alliteration in lines 1-2:

> My mother called my **f**ather "Mr. Hunt"
> **F**or the **f**irst **f**ew years of married life.

There's also some consonance here, with the internal /f/ in "life." All of these delicate, fricative sounds might evoke the speaker's mother's timidity and lack of confidence during the early years of her marriage. The breathy /h/ sounds in the second stanza work similarly, as the mother explains

> [...] **h**ow **h**ard it **h**ad been
> To call **h**im [her husband] any other name at first [...]

These /h/ sounds require repeated exhalations of air, making the tone here feel labored and perhaps even a bit exasperated. The speaker's mother is self-conscious about her younger self's behavior, but she's also defending her actions—insisting that it was difficult and strange to address a man older than her own father as anything other than "Mr." The sibilant alliteration of "seem so small" at the end of the stanza then reduces the poem to whisper, again suggesting the mother's shyness and apprehension.

Towards the poem's end, the alliteration of "stand up straight" adds some oomph to this phrase, which likely refers to the speaker growing up and/or becoming independent.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "father"
- **Line 2:** "For," "first few"
- **Line 5:** "when," "why"
- **Line 6:** "how hard"
- **Line 8:** "seem so small"
- **Line 13:** "stand," "straight"
- **Line 14:** "walk away," "know," "no"

ALLUSION

The poem's title alludes to a 13th-century Christian hymn about Mary, Jesus's mother, standing next to her son during his crucifixion. The hymn describes Mary as both sorrowful and dutiful, determined to be with Jesus in his hour of need despite the pain of watching him die. "Stabat mater" is Latin for "the mother stood."

Placing this allusion at the start of the poem sets up the reader's expectations. The speaker sees parallels between Mary and his own mother. She, too, makes sacrifices for the ones she loves and bears her suffering with grace. The poem isn't saying that her sorrow is on the same scale as Mary's, but rather illustrating how often mothers have to weather great emotional pain on behalf of their families. (The stiff, formal early days of the speaker's mother's marriage might also be included as part of her suffering as well.)

These days, the speaker's mother is a graceful and quietly authoritative figure, looking after her husband in his old age. She *stands up* to meet life's challenges, inspiring the speaker to do the same. The closing couplet subtly nods back to the poem's title:

> That once I stand up straight, I too must learn
> To walk away and know there's no return.

The speaker admires how his mother hasn't been cowed by suffering and seeks to learn from her example.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "That once I stand up straight"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses a metaphor in the third stanza when he describes his mother "guiding" his father "as he roams old age." This subtle metaphor helps to illustrate the challenges of getting old by depicting "old age" as a kind of terrain through which one might aimlessly wander. It conjures up the image of a vast, confusing landscape and suggests that the speaker's father often feels he has somewhere to go but isn't quite sure where it is. This positions the mother as a kind of shepherd with a flock of one. She looks after her husband faithfully, guiding him with tenderness and some mischievous humor.

The speaker turns to metaphor again in the poem's final couplet. The phrase "once I stand up straight" likely refers to growing up, taking responsibility for oneself, and meeting life's challenges head-on (just as the speaker's mother has had to do). This phrase also echoes the poem's title, which translates to "the mother stood" and alludes to a hymn about Mary standing by Jesus during the crucifixion. Standing up straight, in the poem, symbolizes bearing suffering with grace and strength.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "And guiding him as he roams old age"
- **Line 13:** "That once I stand up straight"
- **Lines 13-14:** ", I too must learn / To walk away and know there's no return"

SIMILE

In the third quatrain, the speaker uses two closely related similes to characterize his mother's behavior:

> Now in a different way, still like a girl,
> She calls my father every other sort of name;
> And guiding him as he roams old age
> Sometimes turns to me as if it were a game…

Though it's been many years since she got married, the speaker's mother is "still like a girl" in that she calls her husband "every other sort of name." That "still" is a nod to the fact that, early on in her marriage, the mother was "like a girl" because she interacted with her husband almost as though he were her father or teacher. Now, she's girlish "in a different way": she's playful and teasing, calling her husband names that likely include both terms of endearment and gentle insults. She retains some of her youthfulness by being graceful and good-humored in a tough situation.

As she goes about caring for her husband, she "Sometimes

turns to [the speaker] as if it were a game..." This second simile nods to the speaker's girlishness once again. Perhaps she uses this "game" as a coping mechanism, a way to soften the pain of watching her husband grow feeble and to protect her son from worrying too much about his father. Making light of a heavy situation ultimately reflects the mother's selflessness and love for her family.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "still like a girl, / She calls my father every other sort of name;"
- **Line 12:** "Sometimes turns to me as if it were a game..."

VOCABULARY

Stabat Mater () - Latin that roughly translates to "The Mother Stood." This is a reference to a hymn about Mary's suffering while watching Jesus's crucifixion.

Inscribed (Line 3) - Written (inside of a book).

Her father's elder (Lines 7-8) - In other words, her husband was older than her own father!

Roams (Line 11) - Aimlessly wanders.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Stabat Mater" is a Shakespearean sonnet, consisting of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) followed by a final rhyming couplet. Sonnets are associated with love poetry, so the form is appropriate for this poem about a mother's love for her family (and, implicitly, a son's love and respect for her mother).

A Shakespearean sonnet typically contains a *volta*, or turn, in its final couplet. This is a moment marked by a swift change in tone or argument. In "Stabat Mater," the speaker shifts from focusing on his parents' relationship to focusing on what he has learned from his mother's example. The clear, perfect rhyme between "learn"/"return" in this stanza makes the poem's ending feel firmer and more conclusive.

Finally, there's a small turn in the ninth line as well, which is where the volta falls in a Petrarchan sonnet. Here, the poem switches the focus from the past to the present and from the mother's timid younger self to her more confident role in the family dynamic.

METER

"Stabat Mater" uses a loose iambic pentameter, which refers to lines of five iambs: metrical feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). This is the classic meter for sonnets, and here it lends the poem a steady heartbeat.

Sometimes, this meter helps to evoke the stiff formality of the speaker's parents' couple's early relationship, as in line 1:

> My mo- | ther called | my fa- | ther "M[is- | ter] Hunt"

And in lines 7-8:

> To call | him a- | ny o- | ther name | at first, | when he—
> Her fa- | ther's el- | der—made | her seem | so small.

Elsewhere, by contrast, the steady, propulsive iambic meter capture's the speaker's resolve. Take line 14:

> To walk | away | and know | there's no | return.

The poem is filled with variations on this meter, however, as with the trochee that begins line 9 ("Now in"). The meter isn't overly strict throughout, which keeps its language feeling more natural and contemporary.

RHYME SCHEME

Shakespearean sonnets typically feature the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. That is, each quatrain features alternating rhymes (the first and second lines rhyme, as do the second and fourth), and the poem then ends with a rhyming couplet.

"Stabat Mater" nods to this pattern without following it exactly. The first quatrain rhymes only its second and fourth rhymes, creating the pattern ABCB ("Hunt" A /"life" B /"inscribed" C /"wife" B). The third quatrain follows the same pattern ("girl"/"name"/"age"/"game"), and the poem ends with the expected rhyming couplet ("learn"/"return"). The second quatrain, however, doesn't rhyme at all. Technically speaking, then, the rhyme scheme of "Stabat Mater" runs ABCB DEFG HIJI KK.

The poem is thus musical but not overly predictable or rigid. Perhaps it's significant that lines 6 and 8 *don't* rhyme (if they followed the pattern of the other quatrains, they would). The speaker's mother describes how she felt "so small" in the early years of her marriage and, in effect, the rhyme here hides away.

SPEAKER

This poem is autobiographical and readers can assume that the speaker is the poet himself. For one thing, the speaker's father is named "Mr. Hunt." Sam Hunt's mother was also 30 years younger than his father.

The speaker clearly admires his mother's ability to adapt to a difficult situation with grace and good humor. This poem is essentially a way of bearing witness to her suffering (just as she

bears witness to her husband's). The speaker is clearly moved by his mother's story. It's unclear, from the poem at least, how he feels about his father in all this; perhaps, having had less time with him, the speaker never got to know his father in the way that he knows his mother.

SETTING

"Stabat Mater" doesn't have a clear setting beyond taking place in the speaker's present—"Now." From this vantage point, the speaker looks back on parents' relationship. He begins the poem with a focus on "the first few years of married life," when his mother, who was decades younger than his father, was so shy and intimidated that she called her husband "Mr. Hunt."

The speaker later zooms forward into the present day, when his mother calls his now elderly "father every other sort of name" while "guiding him" through "old age." The poem thus spans many years, which allows it to illustrate how aging and time can drastically alter people's dynamics.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

New Zealand poet Sam Hunt published "Stabat Mater" in his 1973 collection *South Into Winter*. Hunt has said that he's been inspired by his fellow New Zealand writers James K. Baxter and Alistair Campbell, as well as by W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, and Dylan Thomas. He has also cited Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg as major influences on his work, though his own poetry tends to be more formal. Indeed, "Stabat Mater" is a Shakespearean sonnet: a relatively strict poetic form consisting of three quatrains and a rhyming couplet, written in iambic pentameter.

The sonnet dates all the way back to the 13th century but was famously perfected by the 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch. William Shakespeare helped popularized a slightly different version of the form in English (hence the term "Shakespearean" sonnet). Sonnets got their start as love poems, so the form is fitting for Hunt's poem about a mother's love for her family.

"Stabat Mater" also alludes to a Christian hymn dating from the 13th century that describes Mary standing by Jesus on the cross. The hymn's first line, "stabat mater dolorosa," means "the sorrowful/suffering mother was standing" (or "stood," depending on the translation).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sam Hunt was born in New Zealand in 1946. "Stabat Mater," like many of Hunt's poems, is autobiographical: Hunt's parents had a 30-year age gap, and when he was born in 1946, Hunt's father was already 60.

Of this unusual dynamic, Hunt once said, "When I was 10, [my father] was 70. That's the age I am now and the thought of having a 10-year-old would be quite hard work, but Dad coped with it quite well. But when I was in my 20s and 30s, he was in his 80s and 90s and that was the time he was losing it."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Stabat Mater" Hymn — Listen to a performance of the "Stabat Mater" hymn to which this poem alludes, set to music by 18th-century Italian composer Pergolesi. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzOmPUu-F_M)
- The Poet at Home — Sam Hunt discusses his work and reads his poems from his coastal home. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBxks0tpiyE)
- Stabat Mater — Learn more about the famous hymn from which the poem takes its title. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stabat_Mater)
- Sam Hunt on Poetry — Read an interview with Hunt that discusses his approach to the poetic craft. (https://www.thedenizen.co.nz/culture/poet-sam-hunt-life-process-favourite-poems/)

HOW TO CITE

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