

My Father Would Not Show Us

Overview: The poem is written in the voice of a child reflecting on the death of her father. On the one hand you get a simplistic style and emotionless tone, written in the present tense as if to portray the strength of the memory of a young child going to the mortuary to see her father's body. On the other hand you get a more distanced, adult voice reflecting on how her childhood had changed with her father's absence. What is unusual is the sense of resentment the speaker may feel that her father did 'not show [them] how to die.' By the end of the poem the speaker may have softened slightly, with the 'would not' changing to 'could not' but again this is ambiguous.

Context: Ingrid de Kok is a South African poet. The epigraph at the start is by Rainer Maria Rilke an Austrian poet. An epigraph is a quotation at the start of a literary text, suggesting a prevalent theme in the work which follows. Probably the most relevant context is to do with this: *'Which way do we face to talk to the dead?'* Perhaps de Kok is asking us to consider whether there is an appropriate way to talk about dying and the dead. She is emphasising the difficult relationship many people have with death. Culturally there are a lot of taboos surrounding death. Phrases like 'don't speak ill of the dead' encourage the idea that we have to remember people who have died positively. Here de Kok perhaps transgresses this through a certain lack of emotion and bitter tone. What evidence is there however that ultimately she did love her father?

Structure: The poem consists of seven stanzas of irregular length and an irregular rhyme pattern. Many of the words which rhyme are repeated such as 'face' and away' and 'lay'. These words have significance within the poem. The rhyme becomes more regular towards the end, perhaps signalling a sense of closure or finality which comes with death. The poem does not have a chronological structure, beginning with the father 'five days dead' and ending with the father lying with his 'face to the wall', possibly dead. Throughout the poem there is a blending of language and imagery about death with memories of childhood. Perhaps this signifies how the memories of childhood are difficult to separate from the memory of her father dying.

Key Images: The father's face features throughout the poem. At the beginning it is 'organised', then 'inverted'. Later it 'turned away' to face the wall. During the speaker's childhood it is his 'wry smile' that is remembered. His face here is described as 'half-turned', this could imply a smile as opposed to the turning away, and sense of rejection, the speaker feels at the end of the poem. Some other ideas worth considering are the muted, stilted words and images from the first three stanzas with the noise and sense of life in stanza three. Perhaps the saddest line in the poem is 'remember my childhood as it might have been: / a louder, braver place,/ crowded ...'. The implication is after her father's death her life was more subdued.

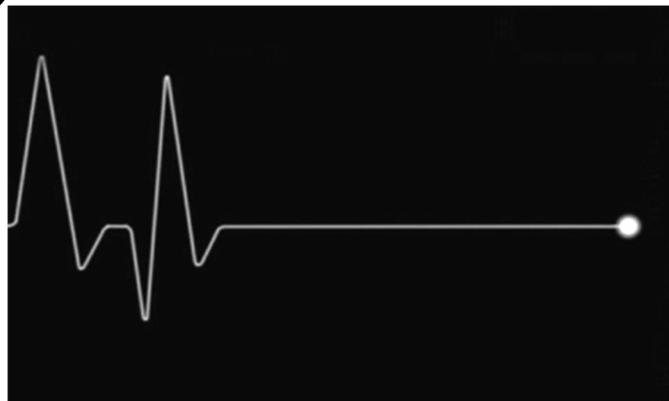
Potential Comparisons

First person voice:

My Last Duchess,
Manhunt

Mixed emotions:

Valentine, A
Complaint, La Belle
Dame Sans Merci



Parent/child

Nettles, One Flesh,
A Child to his Sick
Grandfather

Death / injury / aging

Nettles, A Child to
his Sick
Grandfather