



## POEM ANALYSIS

# “Medusa” by Sylvia Plath

Essay by Janet McCann

**Author:** Sylvia Plath

**Pseudonym:** Victoria Lucas

**Born:** October 27, 1932; Boston, Massachusetts

**Died:** February 11, 1963; London, England

**Country:** United States; United Kingdom

**Culture:** American; British

### ABSTRACT

As “Daddy” exorcises the powerful father, the companion poem “Medusa,” written four days later, casts off the engulfing mother in order to free the emergent self. Medusa is a genus of jellyfish, and Judith Kroll has pointed out that Plath’s mother’s name, Aurelia, is a synonym for medusa. In this poem the scene suggests a delayed birth, a watery womb-world where the jellyfish’s tentacles continue to enwind and stifle the speaker, despite her desire for separation. Picturing herself as a ship chased by the medusa, she asks, “Did I escape, I wonder?” The medusa is compelling: “My mind winds to you/ Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable.”

### KEYWORDS

- Mothers
- Mythology or Myths
- Rejection
- Parents and Children

### TYPE OF POEM

Lyric; Meditation

### APPEARS IN

*Ariel* by Sylvia Plath

*The Collected Poems* by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (editor)

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If the father is cold and distant in “Daddy” but sharply outlined and precise, in “Medusa” the mother is a blob without definition. She is “Fat and red, a placenta/ Paralyzing the kicking lovers.” She complains of suffocation and renounces the mother as she has the father in her desire to be herself. With the epithet “Blubbery Mary,” the image slides from sea to church: “I shall take no bite of your body,/ Bottle in which I live,/ Ghastly Vatican.”

The mother-medusa is swollen and grotesque; she presents a model of martyrdom and negativity whose attraction must be denied if the speaker is to be potent as an individual. Thus the poem concludes with a demand for the medusa’s withdrawal:

Green as eunuchs, your wishes  
Hiss at my sins.  
Off, off, eely tentacle!  
There is nothing between us.

For Plath, reaching selfhood does not involve the introjection of the parent figures but necessitates their

rejection. This is the message of both "Daddy" and "Medusa."

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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