

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Relationships

My Father Would Not Show Us - *Ingrid de Kok*

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MY FATHER WOULD NOT SHOW US

Ingrid de Kok

Brief Summary

The poem details what goes through the speaker's mind when they look upon their dead father. They long for the brighter days of their childhood, and regrets that their father hid his illness and death away from them. They wish their father could be there to show them how to cope with grief and his own death. The poem shows the speaker trying to come to terms with their loss.

Synopsis

- The speaker comes to see their father's body in an open casket
- The father's coffin has not arrived yet, so he lies in a temporary one
- The speaker notes they were prepared to see his unfamiliar face, but not the softness of his clothes
- Looking at their father one last time, the speaker reminisces about their childhood - they imply they have lost their childhood prematurely, suggesting they have lost their father at a young age
- The father was the heart of the home, and the speaker has fond memories of him
- The speaker turns their attention to the days before their father's death
- The father hid himself away from his family when he knew he was dying, making his death come as a shock to the speaker
- The speaker's final image of their father is of him lying alone, away from everyone he loved

Context

Ingrid de Kok (aka Ingrid Fiske) (1951 - present)

Ingrid de Kok was born in Johannesburg in the summer of 1951, and was raised until she was 12 in a gold mining town in South Africa. Her family then moved to Johannesburg. In 1977, she emigrated to Canada, but returned to South Africa in 1984. She has degrees in English and Political Science from universities in South Africa and Canada, and has worked as a lecturer and professor.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAPK6BJeck8>



Much of de Kok's work focuses on the **political and social issues surrounding South Africa's apartheid**. However, she has also written more personal poems about love and loss. De Kok has been involved with anthologies of women's poetry. De Kok now has a partner and son, and is a Fellow of the University of Cape Town.

Apartheid

The Apartheid in South Africa lasted from 1948 until the mid 1990s. It refers to the **institutionalised racial segregation** enforced by the White government at the time. People of colour were separated from white people, were viewed as inferior to white people, and had drastically fewer rights and opportunities. Even once Apartheid was officially over, the era has had great implications for the cultural heritage of South Africa.

My Father Would Not Show Us

There is not much in the public domain about de Kok's relationship with her father, but nonetheless the poem captures an **experience that is universal**. Everyone must experience the death of a loved one, and each culture has their own ways of dealing with grief. South Africa is home to many different tribes and traditions, but many tribes involve animal sacrifice in their funeral rites. Having family and mourners view the body before it is buried is another common practice. In this poem, de Kok features this tradition of an open casket.

EXAM TIP

Online, there are many articles on this poem where the writer gives their own experience with grief and death. Reading these could give a clearer idea of the feelings de Kok is exploring, and how successful she is in engaging with a wide audience.





My Father Would Not Show Us

This is a dedication to Rainer Maria Rilke and his poem written in memorial of a friend. It shows how we struggle to cope and know how to act when someone we love dies.

The harsh noise of the fricatives and plosives mimics the speaker's shock at seeing their father's body.

This take on pathetic fallacy uses the setting to symbolise how death impacts the speaker and their worldview. The cold conveys the love and comfort the speaker has lost.

This could be a word play. Deliverance holds religious connotations, such as the dead being delivered to God, or sinners being cleansed of their evil. The father is far from God.

Death has turned the speaker's world upside down. It takes the people they love and makes them unrecognisable.

The pyjamas suggest intimacy and comfort, making the father appear vulnerable or unprepared for death.

'Which way do we face to talk to the dead?'
Rainer Maria Rilke

My father's face

five days dead

is organised for me to see.

It's cold in here

and the **borrowed coffin gleams unnaturally;**

the pine one has not yet been **delivered.**

Half-expected this **inverted** face

but not the **soft**, for some reason

unfrozen collar of his **striped pyjamas.**

Possessive pronoun shows how the close bond between the father & speaker is key to the poem.

The speaker has been tracking time since their father died, portraying a fixation on death.

Accuses the father of lying to them even in death. They suggest funeral rites are a performance, shielding the reality of death.

A coffin is meant to be someone's final resting place, but "borrowed" implies it is temporary. Shows the speaker's reluctance to accept their father is gone. Sense of wrongness implies the father doesn't belong in this land of the dead.

The speaker has gone through grief before the start of this poem. The duality of "half" encapsulates their struggle to acceptance.

The softness of the clothing doesn't fit with the speaker's view of death as cold, it's harder for them to accept their father's death because they are reminded of his life.





This emphasises the finality of death. The verb “allowed” suggests death is controlling and restrictive.

The speaker’s nostalgia and longing suggests they worshipped their father. They miss the times untainted by death.

The speaker expresses how they and their family depended on their father for guidance and strength. Now, in this time of need, they feel their father has abandoned them, and they are lost without him.

The speaker wants to remember their father as a happy person, full of life and wit.

This metaphor demonstrates how the father’s life is contained by his house, showing how he was a family man. The curtains are a symbol for concealment and containment.

“Lay” is a passive verb, showing how the father has lost his liveliness. Repetition is used again to draw attention to the ways the father has changed.

The speaker’s focus on their father’s memories shows how a whole family heritage has been lost.

This is the **last time I am allowed**
to **remember my childhood as it might have been:**

a **louder, braver place,**

crowded, a house with a tin roof

being hailed upon, and voices rising,

my father’s **wry smile**, his **half-turned** face.

My father would not show us how to die.

He hid, he hid away.

Behind the curtains where his life had been,

the florist’s **flowers curling into spring,**

he lay inside, he lay.

He could recall the **rag-and-bone** man

passing **his mother’s gate** in the **morning light**.

Now the **tunnelling** sound of the **dogs** next door;

Paradox, the speaker suggests they will “remember” the future. They mourn the loss of their childhood as the result of their father’s death.

This foreshadows the father’s separation from the family as he tries to disguise his death.

The repetition shows the speaker is overwhelmed by the thought of their father’s shame. This could be anger or dismay.

This image of life contrasts with the theme of death, emphasising the speaker’s pain.

The symbol of new life, the “morning light”, is contrasted with common omens of death: a “tunnel”, “dogs”, and a “rag-and-bone man”, someone who collects unwanted scraps.





This stanza echoes one before it, but the small changes indicate the speaker's progression. "Could", rather than "would", suggests the speaker no longer blames the father, accepting that he couldn't physically put his family through the pain of watching him die. "Turned" shows intention and protection, while "hid" implies shame and cowardice.

The father's physical distance from his family symbolises the emotional distance they feel as a result of his death. The "counterpane" manifests the barrier death builds.

everything he hears is white.

My father could not show us how to die.

He turned, he turned away.

Under the counterpane, without one call

or word or name,

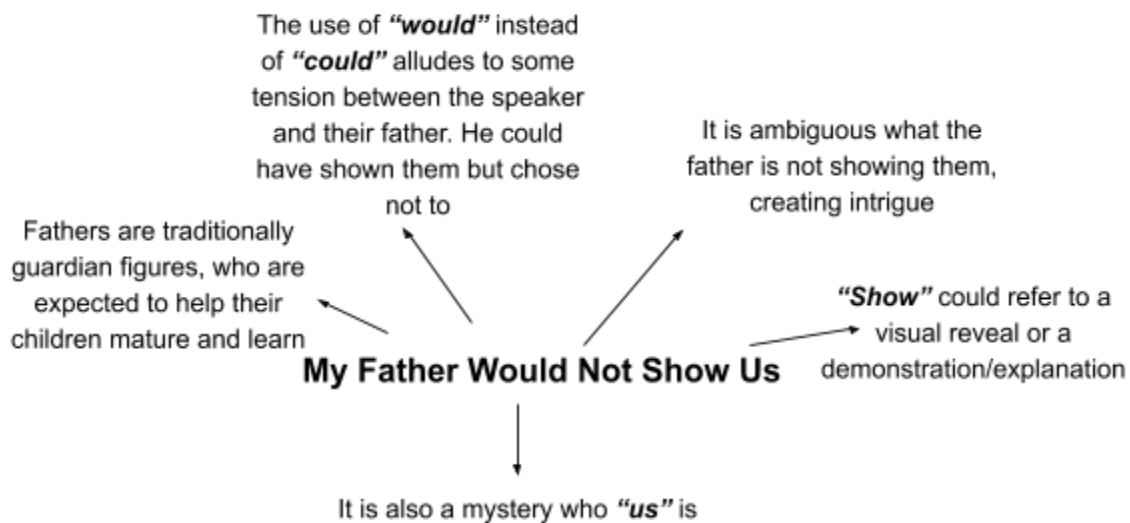
face to the wall, he lay.

The father's life has become empty, like "white" noise. "White" is a symbol of purity, showing the speaker's continued faith in and admiration for him.

The speaker gets no more communication from their father.

In contrast to the way he lived as the heart of the family and community, the father dies alone. The speaker suggests the father felt a duty to hide death from his family.

The title "My Father Would Not Show Us"



Perspective

Dramatic Monologue

The poem uses a **first person narrator** who, while recalling a particular event, reveals parts of themselves, making it a type of **dramatic monologue**. There is no evidence to suggest de Kok is writing an autobiographical work, so be careful to make a clear distinction between the poet and their speaker. Assume de Kok is using her **speaker** to **explore and voice her own perspective on death and mourning**, rather than commentating on her own experiences.

- As a dramatic monologue, the speaker's focus is on their **subject** (in this case the speaker is focusing purely on her father) but as readers we should also study the speaker just as carefully.



<https://aeon.co/ideas/its-complicated-why-some-grief-takes-much-longer-to-heal>

The speaker's observations about their father's death are intended by de Kok to **convey a particular perspective on grief**. She shows how her speaker reacts when confronted with their father's dead body to portray human experience as a whole.

- Immediately the reader is informed the speaker is looking at their own father's corpse, and that he is only **"five days dead"**. This context alerts us to the speaker's fragile emotional state and allows us to empathise more closely.

- De Kok's use of **repetition**, such as **"He hid, he hid away"** and **"he lay inside, he lay"** implies the speaker feels anger, pain, or shame as they remember the way their father died.
- The use of **words indicating great distance**, such as **"away"** and **"inside"**, draws attention to how death is isolating and frightening. Death brought the father away from his father. It could also reveal the speaker's inner feelings: they feel alone because of their grief, and feel abandoned by their father.

Elegy

As the poem shows a speaker grieving for their father, 'My Father Would Not Show Us' is an **elegy**. An elegy is a **reflective, sombre poem** that typically **mourns for someone who passed away**. Through death, de Kok can examine the bonds that tie families together. The process of grief, she shows, is a time when our most extreme emotions come to light.

The poem features a **funeral rite or tradition** - the open casket. This is one way in which people handle and face death. Arguably, an elegy is another form of funeral rite used to process grief. Therefore, de Kok uses one form of mourning to explore the impacts of another. You could



argue this shows how there is no perfect, standalone way to cope with grief. It is a process with many varied stages.

Past and Present

The poem portrays **death's ability to muddle our perception of time**. The father's dead body, physically displayed in front of the speaker, is a **symbol for the time they have lost**.

- As shown in the **paradoxical line** "**remember my childhood as it might have been**", the speaker feels they have lost both the past and the future as it could have been.
- Death has stolen time with their father away, and they cannot return to a time with him in. De Kok suggests death triggers memories and nostalgia, as well as fantasy and questions.

The poet **switches between the past and present** without clear distinction. For example, with the lines "**This is the last time I am allowed / to remember my childhood**" and "**He could recall the rag-and-bone man passing his mother's gate [...] Now the tunnelling sound [...]**". This emphasises the way death defies our way of managing and making sense of time. It also reveals the disorientation and confusion the speaker feels because of their loss.

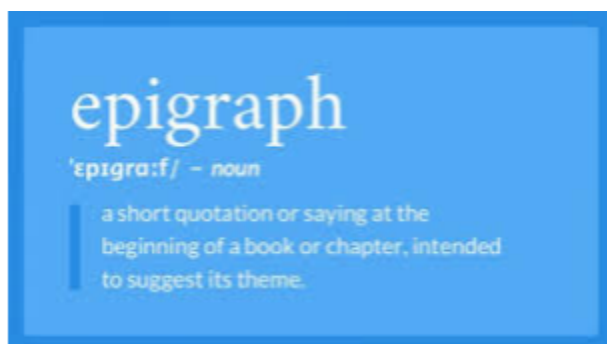
The Opening

Which way do we face to talk to the dead?

Rainer Maria Rilke

De Kok opens her poem by using an **epigraph** - a quotation at the start of the work from a different writer. In literature, an epigraph is used as a **summary**, preface, or link to the wider literary canon (other famous literature). They provoke thoughts concerning the subject, reveal something about the writer's intentions and influences, and welcome comparison.

Because 'My Father Would Not Show Us' is an elegy, commemorating the speaker's dead father, the epigraph resembles an epitaph - the inscription written on a gravestone that is dedicated to the dead. Like an epigraph, the epitaph on a grave is intended to be a tribute to who the person was and why they are missed.



<https://blog.reedsy.com/what-is-an-epigraph/>

Therefore, it is clear de Kok intends this quotation to **reveal the main intention of the poem**. In the same way an epitaph represents a person, this quote represents the pivotal question the speaker is wrestling with. The quotation combines something very literal - the way to "**face**" in a conversation - with something spiritual - talking to the "**dead**". This shows how



our connection to our dead loved ones is a very real, overwhelming experience. The combination of the real and supernatural worlds also shows how death doesn't fit into our world. It forbids any way for us to reason with it because our usual methods are impossible: we cannot **"talk"** to the dead, so we cannot get answers. Moreover, the quotation captures the **speaker's self-consciousness and confusion** as they try to process their grief.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Rainer Maria Rilke was a Bohemian-Austrian poet who lived from 1875 to 1926. The quote comes from his 'Requiem for a Friend', a tribute to Rilke's friend who passed away suddenly two weeks after giving birth to her first child. The rest of the piece can be read [here](#).

The first stanza

***My father's face
five days dead
is organised for me to see.***

The first stanza is incredibly short: three lines, with a total of twelve words. Its **blunt, concise tone** reflects the **speaker's shock at seeing their dead father**. The **short lines** and **enjambment** mimics the way the world grounds to a halt when you see a loved one dead. It suggests the speaker wants to spend as little time as possible thinking about it, but eventually emotions take over, leading to the rest of the poem.

The poem opens **in media res**, exposing the reader to the loss and grief without warning. This helps us feel the same shock and pain as the speaker. Like the short lines and stanza, the opening imitates the disorientation and horror the speaker feels.

The father's death is not revealed immediately. When he is first introduced, he is just **"My father"**, and it isn't until the end of the second line that the speaker reveals what exactly is happening. They are still in **denial**. By opening with **"My father"**, de Kok demonstrates how important the paternal bond is to the speaker. It is important to them that they claim their father as their own.

The **verb "organised"** is used to describe how the funeral home has arranged the body for viewing. The speaker seems to **mock** them for trying to apply logic and



(Image: David Betts Photography)

www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/request-increase-funeral-sizes-birmingham-18031396



order to something as **chaotic and indecipherable as death**. Furthermore, the speaker is **bitter** that everyone is trying to hide the reality of their father's death from them.

- **“Organised”** suggests outside forces, control, and schedules. The speaker implies that society treats death as a performance because it is scared of death. They feel they cannot grieve properly, nor process their loss, because no one will let them see what death really looks like. As well as death, there are **other barriers** between the speaker and their father.

The Ending

My father could not show us how to die.
He turned, he turned away.
Under the counterpane, without one call
or word or name,
face to the wall, he lay.

The poem's conclusion seems to present a **final severance** or departure between the speaker and their father. **“Turned away”**, **“Under the counterpane”**, and **“face to the wall”** all depict **physical distance and barriers** between them. It is clear these **physical borders** hold **metaphorical significance** for the speaker, too.

- Because the speaker accuses their father of performing these **acts of isolation** - **“he turned”** and **“he lay”** - it seems part of them still blames him for the rift between them.
- They are upset that he leaves **“without one call / or word or name”**, showing how they long for one last conversation or sign of love.



<https://positivepsychology.com/great-self-care-setting-healthy-boundaries/>

The speaker's anger at their father shows how **love and grief make us irrational**. The speaker acts as if they expected their father to beat death: this demonstrates how deeply they worshipped and believed in him.

The ending is an **echo of an earlier stanza**, showing both how this event is a defining, memorable moment in the speaker's life and how they have progressed with time. The speaker



declares, **“My father could not show us how to die,”** when before they had accused him, **“My father would not show us how to die”**.

→ The **change in modal verb** from **“would”** to **“could”** shows a level of acceptance from the speaker. At first, they felt the father’s secrecy was deliberate, done to harm them. Now, they know he had no choice.

→ **“Could”** suggests his reaction is a natural, fundamental part of him.

De Kok seems to be referring to a father’s natural instinct to protect his children from harm. Though they are hurt, the speaker understands that the father hid his death from them out of love and care.

The final line doesn’t provide any resolution or closure, showing how death lasts with us forever. Instead, it gives a lasting **image of death**. **“Face to the wall”** could be **metaphorical**, referring to how the father looks on into the afterlife. It suggests death, ultimately, has to be faced alone. The father shields his face from his family so they don’t have to share his burden. The last word is a **passive verb**, **“lay”**. All the life and action has left the father.



<http://www.unurth.com/Gregos-Faces-in-the-Wall-Paris-Malta>

Structure

The poem is **chaotic**, fragmented into **stanzas of varying lengths**, with lines that vary even more wildly. **Enjambment** and **caesura** make the pace stop and start, chop and change. There is **no rhyme scheme**. All of this contributes to a **sense of panic and confusion**, mimicking the erratic state of mind of the speaker. They are unable to find a rhythm or structure, in the same way they cannot find an answer for their father’s death. De Kok shows how there is no explanation or logic in death.

The structure of the poem can be seen to follow the **different stages of grief**: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. At first, the speaker cannot admit their father is truly dead. The coffin is **“borrowed”** and **“unnatural”**. The bargaining comes next, as the speaker **“remember[s] my childhood as it might have been”**. Their anger is clearly aimed at their father for not being honest with them and for shutting himself away from the world. The final two stanzas show the speaker entering depression before starting to accept their grief.



Language

Nostalgia

De Kok suggests that our memories and our histories are some of the most significant parts of grief. She demonstrates that **memories** are what makes death so painful. The speaker sees their father's "**striped pyjamas**" and realises "**this is the last time I am allowed / to remember my childhood**". The father's dead body is a **physical symbol** for these memories and missed moments: his corpse allows the speaker to see what they have lost. As this is the "**last time**" they will feel a true connection to their childhood, de Kok suggests death robs us of the people who connect us to our happy memories. She demonstrates how family is so precious because our family members represent past joy, as well as current joy.



<https://www.vimeo.com/@takogunner4ever/a-nostalgic-overrated-565d7aac1144>

Much of the **language** in the poem is **sensory and vivid**, evoking the nostalgia experienced by the speaker. The speaker recalls "**a house with a tin roof / being hailed upon, and voices rising**", so that we might be transported into the memory. The sound of "**hail**" on "**tin**" is easy to imagine. In addition, the **imagery of a crowd of people** sheltering in a house away from a storm is contained, almost claustrophobic, conveying the intimacy between the father and the speaker. "**Voices rising**" against the storm suggests a **symbol of hope**.

"**Voices rising**", "**morning light**", and "**the tunnelling sound of the dogs**" all conjure up an ethereal, dreamy scene. We feel **connected** to the speaker and their father as they **romanticise the past**. De Kok shows how family is a way for such memories to be shared and stored. The speaker feels they will lose their connection to these images when their father passes away.

Community

The poem is full of examples of how people love the speaker's father, showing how **community is a form of family**. Love brings the community together, and this is particularly important when the community is in mourning. The speaker recalls their "**crowded**" house and the "**flowers**" gifted by others. Though the father and the speaker feel isolated by their grief, de Kok shows how there are people to support us if we go looking for them.

Life vs. Death

The traumatic experience of the father's death is emphasised by the **contrast** to who he was when he was alive.

- The time when the father was alive is presented as a "**louder, braver place**", and he is described as having a "**wry smile**".



- ◆ While death is associated with gloom and emptiness, the **“louder, braver place”** from the past suggests the father provided safety and joy. **“Braver”** implies the speaker was given courage to live fully when their father was alive.
- In contrast, the room with his body is **“cold”**, all he hears is **“white”**, and his face is **“inverted”**.
 - ◆ This image of happy chatter falls silent with the line **“everything he hears is white”**. The father enters a barren land, void of noise and detail.
 - ◆ The adjective **“inverted”** conveys death’s incoherent chaos. The speaker’s father, someone they know very well, has been changed in death.



<https://archaeology-travel.com/england/highgate-cemetery-london/>

Death is symbolised in the **semantic field of borders** de Kok constructs. The speaker fixates on all the things that set them apart from their father: the **“coffin”**, the **“curtains”**, the **“gate”**, the **“counterpane”**. The amount of containers, barriers, and doors in the poem reveals how concerned the speaker is to rejoin their father. They wish to undo the rift created by their father when he **“turned away”**.

De Kok suggests death is so distressing because it **forms a permanent barrier** between us and our loved ones. She implies we spend our whole lives trying to figure out how to access them - to cross the **“gate”** or open the **“curtains”** - without losing ourselves, too.

“My father could not show us how to die.”

The idea of the father explaining to his family how to die is the refrain of de Kok’s poem. The speaker suggests that, throughout his life, the father would try to explain everything he did to his children so that they could copy and learn. When it comes to his death, though, he keeps it secret from them. The speaker feels **betrayed** because they are barred from being a part of such an important part of his life. Because he doesn’t **“show”** them how to do it, it marks the moment when he can no longer be their father. The children have to learn without him.

The line could, alternatively, express the speaker’s **longing for comfort and guidance**. Their father is dead, they are experiencing unfamiliar grief, and the one person they wish could help them out is the one person they cannot see. Additionally, the loss of a parent often triggers a realisation of your own death. They want their father to **“show”** them how to grieve properly and accept their own mortality, but there is no instruction manual. They have to go it alone.

