

Sylvia Plath: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Lady Lazarus"

Summary

"[Lady Lazarus](#)" is a poem commonly understood to be about suicide. It is narrated by a woman, and mostly addressed to an unspecified person.

The narrator begins by saying she has "done it again." Every ten years, she manages to commit this unnamed act. She considers herself a walking miracle with bright skin, her right foot a "paperweight," and her face as fine and featureless as a "Jew linen". She address an unspecified enemy, asking him to peel the napkin from her face, and inquiring whether he is terrified by the features he sees there. She assures him that her "sour breath" will vanish in a day.

She is certain that her flesh will soon be restored to her face after having been sacrificed to the grave, and that she will then be a smiling, 30 year-old woman. She will ultimately be able to die nine times, like a cat, and has just completed her third death. She will die once each decade. After each death, a "peanut-crunching crowd" shoves in to see her body unwrapped. She addresses the crowd directly, showing them she remains skin and bone, unchanged from who she was before. The first death occurred when she was ten, accidentally. The second death was intentional - she did not mean to return from it. Instead, she was as "shut as a seashell" until she was called back by people who then picked the worms off her corpse. She does not specifically identify how either death occurred.

She believes that "Dying / Is an art, like everything else," and that she does it very well. Each time, "it feels real," and is easy for her. What is difficult is the dramatic comeback, the return to the same place and body, occurring as it does in broad daylight before a crowd's cry of "A miracle!" She believes people should pay to view her scars, hear her heart, or receive a word, touch, blood, hair or clothes from her.

In the final stanzas, she addresses the listener as "Herr Dockter" and "Herr Enemy," sneering that she is his crowning achievement, a "pure gold baby." She does not underestimate his concern, but is bothered by how he picks through her ashes. She insists there is nothing there but soap, a wedding ring, and a gold filling. She warns "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" to beware of her because she is going to rise out of the ash and "eat men like air."

Analysis

"Lady Lazarus" is a complicated, dark, and brutal poem originally published in the collection [Ariel](#). Plath composed the poem during her most productive and fecund creative period. It is considered one of Plath's best poems, and has been subject to a plethora of literary criticism since its publication. It is commonly interpreted as an expression of Plath's suicidal attempts and impulses. Its tone veers between menacing and scathing, and it has drawn attention for its use of Holocaust imagery, similar to "Daddy." The title is an allusion to the Biblical character, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead.

The standard interpretation of the poem suggests that it is about multiple suicide attempts. The details can certainly be understood in this framework. When the speaker says she "has done it again," she means she has attempted suicide for the third time, after one accidental attempt and one deliberate attempt in the past. Each attempt occurred in a different decade, and she is now 30 years old. Now that she has been pulled back to life from this most recent attempt, her "sour breath / Will vanish in a day," and her flesh will return to her bones. However, this recovery is presented as a failure, whereas the suicide attempts are presented as accomplishments - "Dying is an art" that she performs "exceptionally well." She seems to believe she will reach a perfection through escaping her body.

By describing dying as an art, she includes a spectator to both her deaths and resurrections. Because the death is a performance, it necessarily requires others. In large part, she kills herself to punish them for driving her to it. The eager "peanut-crunching crowd" is invited but criticized for its voyeuristic impulse. The crowd could certainly be understood to include the reader himself, since he reads the poem to explore her dark impulses. She assumes that her voyeurs are significantly invested - they would pay the "large charge" to see her scars and heart.

However, she imbues this impulse with a harsh criticism by comparing the crowd to the complacent Germans who stood aside while the Jews were thrown into concentration camps. Further, the crowd ultimately proves less an encouragement than a burden when they also attend the resurrection. She despises this second part of the process, and resents the presence of others at that time. Whether this creates a vicious circle, in which that resentment is partially responsible for the subsequent attempt, is implied but not explicitly stated. Critic Robert Bagg explores the speaker's contradictory feelings towards the crowd by writing that Plath "is not bound by any metaphysical belief in the self's limitations. Instead of resisting the self's antagonists she derives a tremendous thrill from throwing her imagination into the act of self-obliteration." She can destroy her body, but her imaginative self remains a performer, always aware of the effect she has on others.

The poem can also be understood through a feminist lens, as a demonstration of the female artist's struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal society. Lynda K. Bundtzen writes that "the female creation of a male-artist god is asserting independent creative powers." From this perspective, "Lady Lazarus" is not merely a confessional poem detailing depressive feelings, but is also a statement on how the powerful male figure usurps Plath's creative powers but is defeated by her rebirth. Though Lady Lazarus knows that "Herr Doktor" will claim possession of her body and remains after forcing her suicide, she equally believes she will rise and "eat men like air." Her creative powers can be stifled momentarily, but will always return stronger.

The poem can also be understood in a larger context, as a comment on the relationship between poet and audience in a society that, as Pamela Annas claims, has separated creativity and consumption. The crowd views Lady Lazarus/the poet/Plath as an object, and therefore does not recognize her as a human being. Plath reflects this through her multiple references to body parts separated from the whole. From this interpretation, Lady Lazarus's suicide then becomes "an assertion of wholeness, an act of self-definition, and a last desperate act of contempt toward the peanut-crunching crowd." The only way she can keep herself intact is to destroy herself, and she does this rather than be turned into commodities. Though "Herr Docktor" will peruse her remains for commodities, she will not have been defeated because of her final act.

As has often been the case in Plath's poems, the Holocaust imagery has drawn much attention from critics and readers. It is quite profuse in this poem. Lady Lazarus addresses a man as "Herr Dokter," "Herr Enemy," "Herr God," and "Herr Lucifer." She describes her face as a "Nazi lampshade" and as a "Jew linen." As previously described, one effect of these allusions is to implicate the reader, make him or her complicit in passive voyeurism by comparing him or her to the Germans who ignored the Holocaust. However, they also serve to establish the horrific atmosphere than be understood as patriarchy, as a society of consumers, or as simply cruel humans. No matter how one interprets the crowd in the poem, they complicate the poem's meaning so that it is a sophisticated exploration of the responsibility we have for each other's unhappiness, rather than simply a dire, depressive suicide note.

