



POEM ANALYSIS

“Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath

Essay by David M. Heaton

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

“Lady Lazarus” is an extraordinarily bitter dramatic monologue in twenty-eight tercets. The title ironically identifies a sort of human oxymoron, a female Lazarus—not the biblical male. Moreover, she does not conform to society’s traditional idea of ladylike behavior: She is angry, and she wants revenge. She is egocentric, using “I” twenty-two times, “my” nine. Her resurrection is owing only to herself. This is someone much different from the grateful man of John 11:2 who owes his life to Jesus.

KEYWORDS

- Bible, Biblical imagery, or Biblical symbolism
- Cats
- Concentration camps
- Death or Dying
- Fathers
- Holocaust, Jewish
- Nazism or Nazis
- Parents and Children
- Resurrection
- Revenge
- Suicide
- War
- Women
- World War II

TYPE OF POEM

Lyric

APPEARS IN

Ariel by Sylvia Plath

The Oxford Book of American Poetry by David Lehman (editor)

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

“Lady Lazarus” is an extraordinarily bitter dramatic monologue in twenty-eight tercets. The title ironically identifies a sort of human oxymoron, a female Lazarus—not the biblical male. Moreover, she does not conform to society’s traditional idea of ladylike behavior: She is angry, and she wants revenge. She is egocentric, using “I” twenty-two times, “my” nine. Her resurrection is owing only to herself. This is someone much different from the grateful man of John 11:2 who owes his life to Jesus.

Given Sylvia Plath’s suicide, one might equate this Lazarus with Plath. Self-destruction pervades the poem as it did her life, but she has inventively appropriated Lazarus in constructing a mythical female counterpart who is not simply equatable with herself. This common tactic of distancing autobiography tempers one’s proclivity to see the poem as confessional. As confession mutates to myth, subjectivity inclines to generalized feeling.

Lady Lazarus resurrects herself habitually. Like the cat, she allows herself nine lives, including equally their creation and cancellation. The first line may stress her power over her fate, but “manage” (line 3) suggests an uneasy control. It also connotes managerial enterprise,

an implication clarified when the speaker's language takes on the flavor of the carnival.

The first eight stanzas largely vivify this ugly but compelling experience. The reader sees the worm-eaten epidermis and inhales the sour breath. More cadaver than person, Lady Lazarus intends terror, however problematic her bravado. Nevertheless, she will soon smile, when time restores flesh eaten by the grave. (The smile will not prove attractive.) For the moment, however, she is only a "walking miracle" of defective parts: a shell of glowing skin, a face blank as linen, a paralyzed foot. Almost spectral, she remains finely, grotesquely palpable.

Stanzas 9 to 19 present Lady Lazarus as a sideshow freak, stripper, and barker. Her emergence from the winding-sheet (perhaps a straitjacket) is a "striptease." The "peanut-crunching crowd" thrills, pruriently. She alters the introductory "Ladies and gentlemen," but her phrasing retains the master of ceremonies' idiom. Reference to her "theatrical/ comeback in broad day" plays poetically with the jargon of show business and magic.

In presenting the history of her efforts to die, Lady Lazarus assures the reader of her honor. This integrity gives continuity, making her the same woman at thirty that she was at ten. It is nothing against her that her first attempt at annihilation was accidental; it was premonitory. Eventually, intention ruled—both descent and resurrection. In the eighteenth stanza, she says that each "comeback" is, however, to the "same place" and the "same brute/ Amused shout." The prosody allows "brute" to be a noun (hence, person) in the line, an adjective in the sentence. As it is the "same brute" each time, beginning with her tenth year, and as she finally intends the destruction of "men," this brute is always the father or his replica. This explains why Plath renders the customary "Ladies and Gentlemen" as "Gentleman, ladies."

Stanzas 19 through 26 clarify Lady Lazarus's victimization at the hands of "Herr Enemy" and "Herr Doktor," who are one and the same and merely the latest incarnation of the "brute" father. The German spelling of doctor and the choice of Herr create the stereotype of Germanic male authority. Lady Lazarus is this creature's "baby," more particularly his "opus." Thus, this menacing figure reminiscent of Josef Mengele, of

the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, fathers her "art" of dying. She sarcastically repudiates his inauthentic "concern" for her but allows him his role in her fiery death and resurrection. Because she was "pure gold," he expected profit from her. He pokes among her ashes for valuable residue, but she has reduced herself to "nothing" but a "shriek." Spiritually, however, she is a virtual reliquary, which turns the tables; "Herr Enemy" will pay, and dearly, for her victimized body and consciousness. There will be a "very large charge" for "eyeing [her] scars," for discovering that her heart "really goes," even for a "bit of blood" or a "word."

Having taken up the battle with the enemy on his terms, she concludes by warning the male deity and demon that when she rises from the ashes, she consumes men as fire does oxygen.

"Lady Lazarus" plays distinctively on the ear. It blends staccato, irregular versification with a dense mixture of highly patterned sounds. End and internal rhymes, both exact and slant, are rapidly mixed and steadily joined to consonance, assonance, alliteration, and sheer repetition. At the outset, Plath makes end rhymes of "again," "ten," "skin," "fine," "linen," and "napkin" before the eleventh line. She dares, in one line, "grave cave ate" and, in another, "million filaments." The "brute" that ends line 53 is followed at once by the only slightly dissimilar "amused." Plath's prosody ingeniously restrains the metronome while rendering sound almost childlike.

The nazification of the speaker's antagonist is a perhaps hyperbolic but crucial feature of the poem. Plath once said to George Macbeth, "I see you have a concentration camp in your mind too." For Lady Lazarus, the model of her victimization is the modern slaughter of the Jews. The "Nazi lampshade" refers to the commandant's practice at Buchenwald of flaying inmates and stretching the skin, often tattooed, over a lampshade frame. The most notorious of the Nazi gas chambers and crematories were housed at Auschwitz, where blankets were made of human hair and soap from human fat. Those who emptied the ovens poked in the ashes for hidden gold wedding bands and for gold fillings missed by camp "dentists." It was at Auschwitz that the infamous and sadistically curious Doktor Mengele listened to the

camp symphony, oversaw experiments on humans, and quizzically dropped in at the ovens. Hence the primal "brute" becomes "Herr Doktor" and "Herr Enemy." "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer," two sides of the same coin, are but extensions of the Nazi male stereotype.

To this frame of reference, Plath adds an amusing filmic touch, after the fashion of the "vampire" and the "villagers" in her poem "Daddy." "So, so, Herr Doktor./ So, Herr Enemy" parodies the stereotypical speech of Nazi officers interrogating prisoners in American war films of the 1940's. That the words are Lady Lazarus's indicates that she is exorcising the victim within her and preparing to adopt her enemy's tactics against him. She had told her nemesis to "Peel off the napkin" of her "featureless face," the manifestation of her passivity, represented as a "Jew linen."

People who return from the edge of death often speak of it as rebirth. "Lady Lazarus" effectively conveys that feeling. It is principally, however, about the aspiration to revenge that is felt by the female victim of male domination, conceived as ubiquitous. The revenge would be against all men, though the many are rendered as singular in the poem. The text forces the reader to take the father as prototype, which drives one to read it in terms of the Electra complex. Why, one asks, is the speaker malevolent toward the father rather than amorously yearning? What has he done to inspire the hatred that has displaced love?

The poem is mythic. It leaves the father's, the male's, basic offense at the general level of brutal domination. One might rest there, taking control and exploitation as the male's by nature, practiced universally and with special vigor toward spouses and daughters. The idea will come short of universal acceptance, but the text does not disallow it.

If one looks at the "Enemy" as modeled on Plath's own father, one finds something else, though certainly no Fascist. Otto Plath's blameless offense was his death in Sylvia's childhood, which seems to have left her feeling both guiltily responsible and angry, a common reaction. One normally expects the adult child to overcome this confusion by reasonably understanding it. This poem is not about that experience; it is about the wish, however futile, to turn the tables on the father and his

kind. Its dramatic overstatement of male evil may be, for one reader, an offense against fairness. For another, it may not even pertain to that problem, but only represent the extremity of long-borne suffering.

Whether the poem depicts the onset of successful revenge is problematic. Lady Lazarus has surely arrived at the point of reversing roles with her antagonist. She understands and intends to exploit his means of violent mastery, and at the last, the prefatory myth of the halting Lazarus is altered to the myth of the ascendant phoenix, the bird that immolates itself every five hundred years but rises whole and rejuvenated from its ashes. Lady Lazarus's "red hair" suggests fire, which lives (easily) off oxygen. "I eat men like air," therefore, seems the foreshadowing of victory, in the restoration of the true self and the annihilation of its detractor(s).

For a person, however, the "eating" of air is not nourishing; also, Lady Lazarus confronts men in every quarter of the universe, and her battle plan is of their design. She is even nominally male herself. Whether the phoenix is male or female is even uncertain, though Plath preferred to think it female. Perhaps the poem ultimately envisions the tension created in the victim by the wish for revenge and the fear of its frustration.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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