

An explication of sylvia plath's "lady lazarus"



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In an interview with Peter Orr in 1962, Sylvia Plath said, " I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying... " In using her own experiences with attempted suicide and involuntary resurrection, Plath has done just that in " Lady Lazarus. " Plath continued with: " I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things... Practicing what she preaches, Plath goes beyond her personal experience and encapsulates an entire issue of female oppression in her semi-biographical writing. She also illustrates this sentiment by creating Holocaust-related similes and metaphors. These correlations are only a part of the dark streak the speaker paints throughout " Lady Lazarus. " The speaker here is able to do all this while parodying her own torment, and therefore giving herself the means to control it. In " Lady Lazarus", Plath often mocks herself and the gravity of the poem's subject.

Deliberately flippant parts of the poem include the speaker sounding like a carnival barker; calling in the public to see " the big strip-tease. " These lines about the persistence and wonder of " the peanut-crunching crowd" are mockingly strident and scornfully obnoxious. A more subdued sense of irony is presented by several obviously sarcastic lines, such as the description of dying being " an art, like everything else. " When the speaker goes further to state that she dies " exceptionally well," it is almost as if she is chuckling to herself through a resentful smirk, sneering at her own inherent sense of tragedy.

These tongue-in-cheek comments towards her misery may also be directed in part to taunt her "Enemy". Even from the beginning, when Plath refers to another suicide attempt as achieving something ("One year in every ten/ I manage it ----"), the more-sensitive reader may find himself perturbed by the wavering tension between the chilling seriousness and the misleading lightness of "Lady Lazarus". Although often addressed with a deceptive light-heartedness, there are many dark images in "Lady Lazarus". The first of these is also one of the several allusions to the Holocaust: the speaker's reference to her skin being "bright as a Nazi lampshade." This image starts off the following barrage of dead and rotting imagery: sour breath, rotting flesh, and being unwrapped like a mummy. The idea of being wrapped up also elicits a feeling of claustrophobia, and helps to bring forth the speaker's feeling of entrapment. The deep and dark feeling of entrapment is most effectively demonstrated by the speaker's recounting of her second run-in with death: "I rocked shut

As a seashell. They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky
pearls." This gloomy oceanic imagery settles around the sentences like heavy and cold water, and segues into images of the grave. The final images of the poem are of ashes and charred remains being reanimated in the style of a phoenix; an arguably triumphant ending, although just as somber as any other previous imagery. In many poems, it would hardly matter at all if the gender of the speaker was switched. Not so with "Lady Lazarus".

Whether or not Sylvia Plath was truly a feminist is neither here nor there, but what's important is that there is a battery towards the male ego and a feeling of female-imprisonment that would have been totally lost should the

speaker have been male. The moment the speaker refers to herself as being merely " a smiling woman" once the " flesh the grave cave ate" re-assimilates itself, there is a feeling of either biting sarcasm or bitter resignation. The carnival side-show imagery speaks to the idea of the woman being objectified, as does the speaker telling the invisible male Enemy, " I am your opus,/ I am your valuable. The prefix of " Herr" before the name of each presumed antagonist suggests a strong and oppressive character (which is supported by the several comparisons of the speaker's oppressors to Nazis and herself to a Jew)