

Theme of suffering in lady lazarus by sylvia plath

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Mental health is a very prominent issue in the world today. While the stigmas attached to mental health have lessened over the years and resources like psychotherapy are available to people, these resources were not always available especially during the post war era. Many were left to fend for themselves; some were helped by placed into institutions while others used writing to express their emotions. Sylvia Plath, an American poet and a short story writer, was one of the many people who used writing to express her emotional turmoil. One of her renowned works is *Lady Lazarus* which was published in 1965, two years after her passing by suicide. *Lady Lazarus* offers indications to various suicide attempts made by the distressed speaker. The title alludes to the character of Lazarus from the Bible who was resurrected by Jesus four days after his death. Similarly, *Lady Lazarus* experiences death repeatedly and is brought back to life but she is in control of her fate unlike Lazarus. In the poem *Lady Lazarus*, Plath uses literary devices such as dark imagery, setting, and allusions to historical happenings to portray the speaker's subjection to enduring at the hands of those around her who wish for her to live.

Lady Lazarus compares her suffering to the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust to show the extent of her pain. Plath compares the speaker to some of the most horrifying events that took place during the Holocaust. Plath pushes past idyllic tradition with her choice of metaphors, attacking the reader's sensibilities with the startling viciousness of her imagery. The speaker states: " A sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade" (Plath 4-5). *Lady Lazarus* refers to herself as a " walking miracle" (Plath 4) for the times that she was revived. This also alludes back

to the title because Lady Lazarus is miraculously raised from the dead. She says that she shouldn't be alive after all her suicide attempts but miraculously, she is. Plath uses simile to compare her skin to a "Nazi lampshade" (Plath 5). This refers to the practice of making lampshades using the skin of Jewish victims in the concentration camps. This horrifying simile is significant because it compares Lady Lazarus's suffering to the victims of the Nazi death camps. The speaker further states: "A paperweight, / My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen" (Plath 7-9). Linen was used to wrap the bodies of the Holocaust victims. The speaker uses this metaphor to emphasize the point that she does not feel anything; she is numb like the dead. Shockingly, this dark imagery is alluding to the speaker's living body after it is restored. She depicts her encounter of living as a torment, as a kind of demise. After being resurrected, her skin is similar to the people murdered in the Holocaust; it is like the skin of a dead woman constrained back onto her living self which conveys the notion that living for Lady Lazarus is like death. By juxtaposing herself to these horrific events the speaker makes the reader regard her as a victim.

Sylvia Plath created two main settings in Lady Lazarus: a carnival and concentration camps. Plath refers to the carnival when she states:

The peanut crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot —

The big strip tease. (Plath 26-29)

The speaker thinks of herself as a spectacle that people are always ready to watch. People view her as an attraction that they cannot get enough of. She feels humiliated as they undress her and see her body "... my hands / My knees. / ... skin and bone" (Plath 31-33). This stanza expresses violence as the speaker loses control of her body. It is shown as fun for the crowd as they are crunching peanuts but is extremely disturbing for Lady Lazarus: she is naked for all to see. This might be referring to the multiple suicides and resurrections of Lady Lazarus which have left her feeling like a spectacle as she just wants to die. Concentration camps are referred to throughout the poem but there were specific examples given that made the setting stand out:

Ash, ash —

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there —

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling. (Plath 73-78)

In these two stanzas, Plath talks about the cremation of the Jewish victims in concentration camps and the horrifying way their remains were used. The Nazis used the ashes and corpses of the victims to make soap, jewelry, and gold teeth. Lady Lazarus is imagining being cremated alive as her third suicide attempt. She imagines the Nazis looking at the dead bodies and ash,

visualizing the items they will create with the remains. But Lady Lazarus is resurrected again: “ Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (Plath 82-84). Lady Lazarus has been revived but unlike Lazarus, she does not need Jesus; she can do it on her own. She comes back to life like a phoenix: rising from her ashes. The last verse explains the speaker’s hatred toward the men in her life just like Plath. The influence that the men in her life have had on her has been hinted at throughout the poem. These verses show all that the Jews had endured during the Holocaust and convey Lady Lazarus’s feeling toward the life that she is forced to live at the hands of people.

In the poem Lady Lazarus, Sylvia Plath uses several literary devices that show the tormented life that the speaker has led. She uses dark imagery throughout the poem to create horrific images in the readers mind to convey the suffering of the speaker at the hands of the people who have saved her repeatedly after her suicide attempts. The Holocaust was alluded to multiple times to compare the lives of the victims and Lady Lazarus and emphasize the pain of living. Lastly, setting was used to create the mood that Lady Lazarus can never be happy. She is a spectacle because of her failed suicide attempts but she hopes to be successful this third time. Sylvia Plath very successfully conveyed the speaker’s pain and attitude toward death with her effective use of literary devices.