

# The symbolism of death and rebirth in sylvia plath's poem lady lazarus

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The purpose of my essay is to analyze the symbolism of death and rebirth, the two major themes that can be found in most of Sylvia Plath's poems. To present my statement I decided to choose an intriguing poem of this female author, Lady Lazarus. All the assertions that I will make in my essay are going to be sustained by critical sources. In the first part of my essay I will write about the meaning of the title and about the way it is related to the two themes. The second part will contain the biography references in the poem and the last part will present a short summary of the poem and the relation between the Holocaust and Sylvia Plath's painful life that contributed to her desire to die and resurrect.

Through the title "Lady Lazarus", Sylvia Plath brings a powerful biblical allusion to the possibility of resurrection. The author doesn't mention the story of Lazarus in the poem, ending instead with a metaphor of the phoenix, the bird that cyclically regenerates from its own ash. We have at the same time the legend of Lazarus that died and was resurrected by Jesus Christ. We can state that there is a symmetry between the beginning and the ending, meant to empower the idea of the death as not being the final stage of the human being's existence, but a sort of purgatory before a better, new one. In the original story, Lazarus is a man, here we have a change of genders as Plath decides it to be "Lady", but this time the female's power is very well presented by coming back to life "- on her own - without the help of a male/God figure. Not only has she brought herself back to life, but she has done it three times (a number that has some significance in the Bible, also)" (Bloom 75)

The woman's power to bring herself back from death is mentioned in the poem through the line " I have done it again". " Again" makes the reader question himself about the repetitive death and rebirth of Lady Lazarus. Also mentioned is the time this happens " One year in every ten". The first one from the three that happened is mentioned as an accident, the second one is made to express a suicide attempt as an art, it was " meant" to happen, but something interfered " Dying/ Is an art, like everything else/I do it exceptionally well."

As for every piece of art, the author has to work to satisfy himself. This may be the reason there is a third suicide attempt as the second one didn't give the final desired image. Everything ends with the assurance of a new comeback, as the one of the phoenix bird.

In the poem I also found some German words such as " Herr Doktor" which can be related to Sylvia Plath's origins. Her father was from Germany and he died when she was eight years old. The death that we encounter here is presented as a final stage, probably because only a woman has the power to bring herself back to life and the man is not capable of such miracle.

The poem is related to the author's biographical background. After undergoing electroconvulsive therapy for depression Sylvia Plath has her first medically documented attempt to commit suicide, she took an overdose from her mother's sleeping pills. The second one appeared first to be a car accident, later revealed as a suicide attempt. If we consider the first accident to be also a suicide attempt and the lost two suicide attempts, we can say

that it is well related to the ones in the poem where the speaker mentions that the first one was an accident, but after that, the last two ones were “meant” to happen.

In the Plath's poem, the rebirth of Lady Lazarus is compared to her survival after continuous suicide attempts. She considers that the only way she can have a better life, one without pain, is through death, where she' will have to give up on her physical existence that will lead to her being reborn in the kind of life she desires. “ The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?/ The sour breath/ Will vanish in a day ... Soon, soon the flash/The grave cave ate\_will be/ At home on me” (ll - 13-16).

After being buried, her physical beauty will not remain. To change after the resurrection, a new start is needed. “ the false self” must die so that the “ true self can live”. (Bloom 86) In the end of the poem, Lady Lazarus rises from her own ash, becoming the creator of her new life, as an author has the power to create his own poetry. “ The entire symbolic procedure of death and rebirth in Lady Lazarus has been deliberately chosen by the speaker. She enacts her death repeatedly in order to cleanse herself of the ‘ million filaments’ of guilt and anguish that torment her. After she has returned to the womblike state of being trapped in her cave, like the biblical Lazarus, or of being locked ‘ shut as a seashell,’ she expects to emerge reborn in a new form.” (academia. edu 419)

The speaker in the poem compares the pain that he's going through with the Holocaust which was a genocide during World War II in which Nazi Germany,

aided by local collaborators, systematically murdered some six million European Jews. Many critics argued about the inappropriate comparison between such a tragic event and a personal life not going really well. Personally, I don't believe that Sylvia Plath intended to be disrespectful towards the unfortunate event, but only to give a measurable degree of tragism to her feelings.

In conclusion, Lady Lazarus is a poem where death and rebirth are two modalities to change human's life. The power to resurrect herself was given in the poem to a woman. This desire of dying so a new life is going to be a better one was also coming from the author's personal issues. Sylvia Plath's desire for rebirth, after death which had three attempts, was transplanted in her poem through a female character that fulfilled this characteristic. She had the power to come back to life by herself without receiving help from someone else as Lazarus received from Christ.

## **Bibliography**

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