

Plath's suicide: considering lazarus



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Born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, Sylvia Plath mainly wrote confessional poetry. Plath's life was marked by periods of severe depression and multiple suicide attempts. The death of her father and betrayal of her husband forced her into a state of paranoia and motivated her to write poems about her sufferings. In the poem, *Lady Lazarus*, Plath employs the character of Lady Lazarus to echo the poet's self as a way of expressing her mania towards death and suicide. The character of Lady Lazarus attempts to commit suicide every decade. However, each time Herr Doctor revives her and portrays her like the biblical Lazarus and a walking miracle. Through out the poem Lady Lazarus struggles to regain control over her proclaimed art of dying and becomes stronger as the poem progresses. Plath uses figurative language, most specifically allusions to both the bible and to the holocaust, as well as metaphors of her mental illness and instability to illustrate her growing obsession with death and foreshadow her third attempt at suicide.

Ever since her first attempt at suicide in 1953, Plath has displayed a “ long standing” interest in the biblical story of Lazarus. In this poem, Plath uses allusion to the biblical story of John's Lazarus of Bethany to juxtapose the character of Lady Lazarus with the biblical Lazarus and character of Herr Doktor with Jesus. In the story of Lazarus of Bethany, Jesus astonishingly raises Lazarus from the dead. Similarly, Lady Lazarus is revived by Herr Doktor from each subsequent suicide attempt. However, when Jesus raised Lazarus from dead, not only was it to advertise God's power but it was also beneficial to both Lazarus and the spectators who were given hope of immortal life. In contrast, when Herr Doktor revives Lady Lazarus he is interfering with Lady Lazarus's proclaimed art of dying. Herr Doktor is

actually establishing dominance over her which she must fight to regain control over her life. He is creating power struggle between them which leads to Lady Lazarus's obsession with death and suicide. As Theresa Collins points out, "'Lady Lazarus' can be interpreted as a struggle for control [. . .] a dominion prevented by her torturer, Herr Doktor." In addition, Herr Doktor revives Lady Lazarus in front of a crowd and portrays her as "A sort of walking miracle..." because similar to Jesus he is longing for admiration and acknowledgement from the people whom Plath refers to as "The peanut-crunching crowd."

Plath uses irony throughout the poem but her most obvious irony is in her proclaimed art of dying. Plath mentions,

"Dying

is an art, like everything else,

I do it exceptionally well."

This quote is ironic because even though Plath brags about being talented at committing suicide she always survives. Every ten years she attempts to commit suicide but each time she is revived by the doctors. Plath is thwarted on each attempt by her torturer, Herr Doktor. It is ironic to see that Plath actually does not want to die on her first time because she states that "I am only thirty. And like the cat I have nine times to die". On one hand Plath is struggling to regain control over her art and on the other hand she accepts the fact that she will not be able to regain control until her ninth suicide

attempt and has actually stopped trying. Plath feels that she is only living to entertain the crowd by miraculously surviving each time.

- 1 para about the tone of the poem.
- 3 para's about holocaust
- 3 para's about life mental disorder and reference