

Lady Lazarus: The Odyssey of a Woman from Existential Angst to Unrivalled Triumph

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath was an American poet whose name defies all boundaries and straddles worldwide as a Metaphor for Rhythmic, Performative poetry laden with references of her Personal Angst, Holocaust and Feminism. She possesses the magical power of translating her personal hurt into a public spectacle, creating a Phantasmagoria before our minds' eye. Her poem Lady Lazarus is charged with some very powerful imagery and a defiance of rational structures. It unleashes not only her agony at personal level but also portrays the woes of women at large and of the Holocaust victims. She displays the mythopoeic powers in her extension of the myth of Lazarus. Plath introduces the female counterpart of Lazarus i.e. Lady Lazarus who has this gift of being reborn and revolting against the torment of men, and all tormentors at large.

Key Words

Feminism, Holocaust, Metaphorical Representation, Mythopoeia, Personal Angst

Introduction

Psychology and the study of art will always have to turn to one another for help, and the one will not invalidate the other.'

(Jung 1941, p. 177)

Sylvia Plath has sought her name in the pantheon of Twentieth Century American Poetry through her wonderfully rhythmic and performative Poetry, a semi-autobiographical Novel, Letters, Journals and Children's Books. The winner of the Fulbright Scholarship, Glascock Prize and Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, she strikes her readers with her literary texts that create her own dimensions of very personal as well as intellectualised understanding of the universe of human relationships. The overshadowing of her works by her life, personality and thought processes make it inevitable for the reader to delve deep into her psyche and life events to get an all-inclusive understanding of them.

Plath, the precocious child of Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober, showed very early signs of creativity. She started writing poems during her childhood itself. During her college years, she excelled academically. She wrote to her mother:

The world is splitting open at my feet
like a ripe, juicy watermelon.

(Brown & Taylor 2004)

By the time she was in College, she had written over fifty short stories and published in a raft of magazines. She majored in English and won all the major prizes in writing and scholarship. Plath's poetry beautifully narrates conflicting emotions through Images and Sound Effects. She is credited with advancing the genre of Confessional Poetry. Her father's death, when she was just eight, not only is the most traumatic event in her life but also the cause of her suicide attempts and a leit motif in her works. Her poems also revolve around the state of Woman in a patriarchal society and the Holocaust. This Paper intends to analyse her poem *Lady Lazarus* that depicts the journey of Woman striving to break herself free from the shackles that bind her with norms prescribed by a male chauvinistic society.

Lady Lazarus: The Odyssey of a Woman

Created during the most fecund period of Plath's creativity, *Lady Lazarus* is a very dark and brutal poem. Apparently, it seems to be a depiction of a woman's Suicide Attempts. These attempts are endeavours to break free from the patriarchy that is completely callous as well as cruel to woman's survival and needs. Plath noted down:

Being born a woman is my awful
tragedy [...] to have my whole circle of
action, thought and feeling rigidly
circumscribed by my inescapable
femininity. (Plath's *Journals* 1982, p.29-
30)

Suicide Attempts

The Speaker in the poem says:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it...

(Lines 1-3)

This is the Woman's third suicide attempt. The whole narration of the suicide attempts is a part of the Confessional narration. Plath's first encounter with Death was a drowning accident at the age of 10. The second time, when she was 20 years old, she tried to commit suicide by swallowing a large number of sleeping pills and hiding in a cellar beneath the house for three days. She again tried to embrace death by deliberately driving off the road and survived that one also. Hence, one attempt to clasp death every 10 years. She has again been pulled back to life from her most recent attempt.

Dying is an Art

Death has been described as an art form:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

(Lines 43-45)

In these lines, correspondence between Death and Art has been established. Both states are states of perfection, beyond mutability. They are to be performed before an audience:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot--
The big strip tease.

(Lines 26-29)

Death is something that is exhibited and the entire portrayal is sensational. As the Speaker is being saved from the suicide attempt, her body is exposed to the public that is very curious to see what has happened. The crowd is also voyeuristic and shoves in to see her unwrapped. It's the big strip tease. Dennis Walder comments:

The personal impulse to death is shown
to be an obscure desire to be sensational.

(Walder 1975, p.49)

Collective Metaphor

The ubiquitous control of a male over the female is also represented through the collective metaphor. The Holocaust metaphorically embodies the woman's struggle against the male dominated society. The speaker identifies herself with the Jewish victims of the Nazi concentration camps. The Nazis smashed the complete freedom of self-expression as well as the identity as an individual. Plath has drawn a parallel between the public horrors of these camps and personal horrors of oppression. The Holocaust stands for the death-and-life battle between the self and a deadly enemy. In Lisa Nabershuber's book, *Confessing Cultures*, Plath

radically redefines herself in terms of historically grounded, collective worlds...Plath displaces the solitary, private individual... [and identifies] herself with the concentration camp Jew also in effect comparing herself to a community, just as she identifies her father and husband, who play the tormenting Nazis as a part of a historical political organization (Nabershuber 2009, p.66).

The poet takes the events from a personal to a historical perspective. The Nazi lampshade, paper weight and Jew linen remind us of the heinous crimes perpetrated on Jews by the Nazis, like making lampshades out of the skin of the murdered Jews, etc. They denote the commodification and exhibitionism of human beings. Plath's skill in transforming a very personal experience into a public spectacle is exhibited here. She herself expresses her thoughts in an interview:

one should be able to control and manipulate experiences like madness, being tortured....and one should be able to manipulate these experiences to the [ignorant] mind. I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant. (Hardy 1985, p.65).

The Lazarus Myth

At the end of the poem, Plath finally finds relief for herself by avenging her father, her husband and the male population as a whole. After her suicide she "melts into shriek/I turn and burn... [turning into] ash, ash" (Lines 69-70). She cautions her enemies to "beware, beware" (Plath 9). The poem's title foretells the ending of the poem in its biblical reference. Jesus had resurrected Lazarus in the New Testament, Gospel of John. He restores Lazarus to life after being proclaimed dead for four days. Like Lazarus, Plath rises "out of the ash"(Line 82). Here, the female counterpart of Lazarus is introduced. And she can also "eat men like air" (Line 84). This is to imply that like smoke, she can grasp at anything and everything.

This is a revelation of her new found power. Thus, Sylvia Plath has been symbolized as rebirth and revenge. She brings out her utter ferocity towards the male oppression that she has been faced with in her previous life.

The Phoenix Myth

Plath brings in the phoenix myth of resurrection. The image is created of a woman who has become a pure spirit rising against those who have confined her and bottled up her creativity and activity: gods, doctor, men, and Nazis. This metamorphosis of the self into spirit, after an ordeal of mutilation, torture, and immolation, makes the poem a hallmark of the dramatization of the basic initiatory process. Plath herself says:

The speaker is a woman who has the
great and terrible gift of being reborn.
The only trouble is, she has to die first.
She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit,
what you will. She is also just a good,
plain, resourceful woman. (Plath in
Ariel, 1965)

Theatrical Voice

The poem is a wonderful blending of different styles. Every style stands out distinctly. There's bravado ("I have done it again"), slang ("A sort of walking miracle"), perverse fashion commentary ("my skin/Bright as a Nazi lampshade"), melodrama ("Do I terrify?"), wit ("like the cat I have nine times to die"), boast ("This is Number Three"), self-disgust ("What a trash/To annihilate each decade"). The poem moves on through reductive dismissal ("The big strip tease") to public announcement, with a blasphemous swipe at the *ecce homo* ("Gentlemen, ladies/These are my hands/My knees"), and comes to its single lyric moment, recalling Plath's suicide attempt in the summer before her senior year at Smith:

I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Almost every stanza of "Lady Lazarus" picks up a new possibility for this theatrical voice, from mock movie talk ("So, so, Herr Doktor./So, Herr Enemy") to bureaucratic politeness, ("Do not think I underestimate your great concern") to witch warnings ("I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air").

Phantasmagoria

The whole of the poem is a Slide show, a sequence of images that perplex us. Four sets of Imagery are distinctly visible. At first, the Speaker is cloth; she is the lampshade, linen and napkin. Then, she is just an assortment of body parts such as knees, skin and bone, and hair. She moves on to become physical objects such as gold, ash and a cake of soap. Subsequently she transforms into a red haired demon. In addition to these are the sensational images of Death, the Peanut-crunching Crowd, the Strip Tease, the Concentration Camps and the Red-

haired Demon that make our hair stand on its end. The poem derives most of its meaning from its incredible imagery. The Sea shell symbolizes the hardened and dead female body. The dead woman who is transformed is adorned with worms that turn into pearls. The Demon eating men like air is a very dreadful representation of the revenge. The imagery lends the poem an immutable charm.

Conclusion

Lady Lazarus defines a barbaric relationship between the society and individual through a multi-layered imagery and identity. The poem is full of beauty, terrible beauty that guides us to its meaning. The success of the poem is due to the tension created between its extraordinarily light-hearted tone and exceptionally serious theme. Plath's personal battle and agony are translated and elevated to poetic excellence and collective metaphors. The mythopoeic powers employed by the poet indicate her versatility and skill. And above all, it is a poem to be read aloud, enjoyed, understood and viewed before the mind's eye.

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