

Lady Lazarus

Notes summarised from: **Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration – M.D. Uroff, Gale Databases**

- The relationship between the poet and the speaker is complicated due to the subject matter of the poem, as there are references to specific incidents in Plath's life (ie: her suicide attempts), but much of the poem is not Plath herself speaking.
- Plath employs the techniques of parody, caricature and hyperbole throughout the poem to add to the theatrical aspect of the piece.
- The nature of the speaker is peculiar, as there is a sense of mocking pride, even a sense of triumph in the attempt at taking her own life.
- The speaker is a performer, and although adopting many different roles, is "chiefly remarkable for her control not only of herself, but of the effects she wishes to work on those who surround her."
- The treatment of suicide in the poem is quite unusual, and often times serves as a parody. Suicide is described as an act, and dying is expressed in theatrical terms.
- There is a comparison made throughout the poem between her suicide and the victimisation of the Jews during the Holocaust.
- She claims that there is a charge for her hair and her clothes, a charge to view her. This adds to the voyeurism set up earlier in the poem, and allows the subject to appear as a Christlike, or martyr figure.
- The speaker is constantly absorbed by the desire to destroy herself, despite being unsuccessful in her actual attempts to take her own life. It is her way of controlling her own fate.
- "Control is not sane, but hysterical." ... "When she answers the gathering crowd that she is the 'same, identical woman' after her rescue, she is in fact telling them her innermost fear that she could, and will do it again. What the crowd takes as a return to health, the speaker sees as a return to the perilous conditions that have driven her 3 times to suicide."
- At the end of the poem, 'eat men like air' she is projecting her destruction outward. "The last stanza is in fact an effort of the mind to triumph over terror, to rise and not to succumb to its own victimisation."
- Her performance is a defence against utter desolation.
- Despite the fact that 'Lady Lazarus' draws on Plath's own suicide attempts, the poem tells us little more than a newspaper account of the actual event, therefore it is not extremely confessional, more that it reveals Plath's understanding of the way the suicidal person thinks.
- The poem serves as a warning against male-dominated power. No longer will she suffer their injustices. She will rise out of whatever remains are left in their destructive wake and "eat men like air".

- Death becomes a symbol of independence, and Lady Lazarus is the most overt example of this. The narrator's "enemy" believes that he holds her identity, her 'nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth', the scars of his power.
- 'Dying / Is an art, like everything else.' – it is an art for the natural woman who repels the mechanised death of warfare, the utter facelessness of genocide, and who proves to a Nazi that dying is not a process of industrialisation.
- Self-destruction is the result of continual submission.

Notes from Extended Commentaries – York Notes

- 'Lady Lazarus' is a powerful poem where Plath has created her own original and disquieting version of the biblical story in which an old man is raised from the dead.
- Lady Lazarus is presented as a very theatrical persona. She sees death as an art, and something that she has a calling for.
- There is strong juxtaposition in the poem, particularly amongst the images of brilliance, and performance as juxtaposed with the horrifying images of the Holocaust.