

M.A. - English
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Lady Lazarus : Criticism

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The poem entitled "Lady Lazarus" is the most important of all the poems written by Sylvia Plath. It is a complicated, dark and brutal poem originally published in the collection Ariel. Plath composed the poem during her most productive and fecund creative period. It is commonly interpreted as an expression of Plath's suicidal attempts and impulses. The title is an allusion to the Biblical character, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. The full story has been told by St. John in chapter 17; of the book of John in the New Testament. Lazarus was the brother of Mary, when he died, Mary and her brother appealed to Jesus to come to the place where Lazarus had been buried in a cave grave. Jesus came and stood before the grave and said Lazarus, come forth and Lazarus came out after being resurrected under Christ's order. His death cloths were removed and he became one of living person. Thus, the lady of the poem is a mythological figure on the biblical Lazarus. Plath takes the myth of Lazarus as the basis of her poem and she enacts her own death.

The poem begins directly with the main theme of this piece that is suicidal thoughts and death. According to the speaker, she has tried to kill herself once every ten years. The first time, when she was only ten, was not an attempt at all. It was just an accident. But the second time she was determined to accomplish her goal of self-destruction. However,

that attempt also bore no fruit. It gave rise to bitter emotions in her heart concerning those who were around. She reveals her biggest enemy between her and the goal, is the doctor who saved her. So, before the last attempt she bluntly says no matter what happens in this attempt. If she gets saved, she will rise like a phoenix and devour men like air.

Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' is a free verse lyric. The poetic persona describes her experiences from a subjective perspective. That's why it is a lyric poem. Apart from that, it is a confessional poem. Plath's style of confessionalism deals with the subjects of suicide, mental trauma and individual experience. The first three lines of the poem refers to the suicidal attempt -

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

The poem is composed of tercets or stanzas containing three lines. There is not any specific rhyme scheme.

The poem is also remarkable for the use of imagery which reflects the treatment of death in the hands of Sylvia Plath, about death. She believes that death is not the negation of life. But all men and women are the creatures of death. The idea of resurrection is present in this poem -

" unwrap me hand and foot -
The big strip tease

Gentleman, ladies : "

Another beautiful image used by Sylvia Plath is contained in the last stanza of the poem. This image is of a mythological bird phoenix. Plath compares herself with this bird and believes that like the phoenix she will be born again quite fresh after death. As she writes :-

" Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air."

Some other literary devices used in this poem are simile, irony and paradox. The simile used in "Bright as a Nazi lampshade" increases the beauty of the poem. The rhetorical question, "Do I terrify?" contains irony as well. "Face a featureless" has an alliteration of "f" sound.

Thus, the poem "Lady Lazarus" is one of the most beautiful poem of Sylvia Plath. Apart from the autobiographical element of suicidal incidences, the poem has also philosophical theme which makes it a unique poem. The sentences are small but of grave meanings. Plath uses different images from historical as well as mythical background to express her views.