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Lady Lazarus: A Look at the Dead Woman

“Lady Lazarus” is one of Sylvia Plath’s best known works. The poem tells of a woman who dies and is reborn again and again. The beautiful use of imagery and alliteration creates a spectacular poem with an interesting dramatic situation and raises questions about women and death.

Though the poem can be read, and admired, on its own the true depth of the poem is better understood by understanding the author, Sylvia Plath. Though a brilliant writer, Plath suffered from depression throughout her life. She attempted suicide several times and eventually killed herself, not long after her husband left her, by placing her head in an oven after taping towels to the bottom of the kitchen door to keep the fumes from reaching her children in their bedroom (Rollyson).

With the author’s life in mind the poem can have a different meaning. Many people suspect that the poem is Plath’s expression of her various suicide attempts, but it should be kept in mind that, like the narrator of a story, the speaker of the poem isn’t a direct representation of the author. If that wasn’t true John Green would be a girl with cancer and J.K Rowling would be a geeky boy with glasses.

Understanding the term “Lazarus” also helps explain the title of the poem as the speaker is never named. Those who are unfamiliar with Christianity and the Bible may not know that

“Lazarus” refers to Lazarus of Bethany who was resurrected by Jesus four days after his death (Fairchild).

Throughout the poem the speaker describes her various deaths. The vivid imagery of the speaker’s deaths creates a dark tone to the poem, such as in the fifth stanza: “The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath / Will vanish in a day” (Lines 13-15). While the imagery of the poem illustrates death in a vivid way, it also makes references to both the holocaust (Nazi Germany) and a circus. In the second and third stanza the speaker refers to the Nazi era: “A sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi Lampshade” (Lines 4-6), or “My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen” (Lines 8-9). The historical reference combined with the morbid nature of the poem creates an eerie feeling in the poem.

The speaker also objectifies herself, describing herself as something akin to a circus freak who people pay to see: “There is a charge / For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge / For the hearing of my heart- / It really goes” (Lines 57-60). By dehumanizing her being the speaker turns her existence, her life and death, into a spectacle for the world to see. But when one objectifies and dehumanize themselves or others, do their deaths hold the same meaning? In the case of the speaker the answer is “no.” Death transforms from a melancholy moment in time or the great finale of a human’s life to a show, a play.

Since women are so often objectified, like the speaker is, what then do women become? If women mean nothing can their deaths mean anything? Though the poem is not a feminist piece it is easy to take empathy with the speaker and wonder if her womanhood is a factor in her desire to die.

As dark and beautiful as the poem's imagery is, its alliteration and rhyme are also powerful, adding a unique tone cadence to the poem. The alliteration in the poem sounds harsh, or sharp, such as in line eight, "My face a featureless, fine" (Line 8), or "The peanut-crunching crowd" (line 26). When read out loud, the alliteration in the poem comes out sharp and stabs at the reader, staying with them. This works very well for a poem that is so dark and morbid.

The end rhyme, found in lines such as line one and two: "I have done it again. / One and every ten" gives the poem movement; a beautiful cadence (Line 1-2). Rhyme often adds fun and energy into a poem or novel, so why would Plath add rhyme into such a dark poem? Because "Dying, / is an art, like everything else" (lines 43-44). Depression and suicide were no stranger to Plath and no stranger to the poem's speaker. But are they a stranger to women? If women are "more emotional" than men, then are women meant to believe that "Dying / is an art, like everything else." (Lines 43-44), one they do "exceptionally well" (Line 45).

Do men die with a flare and spark, or are those devices left only for women? But Lazarus of Bethany that Jesus brought back to life was a man, so have we, as women, stole from men their resurrection and added theatrics in order to make it our own? Does death belong to the women as it belongs to men, or have we mutilated it in attempt to call it our own? In their dealings with death neither Plath nor the poem's speaker give us the answers to these questions. We are given only a well crafted poem full of imagery, metaphor and rhyme. We are given one of Plath's greatest works, and a poem to stay with us for years to come.

Works Cited

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