

Notes on Lady Lazarus by Sylvia Plath:

In A Nutshell

Let's say you're walking down the street. Let's say you stop some smart-looking girl; she's wearing glasses, she's carrying a big ol' pile of books. Let's say you ask this smart-looking girl what she knows about Sylvia Plath. We would bet you every dollar in our bank account that this smart-looking girl is going to tell you one of two things.

Sylvia Plath killed herself.

Sylvia Plath was a poet.

Actually, we're pretty sure that this smart-looking girl is going to share both of these factoids with you. Probably in that order.

As far as the poetry world goes, Sylvia Plath is a superstar. She was born in Boston in 1932 went to the all-girls Smith College. She then received a Fulbright Scholarship (fancy), moved to England, and met and fell head-over-hells in love with poet Ted Hughes. They married in 1956. They had two kids, went to a lot of parties, and Plath wrote a whole lot of awesome poems and a novel (*The Bell Jar*) all before turning thirty. Awesome, right?

Well not quite, because, as you know by now, Plath killed herself in 1963. And her life was not all that rosy. Her father died when she was very young, and she suffered from depression her whole life. She had even tried to commit suicide several times before.

"Lady Lazarus," a poem that Plath wrote in 1962 not long before her death, is one of the most amazingly tortured and beautiful and powerful poems of all time (really, we are not exaggerating), and it comes directly out of Plath's angst.

Unfortunately, because Plath's life was so interesting and tragic, people have the tendency to let her biography (more specifically, her suicide) overshadow her work. Though this is understandable—"Lady Lazarus" is a poem about suicide and resurrection, after all—it would be a huge mistake to ignore Plath's actual poetry. Plath's legacy endures because her poems are awesome, tragic, completely bizarre, perverse, and heartbreaking all on their own and all at the same time. And that's why we're still reading her today.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Just admit it: There's a tiny bit of you that is, or once was, just a little bit emo. Maybe you really like dark eyeliner, or maybe you blog about the cruelty of the world, maybe your parents drive you nuts, or maybe they once did.

If you can relate to any of these things, you'll just love "Lady Lazarus." It's a poem about all those staples of emo-dom—suffering, pain, death. And hey, if you're in an emo mood, you'll love all of *Ariel* (Plath's last and best book of poems, in which "Lady Lazarus" appears).

If you've ever fancied yourself just a little darker, a little more intense, a little deeper than your average guy or gal, "Lady Lazarus" will give you some seriously emo street cred, and a hefty arsenal of death imagery to pepper your own poems with. Just make sure you go watch a heartwarming movie afterward.

The poem is spoken by Lady Lazarus, a speaker who shares a lot of similarities with the poet herself. Lady Lazarus begins by telling us that she has done "it" again. What is this "it"? We don't know at first. She compares herself to a Holocaust victim, and tells us that she's only thirty years old, and that she has nine lives, like a cat. We soon figure out that "it" is dying; but, like the cat, she keeps returning to life.

She tells us about the first two times that she almost died, and tells us that dying "is an art." She says that dying is a theatrical event, and imagines that people come and see her do it. In fact, it starts to seem as if she's performing a third death in front of a crowd at a circus or carnival. She compares herself again to Holocaust victims, and imagines that she's been burned to death in a concentration camp crematorium. At the end of the poem, she resurrects (or returns to life from death) once again, and she "eat[s] men like air."

Lines 1-3

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

The poem begins on a strange note. A speaker—Lady Lazarus—tells us that she's "done it again." But what has she done? What is this mysterious "it"? Why does she do this "it" every ten years?

We won't actually find out the answer to these questions for a little while, so just hold your horses.

In the meantime, let's think about the speaker. Lady Lazarus is a fictional creation by the poet Sylvia Plath. We have to admit: Lady Lazarus has a whole lot in common with Plath herself (which you'll see as you keep reading). But Plath clearly takes pains to separate her real self from her poetry, so we're going to always refer to the speaker as Lady Lazarus.

Plath is getting all Biblical on us in this poem. Lazarus is a character from the New Testament who dies, and who Jesus brings back to life in the Gospel of John.

So why is our speaker named Lady Lazarus? Has she perhaps been resurrected (or brought back from the dead)? Let's read on to get some answers. (And for more on Lady L, check out what we have to say in the "Speaker" section of this learning guide).

And let's think about the poem's form for just a second. It's written in short, three-line stanzas (also known as tercets) with super-short lines.

The poem is quick, clipped, brusque. There's not a lot of lingering over words. Lady Lazarus isn't into long drawn out lines or sentences. She moves quickly through language.

One last thing: you may have noticed that we have a rhyme going on in this first stanza (with the words "ten" and "again"). As you read on, you'll see that the poem has a lot of rhymes, but that they don't follow a specific pattern. If you're interested in form, head over to the "Form and Meter" section for the real skinny.

Lines 4-9

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Now Lady Lazarus starts to describe herself, and it's, well, horrifying.

The first of these lines show us that, whatever she's managing to do, it makes her a walking miracle, which takes us back to the title; Lazarus was miraculously raised from the dead by Jesus. So, if we can make that connection, it's coming back from the dead that our speaker is managing every ten years, and that's what she's managed to do again.

Note that, between lines four and five, we see an example of enjambment—a thought being split between two lines. The split, in this case, divides the lines between the image of skin and the disturbing image of the Nazi lampshade.

Yep, that's right. Lady Lazarus compares herself to a "Nazi lampshade," to a "paperweight" and to "Jew linen."

What's up with all of the Holocaust references? Well, the poem was written in 1962, so World War II and the Holocaust weren't that far in the past. The atrocities of the Nazis still reverberated intensely in the world's imagination.

So let's break these comparisons down. Lady Lazarus is comparing herself to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The Nazis used the dead bodies of the slaughtered Jews in the production of objects, including (according to the rumors) lampshades and paperweights. (Are you feeling disgusted? We're not surprised; this is some pretty sick stuff we're dealing with.)

Lady Lazarus is making a whole bunch of metaphors and similes here. She is a living version—a "walking miracle"—of a lampshade made out of the bodies of murdered human beings. Sick. The things for which her body is being used are so mundane that it's insulting—lampshades, paperweights. Her body is dead, torn apart to furnish someone else's living room or office.

Are you thinking to yourself: whoa, Lady L, that is a seriously intense metaphor? Have you been through a Holocaust? Do you really want to compare yourself to the Jewish victims of the Nazis? If you are thinking those thoughts, well, you're not alone. Some people think that Plath goes too far in her Holocaust metaphors. Some people disagree and think that they are the best way for her to express her pain.

Lines 10-15

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Lady Lazarus knows she's freaking us out in this poem, and addresses us—her audience—directly. She tells us to "peel off the napkin," to (figuratively) reveal her face. She calls us her "enemy." Thanks, Lady L, for making us feel welcome in your poem.

And for you Bible scholars out there, line 11 may be using a biblical allusion to Micah 7:8, in a moment in which the Jews address an enemy and then say: "Though I have fallen / I will rise." It's one of the many moments in the poem in which Lady Lazarus imagines that she has an intense connection with the Jewish people, although we're not quite sure who her enemy is—the Nazis? Death? Us? (Yikes.)

This address to the audience is called an apostrophe. Lady Lazarus speaks to several different audiences throughout the poem, but in this moment, she seems to be talking directly to us (shiver).

She then asks if she terrifies us, and our answer is: yes, obviously. Lady Lazarus knows how to wield power. We're quaking in our boots over here. And, Lady L keeps at it. She describes what she looks like, and even this simple act takes on a grotesque tone. She figures herself as a kind of living corpse, with "eye pits" instead of eyeballs, and "sour breath" that will disappear once she's actually dead—in a day.

This is some pretty intense imagery, if we do say so ourselves. Apparently, it's the zombie apocalypse, and Plath's here to tell us all about it.

Lines 16-24

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

The poem really starts to come together in these stanzas. Earlier, we had a whole bunch of grotesque bodily descriptions and references to Nazis. Now, Lady Lazarus gets more specific.

She's telling us that, soon—just as soon as the stale breath vanishes, we're guessing—the flesh that was eaten by her grave will feel at home on her.

In coming close to dying, it's like her grave ate her flesh. She has already started to rot. Lovely.

She tells us her age—thirty—and that she's smiling. What in the world does Lady L have to smile about? Maybe she's talking about how people see her. Maybe they're mistaking her grimace for a grin. Either way, it's a disturbing image in a poem about death.

Then she drops a little simile on us: she is like a cat. (Remember that old wives tale that says that cats have nine lives? That's what Plath is referring to here.) But instead of talking about the number of lives she has, she's talking about the number of deaths. Emo alert.

Lady Lazarus tells us that "this" is "Number Three." So she is somehow (in the imaginary time of the poem) experiencing her third death. If we think back to the first lines of them poem, we now know that the "it" is death.

But if she's dead, how is she speaking to us? And if she's alive, is she just playing dead? If she's just playing, where are her eyeballs? Why all the corpse imagery if she's alive? What's up with this flesh-consuming cave?

Unfortunately, we can't answer these questions. Fortunately, we're not supposed to! Plath's ambiguity here is so strong that it's impossible to decide if Lady L is dead or alive, and we think that's precisely the point.

We have to go with the poem's crazy logic and accept that the speaker can be dead and alive at the same time. In the world of the poem, even death is ambiguous.

Now, the speaker is giving more detail about her third time dying. Annihilation is a really cool word for destruction, so we're guessing that she feels as if she's been destroyed, once a decade.

Yet, she exclaims that she's trash. Her life, which is destroyed once every ten years, is nothing but trash in the first place. "Why not annihilate something worth destroying?" these lines seem to ask.

And let's not forget about form here. Notice all of the internal rhymes in these stanzas, in words like "grave," "cave," and "ate," and in "nine" and "die." There are so many rhymes that it feels like the poem is collapsing in on itself. Like Lady Lazarus's world is shrinking, and everything now sounds the same to her.

Lines 25-34

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

Though this line is in stanza 9, at first glance it could fit with either stanza 8 or stanza 9, sense-wise. Read a little more of the poem though, and it looks like this line elaborates on "What a trash," from line 23.

Regardless of where this line fits in the context of the poem, you might be asking, what in the world does it mean?

Well, filaments are like tiny little strings. You can have filaments of gold, filaments of hair, filaments of wire, filaments of cells. A filament can also be a tiny part of a flower, or the wire inside a light bulb, which is the part that actually lights up.

We think that, though our speaker took all of those meanings into account, she's imagining her own body as a million little strands of fine linen.

And, as she said in lines 23 and 24, these filaments are trash, to be annihilated each decade. Now Lady Lazarus imagines that she's in front of a "peanut-crunching crowd." We're imagining she's at a circus or a carnival. And, it turns out, she's the main event. Folks are so excited, they're shoving their way in to see her.

The crowd unwraps her clothing, and she's forced into an imaginary striptease. They can see her body parts—her hands, her knees, her skin and bone. This is another violent set of stanzas. In this imaginary scene, Lady Lazarus loses control of her body. It seems fun for the crowd—they are crunching peanuts, after all, but this is a violent experience for Lady L. She is an object of spectacle for a hungry crowd.

But, she tells us, she is the "same, identical woman." What does Lady L mean here? We can think of two options:

One, she's the same naked as she was clothed, which means that she is the same before and after her public stripping. In other words, this experience hasn't changed her.

Or, we could take a different tack. She is the same woman now as she was before her death. (This scene, after all, is happening in the kind of life-death limbo that Lady L is imagining.)

Our speaker is stressing that though she's come back from the dead, she hasn't changed. There has been no metamorphosis, and yes, it's truly her, coming back again, and not some twin pretending to be her. Her feat, of coming back from the dead, was real.

Finally, note the weird power dynamic going on in this poem. Lady L seems so in control of her precise, curt language, but this contrasts with the powerlessness that she feels as an object (or even a victim) of the crowd. And let's not forget that she casts herself not just as the object of a circus spectacle, but also as a Holocaust victim.

So who ultimately has the power in the poem? It's up for you to decide!

Lines 35-42

The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

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

Here, Lady Lazarus decides to fill us in a bit on her first two lives, or really, her first two deaths. Once again, we have that mysterious "it"—but now we know that that "it" equals "death."

Or, does it? We might try to be a bit more accurate. We find out in these lines that Lady L's first "death" was an accident. Her second death was on purpose, though. She "meant" to "not come back at all." But, she was found and brought back to life.

With all of this information in mind, it's a little clearer what's going on. Lady L is talking about all of the times that she almost died. She doesn't actually have nine lives, not even in the world of the poem.

To sum up, she once came close to death because of an accident when she was ten. Then, she tried to commit suicide and failed.

Sylvia Plath, by the way, tried to commit suicide during her college years. She took a whole bunch of sleeping pills and then hid in the crawl space of her mother's house. (She writes about this incident in her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*.)

Plath uses a pretty powerful simile here; she says that she "rocked shut / as a seashell." She creates a powerful image of Lady Lazarus, all curled up, trying to shut the world out, trying to harden and die.

Then "they"—whose who want to rescue her, have to repeatedly call for her, and pick worms off of her as if they're pearls. Are the worms real? Are they in her imagination? We can't know for sure, but the simile comparing worms to "sticky pearls" creates another image in our minds—this time of an oyster, all shut up. And it connects that shut-up sea creature with death, when a body becomes worm food, not to put too fine a point on it. It's as if, even though she survived, she was already dead, just for a little bit. The worms were already eating her.

Lines 43-50

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

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.

Here, Lady Lazarus tells us what is perhaps the greatest truth of this poem: dying is an art. It may not be an art for everyone, or even for anyone other than Lady L, but she certainly turns her death into art (i.e., she turns it into this poem).

These line breaks, which use enjambment, are genius. When we read "dying" on the first line of this stanza, we'd expect something depressing to follow.

Instead, when we jump down to the next line, we hear that dying is an art and apparently that everything else is an art, too. This means that brushing your teeth, driving to school or work, even going to the bathroom—that's art. Imagine an entire reality T.V. show, dedicated to the art of brushing one's teeth.

But the focus here is on death—if life is art, these lines suggests, then death must be art, too. And our speaker says she's an artistic genius at dying—she does it very well.

Or...wait a second. If she's come close, but not quite made it to death three times, she's actually quite awful at the art of dying.

So, dying isn't necessarily the art she does well—it's coming back from being almost dead she's a rock star at.

Things start getting really rhythmic here. The poem doesn't have a strict meter, but in this moment, patterns emerge. We have the rhymes of "well" and "hell" and all of the slant rhymes of "real," "call," and "cell."

The beginning of the lines repeat each other (this is called anaphora) and have similar word choice (also known as diction), which means they have the same rhythm. The rhythm is fast and biting. We almost feel like Lady Lazarus is taunting us—like she's daring at us to challenge her. This is a lady who knows how to be forceful when she needs to be (which is apparently right now).

And she tells us that she does "it" (again, that mysterious "it") so that it "feels like hell" and "feels real." Or, in other words, she comes close to death—or, to be more explicit, she attempts suicide—so that she can feel something. She's drawn to death; she has "a call."

Usually, death is something that happens to us; it's not something that we have control over or choose to do. But here, Lady Lazarus is taking control over her own death. Perhaps she's using suicide to express her control over her life. It's a strange way of thinking about death, that's for sure, but we wouldn't put it past ol' Sylvia.

We can now be sure that we're listening to the thoughts of an extremely depressed and disturbed person. Of course, part of the wonderfulness of the poem is its grotesqueness, but in moments like these, it's hard to forget that behind these lines is probably severe mental illness.

Lines 51-64

It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

"A miracle!"
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

Now we are back in the realm of the circus or carnival; Lady Lazarus tells us that she's making a theatrical comeback. She represents her resurrection—her coming back to life—as a circus act.

She's quite the spectacle.

Someone—a brute—shouts that she's a "miracle." Well, we heard that before, way back in stanza 2.

She says that this "knocks her out." Usually this phrase is a metaphor for being surprised or amazed, but in this moment in the poem, it takes on a violent undertone, as if she's in a boxing match.

As Lady L says, "there is a charge." That means people have to drop some dough to see the spectacle she puts on. If people want to see her scars, they have to pay. They have to pay to hear her heart beat, and they have to pay a whole lot of money to hear her speak, to touch her, or to take a bit of her blood, hair, or clothes.

The items that she's "charging" for get increasingly more personal. The lowest "charges" are just for looking at her; the largest ones are for an actual piece of her (her blood, her hair). We think that Lady Lazarus is being figurative here. She's not actually at a circus, and she's not actually charging money for people to come and see her.

But the important thing is that this is how Lady L feels. She feels like she's in a circus act, like everyone wants to gaze upon her pain for their enjoyment. She feels like everyone wants a piece of her—her hair, her clothes, her heartbeat, her blood.

Notice that Lady Lazarus is always casting herself as a victim. First, she's a victim of the Nazis, who use her skin to make lampshades. Now, she's a circus freak who everyone wants to see to admire her pain. She may seem like a miracle to everyone else, but it sounds like our Lady just

wants to be left alone. And there's once again a contrast between Lady L's powerful voice, and the powerless roles in which she casts herself.

Is she a powerful woman? A hapless victim? Can she be both at the same time?

And we can't forget to mention the sounds, too. We've got the rhyme of "shout" and "out," plus the slant rhyme of "scars," "charge," and "heart." Once again, there's kind of a closed-in feeling in these stanzas. The sounds repeat themselves, just as our speaker keeps repeating this spectacle—dying and coming back to life.

Lines 65-72

So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Lady Lazarus's fixation on the Nazis returns in these lines. She addresses a Nazi figure—a doctor and enemy—and once again represents herself as a Jewish person in relation to him. ("Herr" is a German word that translates to "Mr." or "Sir.")

During the Holocaust, Nazi doctors performed a ton of cruel and lethal experiments on Jewish people. They also placed millions of Jews in gas chambers and crematoriums, and gassed or burned them alive. This is what Plath is referring to in these lines; she's setting herself up as a victim of the Nazis. She imagines that she's burning along with the Jews.

It also tells us who her enemy is—the doctor. Sure, she could just be figuratively speaking here, but we might assume that our speaker, who's clearly suffering from some sort of mental illness, is no fan of the doctors who keep bringing her back from the dead.

Lady L makes a whole bunch of metaphors to get her point across again. She's an "opus" (or piece of literary or musical work). She's a valuable. She's a "pure gold baby" "that melts to a shriek." (When gold melts, it doesn't melt into a shriek, and our speaker isn't actually a pure gold baby. But that's what she feels like, and we're betting, with all the pain she's feeling, she's doing a good bit of real-life shrieking.)

Lady L is continuing the references to the Nazi crematoriums, in which the Nazis burned the possessions of the Jews along with the human beings. She's also describing herself as something that belongs to others, once again casting herself as a victim with no control over her life.

These lines make us think, if the speaker is so valuable to the doctor, then maybe she's not the one charging for little pieces of herself after all. Maybe, it's the doctor who is charging people, and letting them take little bits of the speaker. He's reaping all of the profits of her pain. This

aligns with the view of the doctor as German—during World War II, the Germans profited from the possessions and labor of the Jewish people whom they massacred. And the final line here is ironic; Plath knows that Nazis were not concerned for the well-being of the Jews.

Did you notice that intense rhyme of "burn" and "concern"? The rhyme underlines the fact that the Nazis, in fact, have absolutely no concern for the burning and gassing of millions. What do you make of the fact that Plath, through Lady Lazarus, is making all of these references to the Holocaust? Is she trivializing a horrific event that led to the death of millions?

Or is she making a legitimate comparison in an attempt to convey to us how terrible her pain really is? It's a question that's ripe for debate.

Lines 73-81

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Lady Lazarus extends the Holocaust metaphor even further here. She imagines that in this, her third death, she has been burned alive in a concentration camp crematorium. She imagines a Nazi looking through the crematorium after it has burned its victims; there's only "ash, ash." There is no flesh or bone.

There are few remnants of the human beings burned alive inside: just a wedding ring and a gold filling. The Nazis used to turn whatever remains they could find into soap (we can't help but experience revulsion over here), and Lady L imagines that the Nazi sees the future soap he will make out of these ashes and traces of human bodies. Ugh.

Lady Lazarus's tone here starts to change. Earlier in the poem, she seemed pretty powerless. Everyone was watching her, or so she imagined. But now that she's dead, she imagines herself in a position of power. Instead of being watched by Nazis, she herself is watching the Nazis poke around in the crematorium. She is the seer, not the object to be seen.

And she seems to be building to a crescendo in these lines; she says "beware / beware"—as if she is about to warn the Nazis of something. Plus, Herr Doktor has transformed into Herr God, Herr Lucifer. In other words, she's comparing this doctor to both God and the devil—all male figures who seem to have power over her in some way. At least for now.

These bewares, by the way, may be a reference to Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan," which features the lines "And all who heard should see them there, / And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!"

Lady Lazarus just might be comparing herself to Kubla Khan—the wild man with flashing eyes—in this famous Romantic poem.

The speaker's voice is taking on some serious strength here. She's straight-up warning God and the devil. What exactly does she have planned?

Lines 82-84
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

This is what we've been waiting for: Lady Lazarus rises again. Boom goes the dynamite. Take that, Herr Doktor.

She imagines that she's been burnt to death by the Nazis, but here she resurrects. She stays true to her name. But unlike the Lazarus in the Bible, she doesn't need Jesus (or anyone) to make her resurrection happen. She does it all on her own.

She may share her name with Lazarus the Bible character, but here, Lady L seems a lot more like the phoenix, a mythical bird that bursts into flames and then is reborn out of its ashes. And then, once she has resurrected, what does she do? She "eat[s] men like air." Does this mean that she eats men as if they were nothing, like air is nothing? Do they taste like nothing to her? Does she eat only unsubstantial men? Does this line refer to men and only men, or does it encompass women, too (as in, mankind)?

And why does she eat these men? Is she hungry? (Probably not.) Is this her way of gaining power and control? Is this a way for her to control the meaning of her own death? Perhaps she refuses to be killed by the Nazis again in her next life, and vows to take control of her death and plan it her way.

There are lots of ambiguities at the end of this poem, which leaves a lot of room for interpretation, so get cracking, folks.

But if we just had to tell you our most favorite interpretation, we'd tell you this: in this poem, death offers Lady L the possibility of control—and that control is what Lady Lazarus is really looking for.