
The Cultural And Intellectual Legacy Of Lady Lazarus

Lady Lazarus (1965) is arguably Sylvia Plath's most renowned literary piece, drawing upon a series of historical and artistic influences to render the poet's attempt to not only define the 'self' but re-construct it. As a part of Plath's final collection of poems, Lady Lazarus assumes an autobiographical nature; however, more recent critics have acknowledged the need to re-evaluate the poem's situation as "an unmediated transcription of life." Lady Lazarus can be understood through a multitude of theoretical and cultural lenses, encompassing contentious themes that cross into the bounds of the 21st century. This piece brilliantly demonstrates the significance of the Humanities in contemporary society, as it manipulates a poetic voice that allows for the reconstruction of individual identity and re-defines the human experience. The intellectual significance of this piece is evident through its primary features, as Plath revises the means for self-conception through the transfiguring of a female-self. Consequently, the poem reveals the historical and cultural forces that have shaped its central feminist, suicidal and religious influences, developing a legacy that remains well-versed in contemporary times.

Plath's tendency to deliver works as a confessional mode of writing enables her to challenge and criticise the normative structures that conform to mainstream literary canons, yet it is this very sensibility that demonstrates the intellectual significance of Lady Lazarus; the logic of self-identification becomes the primary power for confessional poetry. This poem can be viewed as a form of 'social criticism', attaching new meaning to the human experience as Plath constructs a poetic voice from a marginalised perspective. For contemporary readers, this work can be seen as a means for understanding the 'self' independent of social structures, further demonstrating its strong didactic intentions. Critic Jon Rosenblatt recognises that the collective use of personal and historical material allows the text to invent new social and emotional structures previously untouched in modern poetry. However, in order for this work to have any meaning for the modern reader, Plath universalises the enactment of personal suffering, detaching her individual self from the text to establish a sense of collective human experience. Consequently, this is a key feature of Lady Lazarus, as 'the self' is realised through a variety of experiences, unbound from traditional and oppressive constraints. Furthermore, Plath's exploration into selfhood is better understood through the application of cultural and theoretical lenses. The text's alignment with diverse, potent and contentious themes reinforce its intellectual significance. Meaning can be attained through reading Lady Lazarus with a feminist lens, whereby Plath's body is employed to represent the universal suffering of women. The poem's rejection of the realist mode underpins the universalisation of the experience of her body, as the text loses its connection to Plath's real and particular body. This use of the body is heavily reliant on a strong logic of identification by which readers substitute their own human experience. Lady Lazarus also encompasses themes of 'death' and 're-birth' that are often referenced to in religious context, revealing a struggle for power that leads to her eventual destruction. Plath constructs a 'heroine' that resurrects like Lazarus, a biblical reference that is developed upon throughout the text, as she writes "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air." However, it is Plath's adept ability to regender the male Lazarus into a female voice that allows her to challenge the oppressive structures. As a result, the poem can be interpreted as a fight for control over her own life and body in the face of an imposing patriarchal society. From the time of its publication, there has been an incessant stream of critical interpretations that render the significant intellectual contributions of Lady Lazarus. The

conflation of self-conceptive, feminist, and religious sensibilities allows Plath to challenge social discourses, while brilliantly rendering the role of the Humanities in defining the human experience and identity.

In its effort to subvert from the social norms of the 1950s and the 1960s, *Lady Lazarus* reveals the cultural and historical forces that encouraged it to do so. The literary and historical context for Plath's work is remarkably broad, addressing a number of traditions that are often associated with the 'middle generation' of American poets; *Lady Lazarus* thus joins the breakthrough of confessional poetry. Sylvia Plath was writing between the first two waves of modern feminism, as this work foreshadows many of the issues that women of subsequent decades began to pursue. Interestingly, Plath's writing does not necessarily fit into one particular tradition or frame, rather her life sits between the depression of the 1930s, the apprehension of World War II, and the oppression of the Cold War (often correlated to its ambiguous nature). Elisabeth Bronfen recognises Plath's lack of relative situation as an indicator for "her deeply ingrained sense of belonging nowhere," as she fails to assimilate with a specific cultural identity. However, Claire Raymond challenges this notion, believing that Plath's posthumous voice is what allows her to eventually identify with a cultural space, as self-elegy marks the text's crucial interaction and assimilation with a social and historical force. Therefore, it is now after her death that we as readers can provide context to *Lady Lazarus*. Raymond further suggests that the nineteenth-century opened women's writing to the post-Romantic influences (more explicitly self-elegy), exploring how Plath's adaptations and alterations of elegiac conventions indicates the transfiguring of a female-self. Sylvia Plath was writing before radical feminism had truly started to challenge the governing patriarchal norms of Western culture in a post-war era. During the time of its publishment, the 'Women's Liberation Movement' gained its momentum, continuing to influence literary works in the ensuing years. Consequently, *Lady Lazarus* is heavily related to the oppressive functions that were being challenged in the 1960s. In a much broader context and moving away from the clear feminist theme of *Lady Lazarus*, Plath displays a tendency to also reference the Holocaust throughout her work. Her personalised treatment of this event stems from her sense of connection to it (reasons for this connection primarily related to her education), as she uses her poetry to identify the Holocaust's conflictual place in our culture. In *Lady Lazarus*, Plath borrows the religious marvel of Lazarus, the transcending power of the phoenix, her rejection of the 'house wife' role, and the terror of the Holocaust to permeate a transitioning of selfhood, whereby cultural and historical forces form the very foundation to her sense of identity.

The legacy of *Lady Lazarus* is evident through Plath's enduring voice, as she takes her personal pain and shapes it into something universal, something significant to the whole culture. Even after her suicide in 1963, Plath's poetry continued to be heard, as many identified how she wrote so cogently and so ambitiously yet was so deeply troubled that her works became some sort of a fantasy—her art was able to transcend her dysfunction. More specifically, Plath is recognised for the enduring legacy she has left for female readers. Alongside *Lady Lazarus*, her poems offer a narrative of selfhood, which appeal especially to young female readers who find themselves searching for a version of themselves in literature. Readers relate to *Lady Lazarus'* mythic, fiery, and emotionally charged persona, demonstrating that a poem can do more than simply observe human nature—literature is capable of assisting in the realisation of the self. With the constant publication of the Plath legacy, this work leaves us with the fleeting pain and the poetic expression of the complete intricacies of life. Her work has only grown and intensified since her death, continuing to magnify the interknitted relationships between individuals inside social hierarchies and networks; through Plath's work, the oppressed and subjugated plead for

their own voice. In her essays on Sylvia Plath, Anita Helle acknowledges that the growing recognition of Plath's legacy has come to be a part of a larger cultural and historical conversation. There is still much controversy surrounding Plath and her bodies of work (such as *Lady Lazarus*) in regards to their place in contemporary cultural traditions, as her modernist legacy reveals the problem with modern authorship. Jacqueline Rose observes, "...aided and enlarged by the means of confessionalism in the 1950s and 1960s...a problem of modern authorship that arises from identifying the textual remains of the writer with the preservation of the literal body of the private individual..." The continual study of Plath's work opens up new avenues for understanding how her cultural and social influences engaged in her creative life, accommodated by an ever-expanding body of criticism.

The phoenix which dwells in Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* is reborn through each individual reading of her work, as it becomes not only Plath's personal and poetic expression, but rather a universal means for understanding the re-construction of the 'self'. *Lady Lazarus* encompasses contentious themes that cross into the bounds of the 21st century, challenging structural and social norms, it is for these very tendencies that demonstrate the works enduring intellectual significance. Through *Lady Lazarus*, Plath reveals the cultural and historical forces that shape her work, whereby she develops a legacy that remains well-versed in contemporary times; as a result, this piece becomes a poetic sensibility for understanding the human experience.