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Sylvia Plath: The Real Life Lady Lazarus

Michele Herrman

A few old, rotting fireplace logs blocked the hole mouth. I shoved them back a bit. Then I set the glass of water and the bottle of pills side by side on the flat surface of one of the logs and started to heave myself up....

Then, one after the other, I lugged the heavy, dust-covered logs across the hole mouth. The dark felt thick as velvet. I reached for the glass and bottle, and carefully, on my knees, with a bent head, crawled to the farthest wall.

Cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths. Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow. I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one by one (Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 138).

With this near-fatal suicide attempt at age 20, Sylvia Plath "rocked shut/ As a seashell." As she came back to life and they picked "the worms off [her] like sticky pearls," Plath became Lady Lazarus, the seemingly indestructible resurrection who purged and asserted herself by repeatedly tempting death. "A sort of walking miracle," she thought that "like the cat [she had] nine times to die." When the poem "Lady Lazarus" was written in October of 1962, four months before her final, fatal suicide, Plath had already survived two brushes with death: her near-overdose at 20, and her intentional car crash in the summer of 1962. "Lady Lazarus" is key to examining her compulsion to suicide; the poem is a description of the ritualistic process by which Plath attempted to reach toward and then reject her dead father, thus being reborn as a stronger, more complete self.

The root of Plath's depression was very possibly in her genes, as the women on her father's side of the family had a history of mental instability (Wagner-Martin, 110); however, the circumstances surrounding her father's death and her inability to grieve properly provided the necessary trigger for her problems. For years before his death, Otto Plath suffered from what he thought was cancer, but stubbornly refused to seek treatment. When his condition worsened and he was forced to get help, he found that he did not have cancer, but a form of diabetes which would have been treatable if he had seen a doctor earlier. He died in 1940 following a diabetes-related leg amputation, leaving his wife and children sad for their loss, but angry since it could have been prevented. Sylvia was especially affected by his death; she had spent all of her eight-year life trying to please her ailing, frequently absent father, alternating between feelings of devotion and dislike for the man. At times she had "wished her father dead so that she would not have to play quietly" (Wagner-Martin, 135); when he did actually die, she did not know whether to blame him, or herself. Her grieving process was also complicated by her mother; attempting to protect her young children from the idea of death, Aureilia Plath did not cry in front of them, nor did she let them see their father's body, or even allow them to attend the funeral or burial. This virtual

denial of his death could very well have been at the root of Sylvia's gradually building obsession with it.

A. Alvarez, Plath's close friend and the writer of her memoir, describes how Plath's need for a connection with her father did not dissipate over time, but intensified until she began to risk death to be close to him:

God knows what wound the death of her father had inflicted on her in her childhood, but over the years this had been transformed into the conviction that to be an adult meant to be a survivor. So, for her, death was a debt to be met once every decade: in order to stay alive as a grown woman, a mother, a poet, she had to pay- in some partial, magical way- with her life. But because this impossible payment involved also the fantasy of joining or regaining her beloved dead father, it was a passionate act, instinct as much with love as with hatred and despair (196-97).

This ambivalence toward death is very apparent in "Lady Lazarus." While she boasts about her technique and indestructibility, "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well," it is still ugly to wear "the flesh/ The grave cave ate" and it "feels like hell." She seemed to relish the dirtiness and coldness of her first suicide attempt, as if the gravelike atmosphere of the cellar and her rescue after three days in a drug-induced coma had given her special powers of resurrection.

Yet she did not harm herself solely out of a drive for self-destruction. As Alvarez stated, it was the aspect of "regaining her beloved dead father" that gave the act its passion- its love and its hatred. While Plath loved and missed her father, she also resented his lack of time for her while he was alive, and looked at his refusal to seek treatment for his illness as intentional abandonment (Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 279-80). Axelrod uses Freud's theory on mourning and melancholia to explain how Plath's ambivalence toward her father led to self-destructive behavior:

The melancholic does not gradually withdraw libido from the lost object, as the normally grieving person does, but rather identifies the ego with the abandoned object. . . . Just as the wish to recover" the lost object causes the melancholic to incorporate it into the self, so resentment causes the melancholic to reproach the lost object or even to want "to kill" it once it is there. Freud concludes that sufferers usually "succeed, by the circuitous path of self punishment, in taking revenge on the original object.... It is this sadism alone that solves the riddle of the tendency to suicide. . ." (26-27).

Thus, Plath's suicides take on triple significance: the act of hurting herself was a way to "reproach the lost object," or harm the part of her father within her; the process of dying was a way to "recover" her father, whom she loved and missed; and resurrection was triumph over her father. As she broke the bond that led to her self-destructiveness, she asserted her self-hood. The uglier the act and the closer it came to completeness, the more triumphant the return.

Plath's "resentment" towards her father, and her desire to "reproach" him for abandoning her and for maintaining a hold on her after his death,

is especially evident in her characterization of him as a Nazi, and of herself as one of his Jewish victims. "Herr Doktor" has torn her apart and made objects from her pieces, her "skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade," her "right foot/ A paperweight," and her "face a featureless, fine/ Jew linen." However, she triumphs over his torture as she rises from the grave, wrapped like a mummy, and does "the big strip tease" for the "peanut crunching crowd." It would be easy for her to kill herself and "stay put," but that is not her point. By tempting death and surviving, she little by little exorcises the demon of her father, and takes pleasure in the "theatrical/ Comeback in broad day."

Yet it was next to impossible for Plath to thoroughly exorcise her father, because he appeared to her in other forms- other men:

I rail and rage against the taking of my father, whom I have never known; even his mind, his heart, his face, as a boy of 17 I love terribly. I would have loved him; and he is gone. . . I lust for the knowing of him; I looked at Redpath at the wonderful coffee session at the Anchor, and practically ripped him up to beg him to be my father; to live with the rich, chastened, wise mind of an older man. I must beware, beware of marrying for that. . . (Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 128).

Despite Plath's acute self-awareness, despite knowing that she sought her father in the men she dated, she still married British poet Ted Hughes, who was unfaithful and eventually deserted her. It was shortly after he left her that she wrote "Lady Lazarus"; more than likely, the separation reminded her of her father and renewed her sense of abandonment. In her journals, she often equated Hughes and her father, writing that her father was a sort of "god-creator risen to be [her] mate in red" (223). And as their marriage weakened, she wrote of a fight: "He knew how I love him and felt, and yet wasn't there. Isn't this an image of what I feel my father did to me?" (279 -80). According to Alvarez, the loss of Hughes caused Plath to experience again "the same piercing grief and bereavement she had felt as a child when her father, by his death, seemed to abandon her" (210); the image of the wedding ring in the pile of ash left by her burned body clearly shows her pain and anger towards her husband's departure.

"Lady Lazarus" was written, then, at the climax of Plath's love and hate for her father and husband. Though they tortured her, burned her, she thought she had the power to triumph over the men who had hurt her, to be reborn like the phoenix:

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

But on February 11, 1963, Plath tempted death for the third time, and lost. When she placed her head in her oven that morning and turned on the gas, she did not want to die; she actually arranged to be found, hiring a nanny who was supposed to arrive at her flat in time to save her, and even leaving a note giving her doctor's name and number (Alvarez, 210). But this time, the real life Lady Lazarus did not rise from the grave; the ritual of death and resurrection went awry. Ironically, her death seemed to

validate her work in the eyes of publishers. The previously rejected poems of *Winter Trees* and *Ariel* suddenly became worthy of publication. We can only wonder what powerful poetry would have come next, had she resurrected once more. As Anne Sexton wrote in a letter on January 20, 1967, "the loss of it, the terrible loss of the more she could have done!" (Wagner-Martin, title page).

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