

## Margaret Dickie: On "Lady Lazarus"

Plath's late poems are full of speakers whose rigid identities and violent methods not only parody their torment but also permit them to control it. The peculiar nature of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" defies ordinary notions of the suicide. Suicide is not the joyous act she claims it to be in her triumphant assertion that she has done it again. Her confidence, at the moment of recovery, that her sour breath will vanish in a day and that she will soon be a smiling woman is a perverse acceptance of her rescuers' hopes, although she calls her rescuers enemies. The impulse of the speaker is the overwhelming desire to control the situation. She is above all a performer, chiefly remarkable for her manipulation of herself as well as of the effects she wishes to have on those who surround her. She speaks of herself in hyperboles, calling herself a "walking miracle," boasting that she has "nine times to die," exclaiming that dying is an art she does "exceptionally well," asserting that "the theatrical/ Comeback in broad day" knocks her out. Her treatment of suicide in such buoyant terms amounts to a parody of her own act. When she compares her suicide to the victimization of the Jews, and when she later claims there is a charge for a piece of her hair or clothes and thus compares her rescued self to the crucified Christ or martyred saint, she is engaging in self-parody. She employs these techniques partly to defy the crowd, with its "brute / Amused shout:/ 'A miracle!' " and partly to taunt her rescuers, "Herr Doktor," "Herr Enemy," who regard her as their "opus." She is neither a miracle nor an opus, and she fends off those who would regard her in this way.

The techniques have another function as well: they display the extent to which she can objectify herself, ritualize her fears, manipulate her own terror. Her extreme control is intimately entwined with her suicidal tendencies. If she is not to succumb to her desire to kill herself and thus control her own fate, she must engage in the elaborate ritual which goes on all the time in the mind of the would-be suicide by which she allays her persistent wish to destroy herself. Her control is not sane but hysterical. When the speaker assures the crowd that she is "the same, identical woman" after her rescue, she is in fact telling them her inmost fear that she could (and probably will) do it again. What the crowd takes for a return to health, the speaker sees as a return to the perilous conditions that have driven her three times to suicide. By making a spectacle out of herself and by locating the victimizer in the doctor and the crowd, rather than in herself, she is casting out her terrors so that she can control them. When she boasts at the end that she will rise and eat men, she is projecting her destruction outward. That last stanza of defiance is really a mental effort to triumph over terror, to rise and not to succumb to her own victimization. The poet behind the poem allows Lady Lazarus to caricature herself and thus to demonstrate the way in which the mind turns ritualistic against horror. Although "Lady Lazarus" draws on Plath's own suicide attempt, the poem tells us little of the actual event. It is not a personal confession, but it does reveal Plath's understanding of the way the suicidal person thinks.

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Sylvia Plath [2]

**Author:**

Margaret Dickie [3]

**Poem:**

Lady Lazarus [4]

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