



LADY LAZARUS

By Sylvia Plath

Who is Lazarus?

- Lazarus is a character from the New Testament who dies, and whom Jesus brings back to life in the Gospel of John.
- Plath imagines herself to be the female equivalent of Lazarus.
- Despite several attempts at suicide, she always manages to come back to life.

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

- 'It' refers to her attempt at suicide.
- Note the form of the stanza- tercet.

*A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.*

•She compares herself to a Holocaust victim, reminding readers of the atrocities Jews were subjected to.

- The brutality of the Nazis still reverberated in the imagination of the people.
- The Nazis used the dead bodies of the slaughtered Jews in the production of objects, including (according to the rumors) lampshades and paperweights.
- Walking Miracle- a living being made of the dead bodies of several dead people, who successfully defeats death.

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.

- This enemy can be a Nazi, a male counterpart, even the reader who represents the curious general populace.
- She has just given the readers the fright of their lives (Look at the images in the preceding lines).

• She compares herself to a Jew, who is seen as “featureless,” lacking any essential identity, but Plath calls the enemy to peel off the napkin, a sort of mask the enemy had made for her, so that her real identity that lies beneath, is revealed, thus terrifying them.

• She considers herself a living corpse (nose, eye sockets instead of eyeballs, skeletal set of teeth and the decaying smell of a dead body) that would soon disappear after her death.

*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.*



- Soon, she would die.
- The smile can be indicative of her triumph over death despite repeated attempts at suicide. She isn't an ordinary woman.
- There is a myth that cats have 9 lives. The last line alludes to this myth. But instead of focusing on the 9 lives, she says she has 9 encounters with death.

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

- This was her third attempt at suicide.
- She finds these once-a-decade destructions of her life, a complete waste. Each time, she uses suicide as a mode of erasing any progress she had made in life so far.

*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.*

- The speaker feels like an exhibit, something from a carnival or freakshow.
- Her trauma is treated with indifference by friends and family.
- The crowd has come to witness her resurrection.
- Lazarus was still in his grave clothes when Jesus restored life to him and later ordered them to be removed off his body.
- But this return from death hasn't changed her. She remains the same.

*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.*

- Her first brush with death was accidental. But her deliberate second attempt too was unsuccessful.
- In 1953, Plath crawled into the crawl space under her house and ate her mother's sleeping pills. She was down there three days.
- She creates a powerful image of Lady Lazarus, all curled up, trying to shut the world out, trying to harden and die.
- The reference to worms sticking onto her shows how close she was to death.

*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.*

- Dying is no less a skill than anything else in life. The speaker has attempted it a few times and now considers herself exceptional, a pro.
- She feels that suicide is easy enough to do, but it's doing it "theatrically" that makes it great art.
- Note, though, that the speaker doesn't just say that dying should be "theatrical," but that it should be a "theatrical / Comeback."
- This would seem to suggest that suicide should be faked or eluded in some way. Some evidence suggests that Plath expected to survive her final suicide attempt.

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.*

- The poet is so obsessed with the idea of self-destruction that she is dismayed when she returns to life.
- It is bad enough that she has returned, even worse is an audience applauding the event.
- Not only that, she returns to the same brute, perhaps her husband, who pretends to be happy on seeing her restored to life.

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.*

- Plath feels as if she's on exhibit, people clamoring and surrounding her, desperate to get a piece of her agony.
- She therefore declares that there is a charge for getting what they want, the price increasing depending on the value of the good.
- Whereas some people might feel flattered to be the center of such attention, Plath feels akin to a whore in the stocks: emotionally naked, vulnerable, and humiliated.
- She feels as though people will pay great money for a scrap of her, so that they can show it off.

*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.*

- She associates her existence with the role of Nazi doctor, whose job it was to return the oppressed and wounded Jew to health, to be further tortured. A perpetual cycle.
- In Nazi crematoriums, they burnt Jews along with their possessions. She looks at herself as someone's possession, a victim, with no control over her life.
- During World War II, the Germans profited from the possessions and labor of the Jews they massacred. Hence, she considers herself to be valuable to the German doctor.
- She considers herself their magnum opus, since she has emerged unscathed after the torture they had subjected her to.
- The last line is ironical-Nazis didn't have any sympathy for their Jewish victims.

*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.*

- She imagines her third death, that she had been burnt to death in a concentration camp crematorium. The Nazis who search the ashes find nothing remaining, except a wedding ring and a gold filling.
- The Nazis are thought to have rendered down the bodies of burned people for fat which could be used for soap.
- She directs her anger against both God and Satan who symbolise male power

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

- This is the climax she has been waiting for. She finally resurrects without the aid of Jesus, unlike Lazarus, like a phoenix (red-feathered).
- She compares herself to a chameleon that subsists on air. Chameleons are capable of changing themselves very well. The poet too considers herself transformed by her resurrection.
- Death too is a transformer, coming in many guises and eating men like air. There's a conflation between the speaker herself and the figure of death at the end.