

# Literary Cue Card: Poetry of Sylvia Plath

**POET:** Sylvia Plath

**BORN:** October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts

**DIED:** February 11, 1963, in London, England

## **SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE POET**

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, to Otto Plath, a professor of German and entomology (specializing in bees) at Boston University, and Aurelia Plath, a high school teacher. She had one brother, Warren, who was born two and a half years later. Soon after this, Otto's started to face health difficulties and suspected he had cancer. The family moved in 1936 to Winthrop, Massachusetts, which is where Plath grew to love the beautiful and powerful sea. In 1940, just after Plath's eighth birthday, her father died from complications due to diabetes mellitus (an easily curable disease) after a leg amputation surgery. This would have a strong effect on Plath later on in her life, and influence some of her poems. In 1942 after Otto's death, Aurelia moved the family to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where Plath stayed until college. She became a star academic student, acing all her courses and excelling in English and creative writing (her first poem was even published in the *Boston Herald* when she was eight).

In 1950, Plath attended an all girls' school, Smith College, on a scholarship. Here, she felt the stress and pressure of university. While at Smith, Plath's poetry was a lot more structured and light, focusing on the technical perfection of the poems, as opposed to the unconventional, dark poems of her later life that have much deeper meaning. In August 1953, Plath suddenly disappeared for several days and was found under her porch with an almost-empty bottle of sleeping pills. Between this time and the time she went to England (1955) Plath dated several young men. However in 1956, after she went to Cambridge University on a Fulbright Scholarship, she met Ted Hughes, also a poet as well as her future husband, whom she would marry in 1956.

In 1959 Plath became pregnant with their first child, Frieda. In 1960 she became pregnant again, but had a miscarriage. In 1962, their son Nicholas was born. In 1962, Plath found out about Ted's infidelity, and their relationship was severely strained. Soon after, the couple split up, and Plath was left alone with her two children. In February 1963, Plath committed suicide.

One of the main poetry movements during the 1950s and 60s, which influenced Plath, was confessional poetry. Confessional poetry is a style of poetry that emerged in the U.S. and is highly autobiographical and included the major topics of suicide and sexuality, just like are seen in many of Plath's poems.

## **PERSONAL REFLECTION On poet (a paragraph):**

I found Sylvia Plath's poetry as a whole to be quite enjoyable. Her poems were mostly well thought out, but at the same time very troubling. What I found most interesting about her poems were the myriad layers beneath the lines of each one. Although the analysis could be somewhat confusing at times, it was interesting to compare her poems based on the year they were written, to various events in her life, which often shined through in the form of allusions, metaphors, and other imagery/literary devices. Plath's poetry was also interesting because of the different devices it experimented with in each poem, not conforming to the typical poetic structure where there is a strict rhyme scheme, and various other conventions. For example, in the poem "You're," the title was like an apostrophe for each line of the poem. Overall, Plath's work, though thoroughly disturbing/depressing, was engaging.

## **1. Lady Lazarus 1962**

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**1-2 LINE SUMMARY:** The poem talks about a woman doing "it," which turns out to be death, but she keeps coming back, like a cat with nine lives. She talks about dying as an art and compares herself to the Holocaust victims. In the end she is resurrected again.

## LIST OF SIGNIFICANT SUBJECTS/PEOPLE, ALLUSIONS/CONNECTIONS, SYMBOLS, & ARCHETYPES

**HOLOCAUST:** Lady Lazarus talks about the Nazis, sympathizing with and feeling as though she was a Jewish victim from the Holocaust. This could possibly have something to do with her father, who was of German origin.

- Stanzas 2-4 use disturbing Nazi imagery to describe Lady Lazarus
- Stanzas 22-6: More imagery correlating with the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust, as well as alluding to the rumor/myth of several Nazi experiments

**REBIRTH & RENEWAL:** This concept juxtaposes the idea of death and deterioration that is talked about in most of the poem (see diction, juxtaposition).

- Stanza 7: “Like the cat I have nine times to die” ☒ simile that symbolizes that she is coming back and her time is not done
- Stanza 28: “Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair” ☒ symbolizes rebirth of a Phoenix, a mythical bird that bursts into flames and then is reborn from its own ashes

## BIBLICAL

- TITLE “Lady Lazarus”: Lazarus was a beggar in a Bible Parable, whom Jesus brought back from the dead ☒ connects with the rebirth, etc.
- “Herr God, Herr Lucifer”: Lucifer is associated with Satan, which is juxtaposition because it is placed next to God

## PLATH’S REAL LIFE

- Stanzas 1, 7-8, 12-3: allusions to her suicide attempts, which occurred when she was 21 with sleeping pills, and then when she was 30 in a car accident
- Stanza 28 “I eat men like hair”: she had many boyfriends in her earlier years

## LIST OF SHORT BUT SIGNIFICANT QUOTATIONS

“I have done it again./ One year in every ten/ I manage it --“ (1-3).

“A I am a smiling woman./ I am only thirty./ And like the cat I have nine times to die” (19-21).

“The peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see/ Them unwrap me hand and foot” (26-8).

“Dying/ Is an art, like everything else, I do it exceptionally well” (43-5).

“A cake of soap, A wedding ring, A gold filling” (76-8).

“Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air” (82-4).

**NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE:** The narrator is ‘Lady Lazarus’ herself. She seems to be reciting a monologue, addressing the reader/audience, though at times she addresses different characters, such as “Herr (Mr.) Doktor,” “Herr Enemy,” “Herr God,” and “Herr Lucifer.” This gives the effect that she is warning the reader towards the end, which intensifies the eerie, dark mood that the poem evokes. This almost seems as if it is a warning or a cry for help.

## TECHNICAL, STRUCTURAL, AND STYLISTIC STRATEGIES IN THE POEM

There are 28 stanzas, each with 3-lines (tercets).

Each line is relatively short and punchy, and there is ample *enjambment*, which gives the poem a choppy, forceful feeling. Examples of enjambment:

- My right foot/A paperweight

- My face a featureless, fine/Jew linen
- What a trash/To annihilate each decade
- The peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see/ Them unwrap me hand and foot
- The pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek

There is rhyme, but no set *rhyme scheme* or pattern. Examples of rhyme scheme:

- Line 1-2: again/ten
- Line 45-6, 8: well/hell/cell
- Line 63: charge...large/charge
- Line 73-4: turn...burn/concern
- Line 83-6: Beware/hair/air

*Alliteration*, *assonance*, and *consonance* are irregular and freewheeling, adding to the disturbed, unbalanced mood of the poem.

- *Alliteration*: face...featureless...fine; hearing...heart
- *Assonance*: nine...die; see...me...tease; touch/blood
- *Consonance*: seashell/call/well/hell/cell

*Synesthesia*: "melts to a shriek"

*Cliché*: "I have done it again."

There is *anaphora* of several phrases, but like the rest of the poem, there is no clear structure or pattern. Thus, there is irregularity that makes the poem sound untamed and fierce.

- The/A (followed by an object)
- I do it/ It's easy enough to do it; the same
- There is a charge
- Or a/ So
- I am your

*Diction* includes words that are very harsh and war-like, which goes along with the allusions to WWII and Nazis throughout the poem.

- Line 24 'annihilate' is a very aggressive, war-like term; 'Herr' means 'Mr.' in German
- Stanza 26 consists of imagery of rumored Nazi experiments (cake of soap ☒ soap made of human fat; wedding rings and gold fillings ☒ they were taken and melted down)
- Stanzas 23-4 "pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek" ☒ referencing melting of gold fillings and rings, as mentioned above

*Juxtaposition* of several concepts makes the death imagery and the darkness of the poem stand out even more.

- Stanza 22 the German word 'Doktor' is placed next to the English word 'enemy,' which is interesting because she didn't use German for 'enemy,' even though she is comparing herself to a Nazi (German) victim

- Stanza 27 “Herr God, Herr Lucifer”: Lucifer is associated with Satan
- Stanza 23 “I am your opus”: magnum opus means greatest work, and as a word has a connotation of finality, juxtaposing rebirth (see REBIRTH & RENEWAL)

Imagery: there is a lot of death imagery, describing a gruesome, deteriorating body, like a corpse oh a Jew from the Holocaust.

- Stanzas 5-6; Stanzas 11-17; Stanzas 21-2

Tone: The tone is mostly negative, though there are certain areas of ironical playfulness (e.. – “I am a smiling woman” and “peanut-crunching crowd,” which implies she is in a circus). The mood evoked from the reader is one that is very dark and depressing, as the ample death imagery as well as the stark juxtapositions leave the reader shocked and even horrified.

Shift: Amidst all the horrific imagery is the first mention of renewal/rebirth, in Stanza 7. After stanza 12, the poem starts to talk directly about Death, with less Nazi/Holocaust imagery. Around stanza 19, the theme of rebirth comes creeping in again.

**POSSIBLE QUESTIONS**: How does Sylvia Plath use symbolism and imagery in “Lady Lazarus”?