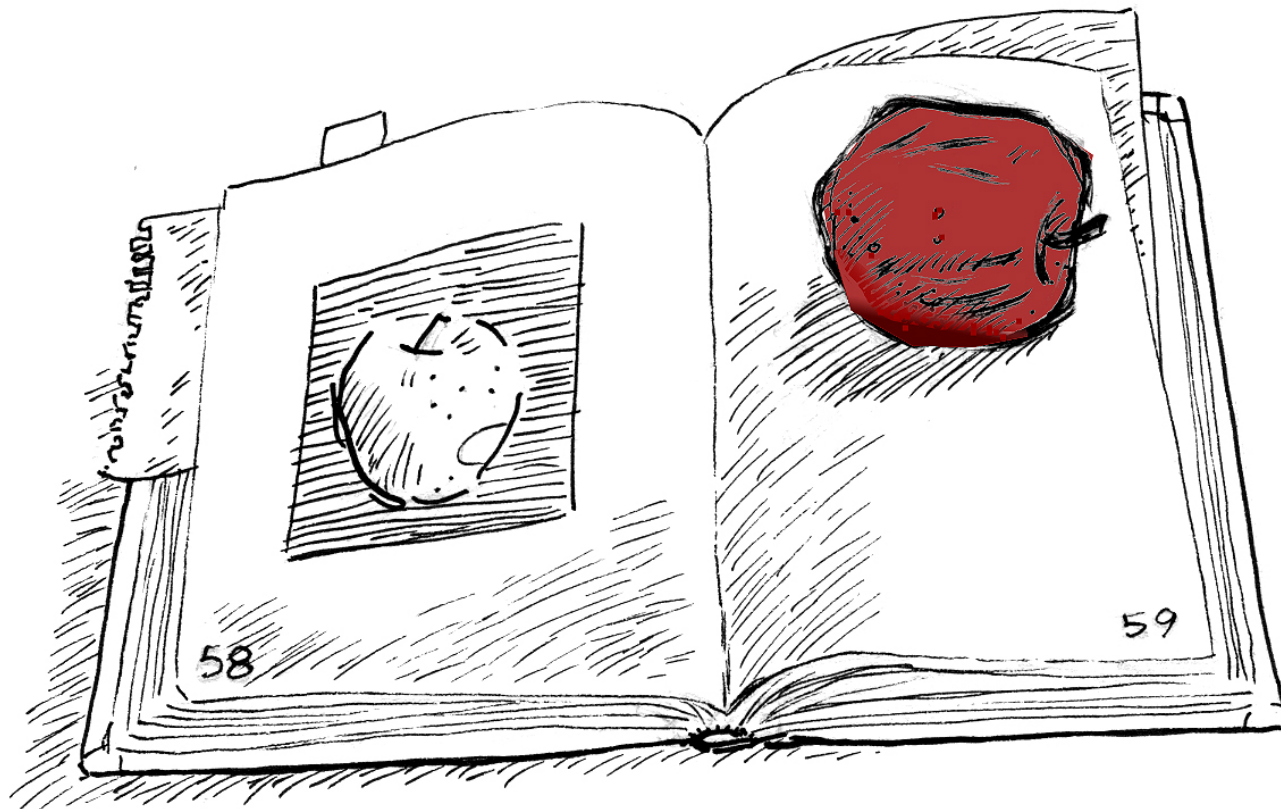


Sylvia Plath



Lady Lazarus

Plath's Version of Confessionalism promotes:

- personality of poet blurs into persona; *yet* keep in mind, until the reader uncovers Plath's biographical information the concentration remains on the poem itself as the focal point, not the life of the poet
- psychological portrayal of a character through monologue; to define what is meant by "experience" by exposing any possible subconscious influences in a character's waking life.
- stream of consciousness: the reader is lost in the thoughts of an intense interior monologue.
- over-embellishment of personality traits, using frank, painfully honest attitudes

Lady Lazarus

Confessional Poetry

- modern movement in poetry, begun in Fifties
- involves deeply personal themes with open, public confessions to the reader regarding the writer's inner self
- common themes include:
 - > depression
 - > sexual experimentation
 - > drugs
 - > mental illness
- taboo subjects such as suicide, abortion, menopause, and even mention of the female menstrual cycle were all common topics during this time
- subjects generally not accepted by the status quo of suburban America
- often uses pop cultural references and historical allusions

Lady Lazarus



Andreas Vesalius
De corporis humani fabrica libri septem

An anatomical ecorche print from 1555 depicting the dissection of human form. Plath utilizes a similar approach in her work, intentionally exposing herself physically and psychologically in a painful honest fashion— and in some regards using a hidden strategy.

Image from: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/historicalanatomies/vesalius_home.html

Lady Lazarus

What taboo topics are addressed in “Lady Lazarus”?

What pop cultural references does Plath use?

What allusions do you see in lines 25-30? (Numerous answers exist here.)

How does the persona’s dissatisfaction compare/contrast with Kate Chopin’s characterization of Louise Mallard in “A Story of an Hour” or even William Faulkner’s characterization of Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily”?

Lady Lazarus

Similarities with T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock":

- *psychological* sequence of thoughts opposed to *logical* sequences of information
- a monologue showing a private voice in a conversational tone with the persona speaking to herself; stream of consciousness
- the title serves as double meaning to the poem's multiple themes; what results is an heightened state of irony
- irregular rhyming patterns; free verse
- existence of multiple private associations and symbols; only the persona fully understands the significance of the representations

Lady Lazarus

Contrasts with T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock":

- regularized tercet stanzas
- allusions specific to recent history and pop culture of her time—
whereas Eliot uses mainly allusions to cultural, classic literature
- an *unnamed* persona, with a close tie-in to Plath's own personal history
and personal attitudes
- Plath's figure experiences an aspect of intense psychological trauma;
Eliot's persona is a victim of modern society or his own weaknesses
- a strong sense of triumph at the closure for Plath's persona;
on the other hand, Prufrock does not seem to learn from his rambling.
He is disconnected from himself and even from his fantasies.

Lady Lazarus

One Aspect of the Metaphoric Themes:

Multiple horrific lives — multiple dramatic deaths
result in a mundane, matter-of-fact look at
the life cycle of humans.

Lady Lazarus

One Aspect of the Metaphoric Themes:

Multiple horrific lives — multiple dramatic deaths
result in a mundane, matter-of-fact look at
the life cycle of humans.

- The newest *symbolic* suicide frees the persona, in a twisted logic, from further psychological trauma.
- The closure of the poem offers a triumph.

What mythical creation does she compare herself?

- She will begin *to attempt* to reconstruct new attitudes within the newest incarnation (or reinvention) of herself.

Lady Lazarus

Plath composed the poem in October 1962, and recited the poem for BBC radio, months before her death in February 1963. In her introduction for the reading she commented:

The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman. (294).

After several readings, what results is one can mirror the persona in the poem with Sylvia Plath's own biography—she leaves many personal symbols in the work which point directly to events in her life.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Ted Hughes, Editor. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.

Lady Lazarus

However, what is important to remember, the persona's narrative is *not* an exact duplicate of the poet; the voice is an over-exaggerated image of Plath's own emotions and psychological make-up.

Looking at Plath's own public statement about the poem's declarations, her theme is not an open confessional, but rather a discussion of paralysis.

Similar to one of Eliot's themes in "Prufrock": modern life dehumanizes and minimalizes the average individual to a point of bleak (and everlasting) existence.

Ted Hughes

In recent years, Sylvia Plath's poet-husband Ted Hughes published a collection of poetry which responds specifically to many of Plath's own work.

In 1998 the collection of work was published under the title: *Birthday Letters*; he dedicated it to his two children. In October of that same year he passed away at age of sixty-eight.

As a poet-of-worth himself, it is only natural that he would react to his former wife's actions in a similar fashion: emotional, symbolic poetry.

The collection consists of eighty-eight poems which directly address, with just two exceptions, Plath.

Ted Hughes

Until this time, Hughes never published work regarding the failed marriage nor about his estranged wife's suicide. Some critics view the book as a means of seeking redemption or as a means to avoid full blame for the dramatic incident.

In one poem in particular, simply titled "Suttee," he seems to specifically respond to the metaphors and symbols presented in Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus," utilizing extreme re-inventions of myth and dream-realities.

The title in fact relates to a Hindu belief where a widow throws herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband.