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Sylvia Plath As A Survivor

Sylvia Plath is a poet often summarized through her work in *The Bell Jar*, her poetry discussing mental health, or from what little readers know of her life aside from her untimely death. In actuality, Plath was not only a poet but also a student, a lover of nature, a mother, as well as a survivor. At the age of sixteen, Plath can be found writing to her mother stating that she is happy to observe the world, though she notes, “Every day is so precious I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older” (Popova 1). Sylvia Plath began writing from an early age and presumably used writing as a tool of reflection and therapy during harsh times in her life. Many of her writings happen to share the theme of death, whether the death is self-reflective or about another subject. Among three of Plath’s poems, “Lady Lazarus”, “Daddy”, and “Edge”, death is a common factor that is discussed, while the context of death varies greatly within each poem. Jeffrey Meyers, a biographer and art critic, summarizes Plath’s work “Lady Lazarus” and makes connections between the poem and Plath’s real-life suicide attempts (1). While the poem does allude to Plath’s suicide attempts, it is also a jarring criticism of society and how they view or treat the survivors of such attempts. Ultimately, Sylvia Plath was a survivor who used her poetry as a form of expression and survival, alongside her consistent themes of death and mortality.

Among Plath’s three poems “Lady Lazarus,” “Daddy,” and “Edge,” many criticisms are made of her work, whether such concerns pertain to her use of holocaust imagery or claiming

that she uses victimization as a tool in her poems, minimizing her work to nothing more than ramblings from her mental illness (Hughes 1). However, in the article “Toward a New Madwoman Theory: Reckoning the Pathologization of Sylvia Plath” by Maria Rovito from the University of Pennsylvania, arguments are made against the ableist nature of such discussions. Not only do criticisms aimed at Plath’s mental illness belittle her work and the weight that they carry, but the efforts of shrinking Plath’s poems to nothing more than side effects of her mental state discredit readers who may find inspiration from her works (Feirstein 1). A reader does not need to share the same mentality or life experiences with the poet to realize the impact of her work, so such factors should not be counted as negative when the poet’s work is being analyzed. Other dangers of such a summarization of character are shown through Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes. Hughes attempted to paint Plath in a negative light after her death, claiming that her mental state caused him and their children grief even, though he was the one to commit extramarital affairs that harmed their marriage (Rovito 320-321). Hughes claimed that Plath gained a disturbing obsession with the use of death imagery in her work in order to deal with her traumatic past and was unable to resist repeating the same messages in her work (Hughes 1). Boiling down Plath’s poems to a coping mechanism for her survival is trivializing the emotions and work she put into them, along with discrediting what else her poems might say aside from the outer layer of death themes. Though Sylvia Plath’s mental state often did affect and influence her most famous works including the extensive imagery of death, her should not be considered less worthy of being read or of the same quality if she had not lived a distressed life.

Death and mortality were common themes throughout Sylvia Plath’s life, both metaphorically in her poems and literally among herself and her loved ones. Plath’s father, though an inspiration of many of her poems, was a harsh figure in her life and died when she was

eight years old. The struggles Plath faced within her own mind are often reflected through her work, though her imagery touches many other topics important to her, such as patriarchy and motherhood. Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, was also a notable and negative figure in her life and is thought to have contributed to the downfall of her mental health. As noted in Plath's letters, Hughes was abusive, manipulative, and left Plath for another woman, leaving her alone to raise their two young children (Haven 1). Left alone to raise two children, it is no wonder that Plath struggled with maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a healthy mind. Despite such hardships, she continued to write poems and even published the semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* under a pseudonym, which would posthumously become a famous work that is even used in schools for mental health awareness (Kerrigan 1). While *The Bell Jar* focuses on new characters and disconnected versions of Plath's real-life experiences, such as the main character experiencing electroconvulsive therapy for depression as Plath once did, her poems highlight much more personal anecdotes in her life such as her relationship with her father and husband in "Daddy".

"Daddy" is one of Sylvia Plath's most famous and controversial poems, and explores her relationship with her authoritarian father, along with how she coped with his behavior after his death. Within the poem, the speaker confesses, "At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you" (lines 57-58), mirroring Plath's own attempts to take her own life. The speaker then explains, "But they pulled me out of the sack /And they stuck me together with glue/And then I knew what to do / I made a model of you" (lines 61-64), alluding to Plath's later life when she married Ted Hughes. Much like her strict father, Hughes was later revealed to be abusive to Plath and, according to some unreleased letters of hers, was thought to be the cause of her miscarriage during their marriage (Haven 1). The writing techniques that are used in "Daddy" express Plath's pain over her father's death and learning to cope with it. The anguish that Plath experienced

living with her father and her husband both worsened her mental state over time, attributing to her consistent themes of questioning mortality and life in her poetry.

Along with “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus” is a staple of Sylvia Plath’s poems, noted for its harsh comparison to Holocaust imagery and the abhorrent treatment of Jewish people in World War II, as well as modern societal judgement. The speaker notes, “A sort of walking miracle, my skin/Bright as a Nazi lampshade” (lines 4-5), giving a haunting reference to Nazi’s who once used the skin of concentration camp victims to form lampshades. Plath has faced backlash for such dramatic comparisons of pain and concerns that her metaphors trivialize the history of World War II (Strangeways 17-19). While critics against Plath’s imagery are understandable, the use of such comparisons are not used to insult real prisoner’s pain, but to accentuate the feeling of grief Plath experienced through universally understood figures. Along with Plath’s historical imagery, most notable is the theme of death in the poem, shown by the speaker stating, “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” (lines 35-38), referencing Plath’s past suicide attempts. One direct example is the mentioned “second time” in “Lady Lazarus”, when Plath attempted to end her life by taking her mother’s sleeping pills. When reviewed with a closer eye, readers can see that the poem is truly a reflection on others views of the speaker and Plath alike, as they struggle with living and being revived by force. The speaker notes, “The peanut-crunching crowd/Shoves in to see/Them unwrap me hand and foot/The big strip tease “(lines 26-29), showing her disdain for the way others view her has an object to be viewed for entertainment. In actuality, the speaker conveys, “At home on me/And I a smiling woman/I am only thirty/And like the cat I have nine times to die” (lines 19-21), revealing that she appears content the outside as she plots more ways to die.

The speaker, representative of Plath, did not wish to be brought back to life only to be ogled by doctors and acquaintances who would later judge her for her attempts.

In contrast to “Daddy” which highlights Plath’s early life, her poem “Edge” exposes the grim thoughts she experienced towards the end of her life. Plath’s depression struck harder than ever during the time she wrote “Edge”, which is blatantly expressed in lines such as “The woman is perfected/Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment” (lines 1-3) and the lines “Her bare/Feet seem to be saying:/We have come so far, it is over.” (lines 6-8). Plath used a speaker that seemed separate from herself, though the poem was presumably closer to Plath’s real thoughts than she let on, as it was written days before she took her own life. Even with Sylvia Plath’s untimely death, many suggest that she did not intend to die as she did, due to the fact that she had recently been put on antidepressants and even left a reminder for herself to call her doctor John Horder who had been visiting her daily (Cooper 8).

It is clear that while Sylvia Plath is famous for her raw, controversial thoughts and unique style in self-reflective poems such as “Edge” or “Daddy”, she was also subject to many criticisms from scholars regarding her themes and reflection of her own mental state through her writing. Despite such opinions, Plath shows that poetry is a special type of expression that may help an individual through dark times in their lives. As many writers use writing as a form of therapy and expression, one may argue that Plath would not have lived as she did were she not able to express herself through her poems whether they came from internal struggles or creative inspiration. As shown in poems such as “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy”, the use of death imagery is not a meaningless writing tool but is Plath’s form of working through the trauma in her life. Plath did not truly wish to die, nor did she use mortality as a fashionable subject. She used such imagery as a way to question other people’s behavior and attitude towards her. Ultimately,

writers and readers alike can learn from Sylvia Plath, as her poetry and life show signs of struggle and survival, despite the themes of death and mortality that can be viewed on the surface of her writing.

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