

From Lady Lazarus to the Thanatopsis of Plath: Interpretation of Images about Death

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Abstract. Sylvia Plath is a widely read and prominent poet in the field of feminism. Moreover, Lady Lazarus is one of her most complicated and representative poems, which has been widely concerned by the academic circle. This paper is for the purpose of interpreting the "Death" theme and the thanatopsis of Plath in the method of Archetype criticism theory and close reading, hoping to make a small contribution to the growing field of research and discussion of the image of death in Plath's poems through the analysis of the text. The poem reveals the perspective of the death of Plath: Death and rebirth are the process of female regeneration and a way of power replacement. In the sense of feminism, Plath's cognition of women's "death" is divided into three aspects: a kind of free will that rejects any interference, a kind of common unfeared ending of everyone's fate, and the ultimate expression of her art. Plath's cognition of women's "rebirth" includes the subjective enhancement of women's strength and the resistance of compelling force from male society. In terms of social and historical criticism, her thanatopsis originates from her tragic personal life, which develops a kind of obsession with death. This obsession also forms her view that death is art, and Lady Lazarus is the statement that death is an art that best describes her thoughts and life.

Keywords: Thanatopsis; Feminism; Archetype; Metaphorical Representation.

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath is one of the most admired Confessional female poets of the 20th century. Plath's works have been widely read over the past century, and her poems have achieved remarkable interpretations and achievements in feminism, self-analysis, death and metaphor. Considering her dramatic life experience, poetry can be said to be the true portrayal of her life. Plath herself is a victim of patriarchy, and her creation is also deeply influenced by patriarchy. From the death of her father to the abandonment of her husband, several important male figures in Plath's life had an undeniable effect on her mental state and creative ideas, which further stimulated her thinking on the patriarchal society and her creative passion.

As one of the most famous female writers of the twentieth century, Plath has always been one of the hot subjects in the study of women's literature. After her symbolic death in 1963, there has been an escalation in fields of research and commentary on Sylvia Plath's poetry. The wide range of her works makes her research not only limited to feminism but involves more aspects. Research methods vary from social and historical criticism and psychoanalytic criticism to the mythological and archetypal approach. Plath has been studied not only from many angles but also in detail, extending from her works to the poet herself. Many studies of Plath in literary history have focused on her mental illness and schizophrenic tendencies; Some analyze the poems Hughes wrote to Plath to explore their true marital status and emotional connection. Some study Plath's father to ask whether Plath's life is an imitation of his father. Lady Lazarus is one of her well-known poems that have been widely studied. The female image and the Holocaust image in poetry have been the focus of scholars' discussion for many years, and their complex connotations can not only be analyzed from the perspective of feminism but also explore deeper issues such as identity and group memory. Previous

research on Lady Lazarus mainly focuses on the pervasive death imagery and its reflection of the poet's turbulent psyche. However, there still exists a large interpretive blank waiting to be supplemented.

This study focuses on Plath's perception of death and rebirth. Lady Lazarus, as a reflection of Plath's self-identity, the poem talks about death, reborn and femininity. How the poetry itself reflected her mental state and her philosophy of life and ultimately further intensified her suicidal tendencies. Through close reading in the wider context and analysis of metaphor, image, satire, simile, paradox and other rhetorical devices, this study aims to contribute to the growing field of research by exploring how one's mental state is influenced by the surroundings and how one's mental state can be manifest in the poetic context. At the same time, this study also hopes to make a small contribution to the discussion of the image of death in Plath's poems through the analysis of the text. Given the vicissitudes of her life and her passion for creation, poetry has become a direct reflection of her life. This study aims to reveal the realistic connection between Plath's literary creation and her suicidal tendencies.

2. Archetypal Interpretation of Critical Images

Some of the images in Lady Lazarus require a kind of Archetypal criticism, which does not directly aim at the "death" theme they imply, involving the motifs or archetypes they originate from to show their universalized meaning and to prepare for the specific interpretation of the "death" theme and the influence from the realistic situation of Plath on this theme.

Plath is conscious of the production of collective imagery or "collective metaphor"; she does not recognize the personal experience as a kind of "shut box" but believes it should be generally relevant [1]. Therefore, Plath identifies herself not as a solitary entity but as a collective population which refers to the persecuted Jews of World War II [2].

However, a literary output is not utterly subordinated to the author; it gains independence once it is finished by the author. So, if a metaphor can cause collective empathy, it must have an original motivation for people/readers to evoke their conscious and unconscious common memories of history, of which the author is not even conscious. That means turning to the theory about collective unconsciousness and archetype will be a possible approach to the analysis of this question. This paper adopts the theory from Jung and Frye.

Jung interpreted the collective unconscious as a common psychic substrate of suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us [3]. It has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals [3]. Archetype is used by Jung to present the function and representation of the collective unconscious indirectly and can be regarded as the concrete appearance of the abstract concept of the collective unconscious. As Jung interpreted, the contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as archetypes [3]. Archetype is not formed in the psychological structure of the individual and is the collective psychological structure formed in the culture of ancestors and generations.

Frye is the first theorist who applies the Archetype theory to literary criticism. He carries on and develops the Archetype theory of Jung and interprets the 'Archetype' as a symbol connecting one poem with another poem. Therefore, it can unify and integrate our literary reading experiences [4]. So "Archetype" conception by Frye is widened to images repeated by literature rather than the content of the collective unconscious.

As interpreted above, the archetype is a kind of image, but due to its universality, it gains the rationality of being diversified. This means that one archetype may present some different images and links to some more specific objects, which can form the bridge between the archetype itself (in the sense of collective unconscious) and the specific mental empathy of readers. This explains the rationality of using archetypes to interpret images in poetry.

2.1. The "Holocaust" as an archetype

In the sense of reader experience, It can arouse the empathy of most of the readers because it is not only a series of specific historical events (about the Jews-Nazi) but also with a universality: it generally exists in the progress of human history. Most nationalities in different historical periods suffered from the Holocaust or similar events. This experience deposits into the human unconscious and forms this archetype. In other words, it generally exists in the human cultural memory or cultural genes. In terms of the content of this archetype, it has settled into a collection or an aggregation of conceptions about violence, collective killing, death and the power which oppresses the inferior group. Hence, the power of the archetype is overwhelming. A person who speaks with an archetype actually speaks in the voice of millions of people at the same time [5]. With the archetype, readers do not need a kind of logical (or rational) cognition activities to grasp the conceptions, for the archetype can be intuitively grasped by most readers, bringing a significant mental effect to them unconsciously: With the strong collective unconscious effect, this "deadly enemy" can evoke the enmity and fear which human universally feel to "holocaust", and, besides the unconscious effect, It implicated the reader, made them complicit in passive voyeurism by consciously comparing themselves to the historical Germans who ignored the cruel essence of Holocaust.

Metaphors or images in poetry can form the bridge between the archetype itself (in the sense of the collective unconscious) and the specific mental empathy of readers. The "lampshade" and "Jew linen" are such kinds of presentation, linking to that period of a specific history, and provide us with an approach to connect the archetype and the specific purpose of Plath:

The archetype interprets the possibility of drawing a parallel between the public horrors of concentration camps and the personal horrors of oppression. The Holocaust stands for the death-and-life battle between the self and a deadly enemy [6]. Here the archetype "holocaust" shows one of its basic implications: "annihilate", which means the general fact that in the binary opposition between two groups, the subject of power eliminates the object of power or dictatorship. The entire destruction of the vulnerable group is a kind of elimination of nonconformists and consolidation of power.

Then these "holocaust" images aim to the personal horror, which is what Plath conveys to readers in essence: She expresses the horror of oppression of gaze from society and denotes the commodification and exhibitionism of human beings. In the sense of feminism, she also uses these images in terms of taking vengeance against the patriarchal system [7]. Which means the "deadly enemy" and the oppressor is male society and male power.

2.2. The Phoenix Myth

The Phoenix myth is an archetype which can arouse reading experiences of readers of this death-rebirth theme. Phoenix is a majestic bird living in paradise, but when it has lived 1000 years, it felt the effect of age. So the travel to the mortal world began, which meant a kind of rebirth: On the first day, Phoenix collected only the finest herbs and spices and built its nest at Phoenicia. On the second day, Phoenix sang to the east, and the melody was so beautiful that the sun god Helios was fascinated. When it was finished, The Sun God continued to drive his chariot through the sky; his power and his trajectory caused flames to fall from the sky and ignite the nest of herbs and the Phoenix in flames--It was burnt. Three days later, a newborn would rise from the ashes and begin the next cycle of 1000 years.

The myth is generally recognized as a Greek myth, but it is an archetype even applied to most nations because of the huge number of similar myths, such as Bennu (Egyptian mythology), Milcham (Jewish mythology), Feng Huang (Chinese mythology), Thunderbird (Native American mythology).

The repetition of similar narrative construction implies a motif: Death and Rebirth. Human ancestors worshiped these kinds of creatures (actually, they created them) as to worship the power that can cause rebirth from destruction. So, what ancestors adored are not just "birds" but also the power they cannot gain but are always yearning for. Death and rebirth are not simply eternal life; it emphasizes a sort of regaining, which means the subject can defeat death and contempt the loss of power--it can regain everything. During the rebirth, the identity the subject has keeps unchanging,

but the regaining gives the subject an enhancement of power; though it may be the same as before, overcoming death and loss is a lofty strength in mind. Compared with eternal life, rebirth is meaningless or unnecessary, but this is only in the sense of existence. If it comes to the spirit, rebirth obviously provides a more powerful and heart-stirring inspiration; rebirth is not only the body but also the pure spirit. This is what ancestors, in essence, pursued in mythologies.

In this poem, the Aesthetic effect of images about death and rebirth also benefits from the meaning of the archetype. At the end of the poem, the narrator will rise from hell with red hair and devour men like air. Due to the archetype, this image shifts the self to a pure spirit rising against those who have confined her and bottled up her creativity and activity [6]. Here Plath clearly expresses her affirmation of female power and expectation of female vitality, which will be close interpreted in the next part.

In conclusion, the Archetype criticism interprets the universality of the "holocaust" and Phoenix myth hidden in the collective unconscious. The reader experience and Aesthetic effect are also more clearly explained by archetype. The logical path to the "Death" theme is established.

3. Plath's Perception of Death-Rebirth and Self-Identity in the Poem

3.1. "Death" and her female identity

Lady Lazarus focuses on the three basic themes of women's self-identity recognition, the awakening of female power and the life-and-death cycle of body and mind. In the repeated process of life and death, women complete the full recognition of their own identity and awaken their own power to seize and resist the power of patriarchy.

Of course, this poem is not only limited to Plath's analysis and criticism of herself, but also can be analyzed from the relationship between the subject and the object in a society that treats people as commodities and ignores their free will and creativity. Plath herself, as a lonely, abandoned female writer, was not recognized as an individual, a whole person, a citizen with rights. From this perspective, Plath's suicide is not entirely an act of irrational and illogical passion but rather an indictment of her rebellion against society, her revenge on the bystanders who tortured and humiliated her for a long time, and the suppression of her ideas and creativity by the whole society. The one and only way she can keep her integrity of personality is to break herself voluntarily, and she does this rather than be controlled and transferred by the outside world that despises her. Despite the hypocrisy of those who tried to save her out of their own values, after her death, they will still spare no effort to distort her image and ideas. She was not going to fail because she had chosen her own death and controlled her own fate by achieving it.

In the second stanza of the poem, "A sort of walking miracle", the poet expresses her complicated feelings about death. On the one hand, she was not without the will to live; she longed for her own strength and courage to live, to continue to make her voice heard for the rest of her life, and to break through the cage of thought. At the same time, it also shows that she is aware of her own strong vitality, which is so tenacious that it is as valuable and mysterious as the miracle of Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus. On the other hand, there is a deep sense of self-deprecation and resentment. Plath wanted to die, no doubt, but neither a childhood accident nor a suicide attempt could make it happen. What is more, Plath not only fails to die but is repeatedly rescued, no doubt against her own will. Plath used the word "miracle" to describe this phenomenon, which she deeply hated, expressing a resignation to fate, a deeper disappointment in her own dark life, and, therefore, a more extreme desire for death. In the poem, Plath compares her own life experience with the Holocaust of Jews by the Nazis and describes her image with the phrase "featureless."

In history, the Nazis did many terrible things to Jews, such as melting their gold teeth to make ornaments and using human skin to make lampshades. The use of these images shows that Plath has a clear awareness of the persecution she suffered in her life as a woman. As a woman, she suffered from the failure of her marriage and the long shadow of a troubled childhood. As a female writer, her creation is bound by the patriarchal society, and her thoughts are ignored by others.

More importantly, the use of the word "featureless" and the imagery of the Holocaust illustrates Plath's real motive for pursuing death -- a protest against the erasure of her "existence" for her entire life. The Holocaust made Jews almost extinct in Europe at that time, and their identity became taboo. The Jews who survived hid their identities and did everything they could to conceal their ethnic identity. Genocide creates communal, enforced anonymity. Plath's description of herself as "featureless" reflects society's stranglehold on women. A featureless woman can only be one of the thousands of women, thousands of ordinary citizens. Such women are not seen as the whole human; they are voiceless, they are faceless, and they are invisible in history.

It must be emphasized that Plath's pursuit of death here is not an escape but a kind of resistance. Plath certainly hated the world she was tormented by, even the good people who tried to help her. However, she pursued death not as a way of seeking relief from suffering but as a free choice of her own volition. After a lifetime of being forced to compromise under the influence of patriarchy, and because so many women are forced to remain silent, to become victims and commodities of society, Plath felt she had to leave this ugly reality behind.

At the same time, in addition to much subjective emotion of death, Plath also reflected in this poem her objective cognition of death. On the one hand, the poet expresses a kind of indifference and insensitivity to death. She repeated that she had done it again, even though it happened every ten years, and she had no fear or even basic sense of it. She downplayed the seriousness of the experience of death as if it was not a possibility which ends life with its necessity but an experiment of possibility [8].

She reduces death to a simple act of "dying", ignoring the internal struggle before death, the impact that death leaves on the world, and even the fact that sometimes death can be an extremely long process. "Death", which should be regarded as taboo, is expressed in such an understatement, which triggers readers' deep thinking on death, and also reflects a sense of strange and unreal.

On the other hand, Plath makes it clear that death, or just her death, is an art. The shadow of death, which should haunt everyone like a worm, was a precious pearl to her. In this way, Plath reasserted her view that simple death is not taboo or ugly but a wonderful drama that can be performed, a kind of art. Such a statement certainly satirized many people in society who looked on and even enjoyed the suffering of others, but more importantly, it expressed that her death was a kind of martyrdom, a key step for her to achieve her belief and complete her personality.

Therefore, Plath's view of death as a woman is simply summarized from three aspects. First, her pursuit of death is an expression of free will that no one else has the right to interfere with. Second, death is not terrible, and death is the end of everyone's fate. Third, death is the ultimate expression of her art.

3.2. "Rebirth" and her female identity

Although Plath intended to commit suicide, simple death did not satisfy her desire for expression, nor did it fit with her philosophy of life and creative ideas. With a dramatic tone and passionate narration, the poem depicts the story of the death and resurrection of a female, Lazarus. Although this unique Lazarus is not different from the biblical figure in experience and other characteristics, her female identity is the core image and creation center of the poem. Plath sets up an extremely rebellious image for the female Lazarus, who resists all the hypocrisy and oppression of the earthly life and refuses to submit to the false salvation of the patriarchal society.

This poem can be analyzed from the perspective of an ordinary woman's self-analysis or from the perspective of a unique female thinker's life, but in a word, it cannot be separated from feminism. "Lady Lazarus" is not just a narrative poem detailing the poet's own depressive feelings but is also a statement on how the powerful male figure oppresses Plath's creative mind but is eventually stopped by her rebirth. Plath is conscious of this male intention to usurp her creative powers; she considers that being a woman is to have her whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by her inescapable femininity [9].

Although Plath knew that death does not mean the freedom of the soul because postmortem pronouncements can be altered., she equally believes she will rise and "eat men like air." Her mind and her soul can be stifled momentarily but will always return in a more powerful form.

Plath's perception of the "rebirth" of female identity can be discussed in two parts: the beautiful vision of rebirth and the real meaning of rebirth in reality.

On the one hand, Plath points out at the end of the poem that she will rise from hell with red hair and devour men like air. Here Plath clearly expresses her affirmation of female power and expectation of female vitality. Plath believed that she, and other women like her, would be reborn after being destroyed again and again. The female image in her mind is both like the ouroboros, which approaches perfection in constant self-destruction. Alternatively, like the hydra, even if someone cuts off one head, it can still grow two new ones; what does not kill it only makes it stronger. Plath's creativity as a woman does not succumb to the violence and arrogance of the patriarchal society but returns in the form of transcendence of the soul after the destruction of the body and continues to express herself and exert female power in this world.

On the other hand, Plath clearly understands that the "rebirth" of women, in reality, is actually a kind of male control and oppression. In the patriarchal society, women have been oppressed and played with for a long time and exist as marginalized people in society, lacking substantive power and economic ability to participate in social affairs. It can be said that such "weak" people are indispensable in the patriarchal society because "strong" people need to have objects to torture. Plath understood deeply that one of the reasons for her unsuccessful pursuit of death was that, as a woman, she did not have the right to die; she was not allowed to escape from the patriarchal world. One of the joys of men taking over the world is the self-satisfaction of repeatedly torturing and humiliating women, which is the real "rebirth" that women experience in reality.

In conclusion, Plath's cognition of women's "rebirth" includes two points: 1. Women always come back stronger after choosing to die. Women cannot be killed. 2. Women are forced to be reborn in the real world because of men's desire for power.

4. The Origin of Plath's Thought of Death and its Influence on her Life

Schopenhauer, in the fifth Treatise on the Art of Treatise, Volume 4 of Schopenhauer's Collected Essays, said that 'the stimuli and moods that induce one's thoughts are more often from the real world than from the book world. The reality of life presented to him was the natural cause of his thoughts. As a fundamental element of existence, its power makes it more likely than anything else to stimulate and influence the mind of the thinker'[10].

Plath's personal life experience is dramatic and tragic. Considering the ideological tendency expressed in her works, it is reasonable for her to express her desire and obsession with death repeatedly.

Based on Plath's early life, Her last and also only novel, *The Bell Jar*, tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a 19-year-old sophomore, who goes through a series of experiences, including working as a guest editor at a prestigious magazine, being rejected from a writing class, a suicide attempt, psychotherapy, and a renewed confidence to return to society and start a new life.

The Bell Jar, from the perspective of a "lack of role models", combined with the social reality of the United States at that time, discusses the spiritual process of loneliness, despair, and struggle of women in the process of growing up under the oppression of the patriarchal society and the inevitability of resistance. The essence of this autobiographical novel is a tragedy under the comic tone. People refuse to take a woman's rich trembling emotions seriously and expect electroconvulsive therapy to cure the despair of the heart. Pathetically, the wide opinion at that time was just like this; people were used to avoiding the painful truth underneath the surface and holding a vain hope of curing the "illness" via physical therapy [11].

Plath's obsession with the imagery of death has a deep reason: her tortuous fate and hard life. Many factors led to the negative depression of Plath's life; the main reason is from men: Plath lost her father,

on whom she had come to depend at a young age. The absence of such a strong leader and protector led to heartbreak and insecurity in her early childhood. She felt helpless and resentful about her father's departure, and his death did not diminish her dependence on his figure. For the rest of her life, she longed for a strong male God as a psychological anchor while deeply rejecting this idea of herself. Her father's death and a deep sense of abandonment put her in the patriarchy for the rest of her life. Her dedication to suicide is also a kind of imitation of her father because she believes that her father's death is a kind of giving up to live, a compromise to death, and a disguised suicide. This tendency also affected her marriage, and after her husband Hughes abandoned her, Plath again faced the fear and despair of being abandoned. Of course, a lifelong fear does not mean Plath was a weak, dodder-like woman. Rather, she was an overly perceptive intellect. All too well aware of how cruel and dangerous this patriarchal society was for women, her sensitive nerves led her to live in deep fear and loathing [12].

Through her art, poem after poem, Plath's increasingly wild and maniacal language was not a sign that she was going insane but that she had come to see the world and her life more clearly. Death is an art, which is the ultimate conclusion of her life and female identity. Only in death can a woman fully control her own destiny and hold all the power in her hands. Therefore, death is not a forced choice for Plath. From the beginning to the end, death is the optimal solution for Plath.

The pursuit of this "art" has driven Plath to the edge of perversion; she regarded those who helped her time after time but exacerbated her suffering as her enemies and even called herself a Jew who was tortured and bullied by the Nazis in the concentration. Plath faced death so calmly that she expressed her urgent longing for death in several works. In the poem *Lady Lazarus*, she reminds the doctor that after she was reduced to ashes, she would rise from the ashes with red hair and eat people like they breathed air. When it comes to death, the poetess was so fond of saying: "And I a smiling woman/I am only thirty/And like the cat I have nine times to die"[13].

It has been widely said in the literary world that writing is the distillation of life. In Plath's case, this can even be refined: writing is a further reflection on her life. In the process of writing, she talks to herself, and the recurring intention of death is not only a reflection of her current mental state but also a hint to herself. The repeated mention of death and thoughts about what happens after death have put Plath at ease and increased her desire to die. Therefore, it is fair to believe that a large number of her works about death came from her desire for death and also enhanced her desire for death during the creation process.

To summarize, Plath's tribute to death shows the deep experience and understanding of life in the poet's mind, reflecting the complex and special requirements of human life.

5. Conclusion

Through a close reading of *Lady Lazarus* by Plath, this study discusses her use of images in poetry and their archetypal meanings, explores the connection between her works and her own life and thought development, and studies Plath's cognition of death.

Plath's perception of death is developmental and dynamic. She sees death not only as a sublime realm and beautiful art but also as a process of female regeneration and a way of power replacement. For Plath, who was tortured in real life, death was an inevitable choice, but that does not mean it was a compulsive choice. After disillusioning, criticizing, and critically thinking about patriarchy, Plath realizes that death is a perfect way for women to pursue their own will awakening and, in this sense, a way for women to freely control their power.

Plath did not just write about death; she brought it to life. The constant liberation of artistic thought made her wilder in life. No one knows whether Plath's eventual death was a perfect testament to her philosophy of death, but it is the statement that death is an art that best describes her thoughts and life.

In conclusion, the study has its own limitations. From the perspective of theme consistency and logical coherence of the whole work, including the length of the text, this study, based on the close

reading of the text, only selected part of the key images in the poem for detailed interpretation and many details have not been included in the scope of discussion.

In addition, this study is proposed to be completed on the basis of pure literary analysis and does not involve the field of psychoanalysis. From Plath's whole life experience, mental illness is a relatively important chapter in her life, which has a profound impact on her artistic thought and personal life. Therefore, the analysis of Plath's works on the basis of psychoanalysis theory is also a promising Angle; although predecessors have done much research in this aspect, there will be a more promising development in the future.

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