Lady Lazarus

SUMMARY

I have done it again. Once every ten years, I manage to kill myself and come back to life. I am a kind of living miracle, with my skin so white it looks like a lampshade the Nazis made from the skin of dead Jewish Holocaust victims, my right foot heavy like a paperweight, and my face, without its usual features, looking like a fine piece of Jewish cloth.

Peel off the cloth, you, my enemy. Do I scare you, without my nose, with my empty eye sockets, and a full set of teeth like a skull? The sour smell of decay on my breath will disappear in a day. Soon, very soon, the skin that decayed in my tomb will be back on my body, and I will become a smiling woman again. I am only thirty-years-old. And like a cat, I also have nine times to die.

I am currently dead, and this is the third time out of nine. What a shame, to destroy each decade like this. See the million flashing bulbs. The crowd, crunching on peanuts, shoves in to watch as my burial cloth is unwrapped from me, like some kind of strip-tease. Gentlemen and ladies of the crowd, here are my hands. My knees. I may be nothing more than skin and bones, but regardless, I came back as the same identical woman I was before I died.

The first time I died, I was ten-years-old. It was an accident. The second time I died was intentional. I meant for it to last, and to never come back. I rocked into a ball, shutting myself off to the world like a seashell. People had to call and call for me to come back to life, and had to pick off the worms, which had already begun to infest my dying body, as though they were pearls that were stuck to me.

Like everything else, dying is an art-form, a skill. I'm extremely good at it. I try to die so it feels terrible, like I'm in hell. I try to die in a way that feels as though I'm actually dying. I guess you could say that dying is my calling (since I'm so good at it).

It's easy enough to die in a cell (like in a mental hospital or prison. It's easy enough to die and stay in one place. It's the dramatic resurrection, the return in the middle of the day to the same place, the return to the same body, the return to the same old loud and surprised shout: 'It's a miracle!' that really tires me out. I charge for people to look at my scars, and I charge for them to listen to my heart—it beats fast and continuously. And there is a charge, a very expensive charge, for people to hear me speak, or to touch me, or to buy some of my blood, or hair, or clothes. So, Sir Doctor. So Sir Enemy, I am your great artistic work. I am your valuable item, like a baby made out of pure gold that, when dying, melts until there is nothing but the sound of screaming. I turn away from you, and burn alive. Don't think I underestimate just don't know how concerned you are for me. Now I'm just ash, all ash—you poke at the ash, stir it around, looking for my flesh, or bone, but there isn't anything left— just a bar of soap, a wedding ring, a gold tooth filling. Sir God, Sir Lucifer, beware, beware. Out of the ashes, I will rise, my hair red (like a phoenix's feathers), and I will eat men like they are nothing, like I am simply breathing.

THEMES

DEATH AND SUICIDE

Throughout "Lady Lazarus," the speaker uses extended metaphors of death and resurrection to express her own personal suffering. The speaker compares herself to Lazarus (a biblical reference to a man Jesus raised from the dead), telling the reader that she has died multiple times, and is, in fact, dead when the poem begins. However, through external forces, the speaker is brought back to life time and time again. For Lazarus, his resurrection was a joyous event, and one might assume that all such resurrections would be happy. But the speaker of the poem subverts that expectation—she *wants* to die. And so the efforts of those who want to save her—whether loved ones, or doctors, or whoever else—feel to the speaker like selfish, controlling acts committed against her wishes.

Obviously, the speaker is not *actually* dead, but uses this metaphor to demonstrate how unbearable life is and, in turn, explain (and perhaps justify) her suicide attempts. Thus, the reader can interpret the poem as the musings of a suicidal mind, with death being alternately presented as freedom, escape from suffering, and the achievement of a sort of peace.

Throughout the poem, the speaker often contrasts life and death by using imagery that subverts the reader's expectations. Note how the speaker describes life through disturbing images, such as comparing her skin to a "Nazi lampshade," or describing her resurrection as "...flesh / the grave cave ate will be / at home on me." This imagery is surprisingly applied to the speaker's living body after it is resurrected. The speaker describes her experience of living as a kind of torture, almost as a kind of death—when she is brought back to life, her skin is like the dead skin of someone killed in the Holocaust, it is the skin of a dead woman forced back onto her living self. Thus, the speaker demonstrates how living, for her, is what death feels like for most people.

In contrast, the speaker describes death as a kind of calmness. For instance, when the speaker describes her second suicide attempt , the imagery evokes the peacefulness of the sea: the speaker tells the reader she "rocked shut," alluding to the

rhythmic, calming waves of the ocean, while the "worms" or maggots that invade a decaying corpse are depicted as "pearls." The speaker also transforms into a "seashell," shedding her skin to become a creature with a hard, outer shell, implying that for her death offers blissful solitude and protection.

For the speaker, skin, which falls away in death, is a symbol that the speaker is still alive. When she is resurrected against her will, the "flesh the grave cave ate" reappears on her. The speaker's disdain for her skin seems to stem in part from the fact that the skin both displays and is the receptacle of the pain and suffering of life. The speaker at one point mentions others "eyeing .. my scars," capturing both how skin is scarred by trauma, but also how skin *displays* that trauma for the world to see. In this way, the speaker's skin subjects her to what she believes is an intolerable invasion of privacy. Death offers protection from that invasion.

When the speaker begins the poem, she reveals that she is currently dead—it can be assumed that she has tried to kill herself. She tells the reader she will be reborn as the woman she was. However, by the end of the poem, the speaker has transformed into a phoenix: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." Although this is seemingly a moment of empowerment for the speaker, this turn also conveys the hopelessness the speaker feels about her situation. The phoenix, a mythological creature, is known for its regenerative abilities. Thus, like the speaker, the phoenix dies and is reborn. However, because the speaker has transformed *into* a phoenix at the end of the poem, this could signify that the speaker is stuck in a cycle of dying and being reborn that she can neither escape nor control. In this way, the speaker expresses the intolerability of her life—though, logically, the reader understands that the speaker is not *truly* immortal, the speaker demonstrates that her life is so insufferable that it *feels* as though her life will continue indefinitely, through the exhausting patterns of suicide and being saved and brought back to a life she does not want. This pattern, in turn, also explains why death is so desirable for the speaker: because she feels as though she cannot die, and must suffer forever, death is only solution to end her suffering.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 10-19
- Lines 22-24
- Line 33
- Lines 35-56
- Lines 69-78
- Line 79
- Lines 82-84

GENDER AND OPPRESSION

"Lady Lazarus," is told from the perspective of a woman in a male-dominated society, and the speaker directly blames her suffering on the men whom she sees as oppressing her. The poem strongly suggests that the men mentioned are the ones—whether loved ones or doctors—who keep bringing the speaker back to life, suggesting how little autonomy women can ever hope to have in a patriarchal world. The poem's metaphors of death and resurrection, then, come to illustrate how society seeks to dominate women's lives and bodies. The implication is that one of the reasons that the speaker wants to die is because, ironically, it's the only way to exercise some semblance of control over her own life—which then makes the fact that she *can't* die all the more agonizing.

Most often, the speaker's oppression takes the form of objectification; society treats the speaker like an object whose purpose is to please others, rather than a complete human being. The speaker even goes so far as to compare herself to a Jewish person in Nazi-occupied Germany. She calls her skin a "Nazi lampshade," her face a "Jew linen." The former is a reference to an urban legend that Nazis made lampshades from the skin of Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust, while this linen refers to the cloth used to wrap the biblical Lazarus in his tomb. Notice also that these are both domestic items—and as such are associated with typical conceptions of femininity. Although invoking the Holocaust is definitely macabre and controversial, this comparison is meant to indicate the extent of the oppression the speaker feels, the degree to which the speaker has come to feel she is seen as a thing rather than as a person.

Later, while addressing her "enemies," the speaker declares: "I am your valuable / The pure gold baby." This metaphor not only reduces the speaker to someone else's "valuable" item, like gold, but also infantilizes her by making this valuable object a "baby." The fact that the speaker's body is so often seemingly put on display for others further suggests how women's bodies are never really their own, but instead used for the benefit/entertainment of other people. The speaker describes her suffering as being a spectacle for the "peanut crunching crowd," which is at once a condemnation of the macabre interest people take in others' pain and more specifically a commentary on how women's pain is particularly commodified; note the sexualized language likening the unraveling of the cloth covering her corpse to a "strip tease." Altogether, it's clear the speaker doesn't feel like she really has much say regarding her own life—and, in her mind, the culprit is the patriarchy.

Throughout the poem, the female speaker expresses particular tension towards several men. The speaker frequently uses apostrophe, directly addressing various figures: God, Lucifer, Doktor (German for "doctor"), and a more general Enemy. She calls them all "Herr," which is German for "sir," indicating that they are all men (and it's also worth noting that Plath's father

was of German descent). These men all represent the different kinds of male authority figures in the speaker's life—religious figures, doctors or psychologists, her father—who all work to control her. But the fact that the men referenced span from the prototypically good (God) all the way to the prototypical evil (Lucifer) suggests that these men can also be seen as more generally representing *all* men, or the entire male-dominated society in which she lives. Ironically, the speaker's wish to die might then be interpreted as a desire to escape this world and its oppression—that is, perhaps, to the speaker, death represents a sort of freedom or reclamation of control over her own life and body.

And yet, when she attempts to commit suicide, the speaker keeps being brought back to life! As such, the speaker warns that, when she returns from death, she will "eat men like air." The speaker intends to destroy the men who have forced her to stay alive, and thus will finally be able to die as she wants. The speaker must consume men—and perhaps with them, their power over her—in order to finally do what she wants. Despite the tangible and almost frightening rage found in this revenge fantasy that ends the poem, though, it never quite pushes past being just a revenge fantasy, and thus seems ultimately not to promise an actual revolution but instead a condemnation of the impossibility of women's liberation in a patriarchal world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-19
- Lines 25-34
- Lines 43-53
- Lines 58-84

SUFFERING AND PERFORMANCE

The speaker sardonically declares that "dying is an art, like everything else," and repeatedly presents her suffering as a performance for an audience that is eager to watch the show. To put it bluntly: the poem is deeply critical of society's twisted fascination with others' suffering.

The speaker describes her death and resurrection as being "theatrical," and describes how "the peanut-crunching crowd"—you'd probably say "popcorn munching" today—push and shove in order to get a glimpse of Lady Lazarus, wrapped like a mummy in death, being resurrected. "The big strip tease," the speaker ironically calls this show, suggesting that people view pain and suffering in much the same way they do sexual gratification: it's all just fodder for their amusement.

The speaker even charges audience for access to her: "There is a charge // For the eyeing of my scars" and "For the hearing of my heart" and even larger charges "for a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood / Or a piece of my hair or my clothes." Not only are people able to watch the speaker suffer, but they are also able to actively participate in her suffering. People's fascination with others' pain, and lack of empathy, seemingly know no bounds. At the same time, the speaker herself does seem to find some sense of empowerment from this spectacle, complicating the notion of it as purely exploitative or degrading. The speaker clearly feels oppressed by a society that objectifies her, and, in a way, decides to *use* that objectification to her advantage by charging for access to her pain.

The speaker, in the lines immediately following, addresses her enemies: "So, so Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy. // I am your opus, / I am your valuable." The use of the word "opus" here implies that the speaker's "work" or "art" of death and resurrection is not *her* work, per se, but rather is the artistic work of her enemies. This makes sense: all the speaker wants to do is die. The spectacle is created when she is continually forced to recover, to be resurrected, such that society can then look at and gossip about why she wanted to kill herself. The speaker suggests that the performance is being forced on her, that she is being forced to star in it.

Of course, this isn't a real show—the speaker is using an extended metaphor to relate how much society craves sensationalism and gossip, and to condemn those who use other people's pain for macabre entertainment.

The performance could also be seen as a metaphor that represents the complicated dynamic between the artist and their art. The speaker describes the repetitiveness of the performance as exhausting, telling the reader that it's easy enough to die by herself, but it's the "theatrical comeback" to the "same place, the same face, the same brute / Amused shout" that truly "knocks her out." Although the speaker's performance is both authentic to her experience, and a way in which she can derive a sense of empowerment from her suffering, she is also wearied by having to repeat her suffering over and over. This could reflect the struggle many artists have when they represent their suffering in their work, and come to believe that, perhaps, the performance of suffering is what makes their work popular or valuable to others, not what they have to say about it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 25-34
- Lines 51-65

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I have done ...
... I manage it——

In the first tercet of "Lady Lazarus," the speaker introduces herself by telling the reader, "I have done it again." Though the reader does not know what "it" is yet, this opening

accomplishes two things. First, it establishes the understanding that the speaker is engaged in a kind of cycle (she keeps doing "it again"), and that this cycle has endured across decades. Further this cycle involves something that the speaker *wants* to do. It's not something she does accidentally. Once every ten years she "manages" to accomplish it.

Once the reader comes to understand that the "it" that the speaker is talking about is her own suicide, the first three lines read differently. First, the poem's central extended metaphor becomes retroactively applied to these lines: the speaker is dead, and speaking as a dead person. Though, since a dead person can't actually speak, this "deadness" is in fact metaphorical. Second, the way that the word "managed" seems wholly insufficient in connection to a suicide—it makes suicide seem akin to getting to the bank before it closes—introduces the heavy irony that pervades the poem.

Line 1 is also the first instance of an end-stopped line, which is used quite frequently in "Lady Lazarus." The line ends with a period: "I have done it again." Here, the punctuation makes the reader take a pause to contemplate, leading the reader to ask, "What did the speaker *do*?" Although the line is fairly vague on its own, in the context of the whole poem, the end-stopped line contributes to the confessional honesty of the piece— the speaker of this poem has a strong and clear voice, and while the tone of the poem is often inclined towards irony, this speaker also wants the reader to pay close attention and understand her plight.

Lines 1 and 2 are also the first instance of the speaker's use of perfect end rhyme. Though the poem does not have a specific rhyme scheme, many of the lines do make use of end rhyme, either with perfect or slant rhymes. Here, the rhyme of "again" and "ten" assists in establishing the rhythm of this poem, while at the same time the rhyme of those two specific words emphasize both the duration and the repetition of the cycle of "death" and "resurrection" in which the speaker finds herself.

LINES 4-5

A sort of ...
... a Nazi lampshade,

Line 4 begins with a nod to the title of the poem's biblical reference—when the speaker refers to herself as "a sort of walking miracle," she is alluding to the biblical miracle of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospel of John. The speaker uses this allusion to Lazarus in two ways. First, the speaker here begins to make clear that the cycle in which she finds herself is one of death and resurrection, just as Lazarus died and was brought bake to life. However, the speaker qualifies her status by calling herself a "sort of" miracle. This "sort of" undercuts the, well, *miraculousness* of her miracle—which foreshadows the fact that *her* miracle, unlike the raising of Lazarus, is not something she wanted.

The speaker then begins to describe her appearance with a purposefully brutal, almost shocking simile, describing her skin as being as "bright as a Nazi lampshade." This image is an allusion to a rumor that Nazis had created lampshades from the skin of Jewish prisoners they had murdered in the concentration camps of World War II. This simile, then, positions the speaker as being like those Jewish prisoners, and asserts that she—like the Jews of the Holocaust—has been systematically objectified and oppressed, her humanity denied to her. This is the first of several metaphorical references that the speaker makes to connect herself to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust throughout the poem. It is worth noting that the poem has received a good deal of criticism for these references, on the grounds that the speaker's (and, by extension, the author Sylvia Plath's) suffering, however bad, cannot really be compared to the awful, and brutal suffering of the Jews under the German Nazi regime. Regardless of where one stands regarding the appropriateness of these references, it remains true that the speaker uses this awful imagery to try to capture and demonstrate the extent of her suffering and the overwhelming power of the forces of oppression that she feels are operating against her.

The "Nazi lampshade" also demonstrates, visually, the state of the speaker's body. The speaker's skin being like that which might be stretched over a lampshade characterizes that skin as being tight, stressed. At the same time, a skin over a lampshade is lit by the light within so that it is on display for the world to see. In this simile, then, the speaker introduces the way that she feels herself to have been both abused and, at the same time, how that abuse has been objectified turned into a spectacle for others to look at. These ideas will continue to appear through the rest of the poem, as will the idea of the speaker's skin being a symbol of both her pain and objectification.

The enjambment between lines 4 and 5 also demonstrates the importance of the speaker's skin— because the line breaks after "my skin," the speaker's skin is emphasized. At the same time, the enjambment causes this sentence about the speaker's skin to "stretch" across lines, just as the skin would be stretched across the lampshade. The structure of the poem mirrors and amplifies its content and meaning.

LINES 6-9

My right foot ...
... Jew linen.

In lines 6-9, the speaker continues to describe her dead body. In these lines, the speaker *literally* objectifies her own body, transforming each part she describes—her foot, her face—into an inanimate object. Her right foot becomes a "paperweight," which seems to refer to the fact that the feet of animals killed by hunters were sometimes turned into paperweights, to serve as a keepsake of the kill. In conjunction with the example of the "Nazi lampshade," her foot being made a paperweight seems to complicate the idea of the speaker's suicide, simply because she

keeps comparing herself to living things that didn't kill themselves, but were rather killed by others. This complicated interplay between suicide and murder will continue through the poem, as the speaker will consistently make clear that her reasons for wanting to die are driven by her experience of oppression.

That the speaker describes her face as "featureless" contributes to the notion that her body is going through the decaying process (and thus, her face no longer has eyes, a nose, etc.), while also perhaps implying that the speaker is experiencing a fading sense of identity. Again, the speaker's body is being described in parts, as different objects, indicating that the speaker has lost her sense of self, perhaps feeling as though she is no longer a *whole* person. Meanwhile, the "Jew linen" again connects the speaker to the horrors of the holocaust while also again alluding to Lazarus—when dead, the Jewish Lazarus would have been wrapped in a linen cloth.

Notably, the speaker describes herself in these lines through a series of objects that are also associated with a domestic setting: a lampshade, a paperweight, fine linen. As the poem continues on to grapple with gender and oppression, these images—coupled with the objectification of the speaker's body—contribute to the idea that the speaker is struggling with what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. It's possible that the speaker is unable to separate herself from the domestic setting (which is traditionally associated with femininity) to the point where it has become her body. This could also explain why the speaker has infused these fairly simple objects with grotesque Holocaust imagery (i.e., the lampshade is not *just* a lampshade, but is a *Nazi* lampshade; the fine linen is a fine *Jew* linen)—this domestic setting is possibly a place where the speaker feels particularly oppressed—the domestic sphere is part of what drives her to suicide—which explains why she has come to associate these domestic features to her body in such a horrific way.

Line 8 features a fair amount of alliteration, with the speaker declaring:

> My face a featureless, fine

The alliteration of "face," "featureless," "fine," links these words together to convey how the speaker has internalized the characteristics of the linen, again enhancing the objectification of the speaker's body—the speaker has so embodied the characteristics of the objects, they all have begun to blend together, represented in the poem through similar sounds. This similarity of the words also conveys the featureless-ness of the speaker's face, presenting the speaker's appearance in a way that conveys sameness.

The way that the speaker structures these lines also contributes to the intensity of the imagery. Because the image of a paperweight sits on a line by itself, separate from the foot from which it was made, the revelation that the speaker's foot was made into a paperweight is delayed and prolonged, and reader's surprise and disgust that a woman's foot was made into a paperweight (even if only symbolically) is intensified.

LINES 10-13

Peel off the ...
... set of teeth?

In the previous lines of the poem, the speaker subtly implied from the examples of the "Nazi lampshade" and the foot made into a "paperweight" that she was killed, or, more importantly, that someone killed her. In lines 10-12, the speaker now uses apostrophe to both acknowledge and directly address that she sees herself as having an enemy:

> Peel off the napkin
> O my enemy.

Here the speaker makes clear that she sees herself as facing some sort of nemesis. The speaker addresses her "enemy" in the context of her features being revealed while asking the question "Do I terrify?," which seems a kind of horrible mimicry of a woman revealing her face and asking if she looks pretty. This echo is certainly intended, and starts to hint at the nature of the enemy—specifically, that the speaker's perceived enemy is a man, or men, or the society that is dominated by men and constantly objectifying the speaker as a woman.

At the same time, the fact that the speaker has turned this moment of revealing her face from a moment of beauty to one of horror captures both the way that such objectification makes her feel, and her desire to subvert and overcome the objectification. The line "Do I terrify?" drips with a kind of false or ironic demureness. She wants the "enemy" who is looking to be drawn in, and then to be terrified.

In line 13, the speaker breaks down the image of her face into its various parts: eyes, nose, teeth. This tactic appears regularly throughout the poem, and emphasizes the sort of objectification and deconstruction that the speaker feels she herself is forced to endure, and will grapple with in various ways throughout the poem. In these lines, the speaker employs anaphora to emphasize the way the speaker takes inventory of her own face, repeating the article "the" each time she describes a new feature: "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?" This repetition of "the" also seems to distance these features from the speaker. She could have said: "My nose, my eye pits, etc." But she doesn't, which both implies the speaker's distance from her own body and also plays into the idea that the speaker is in fact dead, and has no self to which those body parts can belong.

LINES 14-19

The sour breath ...

... a smiling woman.

In lines 14-19, the speaker reveals to the reader that, though dead, she is going to come back to life, thus establishing the extended metaphor of death and resurrection that works throughout the poem. First, the speaker tells the reader, "The sour breath" of decay "will vanish in a day," which is kind of an ambiguous statement: it might mean that as the last vestiges of life drain from her, she'll cease to have sour breath. Or it could mean that when she returns to life, the sour breath will vanish. But in the following lines the speaker makes clear that she is talking about resurrection: "Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me," the speaker reveals, solidifying the image. Finally, the speaker continues, telling the reader that, after her flesh returns, she will then be "a smiling woman."

There is a *lot* going on in these lines. First, note how *disgusting* this resurrection is, as described by the speaker. The flesh that "the grave cave ate" return to the body is just, well, gross. And that grossness is a hint about the way that the speaker feels about life, and about being "resurrected." Second, the phrase "a smiling woman" is meant to be ironic. This irony doesn't mean that the speaker *won't* be smiling when she is resurrected, but rather refers to the fact that she is going to be resurrected *as* a smiling woman. The expectation of those who resurrect her is that she will be glad to be alive, and therefore smiling. But it's also important to note that the speaker's emphasis not just on "smiling" but also on "woman." Here the speaker is obliquely referring to the fact that patriarchal society—the society in which she lives, the society that is resurrecting her—expects, and demands, that women "smile," be submissive, and always pretend that everything is fine. The implication is that the "smiling woman" is ironic because the smile, which the woman is forced to wear, is false. And, in this light, it starts to be evident that the resurrection itself is not really something that the woman wants, and that it, like the "smile," is something that is being imposed on the speaker.

In this section, the speaker uses meter to emphasize the images and themes of the poem, while also asserting the tone and pace of the poem. The lines,

> Soon, soon, | the flesh
> The grave | cave ate | will be

feature several spondees (stressed-stressed), which increases the number of stressed syllables in the line. The double stress of "Soon, soon," reads as insistent, or perhaps ominous, suggesting that whatever is coming can't be stopped. Meanwhile, the phrase "grave cave ate" consists of three stressed syllables in a row and also features a distinct use of assonance through the repeated long /ā/ sound, all of which emphasizes this unpleasant image of the decayed flesh that will soon be returned to the speaker's body, and, therefore, making this entire return to life seem rather unpleasant as well.

The lines that follow (lines 18-19), also use meter in an interesting way. The lines switch to a more relaxed and natural iambic meter:

> At home | on me
> And I | a smi | ling wo | man.

The use of iambic meter immediately following the heavily stressed lines coincide with the actual resurrection, the speaker's flesh returning to her body. However, given the fact that the description of the "smiling woman" drips with irony—and strongly suggests that hiding behind the smile is a whole lot of discontent—it may be wise to read this shift to a regular, consistent meter as also being a kind of mask, as also being ironic. The meter, like the smile, is hiding anger and bitterness beneath. That this is the correct reading is also hinted at by the final unstressed syllable of line 19. This line contains three syllables of iambic meter, and then one unstressed syllable. Such unstressed syllables are called, in poetry, "feminine endings," with the "feminine" connected to the lack of completion and stress in that final foot. So in this line about a woman who it seems is falsely "smiling" because, as a woman, she is expected and compelled by society to smile, even the meter hints at the oppressive patriarchal society that demands, reduces, and objectifies women and makes such false smiles necessary.

LINES 20-24

I am only ...
... annihilate each decade.

In line 20, the speaker tells the reader that she is "only thirty" years-old. This mention is a direct reference to the age of Sylvia Plath at the time this poem was written. It is reasonable to assume, then, that the speaker in fact *is* Sylvia Plath, the writer, though one can also argue that the speaker is rather a creation of Plath's that shares some characteristics with Plath.

Regardless, the mention of the speaker's age is another key detail with which to consider the speaker. At thirty, the speaker is certainly no longer a child, and if she attended college has graduated from college. In other words, by the age of thirty the speaker would have been expected to be enmeshed in a domestic role as part of a household. At the same time, as a thirty-year-old, the speaker is still young—certainly young to be giving so much thought to death, or, for that matter, to be dead. Line 20, then amplifies the shock of the next two lines, which first use the simile of a cat to refer to how many times she has to die, and then reveals that she has already died three times.

The simile of the cat is worth exploring further. Cats are alleged to have "nine lives" mostly because of how agile and flexible they are, able to jump from great heights unscathed. The speaker's simile then, at first seems shocking because of its

focus on death, but a little more scrutiny makes it even more shocking: the simile actually seems to focus, a bit angrily, on how *hard* it is for the speaker to completely die. Again the poem hints that the speaker's focus on death is not based on a desire to avoid death, but rather to achieve it. And the following line, revealing that the speaker has already died three times, strengthens the poem's implication—still just an implication at this point—that the speaker has tried to make her death happen. The line itself is infused with assonance, using repeated long /ī/ sounds to convey the repetitive nature of the speaker's death. This assonance can also be seen as the speaker echoing "I, I, I...," an assertion of the speaker's self, the self that is alive and has so much dying to do.

The speaker then declares, in another instance of verbal irony in lines 23-24, "What a trash / To annihilate each decade." While at this point in the poem, the speaker hasn't explicitly revealed that she has attempted to commit suicide multiple times, there are enough clues for the reader to start to suspect it. These two lines ring with regret or self-mockery, and so they might be read initially as the speaker ruefully acknowledging what a shame it is that she tries to kill herself every ten years. But hiding under that reading is another one, in which the speaker is mocking not herself, but the society around her that is judging her for her repeated attempts at suicide. The lines following line 24 suggest that it is the second reading which should hold sway.

LINES 25-34

What a million ...
... same, identical woman.

In lines 25-34, the speaker switches gears, and uses the extended metaphor of a "strip tease" performance in order to address and criticize the way that others—acquaintances, perhaps, or society at large—exploits the speaker's suffering and agony for entertainment.

The speaker begins this shift in focus in a somewhat obscure way, mentioning "What a million filaments." This is a moment of synecdoche, in which the speaker uses the filaments that glow within a light bulb to stand in for the light bulbs themselves. One could argue that the lights themselves are *also* a kind of synecdoche, in which the lights stand in for a stage that is lit by intense light, so that the audience can see the speaker performing. The speaker uses both assonance and consonance to emphasize just how many lights shine down upon her: the repetition of the /m/, /l/, and /i/ sounds in the words "million filaments" creates a kind of glittering effect, like the glow of millions of lights.

The description of the performance that the speaker then gives under the bright lights is not at *all* positive. The crowd at the show is portrayed as brutish, unsophisticated, eager for a spectacle: a "peanut-crunching" bunch that "shoves in to see." Note how the consonance in "peanut-crunching crowd" evokes and amplifies the sound of the crowd as they eagerly chomp on their snacks. And the show that the crowd wants to watch s nightmarish: the speaker describes herself not as performing the show, but rather as being put on display while unnamed others ("them") strip away her burial shroud in a kind of forced "strip-tease" in which they watch the speaker being brought back to life as the "same, identical woman" that she was before. The "performance" is itself a metaphor, and captures and criticizes a number of things: the way that the speaker is forced to return to a life she does not want; the way that being forced to return objectifies the speaker, makes her vulnerable and bear, and puts her on display for others to look at and judge; the way that the crowd—onlookers—avidly and cruelly enjoy and are titillated by the spectacle of the speaker's forced return and suffering.

The speaker next directly addresses the audience (an example of apostrophe), announcing: "Gentlemen, ladies // These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bone // Nevertheless I am the same, identical woman." Here, the speaker complicates her critique of the audience—the line break after the initial address of "Gentlemen, ladies," leads the reader to believe that the speaker is going to berate the audience she earlier criticized. However, the speaker instead begins the performance, participating in her own suffering as she shows the audience her body, objectifying *herself* as she describes her body parts, explaining the trauma of her resurrection. The speaker's sudden action of voluntarily performing can be read as a choice to take some control in the situation, even if taking that control means becoming complicit in one's own objectification. The speaker's line that she is "the same, identical woman" can be read as a metaphor for the way that a woman, forced into a particular domestic role she doesn't want, decides to perform that role, because grabbing hold of the role is the only sort of control she is allowed to have.

There is also another level to the metaphor of the performance in the poem. Because of the autobiographical details used in this poem, the reader can assume that the speaker *is* Sylvia Plath, and thus, the notion of suffering and performance could be an extended metaphor for a conundrum that faced Plath as a poet and writer. Plath belonged to a school of writers called Confessional poets, because they often used and revealed details of their personal lives as part of their work. For Plath, such details included her struggles with mental illness, abuse, and suicide. Plath's willingness to engage with and reveal personal taboo subjects is one of the reasons why her poems are beloved, but it also draws an audience that was, perhaps, more interested in her trauma than they were with the work. Like the speaker, Plath performs her suffering for a too-willing audience; however, to cease "performing" would mean that Plath would stop creating art. In "Lady Lazarus," then, the speaker's ultimate

Finally, it is worth noting that the reader could also potentially

see themselves as a member of the audience the speaker condemns; in the act of reading this poem, the reader, too, observes the suffering of both Plath and the speaker, and thus participates in her cycle of pain and performance.

LINES 35-42

The first time ...
... like sticky pearls.

It is unclear if lines 35-42 of the poem are a part of the performance, in which the speaker is continuing to address her audience, or if the speaker has moved on from the metaphor of the performance and is instead speaking directly to the reader. Regardless, in these lines, nearly half-way through the poem, the speaker reveals what she has only hinted at before: that the cycle of deaths she has experienced are a series of attempted suicides.

Notably, the near-death experiences the speaker describes match the details of Sylvia Plath's own near-death experiences from suicide, further implying that the speaker of the poem *is* Sylvia Plath. When the speaker explains the "accident" that happened when she was ten-years-old, this is a nod to an incident of near-drowning that Plath experienced in her youth. The "second time" the speaker comes close to death is intentional, alluding to Plath's first known suicide attempt, in which she took her mother's sleeping pills and hid in the crawlspace under her home for three days.

As the speaker explains her second "death," the imagery of the poem shifts to the sea. The speaker "rocked shut // As a seashell." When she was found, her rescuers had to "pick the worms off [...] like sticky pearls." The key point here is that the oceanic imagery lends this description of the speaker's attempted suicide as a kind of calm, protection, and self-control. As opposed to the speaker forced to perform under the blazing lights when brought back to life, her attempted suicide makes her feel like she is blissfully alone, safe inside a shell. Even when she is brought back, she remembers the "worms" converging on her dead body in a positive, beautiful way: as "pearls." Through the first half of the poem the speaker has portrayed her suffering as a product of being controlled by others, of being forced into a role she does not want, of being constantly observed and judged. Here she presents death as a solution to all of those issues, as a solution to her suffering. Because the speaker understands death as being the only solution to her prolonged suffering, her language surrounding it is often much gentler than it is when referring to her body when it is alive. This, in turn, shows just how much the speaker suffers, because she sees her life in a way that others probably see their own death.

As the speaker remembers her suicide attempt, the lines also end in slanted end-rhyme, employing the /ll/ sound as a way to emphasize the speaker's idealization of death. When the speaker states, "I meant / To last it out and not come back at all," the /ll/ is first used to represent the totality of death. The speaker understands death as being a complete solution to the problem of living, and thus the word "all" represents what the speaker wants. The /ll/ of "all" is then repeated in the lines following, as the speaker continues to recount her suicide with the words, "seashell," "call," and "pearls," almost as though, through the act of remembering her first attempt, the speaker is able to remember what it was like to die without the fear of resurrection.

But this poem is written, as the earlier line 22 makes clear, after "Number Three"—after the speaker's *third* suicide attempt, when she has come to understand that her efforts to find the death she seeks won't be allowed, and that she will be "resurrected" against her will.

LINES 43-56

Dying ...
... knocks me out.

After describing her previous "deaths," the speaker ironically states that:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.

In these lines, the speaker continues to play with the notion of suffering as performance, and to assert that death is the right thing for her, or as she says in line 48, that death is her calling.

But there is also an underlying sense of dark mockery, perhaps self-mockery, in these lines. That mockery is captured in the sheer extremity of claiming that you are "exceptionally" good at dying—a claim so grand it might also be taken as actually being self-deprecating—and also in the casual language in line 48, in which she says that she is *meant* to commit suicide: "I guess you could say I've a call." The speaker's dark humor here can be interpreted as implying that even as the speaker believes her logic for why she is right to seek suicide as the only escape from her suffering, she also has some sense that maybe this logic only *seems* rational to her, and, by extension, that she has some sense that she may be suffering from some kind of mental illness. However, it's just as possible to interpret the sarcasm dripping from the speaker's lines as directed not inward toward herself, but outward, toward the world that insists she is suffering from a mental illness when she is sure that her wish for death is in fact perfectly sane. The poem never completely resolves this tension, which suggests it is a tension that the author *wants* to exist in the poem.

In fact, this tension also lives in the structure of these lines. The lines uphold the speaker's sense of rational control through repeated use of the end-stopped line. Lines 44-50 are all complete thoughts, ending in punctuation. These "controlled" lines add to the sense that the speaker is making a coherent

argument here for her desire to die, and also mirrors the more fundamental fact that the speaker's goal in killing herself is to gain control over her self and body—a control that she feels she cannot assert in life. And yet there is at the same time an undercurrent of mockery or deprecation in the rhythm of these lines, some which read with a rhythm that is almost uncannily similar, given the subject matter, to that of a nursery rhyme. For instance, here is the speaker describing how good she is at committing suicide in different circumstances:

> It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
> It's easy enough to do it and stay put.

These lines read like *Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss, a book meant to be silly while also helping kids learn to read. The oddness of such rhythm combined with the subject of committing suicide is jarring, but the poem leaves unclear whether this jarring effect is meant to imply that the speaker has doubts about what she is saying, about her own mental stability, or if the speaker is *mocking* those who think that the speaker is suffering from mental instability. The poem allows both interpretations to exist at the same time.

Meanwhile, in lines 51-54 the speaker once again moves from discussing death to discussing being brought back to life. And, as she does so, the speaker's control over her emotions begins to slip, which is reflected in the enjambment of these lines, such that each line *is not* a complete thought, and the reader is pushed to speed through from one to the next to find out what the speaker is saying:

> It's the theatrical
> Comeback in broad day
> To the same place, the same face, the same brute
> Amused shout.

The speaker's frustration is also conveyed through the internal rhyme and alliteration in line 53, with the speaker repeating /s/, /m/, /ce/, /th/ and long /ā/ sounds: "To the same place, the same face, the same brute." These repetitions emphasize the repetitive *same*-ness of the life into which the speaker is forced to return. The line break after the word "brute" also hints, again, at the speaker's oppression as a woman— in the context of the sentence, the word "brute" is an adjective that is meant to describe a shout, but, because of the line break, the reader is tricked into seeing "brute" as a noun. Thus, the speaker describes coming back to life and seeing "the same brute," implying that one of the reasons the speaker wants to die is because she wants to escape the men—the "brutes"—who continue to oppress her. And, at the same time, she is describing the men who keep refusing to let her die as "brutes."

The speaker continues to use the idea of performance to convey the exhaustion that comes with constantly being exploited and objectified by other people. Dying (and, thus, suffering) she explains, is "easy enough to do" all alone. The "theatrical comeback" of having to do it over and over, and of having to return to public life after attempting to kill herself is what truly exhausts her.

LINES 57-64

> *There is a ...*
> *... or my clothes.*

Once more using the extended metaphor of performance and exploitation, in lines 58-64, the speaker describes how the audience is charged in order to be able to watch her. The speaker uses the anaphora of repeating the phrase "there is a charge" to convey just how extensive this exploitation is, and also how wearying. The audience members can pay to look at the speaker's body, even get close and listen to the beating of her heart. The speaker's sarcastic assertion that her heart "really goes," contains a lot of potential readings. It can be read as mocking the way that the spectacle-loving audience—as if they are saying, "Hey look, everyone, she tried to kill herself but her heart is still beating!" and are amused at that amazing turn of events rather than caring about the trauma that led the speaker to try to kill herself. The line could also be read as demonstrating the speaker's resilience, as the speaker continues to live in spite of her agony—however, given that the speaker keeps trying to kill herself, the beating of the speaker's heart is also symbolic of her inability to take her own life, and thus her lack of control.

These lines also continue the speaker's focus on her objectification by breaking down her body, or what people might want from her, into a kind of inventory: "my heart," a "word," a "touch," or "a bit of blood." These lines also seem to allude to the way that people often wanted to own relics of Christian saints—a bit of bone, something they once wore, or held—as a way to have or "own" a piece of the saint's holiness, such that the saint might intercede on their behalf. While one might argue that comparing herself to a saint is a bit much, this allusion does capture the way that readers of Plath's poetry might have come to venerate her, and her suffering, as also portraying their own suffering and in doing so giving them some kind of relief. More broadly, this again seems to be a metaphor for the complicated way that a poet's work, and the poet, can become objectified and commercialized in complicated ways.

The ideas of objectification and commercialization are also notable in connection with the way that the speaker uses passive voice to refer to the "charge" for getting access to her. She says: "There is a charge." This grammatical construction makes it unclear who is benefitting from this charge. Is it the men who the poem suggests are controlling the speaker? Is it the speaker herself? The poem does not make it clear. That the speaker's body (and thus, her trauma) is able to be bought and

owned seems, necessarily, to degrade the speaker. However, because the speaker is potentially *earning* something from her audience, this also is a rare moment in which the speaker ascribes literal value to her own body— the closer one gets to her, the more one has to pay. Thus, the charge could also read as a moment of empowerment for the speaker. And yet, even if the speaker is empowering herself in such a way, isn't she then also participating in her own degradation? The poem grapples, without solution, with this conundrum: any time the speaker seems to seek empowerment by participating with the forces controlling or degrading her, that empowerment is accompanied by complicity with the very objectification that the speaker hates, and which makes the speaker want to kill herself. There seems to be no way out.

LINES 65-72

So, so, Herr ...
... your great concern.

Using apostrophe, the speaker addresses her aforementioned enemies again in lines 67-72, this time giving them titles that confirm what previously the poem has only hinted at: that her enemies are men, most likely both particular men, men in general, and patriarchal society at large. The speaker establishes that her enemies are men, and aggressively asserts that these men are evil and seek to control her, by referring to them as "Herr Doktor" and "Herr Enemy." The German word "Herr," means "Sir," thus indicating that the speaker's enemy is a man. At the same time, the use of "Herr" is a clear reference to the Nazis, which returns the poem to its earlier Holocaust imagery, with the men as Nazis and the female speaker as their victim.

The "doctor" seems likely to refer to a psychologist, or all of the different psychologists, whom the speaker has had to interact with as they seek to treat her so she can recover from her suicidal tendencies and return once more to normal life. (It's worth noting that at the time the poem was written, it would have been very rare for any such psychologist to *not* be a man.) In other words, these doctors are the ones who "resurrect" the speaker from her wished-for death, and who force her to return to the world as "a smiling woman." Nazi doctors were notorious for performing cruel and inhumane medical experiments on Jewish prisoners in concentration camps, and so in these lines the speaker captures the authority these doctors hold over her, and further, equates the "rescue" of her body as being a sort of medical experiment, rather than a legitimate attempt at caring for her.

The dynamic between the speaker and her enemy is made even more complex by her description of herself as the Doktor's "opus." This word implies that the doctor regards the speaker not as a person but as an object, and does not care about addressing the speaker's suffering in order to help the speaker, but rather because to "cure" the speaker would be an artistic triumph. The speaker also describes herself as the Doktor's "valuable, / The pure gold baby // That melts to a shriek." Again, the speaker is literally objectified here—she and her pain are "pure gold" to her doctors. By also referring to herself as a "baby," the speaker further implies the way that she feels these doctors have infantilized her, and see her as being less mature, rational, or smart as the doctors themselves are. The "melting" of that gold again references the Nazis, who would melt down the gold teeth fillings of the Jewish prisoners they murdered. All in all, these lines are a searing portrayal of a male-dominated medical profession that dismisses the speaker's (and all women's) suffering, sees the speaker not as a person to be helped but as an opportunity to demonstrate personal genius, and which routinely condescends to and dismisses the speaker's concerns. These doctors keep "resurrecting" the speaker not for herself, but for themselves. They force her to do what she does not want to do. They control her.

The internal rhyme in the lines, "I turn and burn. / Do not think I underestimate your great concern," uses the /ur/ sound to illustrate the speaker's growing rage as she continues to address speak to her enemy. The repeated sound evokes a low growl, building anticipation. The repeated sound of the /ur/, coupled with the /n/ sound, also creates a subtle repetition of the word "urn" which is a sort of vase that holds the ashes of a cremated body. This almost subconscious repetition of the word "urn" again refers back to Nazi crematoriums, and also forebodes the ashes that will soon appear, as the speaker "turns and burns."

LINES 73-78

Ash, ash— ...
... A gold filling.

In line 73, the speaker uses epizeuxis when she repeats the words "Ash, ash—" The repeated word, "Ash," does multiple things. First, it further drenches the poem in a sense of dread. Second, it once again references the Holocaust and Nazi crematoriums, and positions the speaker as a victim of a similar kind of crime. Third, it refers to the speaker's own status of being "dead" from her third suicide attempt. And fourth, the repeated use of the word "ash" may also be an allusion to "Ring Around the Rosie," a nursery rhyme that, oddly enough, is also about death. The lyrics of the rhyme go, "Ashes, ashes! We all fall down," indicating that we all eventually die. The invocation of a nursery rhyme at this moment once again implies the speaker's deep and bitter sense of irony, as in the speaker's case the nursery rhyme *isn't* true: the speaker keeps trying to die by suicide, but each time is resurrected against her will. So *everyone* dies, but the speaker lacks so much control that she is not allowed to.

The doctor sifts through the ashes of the speaker with the line "You poke and stir," looking for any sign of life, but the speaker says, "there is nothing there." The speaker then lists a series of

objects: "A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling." Depending on how one reads the line, these items could either be left behind by the speaker, signaling that her mortal form is gone with the removal of all her personal belongings, or it could signal that there is actually *nothing* but ash, with *not even* a soap bar, or a wedding ring, left behind.

Regardless, these objects again evoke imagery from the Holocaust: the bar of soap is a reference to the rumor that the Nazis made soap from the fat of murdered Jewish prisoners, while the wedding ring and the gold filling are references to the valuables stolen from the Jewish people, either when they entered the concentration camps, or after they had died and been incinerated in a mass crematorium. The wedding ring could also be a symbol of Sylvia Plath's own marital issues, as she wrote the poem during her separation from her husband, Ted Hughes. The careful inventory of these objects also once again suggests that the speaker, even in death, is being objectified. And that these remains of the speaker's life are being mined for profit by the people who oppress her.

As with the rest of the poem, these lines coalesce to indict the speaker's patriarchal oppressors for objectifying and exploiting her, but also to grapple with the way that the audience (and by extension the reader) are also "poking and sifting" through the speaker's suffering simply by reading her poem, by being interested in reading about the speaker's suffering. After all, when the speaker says in line 74, "You poke and stir," the most obvious reading is that the "you" refers to the doctor. But it could just as easily refer to the reader.

LINES 79-84

Herr God, Herr ...
... men like air.

In the final five lines of the poem, the speaker confronts her enemies for the final time in the poem, extending her enemies to also include "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer." As the rulers of the afterlife—and two entities that are typically portrayed as being male—it is likely the speaker regards God and Lucifer as enemies because they, too, prevent her death from sticking, so to speak. The speaker does not seem to care where she may go after she dies, as long as she does, but because neither God nor Lucifer will accept her into Heaven or Hell (respectively), the speaker declares war on them as well, using the repetition of epizeuxis to emphasize the warning.

The speaker, in the last stanza of the poem, transforms, completing another resurrection. However, this resurrection is different from the rest—before, the speaker would reappear each time as the "same, identical woman." This time, the speaker implies that she is resurrected as a phoenix, rising from the ashes of herself as a new creature that will destroy the men around her. The phoenix is a mythological bird that symbolically represents the cycle of life and death. The phoenix is depicted as a bird with red feathers that, at the end of its life, bursts into flame and turns to ash, and then rises from its own ashes as a young bird, full of life.

The image of the phoenix doesn't just transform the speaker; it transforms the earlier references of the poem. So much of the poem has referenced the Holocaust, and focused on the way that the Nazis used fire to burn the Jews they murdered, turning them to ash. Up until the last stanza of the poem, the speaker has positioned herself as a similar victim, who has been burned to ash. But now the speaker turns those images on their head—the fire and the ash become not the speaker's doomed fate, but rather her triumph. They are the means of a resurrection on *her* terms, a resurrection in which she is *not* brought back as a "smiling woman" still subject to patriarchal control but is rather a transcendent creature with the ability to not just destroy these men and their power as being empty, as being "like air."

And yet, this triumph is not necessarily complete. Because the speaker does not actually die and is, instead, resurrected into yet another creature who also cycles through life and death, the phoenix could imply that the speaker in fact can *never* escape the cycle of life and death—or the patriarchal society that enforces it—even in this fantasy of revenge. Further, it is possible to argue that of course the speaker will in reality *not* become a phoenix—even if she is phenomenally and justifiably angry at the way that the patriarchal world has treated her. In this argument, the speaker's assertion in this last stanza is *just* a revenge fantasy, with no hope of actually happening, and as such proves that the speaker never can escape the patriarchal prison in which she finds herself.

But there is also one more interpretation of this last stanza. *Of course* the speaker does not believe she will actually become a phoenix. In a poem filled with extended metaphors, it seems very reasonable to look at the speaker's claim of becoming a phoenix as also being metaphorical. And in a poem that also grapples with what it means for the speaker or poet to write confessional poetry at all, it also seems reasonable to think that these last lines also continue to keep in mind that this poem *is* a poem, and that it will be read. In this light, the speaker can be interpreted as saying that her transformation into an avenging phoenix will occur not through some kind of physical miracle, but rather through the creation of this poem. The poem itself is the speaker's means of asserting control and resurrecting herself, of revealing to the world the cruelty and evil of this patriarchal society, and in so doing breaking its power.

SYMBOLS

SKIN

The speaker's skin, which is referenced several times throughout the poem, is a symbol for the speaker's

life, the pain that is so much a part of that life, and the way that her pain is both always on display to others and, at the same time, hidden.

The speaker states that, although she is dead, she knows that soon "the flesh / the grave cave ate will be / At home on me / and I a smiling woman." The speaker sees her skin as an indication of her status, living or dead.

Because the speaker *wants* to die, though, the skin becomes a symbol of her suffering. She demonstrates this when she tells the reader her skin is "bright as a Nazi lampshade." The controversial comparison illustrates the extent of the pain the speaker feels, which, to her, feels just as horrible as the pain the Jewish people felt during the Holocaust. This also demonstrates the horrors her body has suffered physically—the "Nazi lampshade" is a reference to the legend that Nazis used the skin from murdered Jewish prisoners to make lampshades. The speaker is suggesting that the cycles of death and resurrection she has experienced have put her body through a similar level of physical suffering.

The skin, as the outermost part of the body, is the boundary between the speaker and the rest of the world, and as such is a location of both physical and emotional vulnerability. But the skin is also a kind of canvas upon which the curious world can gaze and speculate upon the speaker's actions. The speaker captures all of these aspects of skin when she says that she charges people "for the eyeing of [her] scars." The scars indicate the speaker's physical suffering, the result of the trauma that the speaker's skin has suffered (perhaps by the speaker's own hand, or by other, unmentioned abuses). These scars can also be a metaphorical representation of the speaker's suffering, demonstrating that the speaker's *emotional* pain is so great, it leaves *physical* marks on the skin. Meanwhile, the speaker charging people to look at her skin captures the fact that the scars are not just something that the speaker can see; they are something other people can and want to see as well, as they look upon the speaker, who keeps trying to die and being made to live, as a kind of spectacle. The speaker tries to gain some benefit from the spectacle by charging for it, but it is not clear that such an effort makes up for the speaker's suffering being on display, or for a price being put on that suffering.

Finally, even as the speaker's skin is something that puts her on display, it also hides the deeper truth of her pain. Take another look at the line "the flesh / the grave cave ate will be / At home on me / and I a smiling woman." The return of the speaker's skin in this line doesn't just indicate that she has returned to life. It also hides the deeper truth of her pain. It transforms her from someone dead, from someone who wants to be dead, into what others see as "a smiling woman." Even as the speaker's scars reveal her past trauma in a way that others than gawk at superficially and cruelly, it hides the deeper foundations of the speaker's pain. The speaker, then, ultimately seems to see her skin as a kind of prison that defines her in ways she doesn't want to be defined, and as such can also be seen as a symbol for the speaker's sense of her position in society.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade,"
- **Lines 16-18:** "Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me"
- **Lines 33-34:** "I may be skin and bone, / Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman."
- **Lines 57-58:** "There is a charge / For the eyeing of my scars,"
- **Lines 73-75:** "Ash, ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there"

PHOENIX

The phoenix is a mythological creature with regenerative abilities. It is commonly depicted as a bird with red feathers, and is said to burst into flame when it dies, rising back as a new life from the ashes of its old body.

At the end of "Lady Lazarus," the speaker warns her "enemies" of her upcoming resurrection, asserting that she will "rise with [her] red hair / And [she'll] eat men like air." Though the speaker does not explicitly mention the phoenix, it is generally understood that—because of the themes of death and resurrection, as well as the mention of "red hair" and an earlier mention in the poem of "ash, ash"— the speaker is evoking the imagery of the phoenix.

As mentioned, the phoenix is already a cultural symbol of death and resurrection—however, in this poem, the speaker adopts the phoenix as a symbol of female empowerment. Throughout the poem, the speaker draws attention to a problematic gender dynamic, heavily implying that her pain is caused by the men who continue to bring her back to life: God, Lucifer, her "Doktor." Initially, the speaker is only ever brought back as the same woman she once was, telling the reader, "Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman." However, by the end of the poem, the speaker has prophesied that upon her next resurrection she will transform into a strong mythological creature that can easily destroy her enemies, the men surrounding and controlling her.

However, the phoenix symbol in the poem is complicated, and can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and not all of them empowering. Because the speaker has transformed *into* a phoenix at the end of the poem, this could signify that the speaker is stuck in a cycle of death and rebirth for much longer than the "nine times" she initially described. In this way, the phoenix symbol can be read as expressing even more fully the intolerability of the speaker's life—though, logically, the reader understands that the speaker is not *truly* immortal, the speaker demonstrates that her life is so insufferable that it *feels* as

though her life will continue indefinitely.

Another way to look at the phoenix is that because the speaker has not *literally* transformed into a phoenix, the phoenix could also symbolize the speaker's wishful thinking. There is little in the poem so far to suggest that the speaker can truly "eat" or destroy the men around her by any means, making her rise in the poem as a phoenix a sort of revenge fantasy. So while the phoenix is often used as a symbol of strength and resilience, in this poem it might be read as something that the speaker wishes she could attain, but in fact is beyond her reach.

Finally, the final image of the speaker transforming into a mythological phoenix can be read as a description of what the speaker is hoping to accomplish in this very poem, "Lady Lazarus." Of course the speaker can't literally transform into a phoenix. And it seems unlikely that the speaker can literally destroy the men who have subjected her to the cycle of pain and bitter anger in which she finds herself. But the poem itself offers the speaker a way to transform her pain and anger into something more powerful and effective. The poem itself offers the speaker a way to transform into a phoenix, whose rebirth is a triumph rather than a recurring tragedy. And by communicating both the depths of her pain, and identifying the men who are the source of her pain, the poem does enact vengeance upon these men—both within the poem and in the broader world in which the poem now makes *them* the subject of the world's critical gaze.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 82:** "Out of the ash"
- **Lines 83-84:** "I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air."

HOLOCAUST IMAGERY

Throughout the poem, the speaker uses various images from the Holocaust as a metaphor for her suffering and a representation of her victimhood. Though controversial and potentially offensive to those who feel that the speaker's pain and experience can't possibly be equated with the wholesale and cold-blooded slaughter of millions of Jews, it is clear that the speaker uses this extreme imagery precisely because she *does* feel that it captures the intolerable situation of her life.

Early in the poem, the speaker describes her skin being as "Bright as a Nazi lampshade." The "Nazi lampshade" refers to a popular post-WWII rumor about Nazis making lampshades from the skin of murdered Jewish prisoners. The speaker implies through this image that her skin is similar to that of a Jewish person's during the Holocaust—that her skin is dead, yes, but also that her skin has been tortured, objectified, and used. Further, this description positions the speaker herself as being Jewish, which strongly implies that the speaker feels that she herself endures a situation much like the Jews did under Nazi Germany—that she is being oppressed, controlled, and brutally killed by a malevolent *systematic* force that is bent on her destruction.

The speaker later explains, "I turn and burn... // Ash, ash—" which could be seen as a reference to the cremation often associated with the German concentration camps of the Holocaust. Following the cremation, the speaker's enemy (and the reader) "poke and stir" the ash, finding no sign of the speaker other than: "A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling." Again, these specific images are meant to evoke the Holocaust crematorium; after the Jewish prisoners were killed, their valuables (often gold from jewelry and tooth fillings) were collected by the Nazis and melted down for profit. The "cake of soap" is a reference to the disturbing (and, unfortunately, not inaccurate) rumor that the Nazis used fat from the bodies of murdered Jewish people to create bars of soap, or could be read as a reference to the fact that Jewish prisoners were often told that they were being brought to a communal shower, when in actuality they were being herded into gas chambers to be murdered.

Again, in these allusions to the Holocaust, the speaker seeks to demonstrate the extent of her oppression by equating her own anguish and experience of oppression to that of the Jewish people, while also comparing her own "enemies"—the men controlling her—to Nazis.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Bright as a Nazi lampshade,"
- **Lines 8-9:** "My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen."
- **Line 71:** "I turn and burn."
- **Lines 73-75:** "Ash, ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—"
- **Lines 76-78:** "A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

Various allusions to world events and biblical stories are threaded throughout "Lady Lazarus," and are either used or subverted in order to enhance the speaker's metaphors of suffering, victimhood, and lack of autonomy.

In the title of the poem, the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" explicitly positions herself as the female version of Lazarus, a man who was resurrected by Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John from the Bible. She also alludes to Lazarus by calling herself a "walking miracle" in line 4, as the resurrection of Lazarus was considered one of Jesus's miracles, and when she mentions "Jew linen" in

line 9, which references the sort of shroud that would have been wrapped around Lazarus's body. Yet the allusion is complicated. It directly captures the speaker's metaphorical description of herself as dying and returning to life, yet the allusion also informs the poem in the ways that Lazarus *differs* from the speaker. Lazarus, a man, is brought back from the dead once, and it is a joyous occasion. But the speaker, a woman, describes herself as being brought back from dead *multiple* times, and each time against her will. Thus, through this allusion, the speaker conveys her lack of bodily autonomy while simultaneously demonstrating the seemingly limitless power of her oppressors.

The speaker also references the Holocaust several times throughout the poem, equating her suffering to that of the Jewish people during WWII. In line 5, the speaker describes her skin as a "Nazi lampshade," and later in lines 76-78 evokes imagery from the mass crematoriums of concentration camps, listing items often stolen from the remains of cremated prisoners remains: "A wedding ring/ A gold filling." These allusions position the speaker as a victim of overwhelming and systemic oppression, using imagery from what is considered one of the worst atrocities of human history, while also demonstrating the cruelty of the speaker's oppressors by comparing them, by extension, to Nazi soldiers. (It is arguable that such comparisons used by the speaker are offensive, in the sense that the speaker's experience of patriarchal oppression can't really be compared to the experiences of Jews during the Holocaust.)

The speaker also potentially alludes to the popular nursery rhyme, "Ring Around the Rosie," when she says "Ash, ash—" describing what is left of her body in line 73. The nursery rhyme, oddly enough, is about death and dying, with lyrics that sing, "Ashes, ashes! We all fall down!" This allusion could be a sort of ironic nod by the speaker to the nursery rhyme, considering that the speaker *wishes* she could "fall down" and die, but is never allowed to.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "walking miracle"
- **Line 5:** "Nazi lampshade"
- **Line 9:** "Jew linen"
- **Line 73:** "Ash, ash—"
- **Lines 76-78:** "A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling."

ASSONANCE

There is significant use of assonance throughout "Lady Lazarus." The speaker is locked in a cycle of death and rebirth, thus many of the poem's poetic devices, including assonance, enhance the sense of repetition throughout the poem. In line 21, when the speaker tells the reader, "And like the cat I have nine times to die," the repeated long /ī/ sound helps establish the wearyingly repetitive nature of the speaker's resurrections. The repeated long /ī/ also sounds as though the speaker is referring to herself: "I, I, I." Because the speaker wants to die—thus escaping both her oppressors and, in a sense, *herself*— the sound insists upon the presence of the speaker's body, which is exactly what she does not want. Thus, through the use of assonance, the speaker maintains a cohesive sound while also using it to express her emotions and build tension throughout the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "a"
- **Line 2:** "e," "e"
- **Line 4:** "a," "i," "a," "i"
- **Line 5:** "i," "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "y," "i"
- **Line 7:** "a," "ei"
- **Line 8:** "y," "a," "i"
- **Line 11:** "y"
- **Line 12:** "I," "y"
- **Line 13:** "e," "e," "e," "e," "ee"
- **Line 14:** "ea"
- **Line 16:** "oo," "oo," "e," "e"
- **Line 17:** "e," "a," "a," "a," "e"
- **Line 18:** "e"
- **Line 19:** "I," "i"
- **Line 20:** "y," "y"
- **Line 21:** "i," "I," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 22:** "i," "i," "ee"
- **Line 23:** "a," "a"
- **Line 24:** "a," "ea," "a"
- **Line 25:** "a," "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 26:** "u," "u"
- **Line 27:** "ee"
- **Line 28:** "e," "a," "a"
- **Line 29:** "i," "i," "ea"
- **Line 30:** "ie"
- **Line 31:** "e," "e," "y," "a"
- **Line 32:** "y," "ee"
- **Line 33:** "I," "e," "a"
- **Line 34:** "e," "e," "I," "a," "e," "a," "i," "a"
- **Line 35:** "i," "e," "I," "e"
- **Line 36:** "I," "i," "e"
- **Line 37:** "e," "e," "i," "I," "ea"
- **Line 38:** "a," "o," "a"
- **Line 39:** "o"
- **Line 40:** "A"
- **Line 41:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 42:** "A," "i," "o," "i," "ea"
- **Line 43:** "i"
- **Line 44:** "I," "e," "i"
- **Line 45:** "e"

- **Line 46:** "I," "o," "i," "i," "ee," "i"
- **Line 47:** "o," "i," "i," "ee," "ea"
- **Line 48:** "ou"
- **Line 49:** "o," "o," "i," "i"
- **Line 50:** "o," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 53:** "e," "a," "a," "e," "a," "a," "e," "a," "u"
- **Line 54:** "u"
- **Line 58:** "a," "a"
- **Line 59:** "ea," "ea"
- **Line 60:** "ea"
- **Line 61:** "a," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 62:** "o," "o," "o," "ou"
- **Line 63:** "a," "o," "oo"
- **Line 64:** "O," "y," "ai," "o," "y"
- **Line 65:** "o," "o," "e"
- **Line 66:** "e"
- **Line 67:** "u"
- **Line 68:** "ou," "u"
- **Line 69:** "u," "y"
- **Line 70:** "ie"
- **Line 71:** "u," "u"
- **Line 72:** "i," "e," "i," "ou," "er"
- **Line 73:** "A," "a"
- **Line 74:** "o," "i"
- **Line 75:** "o," "e," "i," "o," "i," "e"
- **Line 76:** "o," "o"
- **Line 77:** "i," "i"
- **Line 78:** "i"
- **Line 79:** "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 80:** "e," "a"
- **Line 81:** "e," "a"
- **Line 83:** "I," "i," "y," "e," "ai"
- **Line 84:** "I," "e," "i," "ai"

ANAPHORA

The speaker of "Lady Lazarus" regularly uses the repetition of anaphora in the poem, for two main purposes.

On the one hand, the speaker frequently wields anaphora as a method of assertion. The poem describes the speaker as lacking autonomy over her (or her death), as wishing to die, and attempting to die, but always being "resurrected" and saved from the death she is seeking. Yet within the poem, the speaker uses anaphora to insist upon her own desires and prerogatives. For example, in lines 45-47, the speaker ironically describes her relationship with death as an art:

> I do it exceptionally well.
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.

The speaker insists upon dying—and the legitimacy of wanting to die—with each repetition of "I do it," which, in turn, grants the speaker a limited opportunity for empowerment, both over her readers and her enemies— the speaker insists upon dying, despite knowing her enemies will resurrect her. The speaker is conveying that the speaker still has some fight left in her and is pursuing what she wants, despite knowing the odds are against her. Put another way, the speaker refuses to be erased.

The anaphora of the poem also generally works to uphold the pervading sense of repetition. The speaker, trapped in an endless cycle of life and death, employs anaphora to reflect the exhaustive repetitiveness of her existence. In lines 57-61, the speaker explains how

> There is a charge
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart—
> [...]
> And there is a charge, a very large charge
> For a word or a touch

Through this use of anaphora, the speaker conveys the repeated exploitation of the speaker's body, as though each charge reflects another instance of the speaker being used. The repetition of "there is a charge," also evokes the deconstruction of the speaker's body, with each charge reflecting a different part of the body that could be used or explored by another—this further conveys the objectification of the female body that is found throughout the poem. The speaker uses anaphora in these instances to emphasize the drudgery and inescapable cycle of exploitation and oppression that she experiences.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath"
- **Lines 23-25:** "What a trash / To annihilate each decade. / What a million filaments."
- **Lines 45-47:** "I do it exceptionally well. / I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real."
- **Lines 49-51:** "It's easy enough to do it in a cell. / It's easy enough to do it and stay put. / It's the theatrical"
- **Line 53:** "To the same place, the same face, the same brute"
- **Lines 58-61:** "For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge / For the hearing of my heart—— / It really goes. / And there is a charge,"
- **Lines 62-64:** "For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood / Or a piece of my hair or my clothes."
- **Lines 65-66:** "So, so, Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy."
- **Lines 67-68:** "I am your opus, / I am your valuable,"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker takes many opportunities to confront the various forces against her, using apostrophe throughout the poem to

directly call out her enemies and condemn them. The speaker first identifies her enemy in lines 10-13, ordering,

> Peel off the napkin
> O my enemy.
> Do I terrify?——

By directly addressing her "enemy," the speaker makes clear that she believes herself to *have* an enemy, which, in turn, sets up the problematic gender dynamic implied throughout the poem. This direct address is also a moment of empowerment for the speaker, in which the speaker challenges her enemy to look at the consequences of what they have done to her. It's also possible to see this direct address as challenging the speaker's in another, more profound way. The speaker is here addressing the men around her—whether father, husband, doctors, or any other men the speaker experiences as oppressing her. It's reasonable to assume that these men don't conceive of themselves as being either the speaker's enemy or oppressors. By directly addressing them as such, then, the speaker is forcing these men to at least momentarily consider whether they in fact are the speaker's oppressors, whether they have engaged in controlling and objectifying the speaker even as they told themselves they were acting for the good or out of love.

Later, as the speaker is forcibly undressed and her abused body is exposed to a "peanut-crunching crowd," the speaker uses apostrophe to point to the themes of exploitation and performance throughout the poem by addressing the audience directly in lines 30-32, announcing,

> Gentlemen, ladies
> These are my hands
> My knees.

The address, here, is ironic: the speaker highlights the ridiculousness of the audience as they watch, eating peanuts, finding amusement and even, perhaps, sexual titillation from her pain. The reader could also find themselves implicated here, as they, through the act of reading the poem, are watching and participating in the speaker's suffering. Here, the speaker shows that the enemy can be *everyone*, and thus condemns society at-large, and society's shallow interest in the suffering of others (and, in particular, of women).

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker identifies one of her enemies as her doctor, represented in line 65 as, "Herr Doktor." This is likely a reference to a psychologist, given the mentions of suicide. This apostrophe, which by using the German "Doktor" rather bluntly compares these men to Nazi doctors in the concentration camps, confirms that the speaker sees the men who try to keep her alive as her enemies, further confirming the speaker's suffering as a woman under male oppression. The speaker continues, "I am your opus, / I am your valuable," indicating the ownership that these figures seem to feel that they have over her, and the way that they see her as an object to be "saved" or "protected" rather than a person to be listened to or respected. Later, in line 72, when the speaker mockingly tells the doctor that she does not "underestimate your great concern," she illustrates that her enemies keep her alive as part of their "opus" or artistic work, exploiting her suffering under what she perceives as a false pretense of caring for her wellbeing but in actuality is a regard for their own practice or reputation.

In the poem's final use of apostrophe, from lines 79-81, the speaker goes so far as to address both God and Lucifer, telling them, "Beware / Beware." Here, the anaphora empowers the speaker—although the speaker is oppressed by the male figures who control whether she lives or dies, she threatens them directly, warning that she will rise again and "eat men like air," thus destroying them. This address indicates that the speaker will fight for what she wants, despite the unlikely circumstances. It should be noted that this confident statement could also be seen as a moment of delusion, as the speaker cannot *literally* kill God and Satan. But it might also be taken as the speaker recognizing the power she has granted herself by writing this very poem, which will eternally stand in judgment of the men and society she sees as oppressing her.

Regardless, apostrophe works to empower the speaker throughout the poem as she names and confronts the enemies who cause her pain, and in so doing, forces those enemies, also, to confront themselves and what they have done.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "Peel off the napkin / O my enemy. / Do I terrify?——"
- **Line 13:** "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?"
- **Lines 30-32:** "Gentlemen, ladies / These are my hands / My knees."
- **Line 65:** "So, so, Herr Doktor."
- **Line 66:** "So, Herr Enemy."
- **Lines 67-68:** "I am your opus, / I am your valuable,"
- **Line 72:** "Do not think I underestimate your great concern."
- **Line 74:** "You poke and stir."
- **Lines 79-81:** "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware."

CONSONANCE

Similar to assonance, the use of consonance in "Lady Lazarus" often works to demonstrate the repetitiveness of the speaker's circumstances, while also working to maintain pace and cohesiveness, and emphasize the speaker's emotions.

The consonance also enhances the imagery in the poem: in line

25, the speaker describes the atmosphere of her performance, noting, "What a million filaments." The speaker, describing the dozens of lightbulbs that illuminate her performance, uses multiple repeated consonant sounds /m/, /l/, and /n/ in the word "filaments" as a sort of mirror to the word "millions," seemingly multiplying the image, conveying just *how many* lightbulbs surround her.

In line 26, the speaker continues to describe the audience before her, calling them the "peanut-crunching crowd." The combination of /n/ and /kr/ sounds evokes the exact sounds of a person eating something hard, as though the reader can hear the crowd as they chomp at their snacks. This, in turn, works to enhance the sarcastic tone the speaker uses as she critiques the crowd, portraying them as a bunch of mindless jerks, eating as they watch her suffer.

The consonance also works with the pacing of the poem, often speeding the reader up as the speaker becomes more and more angry. For instance, here are lines 51-53:

> It's the theatrical
> Comeback in broad day
> To the same place, the same face, the same brute
> Amused shout.

These lines contain several intertwining examples of consonance (/t/, /th/, /m/, /b/ and /d/ sounds). As the speaker becomes more intense and seems almost unable to contain herself as she describes her intolerable circumstance, the frequency of the repetition increases, which, in turn seems to speed up the line. The similar sounds also convey the repetitiveness the speaker describes, conveying through sound the sort of *same*-ness the speaker loathes.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "n," "n"
- **Line 2:** "n," "r," "n," "r," "n"
- **Line 4:** "k," "m," "c," "m"
- **Line 5:** "ght," "s," "z"
- **Line 6:** "ght," "t"
- **Line 7:** "ght"
- **Line 8:** "f," "f," "f," "n"
- **Line 9:** "n," "n"
- **Line 10:** "n," "n"
- **Line 11:** "n"
- **Line 13:** "Th," "th," "th," "t," "t," "th"
- **Line 14:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 15:** "n," "n"
- **Line 16:** "n," "n"
- **Line 17:** "ve," "ve"
- **Line 18:** "m," "m"
- **Line 19:** "m," "m"
- **Line 21:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 22:** "r," "r"
- **Line 23:** "t," "t"
- **Line 25:** "m," "ll," "n," "l," "m," "n"
- **Line 26:** "n," "cr," "n," "cr"
- **Line 28:** "nd," "nd"
- **Line 31:** "m," "s"
- **Line 32:** "M," "s"
- **Line 33:** "b," "n," "n," "b," "n"
- **Line 34:** "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 35:** "t," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 36:** "t," "n," "n," "t"
- **Line 37:** "m," "m," "nt"
- **Line 38:** "T," "t," "t," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 39:** "ed," "t"
- **Line 40:** "s," "s"
- **Line 41:** "ll," "ll"
- **Line 42:** "p," "r," "p," "r"
- **Line 43:** "ng"
- **Line 44:** "ng"
- **Line 45:** "ll," "ll"
- **Line 46:** "t," "s," "t," "l," "s," "l," "ll"
- **Line 47:** "t," "s," "t," "l," "s," "l"
- **Line 48:** "ss," "c," "s," "c," "ll"
- **Line 49:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 50:** "t," "t," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 51:** "t," "th," "th," "t," "c"
- **Line 52:** "C," "b," "c," "b," "d," "d"
- **Line 53:** "th," "m," "c," "th," "m," "c," "th," "m," "t"
- **Line 54:** "t"
- **Line 56:** "t," "t"
- **Line 58:** "r," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 59:** "r," "h," "r," "h," "r"
- **Line 61:** "ch," "rg," "rg," "ch," "rg"
- **Line 62:** "r," "r," "r," "ch"
- **Line 63:** "b," "b"
- **Line 64:** "r," "m," "r," "r," "m"
- **Line 65:** "S," "s," "rr," "r"
- **Line 68:** "l," "l"
- **Line 69:** "l"
- **Line 70:** "l," "t," "t"
- **Line 71:** "rn," "n," "rn"
- **Line 72:** "n," "n," "n," "s," "r," "r," "c," "rn"
- **Line 73:** "sh," "sh"
- **Line 75:** "sh," "n," "th," "r," "n," "th," "th," "r"
- **Line 77:** "dd," "ng," "ng"
- **Line 78:** "g," "d," "g"
- **Line 79:** "rr," "rr," "r"
- **Line 83:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 84:** "n," "n"

ENJAMBMENT

Although much of this poem is end-stopped, there are a few

moments of enjambment that, if anything, are even *more* important to the poem because of how rarely they appear. The enjambment in this poem often falls in places where the speaker wants to emphasize the integrity of a single line. For example, in lines 37-38, the speaker describes her suicide attempt, telling the reader:

> The second time I meant
> To last it out and not come back at all.

The line break between the words "meant" and "to last it out" allows the reader to first encounter line 37 as an independent clause, almost as though it is a complete thought: "The second time, I *meant*." Because this line comes directly after the speaker describes her first brush with death as an accident, the ability to read the line as "The second time I meant," conveys the intentions of the speaker, who desperately wishes to die. But the enjambment also joins these two lines, and in essence stretches out the full thought across two lines. The speaker uses the enjambment to "last out" the sentence, in which she states that she meant for her second suicide to last. The structure of the poem mirrors its content.

Similarly, in line 43, the word "Dying" appears all by itself on a line, with the rest of the sentence ("Is an art, like everything else.") appearing on the line following. The emphasis on the word "dying" cements both the speaker's wish and constant state: death is what she wants to achieve, thus the word appearing by itself demonstrates the speaker's focus and desire. However, because the speaker is constantly *dying* without ever truly being dead (at least, not for long), the emphasis on this word could also reflect the speaker's constant failure to fully die.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "skin / Bright"
- **Lines 8-9:** "fine / Jew"
- **Lines 14-15:** "breath / Will"
- **Lines 17-18:** "be / At"
- **Lines 26-27:** "crowd / Shoves"
- **Lines 37-38:** "meant / To"
- **Lines 43-44:** "Dying / Is"
- **Lines 51-52:** "theatrical / Comeback"
- **Lines 57-58:** "charge / For"
- **Lines 58-59:** "charge / For "

END-STOPPED LINE

The speaker of "Lady Lazarus" suffers greatly from her oppression, and lacks autonomy over her body, her life, and her death—as a result, the speaker finds the most control in her voice, and many of the poetic devices at work in this poem intend to convey a powerful and angry voice, while also preventing that voice from sounding unrestrained.

The speaker uses end-stopped lines to keep the reader's attention close, forcing the reader to listen to her in a way that, perhaps, no one else does. For example, lines 44-50 contain seven consecutive end stops in which the speaker explains that 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.

The end-stopping of each line gives each line a punch, and forces the reader to stop and contemplate each line before moving on to the next one. The speaker is controlling the reader's flow, and in so doing is refusing to be controlled.

The end-stopped lines can also accentuate the poem's thematic elements. For example, most of the end-stopped lines can also be seen as reflecting the speaker's cycle of death and rebirth, with the line "dying" at the end of the line, and being "reborn" again on the line that follows.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "again."
- **Line 2:** "ten"
- **Line 3:** "it——"
- **Line 5:** "lampshade,"
- **Line 6:** "foot"
- **Line 7:** "paperweight"
- **Line 10:** "napkin"
- **Line 11:** "enemy"
- **Line 12:** "terrify?——"
- **Line 13:** "teeth?"
- **Line 15:** "day."
- **Line 19:** "woman."
- **Line 20:** "thirty."
- **Line 21:** "die."
- **Line 22:** "Three."
- **Line 24:** "decade."
- **Line 25:** "filaments."
- **Line 28:** "foot——"
- **Line 29:** " tease."
- **Line 31:** "hands"
- **Line 32:** "knees."
- **Line 33:** "bone,"
- **Line 34:** "woman."
- **Line 35:** "ten."
- **Line 36:** "accident."
- **Line 38:** "all."
- **Line 40:** "seashell."

- **Line 41:** “call”
- **Line 42:** “pearls.”
- **Line 44:** “else.”
- **Line 45:** “well.”
- **Line 46:** “hell.”
- **Line 47:** “real.”
- **Line 48:** “call.”
- **Line 49:** “cell.”
- **Line 50:** “put.”
- **Line 54:** “shout:”
- **Line 55:** “miracle!’”
- **Line 56:** “out.”
- **Line 59:** “heart——”
- **Line 60:** “goes.”
- **Line 62:** “touch”
- **Line 63:** “blood”
- **Line 64:** “clothes.”
- **Line 65:** “Doktor.”
- **Line 66:** “Enemy.”
- **Line 67:** “opus,”
- **Line 68:** “valuable,”
- **Line 69:** “baby”
- **Line 70:** “shriek.”
- **Line 71:** “ burn.”
- **Line 72:** “concern.”
- **Line 73:** “ash—”
- **Line 74:** “stir.”
- **Line 75:** “there——”
- **Line 76:** “soap,”
- **Line 77:** “ring,”
- **Line 78:** “filling.”
- **Line 79:** “Lucifer”
- **Line 80:** “Beware”
- **Line 81:** “Beware.”
- **Line 82:** “ash”
- **Line 83:** “hair”
- **Line 84:** “air.”

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Throughout the entire poem, the speaker asserts that she is dead and is being resurrected against her will. Of course, the speaker is not *truly* dead—what is really going on is that she is attempting suicide, and being saved before she dies and given treatment such that she can return to normal life. But the speaker uses this extended metaphor to represent the way that she has been stripped of autonomy over life to such an extent that she cannot even choose whether to live or die.

The speaker would rather die for good than be subjected to a life of suffering—a suffering so great that it inspires the speaker to engage *another* extended metaphor to describe her suffering. In this extended metaphor, the speaker equates her suffering, and the systematic oppression she is forced to endure, to that of a Holocaust victim. The speaker uses several Holocaust images throughout the poem (a "Nazi lampshade," "ashes," a "cake of soap," etc.) to demonstrate the brutal extent to which she has been victimized. The extended Holocaust metaphor also situates her oppressors, or "enemies," as a Nazi-type figure, again conveying her sense of the overwhelming and systematic force of her oppressor.

The speaker layers in yet another extended metaphor when describing her resurrection, comparing it to that of a carnival "freak show" performance, or a burlesque. The speaker describes the "peanut-crunching crowd / Shov[ing] in" to see her come back to life, watching as she is stripped down, her body exposed like in a "big strip tease." Of course, none of this is *actually* happening— the speaker crafts this metaphorical landscape in an attempt to condemn society's twisted fascination with another person's suffering. Because the reader could interpret the speaker as *being* Sylvia Plath, this extended metaphor could also represent Plath's internal struggle with writing poetry— as a Confessional poet, Plath used many intimate details from her life to inform her work (as seen throughout this poem), thus "performing" her trauma for others on a regular basis in a way that, while empowering, could also be exhausting and even *more* traumatizing. And, in fact, the popularity of Plath's confessional work (especially after her suicide in 1964) demonstrated the macabre fascination society has with witnessing another person's suffering. Thus, this extended metaphor grapples with the complex dynamic of being an artist who uses their pain (and, thus, commodifies it) while also condemning the people who consume this pain.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-84

IMAGERY

"Lady Lazarus," is, famously, filled with imagery that is often meant to shock or disturb, and thus, demonstrate the speaker's horrific existence—hence, all the Holocaust imagery. For instance, in just line 5 of the poem, the speaker describes her skin as a "Nazi lampshade"—the image is meant to represent the tortured state of her body and its objectification by comparing it to a lampshade that Nazis made by literally objectifying the remains of murdered Jewish prisoners.

Towards the end of the poem, in lines 69-70, the speaker describes herself as a "pure gold baby // That melts to a shriek." Here, the image reflects the objectification of the speaker that pervades the poem—in the line before, the speaker tells her enemy, "I am your valuable," thus indicating that, instead of being a person, she is the valuable belonging of another—something that might be locked away in a box, like gold. This image also infantilizes the speaker, reducing her to an infant and hence conveying the speaker's oppression as a woman (in a

patriarchal society, women are often infantilized by men and thus thought to be immature, innocent, and incapable of being responsible for important matters). Again, the melting of the speaker "to a shriek" highlights the speaker's unbearable suffering, while also demonstrating the constant presence of the speaker—even in death, the speaker leaves behind a scream, indicating that she is not fully dead.

However, the speaker does more than just suffer—there are other images that represent the speaker's complex emotional states. For example, when the speaker describes her suicide attempt in lines 39-42, the speaker evokes images of the ocean: the speaker "rocks" back and forth like the calming waves of an ocean, and the worms that come for her dying body are represented instead as precious "pearls." Here, the imagery is used to reflect the sense of calm that death holds for the speaker. These images also work to contrast against the imagery that represents the speaker's life—the images used to convey the speaker when she is alive are all frightening and disturbing, reflecting the way the speaker sees her living body, while death evokes a sense of calm in the speaker. The juxtaposition of these images demonstrates how the speaker experiences *life* in the same way as other people experience *death*, which further explains the speaker's desperate desire to die.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-9:** "my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade, / My right foot / A paperweight, / My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen."
- **Line 10:** "Peel off the napkin"
- **Lines 13-14:** "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath"
- **Lines 16-19:** "the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me / And I a smiling woman."
- **Line 25:** "What a million filaments."
- **Lines 26-29:** "peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see / Them unwrap me hand and foot—— / The big strip tease."
- **Lines 31-33:** "These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bone,"
- **Lines 39-40:** "I rocked shut / As a seashell."
- **Line 42:** "And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls."
- **Lines 63-64:** "Or a bit of blood / Or a piece of my hair or my clothes."
- **Lines 69-70:** "The pure gold baby / That melts to a shriek."
- **Lines 73-78:** "Ash, ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—— / A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling."
- **Lines 82-84:** "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air."

IRONY

The tone of the speaker throughout Lady Lazarus is often heavily sarcastic or sardonic. In fact, many of the poem's most empowering moments can also be doubly read as being a moment where the speaker mocks herself through verbal irony. For example, when the speaker declares in lines 43-48, "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well. // [...] I guess you could say I've a call," she is both asserting her desire and right to die, while also likely ironically mocking herself for never being able to complete a suicide successfully. It is likely that the speaker recognizes, on some level, how unhealthy it is to obsess over her own death—however, because she is constantly subjected to oppression by a patriarchal world, it is unlikely that the speaker can find a new way to cope. In the same way a person might laugh while telling a painful or embarrassing story, the speaker uses sarcasm to poke fun at herself— and, by extension, reveals just how painful her life truly is.

However, the speaker also uses verbal irony to attack her oppressors: at one point, the speaker tells her doctor (Herr Doktor) in line 72: "Do not think I underestimate your great concern." Because the reader by this point recognizes that the speaker sees those who keep bringing her back to life as controlling and more concerned with themselves than with her, this line reads as bitterly sarcastic. While a doctor's "great concern" for a suicidal patient would not normally be called into question, the speaker mocks the doctor's concern by suggesting it is insincere—that it doesn't actually consider the concerns of the patient. This irony also illustrates the ways that the speaker can shift the power dynamic in her favor, undermining the authority of the men who oppress her by revealing through her irony that she sees through the people who are controlling her.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it——"
- **Line 12:** "Do I terrify?——"
- **Line 19:** "And I a smiling woman."
- **Line 25:** "What a million filaments."
- **Line 29:** "The big strip tease."
- **Lines 43-45:** "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well."
- **Line 48:** "I guess you could say I've a call."
- **Lines 55-56:** "'A miracle!' / That knocks me out."
- **Lines 59-60:** "For the hearing of my heart—— / It really goes."
- **Lines 65-68:** "So, so, Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy. / I am your opus, / I am your valuable,"
- **Line 72:** "Do not think I underestimate your great concern."
- **Line 83:** "I rise with my red hair"

- **Line 84:** "And I eat men like air."

REPETITION

Throughout the poem, there are several instances of repetition that the speaker uses to demonstrate the seemingly endless cycle of her death and resurrection, often using this repetition to signal her increasing frustration.

The speaker often uses anaphora as a means of creating repetition, often to accentuate her feelings about her unwanted circumstances. For example, when the speaker repeats, "What a trash/To annihilate each decade.// What a million filaments," the speaker's repetition of the same phrase to begin these lines communicates a weariness with the cycle of death and resurrection in which she finds herself caught.

The speaker also uses epizeuxis throughout the poem, often as a means of warning. The speaker tells the reader, "Soon, soon" the flesh will reappear on her, signaling she has been, again, resurrected. At the end of the poem, when the speaker warns her enemies, repeating, "Beware / Beware," the warning is emphasized through this repetition, building anticipation through a sense of foreboding.

Similar to epizeuxis, the poem also contains a few instances of diacope that are used to convey circular actions. When the speaker describes her suicide attempt, she tells the reader that, in order to bring her back to life, her rescuers have to "call and call," thus demonstrating how, when she died, the people who found her likely repeated her name over and over. Though subtle, the way the word "and" splits the repetition in two, prevents the action from sounding simply long—the rescuers did not "call, call," but rather, "called *and* called," demonstrating that they called for the speaker for so long that they had to start over, in a way similar to the speaker's resurrections keep starting *her* over.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "my"
- **Line 6:** "My"
- **Line 8:** "My"
- **Line 13:** "The," "the," "the"
- **Line 14:** "The"
- **Line 16:** "Soon," "soon"
- **Line 23:** "What a"
- **Line 25:** "What a"
- **Line 28:** "hand"
- **Line 31:** "hands"
- **Line 35:** "The first time"
- **Line 37:** "The second time"
- **Line 41:** "call and call"
- **Line 45:** "I do it"
- **Line 46:** "I do it so it feels"
- **Line 47:** "I do it so it feels"
- **Line 49:** "It's easy enough to do it"
- **Line 50:** "It's easy enough to do it"
- **Line 53:** "the same," "the same," " the same"
- **Line 57:** "There is a charge"
- **Line 58:** "For the," "of my," "there is a charge"
- **Line 59:** "For the," "of my"
- **Line 61:** "there is a charge," "charge"
- **Line 62:** "a," "or a"
- **Line 63:** "Or a"
- **Line 64:** "Or a," "my," "or," " my"
- **Line 65:** "So, so,," "Herr"
- **Line 66:** "So,," "Herr"
- **Line 67:** "I am your"
- **Line 68:** "I am your"
- **Line 73:** "Ash, ash"
- **Line 76:** "A"
- **Line 77:** "A"
- **Line 78:** "A"
- **Line 79:** "Herr," "Herr"
- **Line 80:** "Beware"
- **Line 81:** "Beware"

VOCABULARY

Nazi lampshade (Line 5) - The term "Nazi lampshade" refers to a post-World War II rumor that Nazis had made lampshades from the skin of Jewish people who were murdered during the Holocaust.

Jew linen (Line 9) - The phrase "Jew linen" is a biblical reference, which refers to the cloth used to wrap Lazarus (the man Jesus brought back to life) in his tomb.

Annihilate (Line 24) - To destroy completely. To obliterate.

Filaments (Line 25) - A conducting wire in an electric lightbulb. When using the word "filaments" the speaker is referencing the many stage lights that shine down on her during her "performance." This is an example of synecdoche.

Peanut-crunching crowd (Line 26) - The "peanut-crunching crowd" is the speaker's audience—in years past, peanuts were served at public events, especially in airplanes, stadiums, and carnivals. Peanuts are less popular now, likely because of rising peanut allergies. Nowadays, the crowd would probably be "popcorn crunching" instead!

Brute (Line 53) - "Brute" often refers to a person or animal that is extremely violent or cruel. It also has a connotation of lacking any sort of intellectual reasoning. Here it works as an adjective, describing a person's shout of amusement—implying that the shout, and the impulse behind the shout, lacks any sophistication, compassion, or empathy, and instead emerges solely from an enjoyment of cruelty and spectacle.

Herr (Line 65, Line 66, Line 79) - "Herr" is the German word for "sir." Here, the speaker uses German to further establish that her circumstances are just as horrific as the way Nazi Germany treated the Jewish people, and to equate the men whom she sees as oppressing her with Nazis. If the poem is being read such that the author Sylvia Plath is seen as also being the speaker, then the "Herr" might also implicate her father, who was a German immigrant to the United States, as being one of her "enemies."

Doktor (Line 65) - Again, in German, the word "doktor" is the word for "doctor." Because of the autobiographical elements that inform this poem, the doctor could be read as representing one (or all) of the many psychologists that treated Sylvia Plath during her lifetime, and as equating those doctors with German doctors who worked in concentration camps and, rather than work to help or heal those in need, performed brutal experiments on the prisoners. In other words, the speaker uses this word to castigate her doctors for being less interested in her or her welfare or desires, and more interested in themselves and their practice.

Opus (Line 67) - The word "opus" means any artistic work, especially one on a large scale.

Cake of soap (Line 76) - A "cake of soap" is simply another, old-fashioned way of saying a "bar of soap." Though less obvious than the more explicit "Nazi lampshade," the "cake of soap" here evokes another (unfortunately, somewhat true) rumor from WWII, in which soap bars were made from the fat of murdered Jewish prisoners.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Lady Lazarus" consists of 28 stanzas, with each stanza consisting of three lines (also known as a tercet). Although this particular poem does not follow any specific form, the tercets do slightly evoke the form of the *terza rima*, a poetic form that also consists of tercets and which was established by Dante Alighieri in the famous *Divine Comedy*. The *terza rima* also consists of tercets, with a rhyme scheme that often evokes a sense of simultaneous forward and backward motion. Though "Lady Lazarus" can't be called a *terza rima*, because it lacks both the typical iambic meter and rhyme scheme of a traditional *terza rima*, the form of the poem can be seen as a *reference* to a *terza rima*. This subtle association between "Lady Lazarus" and the *terza rima* makes thematic sense, in a variety of ways. First, in this poem, whose speaker is always circling through death and life, never going anywhere, but also never standing still, connects with the feel evoked by the rhyme scheme of a *terza rima*. Second, "Lady Lazarus" depicts both a kind of hell and a kind of resurrection, and the reference to the *terza rima* connects it to the Divine Comedy, which of course also deals with notions of hell and heaven, punishment and redemption.

The use of three-line stanzas is also often associated with the Christian Holy Trinity— the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit. In this poem, God, Lucifer, and the Doktor are the three specific male figures mentioned, becoming an *unholy* trinity of sorts for the speaker because they all work to keep her from dying. Because of the poem's subject matter and religious references, the tercets could represent the overwhelming influence of men—and perhaps also of religious men—over the speaker's life.

METER

"Lady Lazarus" is written in free verse, and thus has no regular, consistent meter throughout. While the poem lacks a regular meter, though, it still uses meter, often in ingenious ways, to augment, add nuance to, and support the themes and ideas of the poem.

For instance, the poem often contains lines of iambic meter. Iambic meter is often associated with a more relaxed, regular sense of speech—however, in this poem, the iambic meter is more neutral than it is relaxed, and the speaker often uses it is a sort of "staging ground" from which the speaker can metrically leap, and then return, to create stylistic effects. For example, line 4, in which the speaker describes herself as a "walking miracle" is strictly iambic pentameter:

A sort| of walk| ing mir| acle,| my skin

but in line 5, the speaker alters both the image and the meter:

Bright as | a Na | zi lampshade

Rather than the consistent unstressed-stressed pattern of line 4, line 5 is metrically chaotic. Meanwhile the shift from a clean to chaotic meter matches the shift from the purposely rather plain, or even clichéd line in which the speaker describes herself as a "walking miracle" to the extreme intensity of the following line in which she compares her skin to "a Nazi lampshade." The shift in meter mirrors and augments the shift in image and intensity.

The regular rhythm of iambic meter also functions ironically in the poem, as a way for the speaker to capture in the meter the way that she is forced to present herself as happy and normal on the surface when in fact she is filled with anger and despair. For example, when the speaker describes her resurrection in line 19, she tells the speaker she will return as a "smiling woman." The phrase itself is ironic, and the iambic meter contributes to the line's sense of irony by conveying that the speaker is putting on airs, pretending to be a happy, regular woman, when the poem insists otherwise:

And I | a smi | ling wo | man.

This line's regular meter mimics the speaker's false exterior. But also note that final, seventh, unstressed syllable of this line, formed by the second syllable of "woman." There is a name for a final unstressed syllable in a line of iambic pentameter (which would normally end on a stressed syllable). These single unstressed syllables are called "feminine endings," with "feminine" meant to refer to the lack of stress on the syllable. So, in this line in which the regular meter portrays a woman's false happy exterior, the final "feminine ending," which occurs on the second syllable of the word "woman," is an ingenious way for the poem to both hint at the agonized depths behind that smiling, regular exterior, and to make clear that this agony is founded on a gender oppression so deep that it even exists in the very terminology of the poetry she is writing.

The speaker, bubbling with, and sometimes overwhelmed by, anger and bitterness, also frequently uses spondees and trochees to increase the number of stressed syllables in a line in order to increase the emotional tension. For example, in lines 13-18, the speaker uses the rather rare bacchius (a metrical foot with an unstressed syllable followed by two stressed syllables) as she describes her about-to-be-resurrected-against-her-will body to her enemy:

> The nose, | the eye pits, | the full set | of teeth?

The stressed syllables emphasize the skull-like images of the line, while the pattern of stresses communicates rising stress, frustration, and anger. The stressed syllables also draw attention to the consonance in the line, enhancing the /t/ sounds in the words "pits" "set" and "teeth."

RHYME SCHEME

"Lady Lazarus" is written in free-verse, meaning it has no regular meter or rhyme scheme. However the poem still makes use of both internal and end rhyme to accentuate the speaker's powerful voice, as well as to cue the reader in on the poem's themes of suffering and suicide.

For example, the first two lines of the poem *do* rhyme:

> I have done it again.
> One year in every ten,

This rhyme on "again" and "ten," before the reader even knows what the poem is about, already puts emphasis on the speaker being caught in a cycle, and that this cycle has endured for a long time.

The poem then ends a number of the following lines with words that are either perfect or slant rhymes with this opening rhyming couplet: "skin" in line 4, "fine" in line 8, and linen" in line 9. Through these subsequent semi-rhymes, the speaker subtly echoes "again" and "ten," such that the poem is enacting its own cycle of rhymes, reminding the reader of the speaker's enduring and repeating agony.

Similarly, in line 38 the speaker reflects on her first suicide attempt, describing, "The second time I meant / To last it out and not come back at all." Of the 13 lines that follow, 10 end with either slant or perfect rhymes to the word "all:"

- "call" (line 41)
- "pearls" (line 42)
- "else" in the "el" sound of that word (line 44)
- "well" (line 45)
- "hell" (line 46)
- "real" (line 47)
- "call" (line 48)
- "cell" line 49)
- "theatrical" (line 51)

Notably, the switch to this sound begins when the speaker describes her first purposeful attempt to commit suicide (and second overall attempt) and the language and imagery evoke images of the ocean, reflecting the peacefulness of that hoped-for death. The use of these soft rhyming and semi-rhyming /l/ sounds mirrors the speaker's desire for a death without resurrection and captures the speaker's opposing views on life and death: life is repetitive and painful, whereas death is calm, full, and complete.

"Lady Lazarus" is also full of internal rhyme, which works to maintain the rhythm of the poem while also conveying the speaker's attitude. For example, Line 53 uses the same long /ā/ sound to represent boredom and exhaustion. The speaker explains her resurrection "To the same place, the same face, the same brute..." Here, the speaker demonstrates the mundane (and thus, loathsome) routine of her death and resurrection, emphasizing the word "same" over and over, accompanying it with similar /ā/ sounds to continue to evoke the sense of intolerable "same-ness."

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Lady Lazarus" reveals quite a lot about herself throughout the poem, because, in many ways, this poem is about *her*. The speaker reveals quickly that she is a thirty-year-old woman. It can also be assumed from the context of the poem that the speaker *is* Lady Lazarus—this is certainly an ironic title that the speaker has given herself rather than her real name, and thereby ironically connecting her to Lazarus, the man whom Jesus resurrected from the dead in the Gospel of John from the bible. Because the speaker is a woman, and identifies different male authority figures as her "enemies," it can be assumed that the speaker is suffering from gender oppression, which seems likely, in turn, be one of the main reasons she wants to die.

The speaker is also, surprisingly, dead. Though not explicitly

stated, the reader can assume from the first line, "I have done it again," that the speaker has killed herself. Of course, the speaker is not *literally* dead— although the speaker makes it very clear that she does *want* to die—rather it seems that she has once again attempted to take her own life or expressed the desire to do so—and that her "resurrection" has been the refusal of the men around her (whether father, husband, doctors, or anyone else) to actually let her die. The speaker uses death and resurrection as an extended metaphor to represent the extremity of her suffering, the lack of control that she has over her own life (and death).

It can also be assumed that the speaker of the poem *is* Sylvia Plath, because many of the poem's details are directly related to events in her life— specifically, her age, gender, and the suicide attempts that are referenced.

SETTING

The setting of this poem is unclear, with the speaker crafting a landscape of metaphor and emotion. There are no mentions of any environment, nor does the speaker ever identify a geographic location. Because the speaker is dead (at least, metaphorically speaking) it could be assumed that the speaker is in some sort of Limbo or purgatory, waiting for the inevitable return to her body.

One could argue that the setting of the poem *is* the speaker's body— though this is not technically a *place*, per se, the speaker's body is often the central point of the poem, and where all the poem's action occurs.

In regards to the era, it could be safely assumed that this poem takes place in 1964. The age of the speaker, along with several other autobiographic details, indicate that the speaker *is* Sylvia Plath— in which case, these details imply that the poem takes place at the same time it was written. At the very least, based off of the multiple Holocaust references, one can assume that the poem was written not long after World War II, which ended in 1945.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Following her death by suicide in 1963, "Lady Lazarus" was published in Sylvia Plath's 1966 posthumous collection, *Ariel*. Many of Plath's most well-recognized works appear in *Ariel*, such as "Daddy," "Tulips" and "Ariel," the latter of which shares its name with the collection. *Ariel* is considered a hard turn from the much lighter, less personal poems from Plath's first collection *The Colossus* (1960), as it dives into much darker and intimate themes of mental illness and suicide. The collection also covers some similar themes as Plath's semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, which was published in 1963.

Sylvia Plath was considered a poet from the school of Confessionalism, which was poetry that often delved into the personal and taboo topics of the self, such as mental health, and sexuality. Plath cited both Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton as being major influences on her work, as both poets often explored similar themes in their work. Plath was also influenced by the work of Dylan Thomas. Because Plath's estranged husband, Ted Hughes, inherited the entirety of Plath's work upon her death (he edited *Ariel* extensively), Hughes' influence likely permeates Plath's work in innumerable ways.

Sylvia Plath's work was often divisive—though considered a talented writer, the themes and content of her work often inspired criticisms that she engaged in melodrama and self-pity. Others have argued that this interpretation of her work is the result of reading the autobiographic details too closely, or of refusing to recognize the actual depth and reality of both the pain Plath identified and suffered (and this, ironically, of being representative of just the sort of gender-based oppression of which Plath wrote about in Ariel).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of Plath's childhood occurred during World War II—which began in 1939 when Plath was six-years-old, and ending when Plath was around twelve. World War II was a global world war, and considered the deadliest conflict in human history, as in addition to the brutal fighting and first use of nuclear weapons, it involved the Holocaust, the attempted genocide of the Jewish people by Nazi Germany that resulted in the systematic murder of around six million Jews. The Holocaust is often considered "unique" in its murderous scope and specificity, and it had a profound impact on Plath. The imagery from concentration camps appears in several of Plath's poems, with the works themselves often being referred to as her "Holocaust poems."

Plath's poetry also appears to be deeply influenced and in reaction to the Cult of True Womanhood, or the Cult of Domesticity—following WWII (during which women often worked by necessity outside the home while the men fought in the war) women were encouraged to return to the home, fulfilling their primary role as wives and mothers. Sylvia Plath, as an academic, rejected these notions of womanhood throughout her poetry and found them oppressive, believing that many women were especially capable of being writers and editors. Many women also experienced a deep and profound unhappiness from their lack of autonomy, described by feminist writer Betty Friedan as the "problem that has no name" in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. It is likely that Plath suffered from a similar problem—although Plath experienced career success as a poet, she still experienced the problematic expectations of being a dedicated wife and mother, which likely exacerbated

her mental illness. Thus, much of Plath's writing involves a complicated experience of motherhood and femininity, with imagery that focuses on domestic items.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography — Poetry Foundation's brief biography of Sylvia Plath. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- Plath Interview — Audio of Sylvia Plath's 1962 interview with Peter Orr, discussing her poetry career, influences, and her poetic interests. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2IMsVpRh5c)
- Sylvia Plath Crash Course — An episode of Crash Course in which author John Green explores Sylvia Plath's poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJn0ZPd6mYo)
- "Lady Lazarus" Audio — An audio clip of Sylvia Plath reading "Lady Lazarus." This reading includes a few differences from the published version— after line 12's "Do I terrify?" Plath adds, "Yes, yes, Herr Professor, it is I. Can you deny?" Plath also reads an additional line, "I may be Japanese," which follows line 33's "I may be skin and bone." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esBLxyTFDxE)
- Plath's Letters — An article describing the publication of Plath's many, many letters of correspondence between her mother and others. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/05/sylvia-plaths-last-letters)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Mad Girl's Love Song
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Yarnall, Lauren. "*Lady Lazarus.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Yarnall, Lauren. "*Lady Lazarus.*" LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/sylvia-plath/lady-lazarus.