



## SYLVIA PLATH'S BIRTH ANNIVERSARY: CELEBRATING HER LIFE

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Today, 88 years ago, the celebrated poet and novelist Sylvia Plath was born. Considering Sylvia Plath always implies dealing with the myth, the character, and the voice of her poems. What can we learn about her life from her work? That she, like the speaker of "Lady Lazarus," found solace in death? Or was her death an interruption to a career that may have tended towards less dark, suicidal images over time? Death has always haunted this talented artist, but not only during her life. Many read her poems through the lenses of her death, but today we choose to celebrate her life on the day it began.

Despite common descriptions, Sylvia Plath was also a master of humor and comic resources. The confessional nature of her poetry, as it is most often categorized by scholars, is achieved through the speakers' identification with gothic forces of nature, sometimes creating hilarious images like in my personal favorite "The Tour" or in the famous "The Disquieting Muses." Both examples are comic reversals of well-known images: the fairy tale and a 1950s woman's tour of her suburban house. With gothic imagery, each presents instances of strong, combative, knowledgeable, and independent women who befriend sinister presences that help emancipate them. The fear they create in others is their salvation. Plath's message is a powerful one: it is the independence of women that creates fear because, once free, they escape the status quo of their beholder.

There is enough evidence in Plath's poetry to assess her speakers as subjects in control – even as tricksters – rather than the victimization that is often imposed upon them by societal norms. In "Lady Lazarus," the speaker repeatedly stages her death before an audience of perplexed observers. Critics and readers have assessed Plath's poems as a foretelling of her suicide because she had a history of self-harm. In "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" she references her first suicide attempt as a young woman in



her twenties. But, the poems can be read differently. Fictionalizing biographical information is a joke on the critic. It baffles the audience because they are witnessing something that is familiar, but not quite so: the uncanny; the poststructuralist; the rewriting. “Don’t take anything for granted,” Plath seems to claim, “because this is all a staging.” To me, “Lady Lazarus” is Plath’s ultimate expression of intent to trick readers. She writes, “[o]ut of the ash [she] rise[s]” again to delight us with another spectacle when we thought it was over: “I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it.” She plays with what is most morbid to audiences to create her art. Plath readily offers the tidbits of information that critics and readers are so eager to find, satisfying the audience’s need to connect, to feel clever, to fill in the gaps. Yet, every piece of writing “[i]s an art, like everything else.”

At the risk of sounding too morbid, I venture to affirm that Plath’s only published novel (there are rumors that another one was destroyed) is very humorous as well. Being inside the head of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is hilarious at times. Plath portrays all of Esther’s random thoughts rather than describing her with clichés, and some of them are shockingly honest taboos that have roamed through more than one female head: “[at seeing male genitalia for the first time] the only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed.” Through Esther’s apparent mental instability, the author includes reflections that relate more to repressed voices than insanity. Opening the can of worms of comedic male insecurity, Plath dispels the taboo that women can be funny too.

Esther Greenwood finally escapes the bell jar, and the speaker in “Lady Lazarus” rises from the flames. Like the phoenix, reborn perhaps “one year in every ten,” they have not died, they are always there. When we reread Plath’s writings, she likewise lives on. Today, we celebrate her birth and her life: a life of writing, and the wonderful pieces she left behind whose repeated reading remains the best homage. Long live the poet!

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