

Plath Profiles

Reviews



Breaking the Code:

Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" *and Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"*

by Judy Ryan

As an expert in Culture Change, I never would have thought of looking back over fifty years to the poetry of Sylvia Plath for hope, personal power, and inspiration. I come from a more traditional background about literature and, until recently, had always considered Plath as a famous literary suicide and as one of the first feminists. But Julia Gordon-Bramer's *Decoding Sylvia Plath* books now have me convinced that Sylvia Plath's writing is loaded and coded with other meanings.

Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and *Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Daddy,"* both by Julia Gordon-Bramer (2017, Magi Press) are two slim, easy-to-read books that step into some unusual territory: Gordon-Bramer's theory is that Plath's poems are multi-faceted and not just autobiographical. Gordon-Bramer states that each poem reflects the Tarot, Alchemy, Mythology, History and the World, Astrology and Astronomy, and the Arts and Humanities, and the book explains that Plath's genius is in making her poetry addresses these six different, yet related, topics. It is a lot to wrap one's head around, and probably why Gordon-Bramer's initial book, *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath* (2014, Stephen F. Austin State University Press), an expansive study of the first 22 poems of *Ariel*, feels so intimidating. Gordon-Bramer believes that because the Occult is odd and unfamiliar to most of us, we collectively prefer to hold Plath in a more limited view.

Both *Decoding* books woke me up to realize that the hints about Plath and the Occult have always been out there: as we all know the photo of Plath holding her crystal ball in *Letters Home*. The "Tarot pack" of "Daddy" is the Tarot. The Ouija board sessions, hypnosis, bonfire chants, her husband's astrology, and so on. We know that Plath journaled and wrote letters about being like Mr. and Mrs. Yeats with their automatic writing and séances. Wasn't she just kidding around? Gordon-Bramer doesn't think so, and provides a lot of evidence, first explored in *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath*. Now the author has started again, poem by poem, giving each of Plath's works the royal treatment with their own book. Her goal, Gordon-

Bramer says, is to simplify. And simplify, she has. The *Decoding* books are a significantly lighter and a more conversational approach than her first book. In this reader's opinion, they are entirely successful and even fun to read.

Poetry: 101 teaches us about metaphor and that a poem is an image that makes a statement about something else as well. Ezra Pound can have his "petals on a wet, black bough." William Carlos Williams is entitled to his "red wheelbarrow" on which "so much depends." In both *Decoding* books, Gordon-Bramer expresses her frustration that for some reason, Sylvia Plath is not allowed to take on the metaphoric mantle of traditional (male) poets, and is held to strict autobiographical and hysterical interpretations by the so-called experts and academics. While admitting Plath's autobiography is there, Gordon-Bramer says, it is not everything, and only a paternalist society accuses hysteria. But times are changing, and Plath had her own #MeToo stories, as Gordon-Bramer wrote early last year for *Ms. Magazine*.¹

What are these undiscovered metaphors? *Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus"* explains that this poem is a tour de force which tells the story of the Statue of Liberty, the ancient, goddess Lucifer (a.k.a. Isis, a.k.a. Venus), and the Jewish abolitionist poet, Emma Lazarus, who has a poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty. We also have the Passion Play (this poem strangely aligns with The Lovers tarot card), Lazarus sharks, feminism and the German language contributing to meanings in the poem. Gordon-Bramer excitingly connects the dots, and the reader sees how one story supports the other. This is weird, and like no book on poetry I have read before. Plath seems to have identified patterns bigger than herself—what Gordon-Bramer calls *Qabalah*, a spiritual practice rooted in ancient Jewish mysticism.

"Believe in it or don't," the author says in *Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus"* (p. 24). Faith is not required, and she has plenty of hard evidence and history lessons to back up her statements. The books claim that *Qabalah* also explains the "Jew" references in Plath's work. Your jaw will drop when you read Emma Lazarus' words describing the goddess mother Isis/Lucifer/Venus, that goddess was the model for the Statue of Liberty, and how the suffragettes fought for their rights at her foundation, where Emma Lazarus' poem would eventually be posted. Even the planet Venus is represented in a dizzying dance of reflections (Gordon-Bramer's "Mirrors") that say the same thing with the same set of words. Most interesting is that these books get into what was happening in the news at the time Plath wrote the poems. In the case of "Lady Lazarus," there were the first stirrings of a second Women's Liberation movement worldwide, and the spacecraft Mariner 2 was in Venus' orbit.

In *Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Daddy,"* Gordon-Bramer shows how Plath's poem "Daddy" corresponds to the Queen rank of cards in the tarot, and the author provides

¹ <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2018/02/02/sylvia-plaths-metoo-stories/>

enough corresponding tales to make you rethink this poem entirely. For instance, instead of “Daddy” being the father-hating poem we all know so well, Gordon-Bramer shows step-by-literary-step how Plath told the story of Sigmund Freud (the father of psychoanalysis), King Brutus (father of Britain), and Brutus’ legendary London Stone. Plath’s “Daddy” also stands as a clear summary of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a novel about British colonialism which Hughes had read to her the year before their breakup.

I finished these two short *Decoding* books (about 100 pages) feeling amazed and wanting more on the other *Ariel* poems. Gordon-Bramer has stumbled onto a system here that redefines everything we know about Plath and poetry and dares to smash the old patriarchal systems controlling the western literary canon. Also of value is the Guide for Students and Teachers at the back of each book, which is a class-in-a-box for teachers with class plans, discussion questions, vocabulary, suggested supplemental materials, and more. *Decoding Sylvia Plath* is a real-life *DaVinci Code* that will make you consider there might be a grand design to the madness. Thank goddess!