

## A Cognitive Metaphor Approach to Analysing Potentially Schema-Refreshing Metaphors in Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus"

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### ABSTRACT

Based on different approaches to criticism, several interpretations of Sylvia Plath's poetry are possible. Literary critics thus far have used the biographical, psychological/psycho-analytical, or feminist approach to interpret Plath's poetry. Her untimely death has been pivotal in the interpretation of the death themes in her poems.

In this study, I have attempted an analysis of metaphors in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" based on George Lakoff and Mark Turner's Cognitive Metaphor theory and Elena Semino's Schema approach and Metaphor analysis in poetry. I have examined Plath's use of conventional conceptual metaphors in the creation of literary metaphors as well as analysed her creation of original and novel metaphors that contribute to the richness and complexity in her poem.

The present analyses and interpretations reveal that Plath's construction of novel metaphors results in the creation of a world-view that is potentially schema refreshing.

### LADY LAZARUS

Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" consists of twenty-eight stanzas, of three lines each. The structure, lyrical quality and simple diction, could befit a light-hearted poem. However, in-depth analysis of the metaphors in the poem reveals that Plath has chosen to use such a form in order to dilute the impact of some serious and deeply disturbing emotions. The poem can be divided into three parts. In the first part, Plath gives a detailed description of the persona rising out of the grave, metaphorically based on the biblical story of Lazarus and his resurrection from the grave. This befits the title of the poem, "Lady Lazarus" and suggests that the persona is a Jewish woman.

The second part of the poem deals with the persona's description of the suicide attempt she has survived. The persona confesses that she has unsuccessfully attempted to kill herself three times.

In the third part of the poem, Plath elaborates the Nazi-Jew metaphor, intricately linking it with a religious metaphor. The persona describes how German doctors have brought her back from death.

In the last stanza, the persona describes herself as the phoenix who has risen from

the ashes. Thus, a second mythical character known of rising from death is used here. The poem ends with a warning of vengeance.

### CRITICS ON THE POEM

A brief review of the literary critics and the biographers' notes suggest that the poem is about Plath's suicide attempts and her preoccupation with death. Both the biographers, M.L. Rosenthal and M.D. Uroff, see this poem as autobiographical.

M.L. Rosenthal calls it a "true example of a confessional poem": Plath's suicide attempts and their description is the central theme of the poem and argues that she was suffering from Electra complex and obsessed with her father's untimely death (70). He also connects Plath's own German origin and interprets the poem in the light of personal details.

Uroff considers Plath's later poems, especially "Lady Lazarus" as a poem revealing Plath's understanding of a suicidal person's psyche (162).

Steven Gould Axelrod considers the protagonist in the poem as a 'homicidal maniac' (*Sylvia Plath* 232).

Critics like Ingrid Melander interpret some of the metaphors of the poem by associating Plath's suicide to them. The oft-quoted metaphor, "dying is an art", (see analysis in section 1.2.2) is seen by her as 'a declaration in which a perverted, form of accomplishment is asserted'. Melander reads the metaphor of the peanut-crunching crowd (see analysis section 1.2.2) as an example of Plath's 'exhibitionism that belongs to the suicidal urge' (105).

William H. Pritchard mocks Plath's merit in the very title of his essay, "An interesting Minor Poet?" and interprets the lines, "there is a charge..." as a charge that Plath paid herself by ending her life (267). Critics like Al Alvarez have read the poem as a prophecy of doom that Plath had decided to inflict on herself by attempting and succeeding in committing suicide (64).

George Steiner sees Plath's use of the Holocaust metaphor (discussed in section 1.2.5) as "larceny" (330). He argues that as Plath was herself uninvolved in the Holocaust, to invoke it as a metaphor and appropriate the enormity of the Holocaust to personal suffering is far from legitimate.

Jacqueline Rose picks out on poems like "Lady Lazarus" and concludes that they are feminist poems about "victimisation and transcendence, accusation and apotheosis..." (135). She quotes Leon Weiseltier's disapproval over use of the Holocaust experience as a metaphor of personal suffering (206). He claims that it trivialises the Holocaust through that essentially personal reference or aggrandises her experience stealing the historical event.

However, Jon Rosenblatt (website) argues that by using the holocaust metaphor Plath shows demonic characters of the Nazi Doktor and of the risen Lady Lazarus in the light of male dominance over suppression of women and universalizes a personal conflict.

On the other hand, Eileen Aird regards the poem as very skilfully crafted, much more than a 'confessional' or 'extremist' poem. According to her Plath's intellectual ability and poetic techniques make her personal painful experiences highly effective poems. She regards the poem as "a social criticism with a strong didactic intent," with deliberate and effective use of "hysteria" (83).

Linda Wagner-Martin notes that by using the title "Lady Lazarus" Plath has reversed the gender of the biblical figure of Lazarus to 'Lady' Lazarus. She sees this powerful title used deliberately by Plath not only to convey her "unforgivingness" on the atrocities made on women by the male world, but also seeks revenge (*A Literary Life* 112). After having analysed the metaphors and having revealed the rich complexities of the poem, I will reflect on some of the above critical comments in the summary.

## METAPHOR ANALYSIS

The major metaphors in this poem are complex due to their elaboration and extension. In many metaphorical constructions, the Lazarus metaphor is combined with the Holocaust metaphor.

## THE LAZARUS METAPHOR

In this section I will examine the novel metaphors that are based on the conventional conceptual religious metaphor of Lazarus and his resurrection. Thus the source domain is religion and culture specific, activating the reader's schema of resurrection and redemption. The persona begins by stating her failed

attempted suicides.

A visual image is drawn where the persona describes her present state after being saved from death: "A sort of walking miracle... / ...Jew linen" (244).

The persona is "a sort of walking *miracle*" which implies that her being alive and walking is almost unbelievable (my emphasis). The persona describes her skin is as bright as "a Nazi lampshade" (244). Her right foot is like a paperweight. Plath treats the persona's face and foot as separate entities and compares them to objects. The foot is a paperweight, while her face is "a featureless, fine / Jew linen" (244). The references to the Nazi-like brightness and the featurelessness of the Jew at once bring to the mind the Nazi concentration camps where Jews were incarcerated. Plath has thus associated the Jewish Lazarus with the Jews who were incarcerated in the concentration camps. Very skilfully, she extends this metaphor, which is discussed in detail in section 1.2.5 as the Holocaust metaphor. The Lazarus metaphor of the resurrection is extended as the shroud is uncovered: "Peel off the napkin / ...enemy" (244).

Her survival is supposed to terrify the Nazi victimiser: "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / ...Will vanish in a day" (244).

The highly original linguistic image metaphor of a skull comes to mind with the use of the term "eye pits" in the first line. The synaesthetic metaphor transferring the taste of sourness to the smell of the breath is used. The image of peeling off the napkin and discovering a face maps onto the image of lifting the shroud from a dead body. The stanzas describe the skeleton's coming back to life, drawing from the Lazarus story and appropriate to the title of the poem.

The grave is personified and attributed the capability of eating: "Soon, soon the flesh / ...At home on me" (244).

Another conventional metaphor of THE BODY AS A 'HOME' TO THE SOUL is constructed linguistically in a refreshing way. The flesh will again be a home to the life that enters the body. The persona will then emerge, alive and smiling: "And I a smiling woman. / ...And like the cat I have nine times to die" (244).

The reference to the cat dying nine times alludes to folk tales, where cats

are believed to be tough survivors. The implication here is that the persona escapes death though she means to die. The line "I am only thirty" perhaps echoes the words of visitors who console her that her wounds will heal faster due to the advantage of youth (244).

#### CONVENTIONAL CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR: LIFE IS A PLAY

Plath has skilfully elaborated on the Lazarus metaphor and simultaneously also introduced another metaphor, based on the conventional conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS A PLAY (Lakoff and Turner 21). The persona describes how she feels after having survived. Being saved by the doctors, and in hospital, she resents the presence of others watching her. In Line 26-Line 33, the persona describes the survival and the visitors as: "The peanut-crunching crowd / ... I may be skin and bone" (245).

The words "skin and bone" seem to echo the reactions of the onlookers in the hospital; as visitors would usually show their surprise over the deterioration in her health and then would go on to add to their wishes for her recovery. Lazarus metaphor is extended as the words "them unwrap me hand and foot" can be mapped onto uncovering Lazarus's shroud (245). Lying in the hospital, after being saved by doctors, in the literal sense, it is the doctors removing her bandages.

The correspondences from this conventional conceptual metaphor can be clearly mapped onto the poetic metaphor. The persona's survival, her resurrection as Lady Lazarus, is compared to a performer's return to the stage.

Thus, the roles are reversed. In this metaphor the persona is no longer Lady Lazarus, instead she is a strip-tease performer. This metaphor implies that unlike Lazarus, the persona did not want to come back to life.

The persona is a performer on stage; the visitors to the hospital are now compared to the audience. However, here the performance is made more specific; it is a strip tease night show. The visitors at the hospital are now compared to people crunching peanuts and watching the stripping of the persona on stage. She resents being exposed to the crowd who watch her. In this novel metaphor, the persona fits the role of a strip tease on the stage. The persona sarcastically brings out the irony and bitterness of being a woman in a male world. The next two stanzas go on to describe the experience of surviving the suicide:

Comeback in broad day  
 To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
 Amused shout:

'A miracle!'

...

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes. (246)

The normal reactions of those eagerly awaiting her recovery seem to irritate her. The words "amused shouts" express pleasure through entertainment rather than expressing the relief and joy her visitors at the hospital would feel over seeing her alive. The word associates and coheres with the metaphor of theatrical performance and spectators. The persona then sarcastically demands a charge from those who watch her, implying that she is a performer to be highly paid for such a dramatic performance.

#### DEHUMANISING METAPHOR

In stanzas 12, 13, and 14 the persona states her failed suicide attempts. At ten, she had tried to kill herself but declares it was an accident. The second time she tried to drown herself and had been rescued. In describing this attempt, Plath dehumanises the persona as a seashell. In Line 37-Line 40, the image metaphor of a seashell rocking shut is used to describe the shutting out of life from the persona's being: "The second time I meant / ...As a seashell" (245).

Describing how her drowned body was brought back to life, she gives a vivid image: "They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" (245).

Using a dehumanising image metaphor<sup>1</sup>, Plath describes the persona as a shell in the sea, shutting out the world. The image of sticky worms on the body of the persona is disturbing. Having attempted suicides, and having survived them, the persona boastfully

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, if linguistically analysed, the metaphor is a simile- a direct comparison between worms in the phrase, "like sticky pearls" (245). I prefer to subsume simile under metaphors, and will refer to it as a dehumanising metaphor.

claims that dying is something that she does exceptionally well, in the metaphor, "Dying / Is an art" explained below (245).

### "DYING IS AN ART" METAPHOR

The poem is replete with stunning metaphors. The most striking metaphor is the one that considers dying as an art. The persona claims to be exceptionally good in this art of "dying." The metaphor slights the seriousness of death: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well" (245).

The cross-domain conceptual mapping from the source domain of art to the target domain of the act of 'dying' is striking. Dying is considered as an art that one can pursue, perfect, and master. The very disbelief that one would want to pursue and master the art of 'dying' makes the metaphor very novel indeed. I will elaborate on its schema-refreshing potential in section 1.3 below.

### THE HOLOCAUST METAPHOR

This metaphor is drawn upon the modern historical experience of the holocaust. The source domain would bring to the mind indescribable human suffering. Plath maps this metaphor to the target domain of personal suffering, at once compelling the reader to imagine how atrocities in personal lives can be as harrowing as the holocaust.

The persona refers to herself as a Jew. Later in the poem, the doctors who save her are addressed as "Herr Doktor" in German (246). Thus this associates the Nazi-Jew relationship onto the patient-doctor relationship. Being a Jewish woman, she argues that to them, she is "valuable, / The pure gold baby": "So, so, Herr Doktor. / ...The pure gold baby" (246).

The doctors, who should be given credit for the persona's miraculous survival, are seen by the persona as enemies as cruel as the Nazis. Therefore she refers them as "Herr Doktor" (246).

The words "turn and burn" and "Ash, ash" remind one of the Jews burning in gas chambers: "I turn and burn. / ... A gold filling" (246).

Be it a gold tooth filling or a wedding ring, all gold was taken from the Jews before they were gassed. This treatment meted out on the Jews is personalised and

mapped onto the persona's individual sense of suffering.

In the second to last stanza of the poem, the persona warns God and Lucifer that she is beyond heaven and hell: "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware" (246).

The persona is a woman and her enemies are men. The persona addresses the doctors who saved her as "Herr," they are German men as all the references are to men, "Herr Doktor," "Herr Enemy" (246). So the warning is given to the men in general, be it God or Satan or the doctors. Moreover, the religious metaphor and the Holocaust metaphor are combined here. The victim as Jewish woman and the victimiser as a Nazi man suggest that the persona's suffering as a woman is as unbearable as that of any sufferer of the holocaust.

Some ambivalence results from this metaphor as the persona refers the doctors as Germans. If we map the religious metaphor of Lazarus, the doctors should be regarded as saviours; but she refers them as German doctors, thus mapping the Nazi Jew metaphor as well. This combining of metaphors is confusing. Lazarus would have felt gratitude after being redeemed by the saviour Christ, while the Jewish victim would feel nothing but contempt towards the Nazi, which the persona feels. Considering the Lazarus metaphor, the doctor is a saviour, implying Christ. But combining religious metaphor of Lazarus and Holocaust metaphor and mapping them onto the term 'Herr' implies the doctor as a German/Nazi (destroyer) as well as the persona's saviour, and creates ambivalence<sup>2</sup> in interpretation.

Plath also brings in more than one metaphor in the last two lines. Lady Lazarus considers herself as the phoenix and the man-eater. The metaphor of a biblical phoenix is also used in the last stanza: "Out of the ash / ...And I eat men like air" (247).

The threat of 'eating' men metaphorically echoes man-eaters. Thus, another metaphor of seeing the persona as a man-eater is wove into the last line, where Lady Lazarus threatens to rise like a phoenix, change into a beast after being resurrected and take revenge on the enemies.

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<sup>2</sup> Crofts (website) regards the use of the Lazarus metaphor and the Holocaust metaphor as "an uneasy mix of historical and religious reference."



## POTENTIAL SCHEMA REFRESHMENT

Plath's source domains in the construction of metaphors are conventional.

The metaphor of Lazarus and his miraculous resurrection activates a pre-existing, religion-specific schema. It also brings to the eye images of uncovering the shroud. Not only is the resurrection image carefully built in, it is then directed to an altogether different source domain of theatrical performance.

As Lakoff and Turner have rightly stated, Plath then goes onto extend and elaborate metaphors of a theatrical performance, a peanut crunching crowd and the 'charge' one has to pay in order to see the persona perform are indeed original (67). The persona's coming back to life is not only seen as a resurrection, but also alluded to a theatrical performance and visitors are considered as insensitive spectators. The metaphors, however, do have a potential schema refreshing quality. The reader's pre-existing schema, would invoke a suffering patient who would gain emotional support from all the attention and the sympathy that she would get from all her family and friends visiting her and consoling her. However, the persona feels the reverse here. The result would perhaps be the activation of a disconcerting schema regarding life, death, and human relationships in the mind of the reader. The persona's sarcasm and the bitterness towards human relationships have the potentiality to create a disturbing impact on the reader's mind. The metaphors have the potential to enable the reader to comprehend a different world-view.

Comparing sticky worms on the personas body to pearls is shocking. Pearls activate an attractive image of beautiful pieces of jewellery but by equating it with sticky worms, Plath deliberately shocks the reader. It shatters the positive schema and creates a gruesome effect.

To compare painful and distressing suicide attempts to art is indeed disturbing the schemas of death and suicide. In general understanding, one would expect the near death experience as painful. So, one would expect the persona to consider her suicide attempt as an awful experience and a painful event. To regard it as art is to suggest it to be something rather 'creative and aesthetic', a stunning theatrical performance. It has a startling effect as the schema of death is negative, and associates with pain, bereavement, etc., while the schema of art when activated, would associate with beauty, creativity, performance and

passion. This metaphor is novel, as death and destruction are the common conventional ideas that go together, not death and creativity and art. It is not only an original linguistic construction, but also undoubtedly a novel conceptual comparison between death and art.

The metaphor addressing doctors as Nazis is also disturbing. The general understanding of a reader's existing schema about doctors as life-saviours is reversed here. In the reader's usual understanding, when doctors save any patient's life, the patient is grateful and shows his/her gratitude. However, in the poem, far from being full of gratitude, and seeing doctors as her saviours and God-like, the persona accuses them of being mercenary and also addresses them as German, implying that they are enemy. Indeed, these novel and original metaphors are potentially schema-refreshing.

## SUMMARY

I have attempted to analyse the major metaphors in the poem, dividing them into sections. The poem is striking in its images of resurrection, holocaust and strip tease metaphors. The conceptual mapping goes beyond the one-shot mapping of visual images and disturbs the reader's conceptual schemas. Personal suffering and women suffering have been compared to holocaust suffering. The victim, Lady Lazarus, promises revenge on the cruel victimiser, threatening to eat the entire 'Nazi' world of men, like air.

In section 1.3, I have attempted to reveal the potentially schema refreshing qualities of the poem. Throughout the analysis, I have borne in mind that the reader's world knowledge and the subjectivity in interpretation would determine how reinforcing or refreshing a given metaphor is. I would like to emphasize Semino's schema-refreshment scale is indeed important, and one can only reveal the potentiality of the metaphors in refreshing the world-view of the reader.

While interpreting Plath's poetry, I regard her highly original metaphors central to the assessment of her poetic skills. To regard the poem as merely confessional is to undermine its richness and overlook its striking impact on the reader. "Lady Lazarus" is forceful and unforgettable as a poem, and so is the persona created in poem.

In the present study, I have interpreted this poem using the cognitive approach to metaphor analysis. Within the constraints of space, I could only deal with the major metaphors in the poem. As Lakoff and Turner have observed, "poets use conventional

conceptual metaphors" (67). I have shown Plath's use of conventional conceptual metaphors in "Lady Lazarus." I have also revealed through the analysis that Plath uses striking associations between diverse domains in the creation of her novel metaphors. As Semino has stated: "metaphors occupy different positions on the schema-refreshment scale" (213). Plath's metaphors can be placed higher on the schema-refreshing end of the scale, due to their potential quality of refreshing the reader's existing schemas.

The nature of the source domains in her metaphors is unique. Her use of dehumanising metaphors for the persona and her consistent personifications used for non-human or non-living things make her poems unusual. In her consistent use of personifications and dehumanising metaphors, a distinct Plathian style emerges. This style is not only very unusual, but also creates a certain ambivalence making the poems more intriguing than ever. Plath draws upon religious source domains, historical source domains, domains of animals and babies, trees and flowers and maps the visual images as well as the conceptual constituents onto highly dissimilar target domains. This causes cross-domain image mapping and schema activation of concepts hitherto polarised in the reader's mind. As a result, an obvious effort is required on the reader's part to apply the compatible correspondences and thereby re-examine certain concepts in a new light. Thus, the reader's existing schemas are reinforced, stretched or perhaps even refreshed, enabling the reader to comprehend a different world-view. Her selection of these source domains enables her to explain her ideas and present her different world-view.

The present study has revealed how Lakoff and Turner's theory of cognitive metaphor can be applied to poetic metaphors to elucidate the richness of poetry. The notion of Schema refreshment as developed by Semino is indeed a very useful tool not only to reveal but also to explain the potential effects of original and novel metaphors on the reader.

Lastly, I am certain that metaphor analysis and a cognitive approach to Plath's poetry is an appropriate, competent method for interpretation and can be used for comparison and assessment of the existing interpretations of the poems.

## FURTHER RESEARCH

Plath's poems proliferate with images and phrases that echo other poems. One could pursue further in-depth analysis of how Plath uses intertextuality in her poetry. Intertextuality is a significant tool for the apt interpretation of poetry.

Another interesting approach to the analysis would be to examine the semantic prosodies that occur in Plath's poetry. Using the British National Corpus, metaphorical expressions and linguistic deviations could be analysed to reveal how her poetry disturbs the existing cognitive schemas in the reader's mind and forces the reader to re-examine their ideas. Given that literal language and the creation of metaphors are based on the non-literal, ordinary language and conventional conceptual metaphors, such a study would further reveal that Plath's powerful poetic metaphors are indeed novel and original. Focussing on the investigation of negative, positive, and neutral semantic prosodies based on Bill Louw's work, it would be relevant to pursue corpus-based analysis of Plath's poetry. A corpus-based study of semantic prosodies would further substantiate the analysis carried out in the present study.

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