

A Postmodern Study of “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath

Dr. Pinky Sagolsem

Asst. Professor

pinkysagolsem35@gmail.com

Miss. Tseili Dukhru

Asst. Professor

tseiliduk@gmail.com

Mr. Rhilo Mero

Asst. Professor

Dept. of English

Don Bosco College Kohima

merorhilo@gmail.com

#8921656591

Abstract

This paper explores the postmodern elements in the poem “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath was an American poet and author. She can be considered as a postmodern poet as her poetry encapsulates the elements of postmodernist poetry. The rudiments of postmodern poems such as the, disregard for the traditional poetic conventions can be seen in “Lady Lazarus” as well as “Daddy”. Postmodern literature emerged in mid-twentieth century, primarily following World War II. Postmodern literature mirrors the vulnerability of the post World War II landscape. In “Daddy”, the speaker’s father symbolizes the Nazis. The speaker’s fear of the father indicates the destruction of war and the vulnerability of war. Even in “Lady Lazarus” the idea about war is incorporated through the use of words like ‘Nazi lampshade’. Postmodern poetry often includes themes of restlessness and is usually written without a formal structure. The lines of the poem breaks and structures can be chaotic or seemingly meaningless, though there is usually a purpose for the unusual breaks. Both the poems are written in free verse. Postmodern poets sought to break down the walls of traditionalism and conformity and to embrace a more open-ended approach to writing. In “Lady Lazarus”, Sylvia Plath openly talks about suicide and her suicidal tendencies breaking the traditional and conservative approach towards such subjects like suicide. She adopts confessional tone in her poetry.

Key Words: *Postmodernist poetry, World War II, Conformity, Traditional Poetic Convention, Confessional tone*

Introduction

The term postmodernism was first used by Arnold Toynbee who was a well known historian of the twentieth century in 1939 in his book A Study of History Vol I. He used it in his footnote on the very first page of the book. According to Toynbee “the modern period starts (basically in the west) by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, may be between 1850 and 1875” (Krishnaswamy et al, pp, 18). Therefore, the origin of the postmodernism can be located in nineteenth century. Postmodern poetry in literature emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Postmodern poetry in literature refers to a style of poetry which is characterized by skepticism and self-referential approach. Postmodern poetry is a reaction against modernism and the Enlightenment ideas of rationality, order, and absolute truth. It defies the certainty and optimism which are the tenets of modernism, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. It challenges the idea of singular, objective and absolute truth by embracing the multiple truths, interpretations and perspectives.

Postmodern poetry is often noted for new stylistic and thematic aspects. It often adopts free form in writing. It is written in a way that reflects the organic thought process of the speaker by employing the stream of consciousness technique. The postmodern poetry often ponders on the theme of lack of reality and questions the notion of authorship. This style of poetry reflects the complexities of contemporary life. Postmodern poetry is known for pushing the boundaries of conventional and traditional poetry. There is a profound use of abstract imagery and obscure relationships as well as paradoxical juxtapositions of ideas and situations. Postmodern poetry creates a sense of chaos and uncertainty by dispensing the traditional techniques like meter, rhyme and traditional forms of structure.

Sylvia Plath was an American poet, novelist and a short story writer known for her emotionally intense and deeply personal works. Her writings examine the themes of mental illness, identity, death and the struggle of being a women in mid twentieth century society. Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” are two of the most powerful and provocative poems of the twentieth century. These two poems are often analyzed through the lens of confessional poetry. But, there is no denying the fact the fact that these poems encapsulate the

elements of postmodern poetry, with the embodiment of fragmented structure, intertextual references, pastiche and dark irony. Plath's projection of personal trauma, her defiance from the traditional poetic forms and the quest of identity harmonized with the key modernist tendencies.

Postmodern Study of “Daddy”

The poem “Daddy” was written in 1962 and posthumously first published in 1965 in her collection of poems *Ariel*. This poem despite the fact that it depicts the raw emotional and highly fragmented expression of grief, anger, and the quest for identity, a voice that speaks to personal trauma yet it transcends the individual to touch on broader cultural and historical concerns. Sylvia Plath's use of irony, fragmented structure, non-linear narrative, exploration of gender and the tension between reality and representation placed this poem among the postmodern poetry.

Fragmented Narration and Disorientation

Postmodern poetry often embraces fragmented structures by rejecting linear narration and coherence. Plath's “Daddy”, is filled with short, disconnected stanzas that portray fragmented psyche and unstable sense of self. “Daddy” is a play with meanings and contradicting emotions that do not make logical sense. Plath uses this fragmented structure by constructing a disjointed narrative that fluctuates between surreal fantasies, historical imagery and personal memory. All these evoke a complicated emotional experience. In Plath's “Daddy” the narration oscillates back and forth between the memories of the father, and Nazi imagery; shifting between recollections of real interactions and surreal metaphors. The Juxtaposition of historical imagery and personal memories such as the comparison of herself as a Jewish victim and her father to a Nazi creates a disoriented effect. By utilizing the fragmented style, Plath creates a poem with a mixture of reality and nightmare. This disjointed and fragmented narration is central to postmodern poetry where the boundaries between truth and illusion become blurred as observed in Plath's “Daddy”.

The Postmodern Self and Identity

In “Daddy”, Plath seeks to deconstruct the traditional gender roles and demonstrates the feminist aspects of postmodern aesthetics. Plath's portrayal of the father as a powerful and controlling figure reflects the postmodern understanding of gender as socially constructed rather than biologically determined. The speaker's resentment towards her father and his dominance over her reflects the tension that many postmodern feminist writers often convey in their works. In

“Daddy”, Plath uses recurring motif to “kill” her father which suggests the speaker’s desire to free herself from the grip of oppressive masculine figure in a patriarchal society.

The speaker’s identity in Plath’s “Daddy” is inextricably connected to her tortured and complicated relationship with her father. Plath’s description of the father as “A man in black with a Meinkampf look” (Plath, lines 65) “The boot in the face” (Plath, line 49) clearly mirrors the elements of postmodern feminist writers. The final line in the poem, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (Plath, line 80) signifies the breakthrough from the oppressive identity; however, the speaker’s identity remains unsure and unstable.

Intertextuality and Historical References

In the poem “Daddy”, Plath utilizes the postmodern elements of Intertextuality by fusing together the personal memories with several allusions to historical events and mythology. Plath’s portrayal of the father as a Nazi, the speaker as a victim and the use of words like “Luftwaffe”, “Auschwitz” and “Swastika” bring out the historical atrocities. Furthermore, by bringing in references of the “vampire” that “drank my blood for a year” (Plath, line 73) Plath is emphasizing the use of mythology in the poem. The use of all these allusions is not merely metaphorical but also deeply rooted in history, which allows the readers to confront the issue of ideological purity, violence and authoritarianism. Hence, Plath’s poem “Daddy” embodies the postmodern spirit of “anything goes” by blending personal experiences with historical and mythological elements which allows the readers to explore different aspects far beyond the individual’s experience.

Use of Dark Irony and Parody

Another element of postmodernism is the use of irony and parody in order to deconstruct the grand narratives. In the poem “Daddy” Plath uses vivid and exaggerated imagery to portray the father as terrifying and monstrous by comparing him to a vampire, Nazi and an oppressor. The speaker’s reference to her father with the lines, “I have always been scared of you” (Plath, line 41) indicates the father’s oppressive nature. This is a form of irony whereby “Daddy” is the archetype of loving and protective figure but is represented as a symbol of societal control and historical oppression.

The Ambiguity of Meaning

Another hallmark in the postmodern poetry is the rejection of fixed interpretations and the play with meanings. In Plath's "Daddy" the poem is full of ambiguity, allowing readers to interpret the poem in their own way. The poem employs ambiguous imagery to explore the dynamic and complicated emotions surrounding the speaker's relation with her father. The portrayal of the speaker killing herself and her father in the lines, "If I've killed one man, I've killed two" (Plath, line 71) is both disturbing and at the same time liberating. These images depict the radical act of liberation, yet it also portrays the dangers of unchecked rage.

Plath's use of the word "Daddy" is also ambiguous, as it can refer to the speaker's actual father or can be a reference to a more symbolic figure of male oppression and authority in a patriarchal society. Ambiguity is further reinforced in the use of pronoun in the opening line, "you" which create a sense of direct address yet, it allows the reader to interpret the speaker's feelings in a broader sense. Moreover, in the final lines of the poem, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (Plath, line 80) can be interpreted as a moment of closure, however, it is not entirely liberating. The breakthrough of the speaker's journey is undercut by the intensity of her emotions. Plath's use of tension between resolution and its unresolved nature is a postmodern characteristic as it rejects stable and definitive meaning.

Use of Repetition and Nursery Rhyme

Repetition in various forms becomes a key element in postmodern poetry. The poem "Daddy" opens with the repetitive lines, "You do not do, you do not do" (Plath, line 1) creating a rhythmic effect almost mirroring a nursery rhyme. Plath's use of repetition suggests the speaker's emotional intensity and highlights her feelings of being trapped. Sylvia Plath also repetitively uses the words "I" and "I do" which emphasize her personal experience and her obsessive relationship with her father. Moreover, the repeated use of the word "Daddy" throughout the poem suggests the speaker's complex feelings towards her father.

Postmodern Study of "Lady Lazarus"

The poem "Lady Lazarus" was written in 1962 and was published in 1965 in the collection of poems *Ariel*. This poem explores the very intimate themes of life, death and resurrection. This poem delves deeply into her personal life experiences. "Lady Lazarus" is marked with a play with form and skepticism towards grand narratives thereby making it a postmodern poem.

Fragmentation and Discontinuity

The highlighting factor of postmodern poetry is fragmentation which runs throughout the poem “Lady Lazarus” with its sporadic movement and breathless like rhythm: “Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me” (Plath, lines 18-20), “And there is a charge, a very / Large charge / For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood” (Plath, lines 77-80), “Ash, ash- / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing / There-” (Plath, lines 92-95)

Also revealing the oscillating mental state and the undying nature of the motif of resurrection permeates throughout the poem: “I have done it again / One year in every ten / I manage it (Plath, lines 1-3), “And like the cat I have nine / times to die / This is number Three” (Plath, lines 23-25), “Nevertheless, I am the same, / identical woman” (Plath, lines 39-40), “dying is an art / I do it exceptionally well” (Plath, lines 54, 55) “it’s easy enough to do / A miracle! / There is a charge” (Plath, lines 60, 69, 71) “Out of the ash, / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.” (Plath, lines 102-104)

Allusions and Intertextuality and Myth

Another striking tenet of postmodernism is the use of allusions and the intertextuality within her poem which makes it fall under the postmodern tradition. In “Lady Lazarus” it aptly alludes to the story of ‘Lazarus’ (John 11:1-45) from the Bible where it talks about a person called ‘Lazarus’ being raised from the dead, similarly Plath provides her ability to come back from the dead after several suicide attempts:

“I have done it again / I have nine / times to die / This is number three / the second time I meant” (Plath, lines 1, 23-24, 44). Then it also indirectly alludes to the Greek mythology of the legendary bird called ‘Phoenix’ where it rises from its own ‘ash’ hence she substantiates it on her poem in the lines, “Out of the ash I rise” (Plath, lines 102-103) symbolizing the resurrecting spirit and immortal nature.

The proliferation of intertextual references to the Holocaust imagery is also described by the poet where she mentions, “Bright as a Nazi lampshade” (Plath, line 6) and “Jew Linen” (Plath, line 10) and lines such as, “Herr Doktor / Ash, ash- / A cake of soap” (Plath, lines 83,92, 96) this alludes to the disturbing inhumane and grotesque story of the Holocaust, reinforcing the poet’s feelings of being abused by the society in its terrible time. The speaker with these words presents the rumors of the gruesome picture of the male Nazi doctors experimenting with the

bodies of the dead from the concentration camps: making soap using body fat. People were murdered in millions in the concentration camps and their bodies would also be incinerated.

Pastiche, Dark Irony and Objectification

The poem is flooded with the imagery of the religious story of “Lazarus” as well as the mythological legendary bird phoenix where the author likens herself to rise from the ashes dealing upon the theme of death and resurrection. Also the feminist approach can be seen through the use of the word ‘Lady’ emphasizing the importance of female gender role in the male dominated society and placing herself into the role of the ‘Lady Lazarus’. It therefore reinforces the idea of suffering from a female perspective. The dark irony is seen when she is compared to a performance of “The big strip tease” (Plath, line 34) where the people are there to watch her suffer. She breaks stereotypical boundaries of gender roles by reversing the words of “ladies and gentlemen” to “Gentlemen, ladies” (Plath, line 35). The objectification of women runs rampantly throughout the poem where the speaker compares herself to a holy relic, “a sort of walking miracle, my / skin / bright as a Nazi lampshade” (Plath, lines 4- 6). The speaker presents the whole plight of a woman’s body to a theatrical performance where she displays herself to “The peanut-crunching / crowd” (Plath, line 29- 30) as she performs “the theatrical / Comeback” (Plath, lines 64- 65). The very title itself also portrays the ironic reversal of the gender role of the story in the Bible to a women version where she is resurrected each time to only suffer more.

Instability of Identity

The instability of Identity is one of the prominent features of postmodern literature and the poem “Lady Lazarus” delves into the speaker’s struggle of the fragmented and shifting self every time she dies and is resurrected. This inconstant identity exposes the idea of how the self is never fixed but fluid and unstable, which is one of the major tendencies of the postmodern thought. The lines, “I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it-” (Plath, lines 1- 3) and “What a million filaments. / The peanut- crunching/ crowd / Shoves in to see” (Plath, lines 28- 31) exemplifies the death and resurrection motif and how external forces shape her identity: this echoes the destabilization of identity and leaves the speaker fragmented and erratic in her identity crisis whilst being shoved and reshaped by others around her. The recurring imagery of how the speaker mentions “I have done it again” (Plath, line 1) shows that her identity is never

fixed but always fluctuates with each death and rebirth. This cyclic nature challenges the idea of a stable self, emerging as a different person each time the speaker dies.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath is often placed in the category of confessional poet, “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” exhibits strong postmodern tendencies. The use of fragmented structures, use of Intertextuality, pastiche, dark irony and the interrogation of identity in “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” places these two poems as postmodern poems. Plath presents multiple interpretations in “Daddy”. In “Lady Lazarus” she openly talks on topics like suicide defying the societal restrictions on dealing on such serious issues. Through her poems she openly challenges the nature of reality, authority, and personal experiences which are the hallmark of postmodern poetry.

Work Cited

Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester University Press, 2025

Krishnaswamy, N. et al., *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Student’s Companion*, Macmillan Publishers India LTD, 2013.

Plath, Sylvia, “Daddy.” Poem Analysis.

<https://www.poemanalysis.com/poem/1000/daddy-by-sylvia-plath/> Accessed 12th March 2025.

Plath, Sylvia, “Lady Lazarus.” Poem Analysis.

<https://www.poemanalysis.com/poem/1001/lady-lazarus-by-sylvia-plath/> Accessed 12th March 2025.

Seldon, Raman, et al., *A reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Routledge, 2013.