

Eileen M. Aird: On "Lady Lazarus"

A companion piece to 'Daddy', in which the poet again fuses the worlds of personal pain and corporate suffering, is 'Lady Lazarus'. In this poem a disturbing tension is established between the seriousness of the experience described and the misleadingly light form of the poem. The vocabulary and rhythms which approximate to the colloquial simplicity of conversational speech, the frequently end-stopped lines, the repetitions which have the effect of mockingly counteracting the violence of the meaning, all establish the deliberately flippant note which this poem strives to achieve. These are all devices which also operate in Auden's 'light verse', but the constantly shifting tone of 'Lady Lazarus' is found less frequently in Auden's more cerebral poetry. At times the tone is hysterically strident and demanding:

The peanut-crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot?

The big strip tease.

Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands

My knees.

Then it modulates into a calmer irony as the persona mocks herself for her pretensions to tragedy: 'Dying/is an art, like everything else./I do it exceptionally well.' As in 'Daddy' Sylvia Plath has used a limited amount of autobiographical detail in this poem; the references to suicide in 'Lady Lazarus' reflect her own experience. As in 'Daddy?', however, the personal element is subordinate to a much more inclusive dramatic structure, and one answer to those critics who have seen her work as merely confessional is that she used her personal and painful material as a way of entering into and illustrating much wider themes and subjects. In 'Lady Lazarus' the poet again equates her suffering with the experiences of the tortured Jews, she becomes, as a result of the suicide she inflicts on herself, a Jew:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,

My right foot

A paperweight,

My face a featureless, fine

Jew linen.

The reaction of the crowd who push in with morbid interest to see the saved suicide mimics the attitude of many to the revelations of the concentration camps; there is a brutal insistence on the pain which many apparently manage to see with scientific detachment. 'Lady Lazarus' represents an extreme use of the 'light verse' technique. Auden never forced such grotesque material into such an insistently jaunty poem, and the anger and compassion which inform the poem are rarely found so explicitly in his work. 'Lady Lazarus' is also a supreme example of Sylvia Plath's skill as an artist. She takes very personal, painful material and controls and forms it with the utmost rigour into a highly wrought poem, which is partly effective because of the polar opposition between the terrible gaiety of its form and the fiercely uncompromising seriousness of its subject. If we categorize a poem such as 'Lady Lazarus' as 'confessional' or 'extremist' then we highlight only one of its elements. It is also a poem of social criticism with a strong didactic intent, and a work of art which reveals great technical and intellectual ability. The hysteria is intentional and effective.

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