



## Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" with Reference to Cleanth Brooks' Essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure"

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**ABSTRACT**

Sylvia Plath, being one of the confessional poets, confesses her emotional self in her poems. "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are very famous poems and it is interesting to apply the theory of a modern critic Cleanth Brooks who says that 'Irony' is a part of structure of a poem which brings the real charm of the poem out. So here is an attempt to apply the theory of "Irony as principle of structure" in the two poems of Sylvia Plath. It shows how the theory of using a 'irony' as a technique in these two modern poems.

**KEYWORDS**

Irony, Cleanth Brooks, Lazarus, Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath, a very famous American poet, novelist, and short-story writer, was born in Boston, Massachusetts on October 27, 1932 and died on February 11, 1963. Joyce Carol Oates, in the New York Times Book Review, has described Plath as "one of the most celebrated and controversial of post-war poets writing in English." Her parents were Otto Emil Plath (1885-1940) and Aurelia Schober Plath (1906-1994).

Through the surface readings of many of her poems, one can find that most of her poems are based on her central obsession from the beginning to the end of her father's life and his career. Her father, Otto Emile Plath, was a very influential person of her whole life. Her father's life and specially his death which took place on the ninth day after her eighth birthday left a very deep impression on her.

Her collection of writing consists of the works like *The Colossus*(1962), *Ariel*(1966), *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1972), *The Collected Poems* (1981) in Poetry and *The Bell Jar* (1971), *Letters Home* (1975), *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*(1979), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) and *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000) in Prose.

Poems in *Ariel* are considered different than her earlier works because they are considered as personal poetry. Her very famous two poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are considered as poems of same style.

"Daddy" is considered as the poem for Plath's deceased father, Otto Plath. The poet uses many imageries and metaphors. She here insists that she was forced to kill him, calling him 'daddy' but then she says that he died before she had time to kill. She says that she is free after his death; she is not able to forget him even. But she tries to make her mind free from all of her past torments and the male who left negative impression on her life.

"Lady Lazarus" too presents many of the poet's personal experiences. She very theatrically presents her attempts of death. She has tried to commit suicide three times in her life and in every decade she does it once. She imagines how she returns back to life and people come to see her alive. She takes dying as an art and she attempts that well. In fact she is at her deathbed third time and addresses the crowd and warns at the end that she will eat men like air.

One of the important modern critic Cleanth Brooks was born on 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1906. He worked with Robert Penn Warren from 1935 to 1941 and edited *Louisiana Review*. His first book of criticism was a college text which he co-edited with Robert Penn Warren, i.e., *Understanding Poetry* (1938). It is consid-

ered as the foundation of the New Criticism .

In his remarkable essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure", Cleanth Brooks talks about 'Irony' as a tool through which new meanings can come out. He says that various meanings of universal significance are inter-related through an irony which is inherent in the structure of the poem itself.

He argues that meanings of universal significance which the literature tries to find out are suggested through the medium of irony which the poet shows in the structure of the poem. The modern poets use metaphor as their new technique. And metaphor is a technique through which they try to interweave different meanings. When one presents some universal theme to the poem, he presents it with the help of various techniques. One moves through the narrow way of techniques to move to the particular of meanings. One theme is not decided first and then it's embellished with concrete details but he has to give more importance to details and then move with detailing them and through this he may bring out any general meaning

Brooks says that, a poet doesn't say anything directly but he uses metaphors because through metaphors, a poet takes care of the risk partially that he may not be blamed of saying something because through some of the direct statements, he may fall in trouble and the other thing is the charm of a poem would be lost. It would turn into other forms of art rather than a poem.

Poets are committed to use metaphors. It is used to present general theme to the indirection. There is an organic relationship. It means that a poem is not merely collection of beautiful or 'poetic' images. If there would exist objects which are poetic but not kept into a proper way, then it would not be a poem.

Brooks defines 'irony' as 'the obvious warping of a statement by the context'. A simple sentence, like 'This is a fine state of affairs', means opposite in some context. So it's a kind of sarcasm and it's an obvious kind of irony. The reversal of meaning is pointed by the tone of voice. Irony comprises of different modes like 'tragic irony, self-irony, playful, arch, mocking or gentle-irony etc. (Irony as principle of structure)

Brooks says that he doesn't want to justify the term 'irony' in the essay but he wants to show the importance of the term irony in modern criticism. Irony is important aspect of poetry.

The *Ariel* shows Sylvia Plath's brilliance and powerful quality as a lyric poet. Even after many years of her suicide, readers

like them because of its powerful use of language and expression. Here an attempt is made to find out the use of the irony in both the poems of Sylvia Plath.

The poem "Daddy" is one of her bold confessional poems in which Plath presents her father and the relationship which she carried out when he was alive and even after many years of his death. On first reading of the poem, the readers would find out that the narrator is a girl of German and Jewish parents. She presents her dilemma of living such an unclear life where she can't decide her place of belonging. Her father is presented as 'Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, Ghastly statue with one grey toe' ("Daddy" 8-9) and then as a Nazi, a tormentor to Jew, so her father who is considered as a God turns to be a tormentor. That is ironic here; that the God won't like to torment someone and her father who has died was not liked by any.

The title itself would be taken as ironic. The poem has a title of "Daddy" which basically means a father only but it has many connotative meanings related with it. It shows the quality of love, care, trust, faith etc with it. When a child calls a father 'daddy', it shows affection, love towards him. But here, the experience of a daughter with her father is not very good. In fact she wants to kill him. A verbal irony arises when she says, "Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time" ("Daddy" 6-7). The father is already dead but the narrator said that he died before she had time. This is an impossible thing that she says she killed him, but he was already dead before the time she got to kill him. It is because of the love of a girl towards her father. There's a psychological reason behind this. It is as,

"Freudian psychology has been exploited by Sylvia Plath in this poem for her reaction. It argues that the child is in 'love' with the parent. She reacts with hate for the father who has made her suffer by dying at such a juncture in her development". (Kumar 1988:138)

The father's death at such a point of time of her life made her suffer so much, that she doesn't like. She expected him to be there when she needs him. The age with which she was growing made her attracted to the people around her and she doesn't find her father around her so she hates that. But it is hatred out of love. This love-hatred relationship leads to a situational irony. This hatred turns out to be a relation between a Nazi and a Jew. She says,

"So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.  
It struck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich.  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you." ("Daddy" 22-29)

So here, the daughter finds it confusing emotional control for recognizing her father as a German Nazi. The daughter says that jaw becomes a barbed wire, and she utters 'ich' sound, it reminds of the German language and she presents an emotional revolt against her father. The daughter begins to talk like a Jew.

She connects her father as not like a God but with a Swastika 'so black no sky could squeak through' ("Daddy" 47). So she in a way presents negative impression of the Nazi and 'Swastika' is a symbol of their rule. But then she says, "Every woman adores a Fascist, The boot in the face, the brute, brute heart of a brute like you." ("Daddy" 48-50) She says that every woman likes a fascist. So it is her attraction towards him that she tells such a thing. She still has love for her father.

The lines like, "I used to pray to recover you" ("Daddy" 14) and "At twenty I tried to die; and get back, back, back to

you" ("Daddy" 58-59) show her ironic effect here. These are opposite to her other lines where she shows hatred towards her father. It is situational irony here that she wants her father again but she wanted him to kill. She has even made a model of him. She looks at her husband as a part of her father. When she says,

"If I've killed one man, I've killed two  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now." ("Daddy" 71-75)

Here, she hasn't actually killed anyone but she says that she killed two men. Her husband drank her blood for seven years, is to mean that she was tortured by her husband. And finally she says, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" ("Daddy" 80). It is again ironic that she is actually not done with her father. Still there are things to ask him.

"Lady Lazarus" is a poem which presents a terror with the self. It talks about a woman who has a great and terrible option of gaining back the life or to say of rebirth. Here too, Plath makes use of irony to deal with detail meanings. The title of the poem "Lady Lazarus" is used ironically because it is taken from a biblical reference.

"There are two prominent people in the New Testament of the Bible with the name of Lazarus. The most prominent was the Lazarus who died and was brought back to life by Jesus. The other was known as Lazarus the beggar." (<http://www.aboutbibleprophecy.com/p39.htm>)

Originally Lazarus is a male and he was taken back from death to life by Christ. But here Lazarus is a female and she is different in her behavior and everything.

The poet begins by saying that, "I've done it again. One year in every ten I manage it" ("Lady Lazarus" 1-3). It is about the attempts of death which the narrator has made. Her deaths have corresponded different crises which she has gone through. She has attempted to die three times. M.L. Rosenthal writes about "Lady Lazarus" that,

"... the speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman." (Newman 1970: 70)

It is not actual dying here which takes place, but it is different experience which she has gone through. This poem is also taken as Plath's confessional poem. Plath herself went through such crisis: First when her father died, the second when she had her nervous breakdown and third time was just before she was about to write this poem. So the poem is found relevant.

Irony is found when she asks the person whom she narrates to peel off napkin from her featureless face. She asks if they feel terrified. She wants to terrify others, but it is because she doesn't want to come back and still she is welcomed. Verbal irony arises when she says,

"The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?  
The sour breath  
Will vanish in a day.  
Soon, soon the flesh  
The grave cave ate will be  
At home on me  
And I a Smiling woman." ("Lady Lazarus" 13-19)

She says that she will be a smiling woman after coming back from the grave. Everything is going to vanish one day and so the flesh is going to get dried in the grave cave and she will be awake in that. It is a new birth which she assumes to

have. She expects a life after that; she has nine times to live like a cat. The poet tries to impersonalize the poem by using the collective reference. Her suffering is not only her. She uses allusions for that. She says she is like a walking miracle. Her skin is bright like a Nazi lampshade. It is referring to the Nazi commandment that made lampshade out of human skin. She presents the tyrannous situation of many of that time. M.L. Rosenthal says,

“Sylvia Plath’s poem presents the author in the midst of what proved to be her final, and finally successful, suicide attempt. She sees herself as a skilled suicide-artist whose self-loathing the sadistic and voyeuristic audience, easily envisioned as the Nazi- tending aspects of the civilization appreciates too well.”(Newman 1970: 69)

It is appreciated by the Nazis to kill one’s self and she is doing it with self- determination. She says, “Dying Is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well.” (“Lady Lazarus” 43-45). She takes ‘dying’ as an art. It is ironic here that she understands that well and accepting as skillful technique but it is a kind of mocking here that she does on others or who takes death as a wrong thing.

“It modulates into a calmer irony as the persona mocks herself for the pretensions to tragedy.” (Kumar 1988:130)

She is pretentious of her death here. But when she wakes up and looks around with a new vision to the crowd around her body, they take it as ‘miracle’. She expects them to see her scars and hear her broken heart but they do not do that.

So, here in these two poems, one may find out how the use of ‘irony’ has been made by the poet. It is, as Brooks says, inevitable thing for a poem. It is very much a structure of any poem. Even when a poet is expressing her own self, her expressions also may go through the ironical condition sometimes or one may say it is always found in any poem whether it’s a confessional poem or an imaginative one. Irony brings out the real charm and the readers would read then only with interest to go with the flow to find out the past.

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