

## Refiguring Women: Metaphor, Metonymy, and Identity in Plath's Confessional Poetry

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Critics have much debated the implications of Sylvia Plath's use of Holocaust imagery in her poetry, with this scholarship tending to either dismiss or defend Plath's choice of metaphors and subject matter. In his essay, "Black Phones!: Postmodern Poetics in the Holocaust Poetry of Sylvia Plath," Matthew Boswell discusses the initial backlash of criticism focused on the confessional element of Plath's work. These critics claim that Plath's juxtaposition of personal experience with historical genocide is misguided, that "to condone such a confusion is to delude ourselves as to the nature of our personal miseries and their relationship – or relative magnitude when placed against – the most dreadful event in the history of mankind" (Irving Howe, qtd. in Boswell 53). Boswell, on the other hand, argues against the notion that Plath's Holocaust imagery serves as any kind of personal metaphor. His essay attempts a sort of rescue of Plath's work by providing an explanation for what he considers legitimate use of the Holocaust as poetic subject matter.

The criticisms of Plath's Holocaust imagery rest in an inability to understand the Holocaust as an appropriate metaphor for women's struggles with self-effacement and domestic erasure. Irving Howe stated that "it is decidedly unlikely that [the experience of Holocaust victims] was duplicated in a middle-class family living in Wellesley, Massachusetts" (qtd. in Boswell 53). This claim dismisses the larger social issue which much of Plath's work speaks—women's domestic effacement. The Holocaust, as an attempt to eradicate the existence of a certain group of people, serves as an entirely legitimate metaphor for the kind of annihilation of women Plath recounts time and again in her poetry, such as in "Lady Lazarus" when she describes the remains of Holocaust victims having been reduced to nothing but ashes and domestic symbols like "A cake of soap, / A wedding ring" (Plath 17). Howe's dismissal is problematic, as it limits Plath's poetry strictly to autobiography and then trivializes that experience. Jacqueline Rose writes of another of Plath's Holocaust poems, "Daddy," that its major theme is "a crisis of language and identity" and "the argument that she simply uses the Holocaust to aggrandise her personal difficulties seems completely beside the point. Who can

say that these were not difficulties which she experienced in her very person?" (984). In other words, Sylvia Plath was not the only woman who ever struggled with oppression or feelings of subservience in a male-based culture, nor do we or can we ever claim to know the full range of another person's experience (regardless of how much of it is published in books). The voices in Plath's poetry—confessions and all—speak for multitudes of women with an enormous range of oppressive, and even violent, experiences. Howe's narrow view of Plath's poetry as exclusively confessional offensively attempts to compare degrees of oppression among subjugated groups. He is acknowledging the public, historical Holocaust while dismissing the domestic holocaust women have experienced personally and privately.

Rose notes in her discussion of "Daddy" that "it is only that preliminary privileging of the personal which allows the reproach for her evocation of history ... because this is the poem in which Plath identifies with the Jew" (980). Indeed, the criticism stems from a disapproval of Plath's equating one form of oppression with another. Critics who take this stance, then, are deliberately singling out gender oppression as an issue of low value. Rose, however, identifies the way "Daddy"

assimilates, combines into one entity, more than one form of oppression—daughter and father, poor and rich—licensing a reading which makes of the first the meta-narrative of all forms of inequality (patriarchy the cause of all other types of oppression, which it then subordinates to itself). (980)

In other words, devaluing gender oppression is a way to perpetuate its existence. Criticisms of Plath's Holocaust imagery inherently fail at qualifying various degrees and types of oppression because, first, patriarchy is inextricable from all other forms of oppression, and, second, even if we do view them separately, Plath's poetry does not. If the speaker in "Daddy" "thought every German was" her father, then she is potentially every daughter—every woman who has suffered at the hands of sexism, racism, or any other form of abuse (Plath 75). When the speaker recognizes herself as one who "may well be a Jew," she is coming to an understanding of her own subjugation (75). Her claim that, "Every woman adores a fascist", then, implicates women who cannot or will not acknowledge their own subjugation—the speaker's own predicament until the point where she reinvents herself as a Jew (75). Claiming a Jewish identity is a way for the speaker to define her condition, as Jewish victims were obviously well aware of their oppression during the Holocaust, while throughout history many women have not been. That is not to say that women were not or are not aware of their own circumstances, but the public and historical

recognition of women's oppression has been much delayed and downplayed, especially in comparison to something as publicly catastrophic as the Holocaust. Therefore, as a woman who was previously unaware of the full extent of her own oppression (one who has lived a life adoring fascists), self-identifying as a Jew is a step for this speaker toward changing her circumstances. In writing a speaker whom she can identify with personally on many levels, Plath is not violating or appropriating history in any misguided way; she is redefining women's history, which is at once a very personal and public task. Thus, her personal struggle with oppression and its larger cultural existence work together in her poems to speak out against oppression in general.

Boswell states in his essay "that straightforward biographical readings tend to iron out the complexity of Plath's representation of, among other things, psychology, history and femininity, while also devaluing her skill as a writer" (54). His assertion is on target—looking at Plath's work strictly as autobiographical does a disservice to the volumes Plath's work speaks for social and political issues, especially those concerning women. Unfortunately, his attempt to separate Plath's biography from her speakers' in these poems sidesteps the crucial element of the work that is Plath's personal domestic holocaust, and, by extension, the holocaust of women's identities to the subservience of domesticity and other oppressive, patriarchal systems. We cannot view Plath's poetry as a vehicle for any singular political or personal aim without devaluing its inherent purpose. Plath's poetry *is* deeply personal, and at the same time it speaks for all women with regard to feminist issues, namely women's bodies and selfhood.

In Boswell's attempt to dissuade readers from some of the earlier criticisms of Plath's work, he states:

The early infamy of poems such as 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' derived for the most part from what a generation of critics and cultural commentators regarded as their representative transgressions – transgressions which were perceived to violate or distort the legitimate memory of the Holocaust – and from the received idea that Plath's work was somehow 'confessional' in character. (53)

Though Boswell is right to point out that these kinds of critical responses are flawed, the error lies not in the fact that these responses deem such poems confessional. The problematic aspect is the rejection of Plath's Holocaust poems strictly *because* they are confessional. The accusations of Plath's Holocaust poetry as a kind of "representative transgression" suggest that her use of controversial subject matter springs from some pretentious need to rebel—as if she is just some

silly girl speaking out of turn. Such treatment of her work attempts to re-bury the collective women's voice resurrected by Plath after generations of effacement. This kind of sneering sexism perpetuates the devaluation and silencing of women's work and voices by attempting to delegitimize them.

Even though Boswell is arguing against these earlier critics, he still fails to recognize the full potential of Plath's writing. His description of Plath's work as "somehow 'confessional' in character" extricates Plath's personal stake in her work. Boswell's language here (using "somehow" as if there is not even a slight chance that Plath's poems might be autobiographical and trivializing the very word 'confessional' by putting it in quotation marks as if it is a joke) implies that reading Plath's work as confessional is an absurdity, and the implication is no less patronizing than the kind of criticism he reproaches. Boswell's attempt to explain Plath's poetry as having some larger significance than what we now call feminism assumes that women's issues are not a valid source for Plath's Holocaust metaphors. His defense of Plath's work is not really a defense at all; it is a perpetuation of the sexism about which Plath writes, as well as an implicit argument that the private experiences of women are unworthy of historical and literary recognition.

Instead of separating Plath's identity from her poetic subject matter, critics should focus on the synergy Plath creates by writing of "her own history, as at once personal and part of a wider symbolic place" (Rose 981). In "Lessons from the Archive: Sylvia Plath and the Politics of Memory," Anita Helle writes of "a Plath who is more historically located and multiple," which is one way to describe Plath's use of the language of her personal history to subvert cultural inequality (994). As language is a product of the male-realm and has traditionally been used as a tool of patriarchy, women writers such as Plath do not use language in the traditional male sense to represent truth as they see it. Poetry, as it makes use of imagery and figurative language—metaphor, simile, metonymy—creates a means of using language around the bounds of patriarchy. Plath's confessional poetry takes up controversial subject matter and expresses it both figuratively and personally—often in a way that makes readers uncomfortable. Thus, if we choose to continue reading, we must acknowledge that discomfort and move past it, which is perhaps intended by Plath as a first step to recognizing and then changing oppressive systems. The goal of confessional poetry, then, and Plath's poetry in particular, is not vindictive or exhibitionist—it is "the blurring of what is public and private" as a means of both personal and

"historical emancipation" (Helle 997, Rose 981).

As Boswell further attempts to divide Plath from her work, he discusses "Lady Lazarus" and sets up a case for this poem's "clear sense of the distinction between art and reality, and with it the sort of self-awareness and accompanying concern with artistic exploitation and representative ethics that were to become the defining features of postmodernism" (55). Boswell argues that the poem's Holocaust references are intended to "[highlight] the threat posed to memory by the incipient 'Holocaust industry' of the early 1960s" (55). I do not entirely disagree with Boswell's claim here—Plath may well be referring to the "Holocaust industry" in terms of "Jean Baudrillard's claim" that "turning the Holocaust into a spectacle produces a forgetting that 'is part of the extermination'" (qtd. in Boswell 58). The problem is that, once again, Boswell's reading removes much of Plath's personal feminist agency. By eliminating the confession and the autobiography from his reading of "Lady Lazarus," Boswell participates in a similar kind of extermination: a perpetuation of the myth that gender oppression does not matter or is somehow unequal in weight to other forms of oppression. Looking at the Holocaust imagery as strictly literal commentary wipes out its powerful metaphorical quality. Critics who find this metaphor problematic—such as Howe's calling it a delusion of "the most dreadful event in the history of mankind"—also miss the point (qtd. in Boswell 53). As Plath herself writes in her critical essay, "Context": "...the real issues of our time are the issues of every time ... the conservation of life of all people in all places, the jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk of 'peace' or 'implacable foes' can excuse" (169). In other words, Plath's representation of the effacement of women via the use of Holocaust imagery reminds both women and men not to forget about the "most dreadful event" in *womankind*. Though, by ignoring this layer of her work, Boswell does just that.

Boswell's ignorance of Plath's appropriation of the Holocaust as representation of women's effacement goes so far as to insult the psychology of subjugated women: "Lady Lazarus is brazen in her exploitation of the tropes and iconography associated with the Holocaust; but in creating this speaker, the poet does not exhibit *her own weird extroversion*" (55, my emphasis). Though it would be irresponsible to conflate the poem's speaker with Plath in every respect, to ignore the obvious autobiographical references throughout "Lady Lazarus" is also careless. For example, one could easily read the lines in "Lady Lazarus" that recount death as occurring "One year in every ten" as the death of Plath's father in her childhood, her teenage attempt at suicide,

and her own intended suicide as she wrote the *Ariel* poems (Plath 14). Even though Lady Lazarus, the speaker, is not Sylvia Plath, we can still read these events in the poem as based on those in Plath's life and then use them as a lens through which to view the layers of meaning in this poem (as I will further illustrate in the next section). The confessional elements—or, to use Boswell's term, the poet's "weird extroversion,"—clue us in to Plath's motivations for her juxtaposition of personal and historical tragedy (to deny that the erasure of women Plath describes is anything less than a tragedy is its own delusion), and *that* is what lends credibility to the poem and its Holocaust imagery, not the supposed rescue by critical response some forty years later in its attempt to validate Plath's metaphors by patriarchal standards.

It is similarly irresponsible for Boswell to imply that the poem is only capable of one function (speaking out about the Holocaust), as the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" gives voice to Holocaust victims, women, and Plath herself. As Helle states, "Plath and her identities still do not conform to any monocular feminist lens"—or any other political lens, for that matter (994). The poem is, after all, written in the age of postmodernism, as Boswell points out in his essay's title, which suggests the qualities of multiplicity and fluidity in meaning. We can see evidence of this multiplicitous, postmodern element in "Lady Lazarus" as the speaker returns to her second death/resurrection, the suicide attempt, in stanzas 13 and 14, and again in stanza 17:

The second time I meant  
To last it out and not come back at all.  
I rocked shut

As a seashell.  
They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.  
...

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
It's easy enough to do it and stay put. (15-16)

The lines "I meant / To last it out and not come back at all" indicate an attempted suicide, and the fact that "They had to call and call" after the speaker's attempt to "do it in a cell / ... and stay put" describe the incident of Plath's early attempt at suicide, during which she overdosed on sleeping pills, climbed into a crawl space in her mother's cellar, and was not found for several days (as is widely publicized and described in Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*<sup>1</sup>) (15-16).

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<sup>1</sup> Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Readers, however, do not *have* to interpret these lines as a reference to Plath's own suicide attempt, despite the similarities. The language here is also reminiscent of an incarceration—both physical and mental—particularly with the word "cell," which could describe a concentration camp. In both senses, death represents a means of freedom—an escape from control, whether of the oppression and torture of mental illness, patriarchal men, or Nazis. In "Lady Lazarus," the disappearance of the intended victim—the speaker, women, Holocaust victims—via death may be the ultimate goal of the poem's oppressors, but Plath turns death into empowerment. Though it seems like "there is nothing there," the power dynamic shifts as victims become victimizers and "rise" "Out of the ash" to "...eat men like air" (17). As Plath struggled to rise from her own oppression (feeling under the control of men in her life and struggling inside a depressive mind), we can see her aim of using autobiographical references in conjunction with a historical tragedy not just as metaphor but as metonymy—her individual struggle just one part of women's collective fight.

Boswell's reading of the feminist agency in "Lady Lazarus" is simply that "the fatuousness of her apparent turn in attention away from the Jewish victims of the Holocaust...and towards the many men who have wronged her" is an "aggressive feminist position that Lady Lazarus assumes in the final stanzas" (57). He then claims that this move is "is not a total distortion of the concerns of Holocaust verse, and could be justified by the insight that the Holocaust was an event which was, for the most part, conceived and perpetrated by men" (57). His attempt to single out the only feminist aspect of this poem as occurring at the end, and then, in turn, calling it "fatuous" is, once again, insulting (talk about "devaluing her skill as a writer") and is way off-base. The poem's ending lines are not its first or only feminist element. These lines represent a culmination of powerful images of the woman-speaker and her body all throughout "Lady Lazarus." The references to body parts—"my skin," "My right foot," "My face," "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth," "These are my hands / my knees. / I may be skin and bone" (14-15)—point to the invitation of the speaker for all women to recognize themselves, their bodies, and their roles as victims and "rise" with her "out of the ash." In other words, Lady Lazarus could be any woman who is or ever was a victim of oppression: "Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman" (15).

Yes, it is true, as Boswell asserts, that "the Holocaust was an event which was...conceived and perpetrated by men" and the acknowledgement of such is a strong force within "Lady

Lazarus." However, the poem is not a "fatuous" attack on men. The speaker's focus on body parts represents the dismemberment of the female body under domestic oppression and functions, again, metonymically. These body parts stand for women as their oppressors see them—basic domestic functions—but Plath calls for women to recognize themselves as whole. Only then, when the body is reassembled, will women "rise" out of the ashes of subservience, the poem argues. "Lady Lazarus" takes as its subject matter all women—whether victims of the Holocaust history recognizes or those of the domestic holocaust that has often gone forgotten. Thus, Plath's use of Holocaust imagery as a feminist metaphor is in no way "a total distortion of the concerns of Holocaust verse." Boswell's "concern" for Plath's verse is unwarranted, his essay an attempt to rescue work that does not need saving.

Critics, scholars, and readers of Plath need not dismiss her poetry as trivially confessional or attempt to defend it by seeking out legitimacy in her metaphors beyond their intended meaning. It is true that sensationalizing Plath as a confessional poetic icon (and thus focusing on her personal psychology more so than the aims of her poetry) causes us to stray from the inherent purpose of her work, but so does dismembering the work like the body parts of women Plath describes so frequently in her poetry. As critics like Boswell dissect Plath's poems into metaphors, attempting to assign a definite, specific meaning to each one, the synergy of meaning and power for women, victims, and all individuals who struggle becomes lost. Plath's work is heroic in its own right, and to truly understand and appreciate the full potential of her poetry we must approach the fluidity of personal and political implications along with her choices of imagery and figurative language as a whole entity.

## Works Cited

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