

Kate Lindeman : The Question of Classification

Speeches

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Transcript

Music *'Perfect Day'* by Colin Towns; performed by
Kate Lindeman

Sound Effects (FX) Whispering

Minister Dear friends, we gather here today in the Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Yorkshire for the funeral of someone dear to us. We come together to both mourn and celebrate a mother, a wife, a poet. Sylvia Plath no doubt touched each of us sitting here today, but those of us dearest to Sylvia will be eulogizing on their relationship. Lady Lazarus will begin our solemn proceedings, followed by Widow; a dear, if overlooked creation of our beloved Sylvia. Our service will be concluded by Esther Greenwood, the heroine of *'The Bell Jar'*, who will leave us with her thoughts. I now invite Lady Lazarus to begin our service.

Sound FX Whispering, walking

Lady Lazarus Dying is an art, like everything else, and it would appear that Sylvia does it exceptionally well. Once, twice, three times unlucky, then finally, success – and it is this success that brings us here today. As I look around this room, I see many of you have tears streaming down your faces. Theatrics no doubt. Are you sorry to see Sylvia go? Or is her death merely a reminder of your own inevitable mortality. Many people it seems are simply living to die, drifting through life – a series of events, coincidences, ups and downs, and ultimately they pass away, with no difference made to the tide of humanity. But Sylvia, *Sylvia* was dying to live, as her life was not defined by her creative genius, and the monumental body of work she produced, but rather by her marriage to Ted, whom I see sitting before me. In an issue of *Mademoiselle*¹ magazine written three years before my own creation, appears an article titled *'Four Young Poets'*. Sylvia, in her youth, was a guest editor of this magazine, and this feature article followed up Sylvia's story. However rather than praising Sylvia's literary development and prowess, the article focused on what it saw to be her real accomplishment – her marriage to a handsome poet, and included a photograph of Ted studying a book with Sylvia crouching behind him – complementary. While Sylvia, as Ted's wife, was the embodiment of the dreams of *Mademoiselle* readers, I feel that here, at her funeral, it is most important for me to impart the following message: Sylvia was more than a wife to a successful husband. She will be acknowledged by the literary community as one of the greatest poets of her time, yet she lived her life in the shadow of others, of men, who

¹ *Mademoiselle*, 1959 edition – cited in Brenner C, (1999) *'The Poetry of Sylvia Plath'* Columbia University Press, USA, p 9.

were lesser, yet considered more worthy by the society Sylvia found herself so mercilessly placed into. Sylvia wanted to live, to reach her full creative and intellectual potential, however she could not. The barriers she faced were often too tall to overcome, and Sylvia could not bear to be less than of what she was capable. Sylvia was dying to live.

For Sylvia's death there is a charge, a very large charge, and as I look at you all, I fear you do not realise what it is. Sylvia's death is testament to your failings – the restrictions and oppression you allowed to silence the miracle of Sylvia's talent, perhaps as a result of your own inner fear and insecurity. Oh, I see some of the women here today look offended – do I terrify? Do not underestimate my great concern, but I am not only speaking to the men I see before me. Women have become play-things of men. A consumable commodity, and many women allow it. Enjoy it. The big strip tease. Well Sylvia knew. Sylvia knew and she tried to fight, like Lazarus to rise again after each defeat, but now she is gone – there will be no 'miracle' – she will not return, and it is I, Lady Lazarus, who remains, immortalised in Sylvia's writing, a testament to her stifled talent. Sylvia drank the milk of paradise, willingly, naively. The lesser reality she was forced to return to was certainly grim; a world where her writing often went unacknowledged by the literary world, with countless refusals of publication weighing heavily on her mind and confidence. Yet I would suggest, and mind you, I'm her character and am clearly in the best position to judge, that it was the pressure placed upon her to be a model wife and mother, when in reality she was an independent young woman, with no wish to perform such banal 'domestic duties', that led to her ultimate decline. Sylvia once wrote that "being a woman is my awful tragedy".² Perhaps some of you agree. The tragedy is in fact not that Sylvia was born a woman, but rather that she felt that way. That society made Sylvia feel that her very existence, epitomised in her sex, was a tragedy is an unforgivable mistake. Sylvia felt trapped in her sex, saying "My whole circle of action, thought and feeling is rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity."³ In the wake of her death I can only hope that she did not die in vain. Family, and friends, it is now 1963, and the pressure Sylvia crumbled under due to her gender, as can clearly be seen in both her journals and her literary works, begs us to rethink our values, and the value we place on the submissive, subordinate woman. Sylvia felt restricted, her abilities limited, and these outer pressures stifled her inner aspirations and ability and perhaps we should not be surprised at our gathering here today.

Sylvia's life was a struggle, a battle – she was the modern Abel, her society the Cain. She was beautiful, and pure. Gifted. And men were

² Plath S, Journals – Entry dated 1951

³ Plath S, Journals – Entry dated 1951

jealous, and like Cain they murdered her.

Audience member (*coughs*) Honestly!

Lady Lazarus Ah Ted I see you're shaking your head. What was that? '*Am I my wife's keeper?*' you say.

Sylvia, like me, was unafraid of her femininity – she recognised and fought the restrictions society placed upon her sex. Sylvia wrote to her mother that “learning the limitations of a woman’s sphere is no fun at all.”⁴ There is, indeed, truth in this statement, yet what makes Sylvia unique within our conformist society is that she questioned this sphere, pushing the boundaries, making her the extraordinary feminist she was, and will deservedly be remembered as. Sylvia was a lone flower, rising above a bed of weeds – a society – our society – that willingly accepts the subordination of women to men, believing, as said by St Thomas, that woman is an “imperfect man” – a fitting view to draw on considering we are now in the Church of St Thomas. In creating me, along with Widow and Esther, who are yet to speak, and within each of her works, Sylvia has lit a flame to ignite your imaginations, and while I can eternally turn and burn, it is you who must rise out of the ash to act.

Sound FX Walking, Whispering

Minister Thank you Ms Lazarus for your thoughts – they were, uh, most powerful. I would now invite Widow to share her fond memories of Sylvia.

Sound FX Walking, Whispering

Widow Dead. The word consumes itself. Friends, family, I cannot help but be astonished at our meeting here today, under the most dreadful circumstances. I, a creation of Sylvia's, am confined to eternal mourning for the loss of my husband, my life. Yet now I wear the dress of death for another – my dear creator, now reduced to a paper image – defined not by the woman she was, but by the works and the characters she left behind. Sylvia; beautiful, motherly, feminine perfection. Sylvia represented all that we value in a woman – her intelligence and profound artistic ability is undoubted, yet her firm intent on being a loving, nurturing wife and mother, may, regrettably, go overlooked. Dear Sivvy, ever the diligent, loving daughter, wrote to her mother that she was “definitely meant to be married and have children and a home and write”.⁵ Sylvia indeed acknowledges in her journal that she would “Love to cook

⁴ Plath S, in a letter to her mother, Aurelia Plath, dated August 1951.

⁵ Ibid. dated 1956.

and make a house, and surge force into a man's dreams", and she laments "I can't bear to think of this potential for loving and giving going brown and sere in me".⁶

These are the sentiments of the ideal 1950s woman, and show Sylvia to be a model feminine lady.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I listened, somewhat surprised, to Lady Lazarus' eulogy. She was most forceful in her criticism of our society, but I must admit I do not hold her views. Lady Lazarus suggests that Sylvia was a talented genius who was stifled by the society she lived in, but surely this view is narrow, considering the many awards and accolades Sivvy received throughout her short life. At her funeral seems the appropriate time to pay tribute to these many awards: a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge, numerous scholarships to Smith College, and countless monetary prizes for her work from magazines such as *Harpers Bazaar*, *Seventeen*, and *Mademoiselle*. These awards are certainly a reflection of both Sylvia's extraordinary talent that Lady Lazarus spoke of, and of society's recognition of these talents, and I therefore believe that Lady Lazarus is wrong to criticise society's so-called lack of recognition of these achievements. However Sylvia's greatest achievement, as I'm sure her family here today will attest to, was her children. Sylvia was a model mother – she put her children before herself at all times; you may not know that in those final moments Sylvia's thoughts were with her children – shutting their door and opening their window, leaving them food so they might be spared the initial horror of her departure. Yes, Sylvia was a model mother. Ah, Mrs Hughes I see you rolling your eyes, no doubt because you believe Sylvia deserted her children. Sylvia will always be with her children in their knowledge that she loved them with all her heart, though I must admit I cannot hide my shock at her sudden departure.

Lady Lazarus criticised society for forcing Sylvia into a subordinate and submissive role, but I believe Sylvia assumed this role willingly, making her a model wife. I speak here with some authority, as in creating my character, forever dotting on my lost husband, Sylvia instilled in me her own value of the passive role of a wife. Caring, kind, striving to make a crumbling marriage work – oh, there's no need to look awkward Ted, it's undeniable – she is the embodiment of 1950s values, and here at her funeral it is fitting to remember her for her contribution to her marriage and her loving care for her children.

Yet now Sylvia has passed away, and the compassionate trees bend in, the trees of loneliness, the trees of mourning. Trees are surely a fitting

⁶ Plath S, Journal – Entry dated February 1956.

metaphor to describe my dear creator – she was the root of profound thought and creativity – the leaves of the tree are her art, and, most importantly, like a tree she was the source of life, of sustenance to those around her – her children, her mother and her dear brother whom I see sitting to the left. The final thought I would like to leave with you today is one of hope. If Sylvia, battling her inner demons, could be such a kind and loving mother and wife, finding the energy to devotedly pursue her feminine duties, her memory will provide an inspiration for all in the future.

Sound FX Walking, whispering

Minister Thank you Widow for your most sincere and inspiring words. I now invite Esther Greenwood to conclude our service.

Sound Fx Walking, whispering

Esther The Bell Jar has finally descended, and I have been left behind, the personification of Sylvia's past – a lasting link to my brilliant author. As I sat listening to Lady Lazarus and Widow speak of my beloved Sylvia, it struck me how differently they viewed this one woman. One saw her as a feminist, and passionately argued that we, her society, are to blame for Sylvia's death, seeing her as stifled and oppressed by the male dominated society that surrounded her. The other saw Sylvia as a model 1950s woman – a dedicated mother, wife and daughter – and Widow praised her for the very feminine qualities that Lady Lazarus believed that Sylvia fought against.

I'm sure Sylvia would have been deeply intrigued to hear Lady Lazarus and Widow's contrasting eulogies. The debate that has arisen between the two speeches over Sylvia's identity highlights what to me is obvious – that we see the 'two Sylvia's' as mutually exclusive – that Sylvia was, and is, unable to be accepted as being both feminine and feminist. I see some of you look confused, but I would like to continue, as I believe that here, at Sylvia's funeral, is the right place to lay this debate to rest. Encapsulated within the one woman were both feminist beliefs, and feminine desires, and it is therefore hardly surprising that there are contradictions throughout her work. Sylvia's love for her two dear children as seen in her writing on the joys of motherhood in poems such as 'Heavy Women,' is undeniable, and her devotion to her feminine, maternal role is obvious, and we, as Sylvia's loved ones, owe it to her children to never undermine this passion. Similarly, when reflecting on Sylvia's life, it is hard to ignore her anger at the inequality suffered by women, and her frustration at the double standards she found herself confronted with in all aspects of life, saying "If I were a man, I could write a novel about this; being a woman

why must I only cry and freeze, cry and freeze?"⁷

Sylvia was an undeniably proud wife and mother who had an intense urge to satisfy familial and social expectations, however her strong dissatisfaction with the roles she tried so hard to conform to shows her ingrained, individual, feminist beliefs. In 'The Bell Jar' I am faced with a dilemma that I believe was at the heart of Sylvia's decline. I saw my life branching out before me like a green fig tree. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they fell to the ground at my feet.⁸ I believe that Sylvia faced the same problem. The dichotomy of the domestic and professional female that defined my life within the book, mirrors society's classification of women as either feminine or feminist; a division that shaped Sylvia's identity in life, and no doubt will define her work in death. Our society that deceptively tempts women into professional careers and then mockingly refuses the same woman a family, crushed Sylvia, as Sylvia was unable to aspire to both, and thus felt restricted to acceptable roles, struggling to find her true self.

I think Lady Lazarus is mistaken in saying that Sylvia's society oppressed her talents, as her academic and professional success is testament to the wider community's growing acceptance of female professionalism, as Widow indeed suggested. However when Sylvia married, she was no longer seen as a successful individual, but was rather seen in terms of her husband. Society likes smart, witty, clever women, but only because ultimately society, both conservative men and women, feel superior to these women as they are looked down upon as being unfeminine. Undomesticated. Similarly society likes passive, submissive females – unthreatening in their innocence and subordination to their male counterparts. But the moment a woman tries to have both, as did I, as did Sylvia, the figs seem harder to grasp, and if one tries to eat both one is bloated, so one aims for neither, and the figs shrivel and die – opportunities wasted. And the woman dies. Sylvia dies. Ambitions unfulfilled, loves lost. It troubles me. It troubles me deeply that even at Sylvia's funeral, at a time of reflection, we are trying to define Sylvia into preconceived roles, be it the feminine or feminist. Surely Sylvia is both? And surely we should be able to accept this? The fact that we are debating

⁷ Plath S, Journal – Entry dated March 6, 1956.

⁸ Metaphor adapted from Plath, S (1963) *'The Bell Jar'*, William Heinemann Ltd (Original Publication), UK – Chapter 7.

this at all bothers me, as it only makes clearer to me the fact that Sylvia the feminist and Sylvia the feminine woman are seen as mutually exclusive, and highlights our inability to accept the contrasts of Sylvia's identity that made her the intense, rich and beautiful woman she was. It bothers me that we are discussing and thereby encouraging a debate that stems from what Sylvia struggled with during her life – the dichotomy of the domestic and professional female, that forced her to mould herself to a suitable persona with different people, as seen in her cheerful and pleasant letters to her mother, when at the same time she was writing, bitterly depressed, in her journal. Sylvia had a right to be an acclaimed poet and author. She had the right to be a loving mother, and a loyal wife. She had the right to be both. Sylvia struggled with society's inability to accept her as both a wife and a successful writer in life, let not her memory be tainted with the same debate, which ultimately represents the same societal flaws, and the constraints placed on women.

Music 'Perfect_Day' by Colin Towns

Appendix

Poetry by Sylvia Plath that forms the basis of appropriations

'Lady Lazarus'⁹

Sylvia Plath

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it –

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
Oh my enemy.
Do I terrify?

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.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

⁹ Plath, S (written 1962, published posthumously 1965) 'Lady Lazarus' appears in *Ariel*, Harper & Row Publishers, UK.

Then unwrap me hand and foot
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

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.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else,
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

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

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart –
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doctor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash –
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Widow¹⁰
Sylvia Plath

Widow. The word consumes itself –
Body, a sheet of newsprint on the fire
Levitating a numb minute in the updraft
Over the scalding, red topography
that will put her heart out like an only eye.

Widow. The dead syllable, with its shadow
Of an echo, exposes the panel on the wall
Behind which the secret passage lies-stale air,
Fusty remembrances, the coiled-spring stair

¹⁰ Plath, S (written 1960, published posthumously 1980) 'Widow' appears in *Crossing the Water*, Harper Perennial, UK

That opens at the top into nothing at all ...

Widow. The bitter spider sits
 And sits in the centre of her loveless spokes.
 Death is the dress she wears, her hat and her collar.
 The moth-face of her husband, moonwhite and ill,
 Circles her like a prey she'd love to kill

A second time, to have him near again –
 A paper image to lay against her heart
 The way she laid his letters, till they grew warm and seemed to give her
 warmth, like live skin. But it is she who is paper now, warmed by no one.

Widow: that great, vacant estate!
 The voice of God is full of draftiness,
 Promising simply the hard stares the space
 Of immortal blackness between stars
 And no bodies, singing like arrows up to heaven.

Widow, the compassionate trees bend in,
 The trees of loneliness, the trees of mourning.
 They stand like shadows about the green landscape –
 Or even like black holes cut out of it.
 A widow resembles them, a shadow-thing,

Hand folding hand, and nothing in between.
 A bodiless soul could pass another soul
 In this clear air and never notice it –
 One soul pass through the other frail as smoke
 And utterly ignorant of the way it took.

That is the fear she has – the fear
 His soul may beat and be beating at her dull sense
 Like blue Mary's angel, dove-like against a pane
 Blinded to all but the grey spiritless room
 It looks in on, and must go on looking in on.