

Lady Lazarus and the Lady in White: The Voices and Visions of Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson

by

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A-1-D: Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.

Words can be Chernobyls—they explode in our brains, and plumes of their images and meanings rain fallout over forever altered neural landscapes—which perhaps explains why, in the eleventh hour of this quarter, I made a radical and seemingly illogical decision to chuck my Robert Frost/Emily Dickinson project in order to chase a more daring direction. As I see it, I had little choice. The sheer power of Sylvia Plath's poetry managed to doggedly pursue me since I first became familiar with it in the *Voices and Visions* PBS series. In increasingly frequent and unexpected moments since this video introduction, certain lines from Plath's poems would arise in my psyche, like Lady Lazarus herself, and suddenly I would find myself admiring their utter brilliance, and her veracity and sheer guts in expressing them. I eventually laughed at their appearances because they seemed to either take a grand bow or shake their mighty little fists in defiance right before their sudden annihilation by other thoughts. Yet, amazingly, they had the power of regeneration and would renew their campaign all over again. She, apparently, would not be denied. Inevitably, Plath trumped Frost as my parallel poet to Emily Dickinson in this quest to analyze human experience through their selected work. I have little doubt that she is holding the marionette strings.

Because the range of human experience is so broad and I was already hiding under the cold blanket of inertia while struggling to keep intimidation at bay, it seemed

incredibly personal and appropriate to select Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus," written in 1962 during one of her most tumultuous and painful periods before her suicide a year later, and Dickinson's 1861 poem, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." I could certainly relate to both titles. What I most admire about these poems are their incredibly powerful and terrifying themes of life and death and loss and resurrection of the self, resulting in the obtainment of new learning by the speaker of each poem. They are bold statements addressing the inner worlds of consciousness. In Plath's and Dickinson's personal journeys of self-expression, they have each shared intense and uncomfortable—even disturbing—physical, affective, spiritual and intellectual experiences with their readers. Whether these experiences were actual, imaginative or a synthesis of the two are ultimately irrelevant; humanity has been enriched by the poets' abilities to communicate rich and substantive levels of depth and meaning. What Plath and Dickinson offer us through these poems are opportunities to look at aspects of life, death and learning from multiple perspectives and dimensions. Just who were these poets and why have I been so affected by their writing; and can these questions ever be adequately answered to reflect the truth of their complexity, as well as address my own levels of affective, intellectual and creative interest through the triple lens of being a human being, a woman and a writer?

Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson were American poets who clearly valued the world of words. They had obvious literary talents, were highly intelligent, and were committed to the pursuit of their respective creative callings. Both women intentionally fashioned their lives around the development and pursuit of their poetry—Plath, in her initial attainment of higher education at Smith, where she was awarded a Fulbright

scholarship and was destined for Cambridge and a brief but prolific marriage to British poet, Ted Hughes; and Dickinson, who attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for one year before spending the majority of her life as a single woman living in her father's residence while exploring inner and outer landscapes through her nearly 1800 poems. Both poets wrote prodigiously, learning their craft by reading, observing, experiencing, distilling, and documenting. Yet this parochial snapshot does not nearly do justice to the complexity and giftedness that these women shared. What I needed was a multi-dimensional construct to try to better understand their unique depictions of human experience through the poems I had selected, since this was my original mission. As a visual-spatial learner, I opted to analyze their work first from the macroscopic perspective of frames before shifting and honing my focus toward the microscopic perspective of the individualistic images that evocatively sustain both poems.

In order to be able to proficiently identify and frame representations of human experience, I briefly want to provide a context of how I have chosen to interpret the meaning of "frame" before I suggest a specific one that I believe is evidenced in the Plath and Dickinson poems. To do so, I reach across disciplines to look at the concept of frame-based knowledge representations that was created by MIT cognitive scientist, Marvin Minsky in the 1970s.

Just as they sound, frame-based systems are knowledge representation systems that use frames as their primary means to represent domain knowledge, and include several kinds of information such as "definitional and descriptive information. . . ." (Minsky 1) A very simplistic example of a frame was provided in the third paragraph of this paper where I described myself as a human, a woman, and a writer. Although

frame-based systems are considered a fundamental concept in the field of Artificial Intelligence or AI, knowledge representation (KR) is currently understood five different ways. For the purposes of this analysis, I will be adopting the perception of KR as “a set of ontological commitments, i.e., an answer to the question: In what terms should I think about the world?” as well as “a medium of human expression, i.e., a language in which we say things about the world.” (Davis et al 2) I believe that KR, as a perception of thinking and saying things about the world, could be a useful application to discourse analysis by employing the construct of frames. I soon discovered that I was not the only one to think so.

According to discourse analyst Domnica Şerban, “the representation or projection of human events is frequently cast as a narrative centered on one or several personae whose identity is made known and relevant through the things that befall them. . . . Events are analyzable in structural terms that include a temporal (usually sequential) frame and a spatial setting/frame.” (Şerban 144) I believe that the poems under this review ideally fit this conceptual thinking; and a particular frame that I would like to apply to these poems is the schema of concentric worlds that Şerban has written about.

The concentric world schema is a “tightly structured spatial frame, based on concentric, integrated or self-embedded worlds,” and is “cognitively relevant to all text producers and text receivers.” (Şerban 145) It includes the essential states of human existence, such as life and death, “which is considered a ‘frame modification’ involving ‘switches’ of location” that have “strong implications of privacy, freedom and loss of freedom.” (Şerban 146) This spatial frame is very useful in representing the movement

of death to life and loss to regeneration inherent in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and Dickinson's "I heard a Funeral, in my Brain." Additionally, the word "concentric" denotes having a common center (American Heritage 296), and the center in each of these poems is the "I" of the poet, or the first person narrative voice expressed in each work. Symbolically, each poet serves as the axis of the poem, in the sense that the reader may viscerally and intuitively feel that they have stepped into a hurricane generated by the power of the imagery; thus, the poet also serves as the "eye" of the hurricane, simultaneously observing, while relaying and detaching themselves through either very complex combinations of cool superiority, indignation, and passion (in the case of Plath); and numbness, watchfulness and active listening in Dickinson's. Overall, the notion of these poems having a concentric spatial frame of reference seems very appropriate and accurate.

I also think that each poem has distinct temporal frames based on word choices denoting forward→backward→forward movement in time in "Lady Lazarus" and more of a shifting between the of a recollection of a past event with the denotation of movement in the first two stanzas in Dickinson's poem.

With respect to ascertaining the literal and metaphorical human experiences of life and death, loss and regeneration through the pictorial and auditory elements of these poems—Plath's and Dickinson's forms, word choices, tone, and imagery convey powerful statements.

The twenty-eight tercets that comprise the form of "Lady Lazarus," whether consciously or unconsciously chosen by Plath, convey the significance of the number three inherent in elementary number symbolism—the number three representing the

three-fold nature of life, death and rebirth; beginning, middle and end; male, female, child; heaven; earth and the abyss; earth, air, and water, and feminine fertility, as well as the universal symbolism of deities in multiple cultures. There are also a lot of “trios of women represented in mythology and art—triple goddess, three fates, three sirens, three witches, three furies, and three graces.” (Calter 6) Since Plath was encouraged by Hughes to read Robert Graves’s book, *The White Goddess*, (McNeil 477) she may have found Graves’s references to the “goddess of Birth, Love and Death” (Calter 5) to be inspirational. Regardless of Plath’s original intention for selecting this specific poetic form, her choice of it enhances the archetypal elements and mood of the work, as triumphantly depicted in her last stanza: “Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air.”

Dickinson, on the other hand, wrote “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” in five quatrains. The use of quatrains has symbolic meaning since the number four is “associated with the earth in many ways” including: four ages of the world, four cardinal virtues, four cardinal points, four winds, and the four rivers.” (Calder 8) While Dickinson conveys to the reader in the last stanza that she has been on a multi-world journey (“And hit a World, at every plunge”), she also infuses the poem with elements found on earth in the first three stanzas (“Funeral,” “Service,” “Drum,” “Box,” and “Boots of Lead”), which lend an earthy but heavy quality to the piece—anchoring the speaker and reader initially to a specific spatial frame of reference and infusing the first half of the poem with a feeling of entrapment.

Both Plath and Dickson craft memorable imagery through their brilliant word choices. In “Lady Lazarus,” Plath compares the speaker’s skin color to the brightness

of a “Nazi lampshade,” and describes her right foot as being a “paperweight,” and her face “a featureless, fine Jew linen.” She continues to describe the physical sensations of her resurrection by stating that her “sour breath/Will vanish in a day” and that “Soon, soon the flesh/The grave cave ate will be/At home on me.” She vividly describes dying in one instance as being “rocked shut/As a seashell” then eventually hearing her rescuers (to her, “Herr Enemy”) “call and call” as she returns to consciousness as a “pure gold baby” that “melts to a shriek.” (Compendium 1)

Dickinson begins her poem with a brilliant sustained metaphor, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (Monteiro, 657) which speaks volumes in a single phrase. She also employs hypozeuxis (Turco 73) in the first and second stanzas with the gerunds, “treading” and “beating,” intensifying the onslaught of adverse stimuli and enabling the reader to feel the “Funeral” and “Service” literally beating down the speaker’s mind into a state of numbness. She also selects words such as “creak,” “toll,” “Bell,” and “Silence,” which emphasizes the sensory, affective, intellectual and spiritual significance of listening that Dickinson’s poem successfully and prophetically communicates to the reader.

It is little surprise that “Lady Lazarus” and “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” are considered to be two of the most significant Plath and Dickinson poems. Each poem contains layers of meaning that transcend the first person narrative that superficially seems to be the genesis and focus of each poem. Rather than vehicles that potentially suggest mental illness on the part of each poet, I think that both works communicate very complex states of human experience. They have profoundly taught us to look beyond the surface, to see beyond the known, to listen for wisdom beyond our own

(Dickinson), to be compassionate rather than a “peanut-crunching crowd” that “Shoves in to see,” (Plath) and to understand that there is a “high moral price” (McNeil 483) for our actions (“And there is a charge, a very large charge”) (Plath). Although both poems exude pain, they also transmit hope and conclude with the speakers obtaining intuitive and other-worldly knowledge through their harrowing trials. They have each resurrected in their own way. Overall, the poems are brilliant two-way mirrors held up to readers. Plath and Dickinson have blown the tops of our heads right off.

Frames of Human Experience through Plath's and Dickinson's Poetry		
	Plath's "Lady Lazarus"	Dickinson's "I have a Funeral, in my Brain."
Form or genre of poem	lyric	hymnal
Who is speaking?	dramatized "I"	dramatized "I"
What is the attitude/tone of the poem?	boastful ("I have done it again."); superior ("I do it exceptionally well"; arrogant ("I eat men like air."); sarcastic ("the peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see"); potential attention-seeking ("It's the theatrical"), but moreover, the conveyance of pain and escape from the pain that brought speaker to suicide attempt ("I do it so it feels like hell." "I do it so it feels real.")	solemn; plunge from the immediate darkness of death (literal or metaphorical)
Subject of poem	resurrection from accidental and intentional suicide, and the speaker's physical and affective observations and responses of her repetitive returns.	"the evolving experience of intuiting, emotionally and spiritually, a meaning beyond the fact of death." (Monteiro 658)
Structure of poem	tercets	quatrains
Spatial/Temporal Frames	concentric spatial; non-linear and sequential temporal: present-past-present	concentric spatial; linear temporal
What qualities (i.e., response, taste, experience, value) does the poem evoke in the reader?	morbidity; excitement at the speaker's resurrection; provides a graphic physical experience of what returning from death via suicide feels like from multiple perspectives: pale color of skin heaviness of her foot "featureless face" the "sour breath" stickiness "pull worms off like sticky pearls."	heavy solemnity ("I felt a Funeral"; "Boots of Lead"); numbness ("My mind was going numb –"); sudden change in perception of spatial environment from funeral to "Space" and "Heavens"; auditory recognition throughout: "A Service, like a drum-/Kept beating, beating"; "And then I heard them lift a Box/And creak across my

Frames of Human Experience through Plath's and Dickinson's Poetry		
	Plath's "Lady Lazarus"	Dickinson's "I have a Funeral, in my Brain."
	"soon the flesh will be at home on me" unconsciousness ("rocked shut as a seashell" "they had to call and call" "comeback")	soul"; hearing a tolling bell "dropped down, and down —"
What is your historical and cultural distance from the poem?	Poem's Historical Period: Early 1960's gender role issues of artistic vocation/career and traditional roles of marriage and motherhood (poet); post-World War II; Nazi's torture of the Jews in the death camps during the Holocaust (speaker); medical doctors as authority figures (doctor-patient relationship based on the superiority of the doctor—patient as subordinate)	Poem's Historical Period: American Civil War; Victorian era
What are the basic ideas about the world that are expressed? What areas of human experience are seen as important?	Concept of life/pain: We are "walking miracles" but are annihilating ourselves (individually and as a race) into a "million filaments." There is "a very large charge" for our collective actions.	Concept of life/death: That we intuit beyond reason a meaning beyond death.

Give your emotional reaction to the poet and her writing and explain why you react that way.	Overall, I feel a kinship with both Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. My emotional responses regarding their lives and poetry range from sheer admiration and awe for their brilliance of word choices, imagery, and tone; to their audacity and authenticity in exploring and sharing their powerful expressions in such vivid and unforgettable ways. The level of clarity and honesty in their work completely resonates with my experiences as a woman and as a writer. I am inspired by their personal choices to dedicate their lives to poetry, despite personal setbacks or challenges, and motivated to reach for new and uniquely personal ways to express myself through their examples.
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