Holocaust Imagery in Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’:
Plath’s Creative Process through Cultural and Historical Contexts

(Yuko UESUGI)

Abstract
This paper presents how World War II imagery, especially Holocaust, was depicted in Sylvia Plath’s poems and analyses what sort of effect was aimed by her intentionally. Focusing on ‘Lady Lazarus,’ as her creative strategy, her poetic resources are to be regarded as her inner representation, which echoes cultural and historical contexts but simultaneously deviates from them. Using Holocaust imagery, she strategically aimed at making her poems which originally depict her private inner world powerful and universal. Consequently, her representation of her domestic suffering can be understood not only as a universal and reflective creation, but also transcendental art beyond the time.

Key Words: Holocaust, World War II, Nazi, Lady Lazarus, culture, history, contexts

1. Introduction
Sylvia Plath’s texts representing World War II and political trauma are the needles which thread through various chronological historical and cultural events. With the purpose of disclosing the existence of those threads in Plath’s most powerful poems, I especially focus on ‘Lady Lazarus’. My analysis suggests that Plath’s poems echo the World War II texts that inspired the poem but simultaneously deviate from them. Searching a connection between creative resources and the war discourse, the effect of her creative strategy using war imagery is to be revealed.

2. Analysis on the development of Holocaust imagery
Why did Plath start to use Nazi torture in her poems? Her 31-year life between 1932 and 1963 obviously falls on the era of war. As Jacqueline Rose has suggested, Plath’s allusions to Nazi torture uncover not only the limits of representation but the complex ways that fantasy, metaphor and identification interact in a literary text (207-238). In addition, Plath enables political violence to be accessed as an imagined element of structure rather than as an original account (Axelrod, 78-79). She thus produced a new strategy for recalling Nazi violence, based on representation rather than historical evidence. Sustaining the contemptibility of the punisher, she removed the punisher from a real to a fantasied world. She introduced challenging, complex and even dangerous motifs to the narrative. At the scene of the victim’s erotic attraction to her punisher, we, readers, are left with unadmitted pleasure.

Plath also utilized torture as a criterion of domestic ideology, as a figuration for family arrangements that had ‘choked’ and ‘starved’ her (LH, 550, 559). It is a crucial event in her early life that she lost her father, Otto Plath, who died of complications from diabetes when she was eight years old (Wagner-Martin, 21-22). At that time, Plath’s mother did not let her two children attend the funeral, believing that the remaining family members needed to exercise their ‘courage’ (LH, 24, 26). This act of Plath’s mother deprived Plath of an opportunity of condolences, by which she was haunted by her obsessive feelings of detachment in her heart for the rest of her life. Those feelings could be seen as echoing not only her mother’s strategy of denial but also her father’s strategy of limited, withdrawn parenting. Wagner-Martin has described Otto Plath as emotionally remote, eating meals privately and spending only twenty minutes a day with his children (24, 26). If such were the case, we could imagine that there was little touching contact between this self-disciplined, hardworking German immigrant and his promising American daughter who starved of his attention. ‘What do I know of sorrow? No one I love has ever died or been tortured,’ Plath wrote in her journal when she was eighteen (J, p.33). This comment may give us a clue that Plath’s feelings of detachment from her childhood loss continued as an obsession for the rest of her life. Her adult poems, however, search for feeling of ambivalent mourning for her lost father, as if it were a farewell to her own obsession, in a dramatized ritual setting, and often represent figures of the punisher and his victim.
This distraction on Plath's childhood echoed the ontological insecurity of the Cold War, with its mutually guaranteed destruction. In the last months of her life before her suicide, Plath wrote that she was preoccupied by 'the incalculable genetic effects of fallout' and the 'mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America' (JP, 64), and she described herself as being 'sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse' (JP, 64). That is her own reaction to nuclear war. It is such unproductiveness of the past and the future that cause Christiana Britzolakis to call a 'theatre of mourning' – poems populated by figures of mourning which exceed their apparent pretexts (7). This theatre setting was an essential ritual for Plath not only to say farewell to her own confined childhood suffering but also to create figures of a punisher and a victim, who at the same time integrate the distressful history of World War II, a fear of Holocaust, and a vision of torture scenes.

In 'Lady Lazarus', the popular imagery of her time is related to torture imagery illustrated by Plath. The female or feminized victim suffers, tortured by a Nazi sadist. Of course, with him, identification as a human being is impossible to maintain. The punishers abate their victims brutally and the victims become only 'skin and bone'. It is not surprising that a victim may become vengeful and come to wish to 'eat' her tormentor. Beyond melancholy itself, a 'cake of soap', a 'wedding ring', a 'gold filling'. Her final image of Lady Lazarus, who arises 'Out of ash' integrates her own inner life and genocide in Holocaust, despair and violence, and relief from transcendence and desperation. It is a transformation from a phoenix as a rebirth symbol into a vampire who eats 'men like air' with overwhelmingly dangerous power.

The punisher, as frail in his depths as the victim appeared to be on her surface, seamlessly transforms into a passive object of not only anger but yearning – as Otto Plath did for his grieving daughter. In 'Mourning and Melancholia', which Plath carefully read, Freud writes that the melancholic ego wants to absorb the lost object 'into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it' (Freud, xiv. 249-250). Reacting to this disturbing wish, the melancholic frequently reduces one's appetite. A psychological complex is visible in Lady Lazarus's wish to eat men 'like air'. Here the domestic and historical narratives meet as Plath's speaker mimics both melancholic anorexia and the starvation of concentration camp victims.

Plath's represented 'Herr Enemy' as a sadistic persecutor of genocide and made the real historical Holocaust events creative triggers of her own fantasies of historical and domestic torture. She is an 'opus', 'valuable' 'pure gold baby' occupied by 'Herr Enemy' and 'melts to shriek'. Burnt to ash, she is reduced to a cake of soap', a 'wedding ring', a 'gold filling'. Her final image of Lady Lazarus, who arises 'Out of ash' integrates her own inner life and genocide in Holocaust, despair and violence, and relief from transcendence and desperation. It is a transformation from a phoenix as a rebirth symbol into a vampire who eats 'men like air' with overwhelmingly dangerous power.

Beyond the historical image of genocide, Plath's torture victim at times tortures herself, blurring the distinctive relationship between sadist and sufferer. Plath not only portrayed scenes of torture but also regularly tortured her readers by showing these graphic scenes of sadism. Therefore, she awakened them to the complications of torture. The poems face up to the readers with torture's ambiguous force of repulsion and pleasure in our fantasy life and with the pointless, painful and fatal repetitiveness in our political life. In scenes of violence, Plath invites readers to share the fantasy with her which most people would prefer to avoid. Such scenes, like melancholy itself, enable readers to understand what Julia Kristeva calls 'the Thing' (13-15) – the real that evades signification. Combining the traditional poetic roles of historian and prophet, Plath comprehended the fearful but desirous nausea that the scene of torture may bring about. She depicted the torture of Holocaust as the puzzling bridge roles that attack, suffering, life and death collaboratively play both in our fantasies and in our real lives.

3. In the light of cultural and historical contexts

Plath's torture narratives create a bond, which mingles not only the Holocaust imagery and World War II but also the discourses of public history and personal relations. According to
Holocaust Imagery in Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’: Plath’s Creative Process through Cultural and Historical Contexts

Elaine Tyler May and Alan, the American Cold War policy of ‘containing’ the Soviet Union, initially articulated in the writings of diplomat George Kennan in 1946-1947, led to a ‘containment culture’ and specifically to an ideology of ‘domestic containment’, in which American women were contained within their marital and maternal roles and, if they were middle-class and white, within newly constructed suburbs far from the urban centers where their husbands spent their days. To be representative of the American ideal, women needed to be white, married, fertile and suburban – and, often enough, frustrated, trapped and sedated. The pacification of the populace through rigidly differentiated gender roles and racial locations – literal geographic separations – complemented the American battle against the Soviet Union within the larger Cold War epistemology. Similarly, Plath’s narratives make clear how wife abuse and torture policy intertwine with each other in the time when modes perform domination and maintain order.

Apparently, Plath herself opposed and detested war. When she had got her newborn daughter, she wrote to her mother that she felt proud that ‘the baby’s first real adventure should be as a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation’ (LH, 440). She knew of President Dwight Eisenhower’s warning about the ‘military-industrial complex’ in his address and also was aware of colonial and neocolonial torture practices in the Third World by systematic use of torture by the French Army. It is also certain that she had read Anne Frank’s Diary because she mentioned Frank’s fate in a meditation on suffering in her journal of 1958: ‘Cremation fires burning in the dead eyes of Anne Frank [sic]: horror on horror injustice on cruelty…how can the soul keep from flying to fragments?’ (J 414). The late 1950s and early 1960s brought many new depictions of Nazi horrors. She finished ‘Lady Lazarus’ on Oct. 29, 1962, when many articles about Eichmann appeared in magazines and newspapers in London.

Obviously, a lot of Holocaust documentation and narrative during this period moved Plath’s fantasy life in a direction not entirely different from that of the low level imaginings. Porn and high-art textual practices mingled in a feminist art. The spectacle of pain may produce many different reactions among audience, including one of pleasure. The Holocaust narratives which circulate through world culture provided Plath an opportunity to confront her own inner suffering and her desire to get attention. At the same time, they gave her a resourceful of historical data that her gifted manipulation of language, feeling and allusion could revitalize. Also, she reflects and creates ‘a link between her private pain and a much more vast and overwhelming Weltshmerz’ (Young, 119). This strategy helps her not only to make her inner suffering universally mass suffering but also to create interchangeable identities in her poems. In this sense, her art deviates from historical and cultural contexts. She discovered her lyric subject in cultural and historical contexts, and she infused history with a vivid literary presence in her poems. If many readers recall Plath hauling in the threads of the Holocaust, many will also recall the Holocaust hauling in the threads of her imagery.

4. Conclusion

‘Lady Lazarus’ is like a treasure box which contains transforming imagery of the victim’s nakedness, lack of privacy, the perpetrator’s domination, pornographic gaze in a strip tease where ‘there is a charge’, tortured inmates, gleeful captors, a rebirth of Phoenix, a burning witch in a witch hunting, a vampire who eats ‘men like air’, and so on. This poem leads readers like a swinging pendulum to the past as well as to the present. Her suffering, which matters most in Plath’s texts, echoes cultural and historical contexts. By use of Holocaust imagery, she aimed at making her poems which originally depict private inner world powerful and universal. Moreover, in result, we, as Plath readers, took over her representation of her domestic suffering not only as a universal and reflective creation, but also transcendental art beyond the time.

Abbreviation


Works Cited


