



# Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus". Cultural and social context

*Anne Runkel*

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Seminar paper from the year 2008 in the subject American Studies - Literature, grade: keine, University of Hamburg, course: American Poetry & Poetics, language: English, abstract: The name of Sylvia Plath is intrinsically tied to the literary movement of Confessional Poetry. Her poem "Lady Lazarus" is often regarded as the prime example of this genre, as it is "an apparent forecast of Plath's suicide" (Middlebrook 644) only one year later. But the idea of a 'confessional' poetry that directly refers to the poet's personal experience has lead Plath-Criticism astray for many years.

Critics "have discussed Plath's life and work as if they were exactly the same thing," and have drawn bizarre conclusions by assuming "that Plath's writing can be used as a reliable source for diagnosing her mental condition." It is obvious that this kind of immediate understanding of Confessional Poetry leads nowhere. As Tracy Brain puts it, in her essay about the dangers of reading Sylvia Plath's work as an unfiltered outpour of personal experience ("Dangerous Concessions: Sylvia Plath"):

How can we ever hope to distinguish the »extreme« »diction and address« that is prompted by lived events from a vividly imagined drama that is the result of an expertly assumed style?

The answer is: We cannot. Still, one should not altogether ignore the context of the Confessional movement when interpreting Sylvia Plath. But how can Confessional Poetry be dealt with, without getting caught in the traps and pitfalls of a biographic reading?

This essay will first try to detect the underlying principles of the so-called 'Confessional Poetry' and position it within literary history. By revealing some of the influences and conventions of Confessional Poetry it aims to uncover the deceiving strategies of this type of poetry. The subsequent interpretation of Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" will then try to concentrate on the cultural and social context the poem was produce in and examine in which ways Plath used these different contexts as well as the deceiving strategies of Confessional Poetry in general, to create the unique character of the poem.

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