A Stylistic Analysis of Sylvia Plath's Confessional Poem *Lady Lazarus*

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ABSTRACT: *This study analyzes a confessional poem "Lady Lazarus" (23-29 October 1962), composed by an American poet Sylvia Plath. To examine confessions by discovering implicit meaning, embedded in poetic language, this study takes support from stylistic theory with the focus on Leech's (1969) concepts as theoretical framework. This study explores several employed figures of speech including 'tropes' (e.g., simile, metaphor, hyperbole, apostrophe, pun, personification, paradox, irony, onomatopoeia, symbol, metonymy and rhetorical question) and 'schemes' (e.g., immediate repetition or epizeuxis, anaphora and epistrophe). With these figures of speech, the author represents several confessional elements such as death, childhood, loneliness, rage, unwanted life, dissatisfaction, loss of identity, patriarchy, horror, suicide attempts, vulnerability, danger, trauma, suffering (physical, psychological, mental and spiritual), shock, revenge, empowerment, infidelity, rebellion, anxiety and rebirth. The study concludes that the stylistic analysis of Plath's "Lady Lazarus" plays a vital role in understanding harsh biographical realities of her life with confessional representation.*

Keywords: Stylistics, figures of speech, tropes and schemes, biographical realties,

Introduction

This study provides a figurative language analysis of a poem *Lady Lazarus* (1962) composed by an American poet, Sylvia Plath. Plath belongs to a male-dominated society, where woman is found crushed under the patriarchal powers in the guise of male gender roles. Due to this social structure, Plath lives a marginalized life; especially at the mercy of her father and husband. Her poetry reflects all such traumatic experiences of her life together with the description of her suicidal attempts (Steinberg, 2004). Therefore, she is acknowledged as a 'confessional poet' (Bassnett, 2005) and is considered as one of the main figures of confessional movement (Gill, 2008).

The selected poem (*Lady Lazarus*) is an example of her confessional poetry. Plath writes this poem after her separation from her husband. Herein, she narrates her unsuccessful suicidal attempts with intimation for successful

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one. Finally, the poem ends with the author's rebirth as a rebellious identity. Having a combination of her biographical and confessional aspects, the poem appears complex and ambiguous to its readers.

To make the selected poem understandable for the novice readers and to discover the life facets of Plath clearly, this study aims to figuratively analyze the target poem through the lens of stylistic theory. Following Leech's theoretical framework (1969), this study explores two patterns 'tropes' and 'schemes' in this poem. These features are supposed useful to dig out the meaning behind the poetic language of the text.

Literature Review

This selected poem has been analyzed by several scholars (Ling, 2004; Runkel, 2008; Cheema, 2009; Väisänen, 2001; Feuerstein, 2012; Cattel, 2012; Naylor-Smith, 2013; Bukhari and Asgher, 2017) from different stylistics' perspectives. For-example, Väisänen (2001) highlights 'personification, metaphor, and irony' in the poem to focus on the author's personal distresses in socio- cultural, political, and historical contexts. Runkel (2008) analyzes 'repetition' in the poem as a figurative device applied by the author to heighten intensity of rage and hopelessness. Cheema (2009) focuses on the aspect of "color imagery" in the poem. Cattel (2012) and Naylor-Smith (2013) analyze holocaust metaphor, holocaust imagery and metonymy in the poem to reveal the confessional elements.

Despite of all these studies, this present study is unique in various ways. It provides stylistic analysis of the chosen poem with the help of theoretical framework given by Leech (1969). Due to this, unlike Runkel (2008), Cheema (2009), Cattel (2012), Naylor and Smith (2013), and Bukhari and Asgher's (2017) studies etc., this present study collectively analyzes several figurative devices in the form of 'tropes' and 'schemes'. This exploration is supposed to help the reader to understand Plath's style of amalgamation of biographical aspects with confessional features. The following section is going to briefly review stylistic theory with the reference to Leech's framework.

Style and Stylistics

Style is a notion to relate writers with texts. Style is a way "to write with" in language (Khan, Raffique & Saddique, 2014, p. 121). It is the way for the author to express what he contemplates with the use of language. According to Davis (2011), 'Stylistics' is the manifestation of "stylisticality in style" (p. 93). Simply, stylistics is stated as study of the "style" (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998, p. 2) or "literary style" (Leech, 1969, p. 1). Stylistics is a contemporary field, linked with literary criticism; relation between them is well-elaborated by Burke (2014). Stylistics, a text-oriented method (Klarer,

2005), is also called 'literary linguistics' which, in the opinion of Burke (2014), is based on both study of text and its analysis. And for Simpson (2004), it is basically about examining texts. According to Stockwell (n.d), it has been most applicable approach for literary texts as supported by Spitzer (1948), Wellek and Warren (1949), and Ullmann (1964). This way, the theory of stylistics opens new avenues for literary criticism and both go hand in hand.

Stylistics is still in progress in the shape of modern stylistics with different levels such as pragmatics (discourse analysis); syntax (grammar); lexical analysis (semantics, lexicology); phonology (phonetics, morphology, graphology) and many other features (Simpson, 1997). These features or levels are actually stylistic layers which help the researchers in digging out hidden meanings under the texts.

The Link between Stylistics and Figurative Language

The connection between stylistics and figures of speech is shown by Klarer (2005) and Plett (2010). In Chambers Dictionary, 'rhetorical figure' is defined as "a deviation from the ordinary mode of expression" (Bennett & Royle, 2004, p. 77). Since 1980s, interest in figurative language has been developing continuously (Alm-Arvius, 2003). 'Tropes' and 'schemes' are two of the features of stylistics whose purpose is to depict, illustrate and analyze (Alm-Arvius, 2003). In the view of Shen (2006), the Russian Formalists and New Critics reflected figurative language as a basic stylistic quality that enriches the peculiar "nature of all poetic discourse" (p. 459). The examples of rhetorical devices are mostly established in literary works, especially poetry. Figurative language, in the form of rhetorical devices, is generally used in the poems as poetic language can be beautified with the use of figurative devices. Poetry having figures of speech creates a great effect on the audience. Now, the following section describes Leech's (1969) theoretical framework.

Leech's (1969) Theoretical Framework

This research is based on theoretical framework of stylistics, suggested by Leech (1969). Figures of speech analysis is one of the domains of 'Stylistics' and schemes and tropes are sub-categories of figures of speech or rhetorical figures. The current research is done on the basis of following checklist of figures of speech, given by Leech (1969) for the analysis of stylistic features:

Tropes and Schemes

Tropes: It is "foregrounded irregularities of content". (Leech, 1969, p. 74)

Onomatopoeia: It "takes the form of a resemblance between what a piece of language sounds like, and what it refers to". (Leech, 1969, p. 96)

Paradox (Contradiction): "A statement which is absurd, because self-evidently false". (Leech, 1969, p. 132)

Metaphor (implied simile): It is a "covert comparison" between two unlike things without the use of words; as and like. (Leech, 1969, p. 156)

Metonymy: It "consists in using the name of one thing for that of something else with which it is associated" (Leech, 1969, p. 152). It is "the type of meaning transference". (Leech, 1969, p.76)

Simile: It is an explicit and "overt comparison" of two unlike things with the use of words; as and like. (Leech, 1969)

Personification: "An abstraction is figuratively represented as human". (Leech, 1969, p. 158)

Symbolism: "The meaning from literal to figurative is what we associate with symbolism". (Leech, 1969, p.162)

Rhetorical Question: It is "a question which is abnormal, in that it expects no answer". (Leech, 1969, p. 184)

Hyperbole / Overstatement / Exaggeration: It "is often a means of celebrating human ideals". (Leech, 1969, p. 170)

Irony: It "often takes the form of saying or implying the opposite of what one feels to be the case". (Leech, 1969, p. 166)

Apostrophe: It "signifies an orator's interruption of his address to his audience, in order to address some third party, who may either be present or not." (Leech, 1969, p. 185)

Pun (word-play): It "is a foregrounded lexical ambiguity". (Leech, 1969, p. 209)

Schemes: It is "foregrounded repetitions of expression". (Leech, 1969, p. 74)

Immediate Repetition (Epizeuxis) The words or phrases are repeated for two or more than

two times in an immediate sequence.

Anaphora: It is "initial repetition". (Leech, 1969, p.80)

Epistrophe: It is "final repetition; opposite of anaphora". (Leech, 1969, p. 81)

To sum up the review, this study follows the theoretical framework by Leech (1969) together with biographical and confessional elements of the poem as a data analysis and interpretation in the present study.

Research Methodology

This research study is primarily analytical in nature with the application of stylistics. The purpose of the study is the employment of 'tropes' and 'schemes' to dig out biographical truths hidden behind poetic language with the depiction of confessional elements. These stylistic features are analyzed and interpreted in the text with the help of close reading.

Moreover, close reading is an appropriate technique to achieve textual meaning (Cuddon, 1999). For that reason, this qualitative study is analyzed through close reading method. In this process of analysis, the researcher approaches the text to identify and find out the words, phrases, clauses, sentences within stanzas having 'tropes' and 'schemes' to classify them for the explication and exploration of the implied meaning in the text to reveal real things behind poetic language to have insight into Plath's inner self.

For the current study, the data was collected through internet and library research in the shape of primary and secondary sources. The primary source was taken as the text of Plath's confessional poem *Lady Lazarus* (1962), selected from *The Collected Poems* (1981) (hereafter *CP*) by Sylvia Plath, edited by Ted Hughes. The secondary sources were research papers, books, dictionaries and dissertations.

Data Analysis

Application of 'Tropes' and 'Schemes'

In the poem, examples of tropes are searched and analyzed in abundance. Plath meets with death as an obsession throughout the narrative poem. To tell about her recent suicide encounter attempted again, she declares *"One year in every ten / I manage it ——"* (*CP*, p. 244). In the statement, "year" is a metonymy for attempt or time once in every ten years. One time, at the age of 10 years, she tried to meet suicide through drowning chance. Second time, at the age of 20 years, after taking enough sleeping pills, she hid herself in her house basement for three days (Daiya, 2013). The third attempt she survived recently was a road accident (Daiya, 2013). Having age of thirty years, she is finished with three attempts of suicide in each decade, in the age of ten, twenty and thirty years. That is why she calls it *"A sort of walking miracle, my skin"* (*CP*, p. 244), is a hyperbole. Being saved each time, it is claimed as a miracle because she, in reality, can be seen still alive. This way, she displays herself as if she is performing this all in a theatre in order to make her confessional voice accessible to the audience directly. After she is rescued at this stage, her skin is now *"Bright as a Nazi lampshade,"* (*CP*, p. 244) that is simile for it associates her body part 'skin' with a Germanic asset, making her dreadful. She addresses her deceased father with an apostrophe in revolt *"O my enemy."* (*CP*, p. 244). In the statement, the "enemy" stands as a metaphor for him who left her all alone in her childhood when she was just eight years old. In her view, if her father would be friend of her daughter, he would not have abandoned her forever. She also calls her dead father apostrophically in some other statements such as *"So, so, Herr Doktor."* (*CP*, p. 246), *"So, Herr Enemy."* (*CP*, p. 246) and *"Herr God, Herr Lucifer"* (*CP*, p. 246). In the statements, "Doktor", "Enemy", "God" and "Lucifer" respectively are used as metaphors for her departed father. "Lucifer" and "Enemy" are also

used in an ironical sense as in the same statements she calls him 'God' and a healer. In these statements, "Doktor" and "Herr" are Germanic words for 'Doctor' and 'Mr.' respectively because Plath's father, Germanic Otto Emil Plath, was a professor in the discipline of entomology with Ph.D (Schultz, 2005).

Being terrible, she enquires through asking rhetorical questions *"Do I terrify? —— / The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?"* (*CP,* p. 244). She wishes to look horrible with such dismembered parts of body comprising *"My right foot / A paperweight, / My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen."* (*CP,* p. 244). *"The sour breath"* (*CP,* p. 244) is a metaphorical statement that is used for annoying life she goes through after she got separated from Ted Hughes and lost him to Assia Wevill. This place, she confesses disappointment with her current circumstances of life. So, she feels obsession with death, suicide as she *"Will vanish in a day"* (*CP,* p. 244). The personified statement *"The grave cave ate will be / At home on me"* (*CP,* p. 244) is an assumption after her second suicide attempt for she has become dead as even her flesh is consumed by grave and no traces of hers is apparent. She confesses her loss of self in a society of patriarchal powers. *"And I a smiling woman"* (*CP,* p. 244) is a paradoxical statement because of its contradiction as it seems impossible how one can be at ease with death through smiling. In her point of view, it is only possible way to shatter the barriers of patriarchal powers as being alive it is unmanageable. Therefore, she does not wait for death (suicide) but drives herself near to it again and again. With smile, she herself intimates her total age with confirmative statement finally *"I am only thirty."* (*CP,* p. 244); she got authorized here for her last suicidal encounter. At the age of thirty years, she committed suicide on February 11, 1963 successfully; in 1956, it was the same month she got chance to meet Hughes once time and went through his 30 poems (Debata, 2013) as if she calculated real years of her life to be spent with him.

The statement with simile *"And like the cat I have nine times to die."* (*CP,* p. 244), she has been given more chances than three (she tried already) to keep on trying to die like a cat can entertain chances atleast upto nine. The statement is also hyperbolic one which exaggerates Plath's trials to pass away in her life atleast for nine times but despite trying, she is unable to perish successfully. Though she tried for suicide encounter for three times, she got rebirth and returned after each one. She says for her current suicide attempt that *"This is Number Three. / What a trash / To annihilate each decade. / What a million filaments."* (*CP,* p. 245) is another instance of a hyperbole. She is saved after each encounter of suicide but she feels shattered and divided into parts, dismembered. The after-effects of suicide encounter are exaggerated by calling it a waste. She attempted to meet death (suicide) through driving off the road knowingly at the age of thirty but rescued for third time (Daiya,

2013). In *"The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see / Them unwrap me hand and foot —— / The big strip tease."* (CP, p. 245), "The peanut-crunching crowd" is onomatopoeia as the spectators, looking at suicidal show of Plath, are seen as crunching peanuts apparently; exclusively her second suicidal encounter became the focus of public talk. While speaking with audience, she addresses them ironically being gender-conscious as in *"Gentlemen, ladies"* (CP, p. 245). In processions, the addressees are addressed like 'ladies and gentlemen' but here Plath reverses the fact as the common accepted notion is 'ladies first' in every society. By calling patriarchal forces first 'gentlemen', she exposes a gender-biased society where she shows herself vulnerable to dangers as being weak and inferior and feels herself as if she is dead, no more at the moment. *"Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman."* (CP, p. 245) is another example of an irony which directs how a female can maintain herself in similar form after manifold encounters of suicide.

The assertions for left over suicide attempts, first and second one are *"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."* (CP, p. 245). The poet reads, while making an effort for suicide for second time, *"I rocked shut / As a seashell. / They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls."* (CP, p. 245) are declarations with similes. Her first two trials are such as unconscious and conscious one; the first, unconscious, insensible one, when she was only ten, crawled in the direction of sea and later, the second one at the age of 20 years is conscious, sensible one, when she crept into her house basement (Butscher, 2003). Being Smith college learner, she attempted to suicide for a second time but could not succeed once more. Her mother and brother kept on shouting for her but she was found after three days in a basement at house of her mother. In comparison to her all suicide attempts, second one is the most painful as it became the subject of public talk. After its survival, she feels herself weak emotionally, mentally, physically and psychologically. She is done with all three suicide attempts artfully. *"Dying / is an art, like everything else."* (CP, p. 245) is a statement with simile as the art of dying is shown with comparison as simple as other common things. "Dying is an art" stands for paradox; it cannot be called as an art for any common person but for her it is really an art because she has remained in practice for this painful activity for several times and has now developed herself that much as an expert that her coming attempt will definitely be her final and successful encounter. She authorizes herself as a "skilled suicide-artist" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 80). This authorization results into an irony *"I do it exceptionally well."* (CP, p. 245); being perfectionist, she also acted this task remarkably each time. With the use of simile *"I do it so it feels like hell."* (CP, p. 245), she confesses such stressful reality. After three suicide encounters, her existence is *" 'A miracle!' "* (CP, p. 246) that she declares with onomatopoeia as an *"amused shout:"* (CP, p. 246)

which compels her to confess suffering at this phase of her life. In *"There is a charge / For the eying of my scars, there is a charge / For the hearing of my heart —— / It really goes."* (*CP,* p. 246), "charge" is a play word (pun) with its dual meaning as amount demanded or excitement. Being saved thrice, for her it is acknowledged as a miracle to return to life once more and she has turned into valuable at present.

For her departed father, she is *"The pure gold baby"* (*CP,* p. 246), is a metaphorical statement for her as with the passage of time she has become valuable now with such arts of dying and returning back; *"That melts to a shriek."* (*CP,* p. 246) is onomatopoeia since her life is occupied with shouts now. Being reborn after death, Plath imagines herself as in *"Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air."* (*CP,* p. 247) where the color "red" symbolizes empowerment, revenge and danger. In the symbolic description, she acts like a witch to make revenge more fearful. The poem closes with the line *"And I eat men like air."* (*CP,* p. 247) is a simile. Like air, she can access to anyone easily. The declaration is also a hyperbole where in revenge, her rebirth after suicide haunts her husband and her father as she could not fulfill her that wish before her suicide. At last, Plath made an effort for suicide on February 11, 1963 successfully and the purpose behind is substantiated in a most argumentative statement that "Hughes had been telling Plath that he wished she would kill herself" (Alexander, quoted in Clarke, 2001, p. 203).

In the poem, the instances of schemes are also searched and analyzed. As a formal repetition, the instances of immediate repetitions (epizeuxis) are: *"Soon, soon the flesh"* (*CP,* p. 244); *"So, so, Herr Doktor."* (*CP,* p. 246); and *"Ash, ash ——"* (*CP,* p. 246). Through these repetitions, Plath confesses anxiety with the depiction of her second suicide attempt, memories with her father in her childhood and her destruction finally. The instances of anaphora as a type of parallelism are with reiteration of words in the beginning of lines: *"I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real"* (*CP,* p. 245); *"It's easy enough to do it in a cell. / It's easy enough to do it and stay put. / It's the theatrical"* (*CP,* p. 245); *"To the same place, the same face, the same brute"* (*CP,* p. 246); *"So, so, Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy."* (*CP,* p. 246); *"I am your opus, / I am your valuable,"* (*CP,* p. 246); and *"Herr God, Herr Lucifer"* (*CP,* p. 246). Such types of repetitions occur that make Plath fulfill goal of her life through planning to last out her own life, a suicidal confession; the males her life was connected with are no more with her. The only instance of epistrophe as a type of parallelism is *"And there is a charge, a very large charge"* (*CP,* p. 246). Such repetition highlights the worth of Plath after the miracle as she was rescued for three times that confesses her revival (rebirth).

Findings

This study finds both 'tropes and scheme' patterns in the poem. Concerning tropes, Plath applies similes, metaphors, hyperboles, apostrophes, pun, symbol, personification, paradoxes, ironies, onomatopoeias, metonymies and rhetorical questions, and for schemes, immediate repetitions or epizeuxis, anaphoras and epistrophe or counterpart of anaphora are used in the poem. With the use of such rhetorical figures, not only her unsuccessful suicidal attempts are proved but also her final planning for fourth one attempt is discovered. Her husband's infidelity has forced her to meet death, attempting suicide finally in a successful way. The narration of suicide encounters is the narration with confessions. Such findings are the outcomes of the usage of stylistic devices in her poem *Lady Lazarus*.

Further this study finds that the confessional elements are death, childhood, loneliness, rage, unwanted life, dissatisfaction, loss of identity, shock, revenge, empowerment, infidelity, rebellion, anxiety and rebirth, etc. are embodied with the stylistic features. This exploration highlights stylistic strategy of Plath. Herein, Plath interprets her scrupulous conscience through the employment of poetic devices for poetic effect. Plath is legendary for her style of writing through negative connotations; she is master at how to evoke her suicidal ideas in her poem *Lady Lazarus*.

Conclusion

The study analyses Plath's confessional poem *Lady Lazarus* in the light of stylistic patterns 'tropes' and 'schemes' suggested by Leech (1969). Though this poem has been analysed several times but rarely any critic ever explores the collective underlying stylistic features of the poem. These features seem to co-relate with the writer's life. Following close reading, this study reveals the true picture of her life.

This study analyses several confessions that reside in Plath's mind, especially suicide. Separation from her infidel husband crushed her totally. The much impact of males, especially her husband, lies in her life and getting free from such authorities force her to hug suicide. No one can possibly think about her by not viewing her life, full of tragedies. Rhetorical devices are employed in the poem to link the narrator with the poet closely. Being confessional poet, whatever Plath confesses is real reflection of her life in poetic language. This research has applied the analytic method of stylistic theory in getting the meaning of poetic language, ascertained to be much helpful. The poet has concealed herself under her way of writing, style. This research shows that the style adopted by the poet in her poem *Lady Lazarus* is confessional truly. She takes support of 'tropes' and 'schemes' in order to

communicate with the audience through the confessions directly. The study proves her a perfectionist, an artist as she played with her life wonderfully again and again by committing suicide but saved thrice and finally planned for the fourth, last one. Such style of narration has made her famous in the world of confessionalists. Her poem *Lady Lazarus* can be counted as an open book of her traumatized life. It is the existence of biographical aspects and confessions in Plath's poem *Lady Lazarus* that makes her still alive in the realm of poetic domain.

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