Death Sentences Study Guide

Death Sentences by Radmila Lazic

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

In the war-torn country of Serbia, few writers, feminists, political activists, or editors have been as influential as Radmila Lazic. One of her country's most prominent poets, Lazic has published six books of forthright, bold, and moving poetry. She has also founded and edited a magazine of feminism, edited two anthologies, and founded a civil resistance movement to protest Serbia's infamous militant leader, Slobodan Milosevic. It was not until 2003 that the first translation of her work into English, *A Wake for the Living*, was published. This poetry collection opens with a striking poem titled "Smaknuca" ("Death Sentences"), in which a woman tells her lover that she will not be like Ophelia, the love interest of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Instead of Ophelia's death sentence of drowning, she says, she wants the death sentence of her lover taking off her dress and putting his arms around her neck.

"Death Sentences" is a poem with implications about feminism and sex, and it uses Ophelia□a key symbol of traditional, passive femininity□to demonstrate some of the problems with an outdated and repressed idea of femininity. The poem implies that the speaker will enjoy a liberated and open sexuality without the traditional, overly romantic, and idealized constraints of love. Lazic also presents a deep ambiguity in the poem, since this new, free love is also a "death sentence," thus establishing a key theme throughout *A Wake for the Living*, that joy coexists with hopelessness and death. Translated by eminent Serbian-American poet Charles Simic, "Death Sentences" is available in the 2003 Graywolf Press edition of *A Wake for the Living*.

Author Biography

Radmila Lazic was born in 1949 in the central Serbian city of Krusevac, which is on the Morava tributary of the Danube River, at a time when it was part of Yugoslavia. When Lazic grew older, she moved to the Serbian capitol of Belgrade to pursue a career as a poet, editor, and activist. She has since become a prominent Serbian figure in all three of these areas.

The poetry collection *A Wake for the Living* (2003), which includes "Death Sentences," is Lazic's first work to be translated into English. She has five previously published successful collections of poetry in Serbian and has received a number of literary prizes. Lazic is also a respected editor and critic. She has published many essays on literature and has edited two anthologies□a volume of women's poetry and a volume of antiwar letters. A celebrated feminist, Lazic is the founder and managing editor of a Serbian journal of women's studies, *ProFemina: International Journal for Women, Writing, and Culture*, which is published in Belgrade. She is also a key political activist, credited with founding the civil resistance movement during the 1990s, while an infamous Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, was in power.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

"Death Sentences" begins with what seems to be a paradox: the speaker was born both too late and too early for something. The meaning becomes clearer in the second and third lines, as the speaker reveals that she is addressing the fictional character of Hamlet, a reference to Shakespeare's protagonist. Although she is actually addressing her own lover, she calls this lover by the name of Shakespeare's hero, thereby comparing her relationship with her lover to Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship. When the speaker says she was born too late to be his Ophelia, she means she was born too late to be a woman of Shakespeare's time, which implies not just that she was not alive during this period but that women have changed since the early seventeenth century and, perhaps, are less likely to drown for their lovers. The speaker also says she is too old to be Ophelia, who is probably quite young in *Hamlet* and who the speaker describes as "pimply," like an adolescent girl.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, the speaker imagines herself drowning□as Ophelia does in Shakespeare's play after Hamlet has abandoned her and killed her father, and she has gone mad. The speaker describes this drowning in the first person, but throughout stanzas 1 and 2 she is imagining the event as if she were Ophelia. Therefore, she is commenting on the significance of the drowning in *Hamlet*. It becomes clear as the poem progresses that this drowning is a symbol for Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship, a kind of relationship the speaker does not want to have with her lover.

The speaker uses the verb "let" to begin the second stanza, implying she is allowing or even willing herself to drown. She describes her hair as "flattened wheat," as though it will be made into bread. The second line describes her hair spreading over the "dark" water, and the next lines imagine her eyes floating beside the water lilies, disturbing them. Lilies are associated with purity and virginity, which implies the speaker's eyes are pure, but since they "upset" the water lilies, there is also the implication that there is something disturbing and unsettling about this kind of purity and virginity. It seems as though her lily-white eyes are somehow floating disconnected from her head, which suggests that the drowning is quite gruesome.

Stanza 3

The third stanza continues to describe the speaker's imagined drowning. The first line makes use of the poetic device of repetition, using the Serbian word for fishes, *ribi*, twice in a row to describe the speaker gliding "fishlike between fishes." The Serbian phrase is *medju ribe ribi nalik*, literally "between fish like fishes," and it underscores the speaker's underwater motion, making it seem as though she actually is a fish and not a

person. In its first three lines, this stanza also repeats *Da*, the word for "that" and "yes," which is another example of the device of repetition that Lazic uses to emphasize that the speaker is sinking deeper and deeper in the water.

In the second line of this stanza, the speaker compares herself to a "dead seashell," which suggests she will eventually wash up on shore, perhaps implying that Ophelia will come back to haunt the land or that Ophelia's death will become a lesson for people who walk along the beach. The speaker then imagines herself at the bottom of the water, burrowing into the "sand next to shipwrecks of love." This phrase raises the question of whether Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet was like a shipwreck of love, or whether it is "next to" a shipwreck of love□not itself a shipwreck because the couple were not really in love at all.

The final image of the speaker drowning like Ophelia is an "amphora," which is a large vase of the kind used in ancient Greece, with an egg-shaped body and a narrow cylindrical neck. Since amphorae are associated with classical civilization, this image makes the idea of a drowned woman like Ophelia seem as though she is a relic of the ancient past. Also, the fact that the speaker imagines herself as an amphora "entangled in seaweeds" reinforces the idea that there is something disturbing and undesirable about Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet.

Stanza 4

This stanza marks the turning point in the poem, when the speaker shifts from a description of the kind of relationship she does not want to have, to one that she prefers. Instead of a romanticized but nonphysical relationship like that of Hamlet and Ophelia, the speaker would like her lover to take off her dress. It is important to note that in Shakespeare's play it is Ophelia's dress that drags her down into the water and drowns her. The poem's speaker wishes to be free of this burden, and she compares the dress to "aspen leaves" tossed about in the wind. Aspen leaves would normally float in the water, which implies that the speaker has no wish to drown for her lover.

In the third and fourth lines of the stanza, the speaker continues her description of the aspen leaves that represent her dress. When she states that the wind shakes these leaves "without permission / As if there's nothing to it," she implies that she is like the aspen tree and her lover is like the wind, effortlessly taking off her dress. This is significant because he does it "without permission," either because there is no need for permission or because he does not wait for it. Because the wind is normally associated with inconstancy, this also seems to suggest that their relationship is in some way fleeting, or perhaps that physical intimacy comes easily to them and is not a big deal.

Stanza 5

The last two lines of the poem cast doubt on the idea that the speaker's relationship with her lover is fleeting or inconsequential, calling the kind of relationship in which the speaker's lover takes off her dress a "death sentence," just as the kind of love that ends

with a woman drowning is a death sentence. The speaker says she would prefer this death sentence, in which her lover's arms are around her neck for "eternity" over a death sentence by drowning, but the fact remains that they both end in her death. The image of the lovers arms around the speaker's neck evokes the image of an execution, as though a noose is around her neck or she is being strangled.

Themes

Feminism

Lazic is a celebrated feminist, so it is no surprise that her work comments on a variety of themes related to women's issues. Ophelia is one of literature's classic examples of an oppressed and inhibited woman, and "Death Sentences" points out the sexism involved in the way that Hamlet and the rest of society treat her. Since long tentacles such as seaweeds often symbolize the instruments of male power, it is even possible that the seaweeds that "entangle" the speaker represent some dark, male force holding her underwater. This would imply that Ophelia is part of a patriarchal, or male-dominated, system that keeps her under control, drives her mad, and is responsible for her death.

Lazic does not imply that Ophelia is a defiant victim of Hamlet. The verbs that the speaker uses to describe the drowning imply that Ophelia may believe in the patriarchal values that lead to her death. For example, the verb "let," which begins the description of Ophelia's, suggests that Ophelia is allowing herself to drown. Similarly, the fact that Ophelia "burrow[s]" into the sand makes it sound as though she is burying herself on purpose. This may imply that Ophelia is trying to kill herself, or it may suggest that it is as though a woman in a relationship like Ophelia's is steering herself toward tragedy. The idea that Ophelia is an active force in her own death sentence does not necessarily shift any blame on her, but it does suggest that patriarchal values are powerful enough to seem natural and right to those suffering under them.

Lazic leaves these questions open, and the final couplet stresses that she treats the theme of feminism ambiguously. This couplet implies that the scenario of being sexually intimate with Hamlet is like a death sentence, with the man's arms around the speaker's neck like a noose. A modern, sexually free relationship is therefore like Ophelia's romanticized, dependent, repressed relationship in the sense that both of them lead to an "eternity" that is like being condemned to death. This does not stop the speaker from recognizing that she would vastly prefer sexual liberation to an oppressive, inhibited relationship like Ophelia's. Lazic appears to be implying that contemporary relationships have significant, harmful inequalities, but that some progress has been made from a world in which women could not derive pleasure from their male oppressors.

Romantic and Sexual Love

Lazic's commentary on love and sex in "Death Sentences" is related to her theme of feminism. She presents two very different kinds of heterosexual relationships in order to consider the true nature of intimacy. The first type of relationship she depicts is that between Ophelia and Hamlet. The historical context section, below, provides a description of this tragic couple's story, but from Lazic's poem alone it should be clear that their relationship is caught up in naive, dependent, and romantic conventions of the past. Ophelia is in no way independent or free; she idealizes Hamlet and is so crushed

when he abandons her and kills her father that she goes mad and drowns. Their relationship is not physical; it is based on Ophelia's youthful infatuation with Hamlet. In Lazic's view of this traditional form of romance, therefore, the woman is inhibited and victimized by her devotion to the man, whom she idealizes and on whom she is entirely dependent.

The second type of love Lazic portrays is characterized by mature, middle-aged physical intimacy and sex. The speaker says in the first line that she is "too old"□unlike the "pimply" and therefore youthful Ophelia□and the speaker's statement that taking off her dress is like the wind shaking an aspen tree "without permission / As if there's nothing to it" suggests the free and open sexuality of someone whose romantic illusions have been lost. Lazic can be a humorous poet, and in one sense these lines are both funny and joyful, celebrating the pleasure of sexual love despite its difficulties.

Both types of romance have their problems, and the idea of free love is partly undermined by the fact that like traditional, idealistic love it is a "death sentence" that hangs around the speaker's neck. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the speaker vastly prefers a free, sexual, mature type of relationship. In fact, it is possible to read the poem in an entirely lighthearted manner, in which it is actually an ironic celebration of free love without obligations. This simply requires taking the poem's final couplet as an ironic statement, or a joke, in which Lazic implies that a relationship of free love is not an eternal death sentence at all but exactly the opposite: a temporary joy.

Style

Conceit

In poetry, a "conceit" refers to an elaborate and extended metaphor. A metaphor is a word or phrase that is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or comparison between them, and a conceit can carry one metaphor across many stanzas and through many different situations. Conceits are not as common as they were in seventeenth-century England, for example, but Lazic uses one when she employs Shakespeare's character of Ophelia as a metaphor for the speaker of "Death Sentences." The speaker begins by saying she is not like Ophelia, but then she spends the next two stanzas imagining herself as Hamlet's abandoned lover, sinking in the water and drowning. This entire comparison is a conceit.

Poets often use conceits to shed light on the object or event being replaced by the metaphor, and conceits allow the reader to picture something in a new and different way. Lazic's conceit in "Death Sentences" is the chief means by which she conveys the type of relationship the speaker does not want. It also allows Lazic to comment effectively on the themes of feminism and love, because Ophelia's situation is an apt way to symbolize the poet's ideas about a traditional and idealized view of love in an oppressive, patriarchal society. In fact, the conceit provides the basis for the entire structure of the poem because the concept of "Death Sentences"□that is, the poet's commentary on female oppression□as well as the speaker's idea of free sexual love are both derived from this poetic device.

Apostrophe

Apostrophe is a word and concept that comes from ancient Greek drama; it refers to a poet or speaker turning from the audience as a whole to address a single person or thing. "Death Sentences" is an example of apostrophe because the speaker addresses the entire poem to "Hamlet," her lover. Apostrophe is a useful poetic device because it immediately places the text into a particular context; it gives the language a specific function and reminds the reader that writing and speaking are means of communication between people. This context is important in Lazic's poem because it develops the speaker's character by showing how she interacts with her lover, and it allows the reader the pleasure and interest of feeling a part of the situation, as if she/he were reading a private letter.

Historical Context

Serbia and the Former Yugoslavia

Serbia had been part of the communist Yugoslav Federation since the end of World War II when, in the late 1980s, Yugoslavia began to dissolve into various republics with nationalistic aspirations. Slovenia and Croatia were the first to break away. Because of a territorial dispute with Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian nationalist politician and leader of Yugoslavia at this time, a civil war began in Croatia. By 1992, a further conflict had broken out in Bosnia, which had also declared independence. Serbs drove Bosnian Muslims from their homes and killed many, a course of action later described as "ethnic cleansing." By 1993, the Bosnian Muslim government was besieged in the capitol, Sarajevo, while Serbian forces controlled 70 percent of the republic. Bosnian Muslim forces were also fighting with Bosnian Croats, who wanted to be part of a greater Croatia. United Nations peacekeepers were ineffective in controlling the situation. However, by 1995, a peace agreement had been reached.

In 1998, another conflict began, in the republic of Kosovo, where an army supported by its majority, ethnic Albanians, rebelled against Serbian rule. The international community supported greater autonomy for ethnic Albanians but opposed their bid for independence. The powers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) warned Milosevic, still the Serbian leader, to bring an end to violence in the region. When this diplomacy failed, NATO began to launch air strikes against Yugoslavia in March 1999. Kosovar Albanian refugees then began pouring out of the region with accounts of ethnically motivated violence against them, and United Nations peacekeepers took control of the region.

Milosevic fell from power as a result of the 2000 elections; he refused to accept the electoral results, but a popular uprising forced him to leave office. In June 2001, Milosevic was extradited to the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague by Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, who was assassinated in Belgrade two years later. Shortly before Djindjic's assassination, Yugoslavia was officially replaced by a loose union of Serbia and Montenegro, the only remaining republics of the Yugoslav Federation.

Hamlet and Ophelia

Hamlet and Ophelia are central characters from Shakespeare's famous play *Hamlet*, which focuses on the period after Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark, has died, and his father's brother, Claudius, has married Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. The slain king appears to Hamlet as a ghost and reveals that his brother, Hamlet's uncle, poisoned him in order to usurp the throne. Hamlet vows revenge but is torn over how to respond, and the other characters begin to wonder whether he has gone mad. Ophelia, the daughter of a foolish but loyal lord called Polonius, has by this point revealed that

Hamlet has lately expressed his love for her, but Polonius has forbidden her to talk to him because he believes that Hamlet's affections for his daughter are trifling and unserious. Ophelia therefore rejects Hamlet's letters and refuses to see him.

When Polonius sees Hamlet acting as though he is mad, he decides the cause of this must be Hamlet's love for Ophelia. Polonius therefore regrets that he has forbidden his daughter to speak with Hamlet and arranges with King Claudius to hide and watch Hamlet interact with Ophelia so that Polonius and Claudius may know whether Hamlet is actually in love with Ophelia. When Hamlet meets Ophelia, he rejects her entirely and tells her, "Get thee to a nunnery." During the course of events that follow, Hamlet hears someone hiding in his mother's bedchamber and stabs him from behind a curtain, discovering afterwards that it was Polonius. Hamlet departs for England and avoids Claudius's plot to have him murdered, but meanwhile Ophelia learns of her father's death and goes insane. Ophelia's brother Laertes returns from France when he hears of his father's death and, seeing his sister insane, vows revenge on Hamlet.

While Laertes is plotting with Claudius to poison Hamlet, Queen Gertrude enters to announce that Ophelia has drowned. In a famous, romantic passage, Gertrude describes how Ophelia was hanging in the boughs of a willow tree with many garlands of flowers when the branch broke and she fell into the water. Her clothes first held her up, and she sang "snatches of old tunes, / As one incapable of her own distress" as she floated along, but then her garments became soaked and dragged her to her "muddy death." Laertes and Hamlet both leap into Ophelia's grave during her funeral, before the final climactic tragedy, during which Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet all die.

Critical Overview

Although "Death Sentences" has received little individual attention, *A Wake for the Living* received favorable reviews upon its publication in 2003. Lazic has long been a respected and influential poet in Serbia, but this collection was her first book translated into English, and it has made a positive impression in the English-speaking critical community. For example, in her review of the book for *Library Journal*, Heather Wright praises Lazic's "honest and straightforward style" and calls Lazic's work "illuminating." Similarly, in a review for *Booklist*, Patricia Monaghan characterizes *A Wake for the Living* as a "startling, bold, assertively sexual work" filled with "stunningly unsentimental poetry" that may for some readers "be unsettling" but for others will offer "a welcome breath of truth."

In the *Washington Post*, Edward Hirsch calls *A Wake for the Living* "utterly convincing" and notes, "Lazic writes as a feminist with a dark sense of humor and a surreal imagination." Hirsch goes on to discuss what he calls a "dialectic operating in Lazic's work," an ambivalence also discussed by other critics of Lazic's work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses Lazic's commentary on love, sex, and desire, arguing that the opening poem of A Wake for the Living *establishes the paradoxical view of love that the poet will explore throughout the collection.*

"Death Sentences," the first poem in *A Wake for the Living*, is an extremely effective opener. It draws in the reader with the exciting and joyous moment of the speaker finding the "eternity" of her lover's "arms around [her] neck." Since this moment is also a "death sentence," however, it establishes a complex paradox about sex, desire, death, and life that leads readers, intrigued, to follow these themes throughout Lazic's collection. The book is full of such paradoxes; it juxtaposes images of death and despair with those of life and joy until they become profoundly confused, and the poems consistently view these contradictions in terms of sex and desire. This essay will argue that the central paradox of "Death Sentences," that death and despair coexist with sexual and romantic joy, is a crucial revelation that reappears throughout *A Wake for the Living*.

Critics such as Edward Hirsch recognize this "dialectic," as Hirsch calls it in his December 2003 *Washington Post* column, as one of Lazic's central themes:

There is a kind of dialectic operating in Lazic's work between irony and ecstasy, between the wisdom of long experience, which teaches her that "the time of miracles is behind us," and the innocence of fresh desire, which keeps surprising her with its bright insistence.

In "Death Sentences," this dialectic at first appears to be a debate between old and new ideas of sex, love, desire, and intimate relationships. Thus, Ophelia is associated with drowning in old conventions while the speaker and her ideas about free love are associated with feminism and contemporary relationships. During the course of the poem, Ophelia's traditional, oppressed, outmoded idea of romantic love seems to give way to the new possibilities of a liberated female spirit.

Indeed, Lazic makes it clear, here and in poems such as "Evergreen," that she is a proponent of feminism and free love with no desire to return to the oppressive conditions of the past. "Evergreen" attacks the many varieties of women like Ophelia who Lazic disdains: "I've had enough of lonely women. / Sad. Miserable. Abandoned women." The speaker of this poem stresses that she wants nothing to do with "faithful wives with their eyes lowered" and their lovers, who are "Loved to death till death do us part." Instead of this inhibited romanticism, Lazic imagines a kind of love after death "do us part," in which she jumps "Into everyone's throat or heart, / So I can be born again in labor pains."

It is interesting that this liberated idea of love is so closely associated with violence and death; its final image is the decapitated head of the speaker's lover on her belly, like the

biblical image of the severed head of John the Baptist that Salome requests to be brought to her on a plate. This is a startling and somewhat confusing image, introduced by the paradox "I'd do everything the same way and everything differently," as though the speaker would like to act out the traditional and historical attitudes toward love after all, both as they have been acted out in the past and in new, different ways. Unsure how to interpret these lines, the reader is left contemplating a paradox in which two kinds of love that initially seemed nothing alike are revealed to be quite similar. Although a modern view of love seems more joyful and desirable, both types are closely tied to death and hopelessness.

"Death Sentences" reveals a similarly difficult and troubling paradox in its final stanza. It is true that Ophelia's idea of sexual desire□a classic example of the idealized, romanticized, oppressed, and inhibited love that, in times past, a woman was meant to feel for a man□is presented as something outdated and undesirable. Yet the fact remains that the speaker's idea of love is also a "death sentence" in which her lover's arms are around her neck like the noose of a hanging rope. Lazic envisions this mature idea of love, in which the speaker's dress falls from her body like leaves fall from the trees, as an "eternity" of winter.

The poem, therefore, is not a dialectic between two different ideas of love, one of them associated with death and the other with life, as much as one vision of love in which death and life are varying, coexisting forces. Ophelia and the speaker are both faced with hopeless death sentences, and the main distinction is that the speaker prefers to enjoy life while it lasts. The speaker also wishes to be free of the oppressive, male-dominated conventions of the past, but Lazic implies that this may not be possible. If the speaker were truly free from these conventions, Lazic would be unlikely to portray the man taking off her dress like the wind shaking off the leaves "without permission," as though the wind were the same kind of overwhelming natural force as the water that drowns Ophelia. Indeed, the image of Ophelia "entangled in seaweeds" is similar to the speaker entangled in her lovers arms; both of these tentacle-like objects seem to be instruments carrying out the women's death sentences.

"Come and Lie Next to Me" is another poem that brings up problems that Lazic recognizes in so-called free love, and it emphasizes perhaps more explicitly, but with some of the same imagery as that of "Death Sentences," that all types of love involve paradoxical extremes of life, death, joy, and despair. The reader knows that the type of love in "Come and Lie Next to Me" is liberated, mature love because the speaker says, "I need your love muscle only," stressing that she has no romantic illusions. Yet this type of love is like Ophelia's in the sense that it is self-sacrificial and demeaning: "I give you my body on credit, / My soul on the layaway plan." Although this implies that the speaker will regain her body and soul, it is nevertheless an image of subservience, and the poem's final couplet reinforces this sense of inequality: "Outside the leaves are falling / Like meat from the bone."

However much Lazic's speaker is a carnivore who desires to take advantage of her lover as much as he takes advantage of her, the fact remains that love is consistently outside the realm of "Truth and justice, the higher pursuits," which in "Come and Lie

Next to Me" were "invented / So they can separate us." Whenever Lazic condemns traditional conventions of love, as she does with marriage in "Conjugal Bed," she also recognizes that all love is in some way conventional, and all relationships contain an element of violent and oppressive deadliness. This is why the Shakespearean reference in "Conjugal Bed," like the reference to Hamlet and Ophelia in "Death Sentence," is a confusing paradox:

This bed is not a grave for us to lie in.

Neither are we Romeo and Juliet

For tears to be shed over our corpses,

And giving a wake for the living is intolerable.

Although Lazic is sincere in her condemnation of Romeo and Juliet's naive, idealistic, deadly love, she is somewhat ironic about the speaker's statement that a wake for the living is "intolerable." Her collection implies by its title that its poems will be like "A Wake for the Living," and the title does, in fact, turn out to be an apt description of Lazic's paradoxical themes, particularly those of sex and love. Throughout the book, love is like a wake for the living in the sense that it brings a ritual of death into the experience of life. Lazic also implies, however, that love brings life into death, since a wake is a final moment to experience the semblance of life in a dead body. While she continually portrays the middle-aged female desire for sex as something that brings joy and life into a woman's world, Lazic simultaneously stresses that middle-aged sex is like acting out a despairing and hopeless "funeral march," as it is called in "Evergreen."

The remarkable thing about "Death Sentences" is that within five short stanzas it so effectively establishes this complex and paradoxical notion of love, sex, and desire, which will recur throughout *A Wake for the Living*. Lazic is able to accomplish this partly by repeatedly introducing paradoxes into the poem, beginning with the contradictory idea she was born too late and yet is too old to be like Ophelia. The paradoxes continue in stanzas 2 and 3, where the imagery is carefully balanced between romanticized metaphor and gruesome reality, with juxtaposed phrases like "floating water lilies" and "floating eyes." The imagery of Ophelia floating like an amphora entangled in the seaweeds continues to emphasize this sense of contradiction, since it is unclear whether this ancient, precious object is submerged and drowned or simply floating within the weedy tentacles.

In stanza 4, Lazic introduces the image of the speaker naked like a barren willow tree that the wind has stripped of its leaves. There seems to be a contradiction because the speaker prefers that her lover take off her dress, but the wind seems to purposefully shake the tree and make it bare "without permission," suggesting that the wind/lover has taken advantage or used force even though to the wind/lover it seems "As if there's nothing to it."

Finally, Lazic presents the key contradiction of the poem: that this new, free love is joyous and filled with pleasure at the same time as it is an eternal "death sentence,"

with the lover's arms around the speaker's neck both as a noose and as a passionate embrace. All of this imagery suggests that love is not a straightforward struggle between joy and cynicism, life and death, good and evil, but an expression of wonderment that all of these ideas coexist in a paradoxical manner. After she has established this paradox of love, sex, and desire, Lazic is free to explore these themes throughout the rest of the collection, using "Death Sentences" as a keynote for the true nature of love.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Death Sentences," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Carter is currently working as freelance writer. In this essay, Carter considers the author's powerful use of imagery and language to transcend her own perceptions of death.

A simple reading of Radmila Lazic's "Death Sentences" reveals an interesting, often surreal look into the realm of death. But to simply view the work as a juxtaposition or side-by-side comparison of death to that of a Shakespearean tragedy is a careless underestimation of the emotive and spiritual power that lies beneath the work's surface. Upon closer examination of what appear to be innocuous or bland symbols, the poem takes on a psychological, emotional, and spiritual depth in its exploration of death, hitting a nerve that taps into the very pulse of human experience.

Lazic's poem begins with a paradox. The speaker cannot go back in time; her dilemma, that she "was born too late" yet she is "much too old," presents the reader with a riddle to solve. The answer lies in the Elizabethan references appearing in the two lines immediately following in stanza 1. Addressing Shakespeare's "Hamlet," the speaker wryly acknowledges that she could never fit the role of a "pimply Ophelia." These three lines mirror the complexities of the Shakespearean tragedy. Like the speaker, Hamlet often spoke in riddles. In fact, one of the major themes of the play involves the idea of appearances versus reality. There is an underlying madness to the play and as the audience discovers, the truth is often elusive. Hamlet's father's death, for example, is made to look like an accident but is really a well-planned murder. Likewise, Prince Hamlet's ascent to the throne is on the surface logical, but the audience soon learns that he is a murderer. Finally, it is Hamlet's feigned or contrived madness that serves to drive Ophelia to insanity and eventually death.

To begin a contemplation of death with this particular Shakespearean reference is fitting to the topic. It is in *Hamlet* that the question of existence and death is raised in act 3, scene 1: "To be, or not to be; that is the question." Throughout the play, Shakespeare challenges notions of death. In act 1, scene 2, Shakespeare asserts, "All that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity." Death is explored not only in the brutal murders of several people but in the tragic death of Ophelia, who, it could be argued, was murdered by Hamlet's deceptions. For instance, it is in her madness that Ophelia passes out flowers. Particularly significant is the rosemary she gives to Laertes, a symbol of remembrance used in funerals, foreshadowing her own death in asking her brother not to forget her. It is in this state of madness that Ophelia dies. The tragedy of death, including Ophelia's, pervades much of the play, leaving the audience to sort out, and make sense of, not only a series of brutal murders but the death of a young, innocent, lovesick girl.

In stanzas 2 and 3 of Lazic's poem, the speaker's contemplation of death continues in a series of images of her body eerily floating in dark waters, from its fishlike glide amongst shimmering fish bodies, to its final submergence in the water, like a dead seashell or a shipwreck. The references in stanza 2 again stir up memories of the play for the reader.

The speaker's body is described as a ghostly apparition suspended in the water, alluding to the ghosts that haunt Prince Hamlet. Like the speaker's body, Ophelia's also found its watery grave. In act 4, scene 7 of Shakespeare's play, Ophelia, attempting to hang floral wreaths from a tree overlooking a pond, falls in and sinks into its muddy depths, eventually pulled down by the weight of her water-soaked clothing. The speaker of the poem recalls the death of Ophelia, her lifeless body submerged in the pond, likening it to "shipwrecks of love."

The speaker visits the Shakespearean tragedy, not to identify with the drowning victim, but to emphasize her own relationship with death. Ophelia died a young, beautiful, innocent woman who was tragically in love. In the end, it was Ophelia's love for Hamlet that literally drove her mad. In consideration of Ophelia's tragedy, the speaker of the poem, on speaking of her own death, is quick to suggest that she is no "pimply Ophelia." The reference betrays Ophelia's immaturity and is used by the speaker to contrast or compare herself to the young tragic figure. It serves to emphasize the speaker's age and wisdom, suggesting that perhaps because of her age not only would she not suffer death in the same manner but that her death would not be a tragedy. She acknowledges that her death will not be an untimely event, like Ophelia's, but a logical consequence of age.

The speaker's meaning in this clever yet powerful juxtaposition (or side-by-side comparison) of her impending death with Shakespeare's tragedy is also asserted in stanza 3, line 4, when the speaker identifies herself as "I, the amphora," which "Burrow[s] in sand next to shipwrecks of love." Amphora, often mentioned in ancient Greek literature, were tall, slender vessels used by the Greeks for the preservation of wine, oil, honey, and fruits that required special keeping. They were also used for cinerary urns, or vessels housing cremated remains of the dead. Their pointed bases were purposely designed as a foothold to position them upright in the sand or soil. This image serves to contrast the "shipwreck of love" or tragic accident that characterized Ophelia's death. The speaker identifies herself not with the shipwreck but with the dual image of the amphora, one of a stately vessel housing a delicate wine or "treasure" that only gets finer with age; the other, a ceremonial vessel housing her own remains. The amphora was created for a specific intent or use and, by extension, the speaker's identification with the Greek object solidifies the assertion that her death is to be expected.

In drawing a parallel to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with respect to Lazic's work, the initial interpretation would be to view "Death Sentences" as one poet's morbid resignation to the inevitability of death. Certainly, on the surface, the speaker paints a bleak picture. The speaker's lamentation in the opening lines of the poem, particularly the first line of stanza 1, is a paradox out of time, out of sync, mimicking the timelessness of death and the incomprehensible interruption this event can create. Through the eyes of the speaker, death in the poem comes to the reader much like an old photograph, a collection of dull hues, of browns, silvers, and dark greens, of flattened wheat, glimmering fish and floating lily pads. Redemption does come for the speaker in stanzas 4 and 5. She welcomes death as if it were a lover holding her in a sensual embrace,

preferring death to come "take off my dress," imagining it falling at her "feet like aspen leaves," her death sentence an "Eternity of your arms around my neck."

Returning to stanza 2 of the poem illuminates the speaker's ecstatic experience with death at the end of the work. Significantly, her body is described as having "upset the floating water lilies." The image of the water lily, or the lotus, is a powerful religious symbol. In its natural state, the lotus flower is rooted in the depths of muddy ponds or swamps, its dark green leaves floating on the surface. The lotus emerges from its muddy depths to the surface where it blossoms into a pure white flower. It has been said to symbolize the manifestation of the universal Buddha nature or Christ Consciousness inherent equally in all life, universal images of immortality and resurrection. It is a symbol of spiritual evolvement. Particularly, Buddhist and Hindu deities are often portrayed holding a lotus blossom or are seated on a lotus; therefore, it is associated with achieving one's highest potential in the spiritual world. Amanda F. Rooke says in "The Lotus,"

Lotus relate to creation, regeneration, and the state of the initiative and higher beings, all of whom travel through life's vicissitudes and trials to become at one with the creative source of life in order to return and spread its light to other receptive souls.

The "aspen leaves" mentioned in stanza 4 are an equally important mystical symbol in the work. Universally the aspen leaf is traditionally associated with an excess of sensibility and fear. According to Christian folklore, for example, all of the trees bowed in sorrow when Christ was crucified, with the exception of the aspen, whose pride and arrogance doomed its leaves to eternal trembling.

Considering the powerful symbolism behind the lotus and the aspen leaves leads the reader to another conclusion. Reexamining the poem, the reader experiences a marked shift between the first three stanzas and the last two. The work begins in resignation as the speaker laments certain death. By the end of the work, the redemptive powers of the dark waters in which she was submerged have taken effect, her view of death moving from one of sorrow to great elation. At this point, the speaker reaches her own enlightenment; she is, in a sense, reborn. A religious reading of the poem reveals a woman who in the end is welcoming her death as if she were recalling the Rapture, or Christ's return, with the open arms of an eager lover. The poem abruptly shifts as she willingly sheds her fear, symbolized in the effortless shedding of her dress "like aspen leaves." Her death sentence is no sentence at all but the promise of an eternity of bliss in the loving arms of Christ.

Radmila Lazic's "Death Sentences" fittingly ends in mimicking the very words of Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure* who states "If I must die, I will encounter darkness as a bride and hug it in mine arms." This quote mirrors a determination on Shakespeare's part to welcome death as a new and exciting experience. So, too, does Lazic's work. The poem beautifully moves through the speaker's own fear and grief concerning her impending death, past acceptance to a state of excitement and bliss as she contemplates her adventure into a new realm. The complexities and economies of language and of imagery illuminate the psychological, emotional, and spiritual depths to

which the poet so artfully submerges herself to explain a realm beyond human comprehension, encouraging readers to join her with open arms.

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on "Death Sentences," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

The themes of "Death Sentences" are explored throughout Lazic's collection. Read the rest of *A Wake for the Living*, and discuss how the other poems relate to the opener. How does a further knowledge of Lazic's work affect your view of the poem? Choose one or two of the poems that you feel bear an important relationship to "Death Sentences," and then compare and contrast them, discussing how themes such as feminism, sexuality, death, and love are treated similarly and/or differently.

Research and write an essay discussing the history of Serbia since 1990, including Lazic's role in the civil resistance movement and her work as an activist. How do you think the country's conflicts have affected her poetry? Describe any traces of the Serbian political climate that you notice in "Death Sentences" or other poems from *A Wake for the Living*.

Read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and discuss the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. How would you describe Ophelia's character? How does her relationship with Hamlet relate to the main themes of the play? What does Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia reveal about Hamlet's character? Why does Ophelia go mad? Explain your responses.

Research how Ophelia has been used as a symbol in works of literature, psychology, sociology, philosophy, or history in the centuries since Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. How do various authors approach her character? How does she tend to be referenced and in what major contexts? How has she been represented and what function does she serve in women's studies and feminism?

What Do I Read Next?

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) is one of the most important plays of all time and one of literature's most profound meditations on meaning, existence, and numerous other themes. It tells the story of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and his struggle to avenge his father's murder.

Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls (1995), by clinical psychologist Mary Pipher, describes the difficult and oppressive world that young girls face in contemporary American society and offers suggestions about how to support them.

Contemporary Yugoslav Poetry (1977), translated by Charles Simic and edited by Vasa D. Mihailovich, is a good source for exploring some of the best post—World War II Yugoslavian poets, such as Matija Beckovic and Milos Crnjanski.

Charles Simic's Pulitzer Prize—winning *The World Doesn't End* (1989) is an innovative collection of untitled prose poems that refer to numerous historical, religious, and philosophical figures.

Further Study

Holton, Milne, *Serbian Poetry from the Beginnings to the Present*, edited by Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich, translated by Charles Simic and Momcilo Selic, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988.

This lengthy and authoritative anthology of Serbian poetry is useful for understanding Lazic's literary context.

McQuade, Molly, and Charles Simic, "Real America: An Interview with Charles Simic," in *Chicago Review*, Vol. 41, Nos. 2—3, 1995, pp. 13—18.

This interview provides a brief but interesting biography of Lazic's translator, including his experience immigrating to Chicago from Yugoslavia.

Meier, Viktor, *Yugoslavia: A History of Its Demise*, Routledge, 1999.

Meier's historical analysis focuses on Yugoslavia during the 1980s and 1990s to tell the tale of its devastating wars and ethnic conflicts.

Simic, Charles, *Orphan Factory: Essays and Memoirs*, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

In addition to a variety of fascinating autobiographical stories, this book includes essays and reviews that reveal Simic's unique perspective on literary criticism and appreciation.

Bibliography

Hirsch, Edward, "Poet's Choice," in *Washington Post*, December 21, 2003, p. BW12.

Lazic, Radmila, "Death Sentences," in *A Wake for the Living*, translated by Charles Simic, Graywolf Press, 2003, pp. 2—3, 31, 83, 89—91.

Monaghan, Patricia, Review of *A Wake for the Living*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 100, No. 5, November 1, 2003, p. 473.

Rooke, Amanda, "The Lotus," in *Sunrise*, Theosophical University Press, 2002.

Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, in *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 653—90.

Wright, Heather, Review of *A Wake for the Living*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 128, No. 20, December 15, 2003, p. 125.