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“CONFESSIONAL POETRY”

DEFINITION

- “Confessional poetry”, remarked the critic, Irving Howe, “is the one, in which the writer speaks to the readers telling him something about his life. It unmask the poet’s true nature and provides an insight into his private life.”
- Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal or "I."
- This style of writing emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is associated with poets such as **Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton,** and **W. D. Snodgrass.** **Lowell's** book *Life Studies* was a highly personal

account of his life and familial ties and had a significant impact on American poetry.

- The term '**confessional poetry**' was first coined by American Poet, M.L. Rosenthal, through a review, entitled 'Poetry as Confession' written discussing Robert Lowell's approach of writing poetry in 'Life Studies'.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONFESSIONAL POETRY

- **A Reaction against Depersonalized Poetry**

Confessional poetry was a reaction to the **depersonalized, academic** poetry of writers like T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. These poets believed poetry was a thing apart from its creator, and that there was no need for the self in poetry. The confessional poets did not follow this perspective. Instead they wrote from a deeply personal perspective and filled their work with intimate and controversial details from their private lives.

- **Autobiographical in Tone**

The confessional poetry of the mid-twentieth century dealt with subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in American poetry. **Private experiences** with and feelings about **death, trauma, depression** and **relationships** were addressed in this type of poetry, often in an **autobiographical** manner.

- **Craftsmanship**

The confessional poets were not merely recording their emotions on paper; craft and construction were extremely important to their work. While their treatment of the poetic self may have been groundbreaking and shocking to some readers, these poets maintained a **high level of craftsmanship** through their careful attention to and use of prosody.

IMPORTANT CONFESSIONAL POETS:

Robert Lowell

- Robert Lowell, the veritable **founding father** of the movement, was a professor at Boston University, where he taught poetry workshops that Sexton and Plath attended. *Life Studies* dealt with many of Lowell's family dysfunctions, alcoholism, and sexual guilt, thereby breaking with previous poetic tradition and inclining toward the freer forms of William Carlos Williams. M.L. Rosenthal first used the term "confessional poetry" when writing a review about Lowell's work.
- What is unique about Lowell is that he grounds his personal poetry in the hidden past of the Lowell family – he focuses on ‘the family disgraces, tensions, neuroses, and failures.’ The hidden past is valuable to Lowell for what it has to teach us about the present. In particular, his nervous breakdowns are caused by memories from his past that haunt him. However, unlike other ‘confessional’ poets, Lowell also explores the consequences of the past in modern society.
- In many of his poems Lowell criticizes the behavior of his ancestors and blames them for the decay of society. In ‘Skunk Hour’, Lowell criticizes the corrupt society, ‘the season’s ill’, which is responsible for his ‘ill-spirit’, when he confesses ‘My mind’s not right.’
- In several poems, Lowell discusses the failure of relationships. In ‘*Man and Wife*’, Lowell contrasts the romantic early phases of a relationship, characterized by the statement ‘All night I’ve held your hand’, with the stale relationship of the present. Twelve years later, the loveless marriage is characterized by his wife’s ‘old-fashioned tirade’ that ‘breaks like the Atlantic Ocean’ on the head of her husband.

Anne Sexton

- Anne Sexton attended lot of workshops with Robert Lowell, who pioneered writing in the Confessional genre which was absolutely new and unique in the world of English Literature. Sexton wrote poetry that dealt with her personal life, including her experiences with psychotherapy, sex, depression, and rage. She One of her most significant works, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), dealt with such excruciating topics as molestation by a father.
- Anne Sexton has secured a place for herself as a feminist poet, as she writes a lot about women's psyche, their struggle with their own thoughts and dilemmas, their steadfastness regarding certain things in their life and their agony and emotions. The Freudian influence on Sexton cannot be negated and it is also reflected in her poetry.
- Her poetry dealt with subject matter that was never written earlier in the American Literature. Sexton handled themes and subjects which were considered a taboo for the society. Traditionally they were never discussed in poetry. Themes such as **mental breakdowns, suicide, incest**, abortion made her the confessional poet.
- Sexton's poems engaged in what was 'repressed, hidden, or falsified' from an early stage in poems such as '*In the Beach House*', which associated her parents' lovemaking, 'the royal strapping', with a beating she had received from her father.

Sylvia Plath

- Sylvia Plath is commonly seen as a confessional poet, although some critics dispute her placement within this movement, arguing that her work is more universal than commonly assumed. Plath's poetry remains some of the most beloved and acclaimed work of the 20th century, challenging its readers with the complexity of its allusions, metaphors, and images, as well as startling and disrupting readers with the force of its insight, self-awareness, and

psychological penetration. *Ariel*, published posthumously in 1965, deals with the very personal issues of suicide, sex, her children, and, most dramatically, her complicated relationship with her deceased father. Poems like "*Daddy*," "*Ariel*," and "*Lady Lazarus*" are stunning in their originality, wit, and brutality.

- Her poem "**Daddy**" has been reviewed and criticized by hundreds and hundreds of scholars, and is upheld as one of the best examples of confessional poetry. Addressed to her father, the poem contains references to the Holocaust but uses a sing-song rhythm that echoes the nursery rhymes of childhood:
 - *Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time--
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal*
- Her poem, "**Ariel**" depicts a woman riding her horse in the countryside, at the very break of dawn. It details the ecstasy and personal transformation that occurs through the experience.
- "**Lady Lazarus**" is a poem commonly understood to be about suicide. It is narrated by a woman, and mostly addressed to an unspecified person. The narrator begins by saying she has "done it again." Every ten years, she manages to commit this unnamed act. She considers herself a walking miracle with bright skin, her right foot a "paperweight," and her face as fine and featureless as a "Jew linen". She addresses an unspecified enemy, asking him to peel the napkin from her face, and inquiring whether he is terrified by the features he sees there. She assures him that her "sour breath" will vanish in a day.
- **Her poems fall in three distinct phases:**
Plath's **first phase of poetry** has been deemed her "juvenilia" phase. This term generally applies to the period around 1950 through 1955, just after the close of her twenty-third year, and refers to about 220 poems. They are not considered her best work and are often considered of interest only to scholars.

Many of these poems address the challenge of being a woman in a patriarchal society, especially in regard to creative pursuits. However, many others concern themselves with politics and more personal, psychological concerns. Some of the juvenilia poems were published in magazines, while others survive in typed copies, and yet Plath's husband Ted Hughes believed there could be many more yet to be uncovered.

- The **second phase of Plath's poetry** dates from between 1956 and late 1959/early 1960. This phase produced most of the poetry that would be published in her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*. Some of these poems began to take on a "confessional" aspect, no doubt through the influence of her teacher and mentor, Robert Lowell, whose *Life Studies* is considered the magnum opus of confessional poetry. The poems from this period explore imaginative dreamscapes, probe deep into the psyche, confront personal traumas, and allude to societal issues and ills. Critics lauded her cleverness, her technique, and her sympathetic but fastidious approach to her subjects. Most of the reviews were scholarly, however, and often paternalistic; some encouraged Plath not to be too self-conscious in the writing.
- The **third phase of Plath's poetry** was written during the period from 1960 until her death in 1963. This period was one of intense personal and psychological turmoil for Plath, as both her marriage and mental state disintegrated even as she experienced a heightened level of creativity. The poems were dashed off quickly, but featured remarkable images, deep psychological insights, disturbing references to the Holocaust, and stunning experimentation. Many of these poems explored her relationship with and resentments towards her deceased father, and the poems that were written weeks or days before her death give insight into her tortured mental state.

W.D. Snodgrass

- W.D.Snodgrass's first collection of poetry, **Heart's Needle**, is a highly autobiographical book, which sensitively describes the loss of his daughter in a divorce. It won the **Pulitzer Prize** in poetry and marks the beginning of

the Confessional mode of poetry, and it would influence such poets as Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and his teachers Lowell and John Berryman.

- He authored more than 30 books of poetry, criticism, and translations, while teaching at several colleges for 40 years. Snodgrass was considered one of the central figures of the Confessional mode, even though he disliked the term and did not regard his work as such.
- “Like other confessional poets, Snodgrass is at pains to reveal the repressed, violent feelings that often lurk beneath the seemingly placid surface of everyday life,” David McDuff observes in *Stand*. The style was imitated and, in some cases, surpassed by other poets.
- However, later works by Snodgrass show him widening his vision to apply the lessons of self-examination to the problems of 20th-century Western culture. His poems also present an inclusiveness of detail and variety of technique aimed to impact the reader’s subconscious as well as conscious mind.

John Berryman

- Another confessional poet of this generation was **John Berryman**. His major work was *The Dream Songs*, which consists of 385 poems about a character named Henry and his friend Mr. Bones. Many of the poems contain elements of Berryman's own life and traumas, such as his father's suicide. Below is an excerpt from "Dream Song 1":

*All the world like a woolen lover
once did seem on Henry's side.
Then came a departure.
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or
ought.
I don't see how Henry, pried
open for all the world to see, survived.*

Indian Confessional Poet: Kamala Das

- In Indian writing in English, we have to mention **Kamala Das** (1934-2009), the prolific Indian woman writer of the twentieth century who explicated confessional elements in her poetry. Das borrows this style of writing from her contemporary American writers and employs it as a means of articulation, negotiation and resistance through projecting the self.
- She uses confessional elements combine a range of themes including familial issues, physical and mental illnesses, despondence, addiction, and articulating on those topics such as body and sexuality, which were seen as taboos. Her open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt, infused her writing with power and she got hope after freedom, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation.

Her important confessional poems are:

- **The Sirens**
- **Summer in Calcutta**
- **The Descendants**
- **The Old Playhouse and Other Poems**
- **The Stranger Time**
- **Tonight, This Savage Rite (with Pritish Nandy)**
- **Collected Poems**
- **The Annamalai Poems**
- **Only the Soul Knows How to Sing**

CONCLUSION:

- The confessional poets have garnered a lot of critical interest, but there is a tendency to conflate their art and lives too fully - the usage of a personal pronoun in their work is not an unequivocal invitation to assume that the subject of the poem is always the poet. Critic Mary A. Murphy writes about the poets that "their poems are not open wounds on the page.

- Their work is a crafted response to their overwhelming emotional impulses. They use the sharply defined sensory prompts and the everyday language of the common person learned from the imagist school. The profound intimacy of the poetry demands such an accessibility."
- While the tales of personal tragedies might be the most fascinating aspect of their work for many readers, the confessional poets were also masters of their craft. Plath is well understood as a reflection of both sides of the debate.
- Thus, we can say that the confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s pioneered a type of writing that forever changed the landscape of American poetry. The tradition of confessional poetry has been a major influence on generations of writers and continues to this day.

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