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Confessional poetry / Sylvia Plath

Confessional poetry is an expression of personality and never escape from it. The personal life ofthe poet under the stress of psychological crisis, sex, family life, private humiliation and psychological state of mind are the major concerns in this kind of poetry. The expression of personal pain has been regarded as the hallmark of confessional poetry. It chiefly deals with personal experiences, trauma, depression, psychological break-down and the relationships articulated through a new kind of rhythm and mode of expression. Psychoanalysis acts both as a means of self-analysis and as a literacy device. It enables consideration of the poet not only in terms of the straightforward narration of his/her life, but also in relation to his/her poetic language and the process of creativity. Hence, in order to study the confessional poetry psychoanalytic literary approach objectively plays a significant role.

The phrase "confessional poetry" flourished in America in the twentieth century with the poetic articulations of Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton etc. It burst into common usage in September of 1959, when the critic M.L. Rosenthal coined it in his review of Robert Lowell's Life Studies in the Nation. The book, which contained poems thatunsparingly detailed Lowell's experiences of marital strife, generational struggle, and mental illness, marked a dramatic turn in his career. Lowell, Rosenthal claimed that confessional poetry "removes the mask" that previous poets had worn when writing about their own lives. The poemsin *Life Studies* felt like a "series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-boundnot to reveal." Rosenthal used this term to describe a new poetry which, he believed, was therapeutic and autobiographical as it puts the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such away as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization" (Rosenthal, 1985, p. 69). „I" or the first person narrative voice in the confessional poetry is the poet himself/herself who confesses his/her repressed feelings to the reader.

The sociopolitical atmosphere of the late 1950s and 1960s in America was marked by the aftermaths of World War II and its contrasting characteristics. On the one hand those were the years of Cold War, constant threat of nuclear weapons, the spread of anticommunism andeconomic uncertainty, but on the other technological development, commercialism, visual media and pop culture. Under these circumstances the period was marked by anxiety and retreatment to family and home. Nearly two-thirds of white US citizens moved to suburbs causing one of the biggest cultural shifts in America and shaping the new domestic ideology that caused many issuesconcerning gender roles. Women were especially affected by those new values where family and home were deemed their only preoccupations

and started to express their frustrations with the history of oppression louder than ever before. The feminist movement, along with the emergence of popular psychology and the need of self-improvement, helped in shaping the nation`s and people`s sense of identity, mostly expressed through countercultural and literary movements. Those postmodernist literary movements reacting to the social changes were The Beats, The BlackMountain Poets, Black Arts, The New York School, as well as Confessional Poets. This sociopolitical context shaped the Confessional poetry regarding its feminist and antiwar content, combining personal themes with the social ones as well as the criticism of the Cold War and its desire to keep the realms of politics and art separate.

In most confessional poetry, the "direct" treatment of self as subject matter is taken literally and seriously. Most confessional poets believe that the poet's actual life experience is the only proper (and knowable) subject of poetry. In the 1950s and 1960s, decades saturated with New Criticism dictates that the poet and "speaker" of a poem were never coincident, confessional poets insisted otherwise. Their breaches in poetic and social decorum were linked. According to scholar Deborah Nelson, Lowell's "innovation was to make himself … available, not as the abstract and universal poet but as a particular person in a particular place and time." Thus, confessionalism became a process of therapy in which a patient recounted and recalled his or her past to get rid of it. From religion and psychiatry, the practice of confession crept into modern literature. Most of Anne Sexton‟s poetry concentrates on her deeply personal feelings especially anguish. As she told Beatrice Berg that her writing began, in fact, as therapy.

Confessional poetry is a narrative construction of self in language. As Stephen Crites, states: "The self is a kind of aesthetic construct, recollected in and with the life of experience in narrative fashion" (106). In addition, the narrative construction of self is rhetorical in the sense
that those narratives have to be "convincing," both to self and others, to be successful. Thus, thenarrative selves created in confessional poetry (and therapy) also can be seen as rhetorical constructs, ethos that seek to persuade both writer and reader (or patient and therapist) of the validity and veracity of its narrative construction. in most confessional poetry, the ethos that is created is one of the poet as suffering artist. Walter Fisher understands narrative validity in confessional poetry as the "probability" or coherence of the narrative. Both the probability and fidelity of the narrative configuration of experience and self can be understood to create the "ethical appeal" in confessional poetry that is necessary for persuasion and thus healing.

One of the most well-known poems by a confessional poet is "Daddy" by **Sylvia Plath**. 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 diedbefore I had time--/ Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,*

Confessional poetry written by Sylvia Plath recognised as stunningly original in its anger, its vivid colours, and its depiction of energy, and the life juxtaposed to the seductive lure of despair,emptiness, and darkness. Her poetry reveals the intimate moments of her life. When Sylvia Plath lost her father, Otto Plath at the young age of eight, it meant an unforgettable betrayal for her all effort. It seems that her father‟s death was exactly the point when she started writingto fill her empty ego. It became her obsession, her need. Psychoanalysis helps to study Electra complex of Plath in her poem Daddy. This poem deals with her own unresolved Electra complex of which stemmed from the anger and resentment the author felt for the father who has passed away when she was eight years old. It is written at the difficult time when her husbanddivorced her and left her with painful feelings of emotional abandonment. Plath displays this unresolved Electra complex when she describes her father to be:

I never could talk to you.

The tongue struck in my jaw.

It struck in a barb wire

snare.Ich, ich, ich, ich,

(“Daddy” 24-30)

Jill Scott argued that Plath „demonstrates this willingness to go the extreme lengths to falsify the image of the father, as if it might provide some relief no matter how tentative‟ (Scott, 2005,p. 153). She believes that this stems from survival: the innate will of the daughter to gain control over the image of her father, and of patriarchal oppression. As per the psychologists views thepoetry is the creative work which has its origin from imagination. Imagination stands for the repressed or hidden thoughts of the mind.

Plath is more Lacanian in her approach of confessionalism. Unlike Freud, the French theorist Jacques Lacan focuses on language and issues related to it. His famous formulation about unconscious is that „the unconscious is structured like a language‟ (Lacan, 1977, p. 203). For him, language structures not only our conscious social life, but our unconscious life as well. By studying a subject‟s

dreams and speech patterns, one can illuminate features of the split in the subject‟s imaginary register. Lacan‟s notion of desire is in some way different from that of Freud. The desire remains in the unconscious, unfulfilled and unsatisfied because that biological demand does not satisfy the desire. It is through substitution, through an endless metonymic chain of language, that the subject seeks to evoke the object of desire. Her collections of poems, Ariel published after her death, depict the failure of a troubled marriage. The poems in *Ariel* have speakers who have the uncompromising intensity of Electra, on whom she wrote an early poem. Her lines "Dying is an art, like everything else"

In "Lady Lazarus" Plath had created a poem of chilling imageries, morbidity and feminist triumph."I do it so it feels like hell/ I do it so it feels real. /I guess you could say I've a call" (245). In the poem, she talks about her suicide attempt. The obsession with dying thus becomes a part of her writings and poems. "Lady Lazarus" triumphs over patriarchy by refusing to allow further commodification and objectification of her. The" red hair" and "eat men like air" signifies a new hope and zeal with which lady Lazarus /Plath wishes to reclaim herself: *I have done it again./ One year in every ten / I manage it"* Lady Lazarus' is a complex and gloomy poem, widely regarded as one of Plath's best poems, and has received a great deal of critical attention. It's widely assumed that it's a reflection of Plath's suicidal attempts and inclinations. Plath, using the themes of death and resurrection, delivers a dark glimpse into the suicidal mentality, as well as a critique of society's perverted fetish with others' pain and suffering and the agony of being a woman in a patriarchal society. The title of the poem is a biblical reference to Lazarus, a man Jesus brought back from the dead. She compares herself to him, telling the reader that she has died several times and that she is dead as the poem begins. The speaker, however, is repeatedly restored back to life. Lazarus' resurrection was a pleasant event for him, as resurrections generally are. However, the narrator defies expectations by stating that it is her wish to die. As a result, the speaker perceives the actions of people who want to help her whether loved ones or doctors as selfish, dominating activities carried out against her desires. The narrator says that dying is an art and she excels at it. She considers it a theatrical performance and people gather to watch her do it while munching on peanuts. It almost seems like she's putting on the "act" of her third death in a circus or carnival in front of these people. The poem is a scathing indictment of society's sick infatuation with other people's misery. Her pain and suffering are just foddered for the amusement of the "peanut- crunching crowd" or 'popcorn-munching crowd' in modern terms.

Lady Lazarus' is a dramatic monologue which echoes and parodies 'The Love Song of J. AIfred Prufrock'. The title alludes, of course, not only to the biblical story of Lazarus but also to Prufrock'slines*: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, | Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all*'. Like Eliot, Plath uses clothing as a metaphor for rhetoric: the 'veil' or 'garment' of style. By contrast with Eliot's tentative hesitations, obliquities, and evasions of direct statement, however, Plath's poem professes to 'tell all'. Lady Lazarus deploys a patently alienated and manufactured language,in which the shock tactic, the easy effect, reign supreme. Her rhetoric is one of direct statement ('Ihave done it again'), of brutal Americanisms ('trash', 'shoves', 'the big strip tease', 'I do it so it feelslike hell', 'knocks me out') 'Lady Lazarus' is a poem of a parodizing technique while simultaneouslyadvertising themselves. The poet who reveals her suffering plays to an audience, or 'peanut- crunching crowd'; her miraculous rebirths are governed by the logic of the commodity. Prufrock is verbally overdressed but feels emotionally naked and exposed, representing himself as crucifiedbefore the gaze of the vulgar mass. Lady Lazarus, on the other hand, incarnates the 'holy prostitution of the soul in the experience of being part of a crowd; emotional nakedness is itself revealed as a masquerade. '

Lady Lazarus stages the spectacle of herself, assuming the familiar threefold appearence of actress, prostitute, and mechanical woman. The proliferation of intertextual ironies also affects theconcluding transformation of 'Lady Lazarus' into the phoenix-like, man-eating demon, who rises 'out of the ash' with her 'red hair'. This echoes Coleridge's description of the possessed poet in 'Kubla Kahn': 'And all should cry Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!' The woman's hair, a privileged fetish-object of male fantasy, becomes at once a badge of daemonic apperance and a flag of vengeance. What the poem sarcastically 'confesses', through its collage offragments of 'high' and 'low' culture, is a commodity status no longer veiled by the aura of the sacred. Lyric inwardness is 'prostituted' to the sensationalism of 'true confession'. The poet can nolonger cherish the illusion of withdrawing into a pure, uncontaminated private space, whose immunity from larger historical conflicts is guaranteed by the 'auratic' woman. For Plath the female body, far from serving as expiation metaphor for the ravages of modernity, itself becomes a sign whose cultural meanings are in crisis.

Confessional poetry of Plath left an indelible mark on both Confessional and feminist literature bringing to the forefront two of the biggest struggles in the postmodernist era being mentally ill orbeing a woman, but more importantly being both. It is worth mentioning that the long history of Confession has led to forming a distinct poetic genre that uses the rhetorical aspect of language asa means of therapy or as a medium of working through trauma. Hence; it is essentially the contentand technique that differentiate confessional styles from the preceding ones.