

Unconventional Themes in the Confessional Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell

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Abstract

The 20th Century witnessed terrible holocausts in the form of the Great Depression (1929-39), World War II (1939-45), Cold War (1945-89), these were the happenings which affected the whole world and left people disillusioned and hopeless. The people faced Economic; Social, Psychological and Spiritual crisis which shook the very foundation of the world and America was not left untouched. A new form of poetry called as "Confessional Poetry" came into existence, when unconventional themes became very popular and traditional themes lost their relevance. It was the modernist era which was marked with a note of realism. It was

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partially a reaction against the "Pseudo-romanticism". The proposed paper is an attempt to explore the unconventional themes in poetry of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell.

American poetry arose as the efforts of colonists to add their voices and perceptions to English poetry in 17th century, before the unification of the thirteen colonies, their poetic works basically relied on Contemporary British models of form, diction and theme. But in 19th and 20th century, a distinctive poetry begun to emerge and American poets made a mark in the English-Language *avante – garde*. The 20th century is called as the "American Century" by a few historians. America followed an isolationist policy but in 20th century it entered into the world politics.

The scientific, technological and industrial developments and elite cosmopolitanism in the modern era of globalization has further worsened the situation. The civilization advanced but poetry declined. At the beginning of 20th century no great poetry was written. Certain Literary movements like symbolism, imagism, classicism, surrealism, formalism, modernism and post-modernism etc. also influenced the poets to a significant extent. Traditional verse forms and the paraphrasable content of poetry were rejected. Lot of experimentation and innovation is seen in the modern poetry. Consequently, a new poetry characterized by free-verse, missing syntax, recondite allusions, obscurity and ambiguity became excessively popular.

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Poets have broken away from the tradition completely; they felt that poetry should also change with changing time. Gone are the days when it was believed that the job of the poets was to create 'beauty'. T.S. Eliot offers a representative view. He writes "The essential advantage of a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal. It is to be able to see beneath both the beauty and ugliness: to see the boredom and the horror and the glory."

The disappearance of religious faith has brought disillusionment into the lives of people. "God is in the heaven" (T.S.Eliot) this kind of optimism became the thing of past. Another poet J.Houseman refers to the supreme power in the most blasphemous phrase: "Whatever brute or blackguard made the world"(Houseman; 1978:245). Thomas Hardy also in his greatest work. "The Dynasts" expresses his disbelief in God and his concept of deteriorationism. T.S. Eliot too was quite religious man but his attitude towards life as expressed in his classic poem "The Wasteland" is far from optimism. To quote a few lines from the poem:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaving together
Headpiece filled with straw, Alas!
Our dried voices when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless

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As wind in the dry grass

(T.S.Eliot, *The Wasteland*, 1922)

The Modern age is rightly called as "the age of anxiety". In spite of our material prosperity our lives are full of tension, gloom, disillusionment and disappointment. But the pessimism of 20th century is not of the nature the stylized melancholy of Shelly or Keats; it is more intellectual and impersonal.

As a result of all these factors and the searching and unflinching realism the poets were face to face with repulsive facts which scandalized the "goody-goody" Victorianism, Pastoralism, Romanticism are the things of irretrievable past. In general the poetry in cotemporary era has been moving out of the mainstream and some "unpoetic" themes such as. Prostitution, sexual guilt, alcoholism, confinement in mental hospital, hatred for parents, failed relationship, death, suicide, disease etc.became popular.

This paper is an attempt to explore the varied unconventional themes employed in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell. They both are called as the pioneers of "confessional poetry". Sylvia Plath is an American poet, novelist and a short story writer. She is best known for her collection, *The Collossus and Other Poems*(1960) and *Ariel*(1965) as well as *The Bell Jar*, a semi-autobiographical novel which was published shortly after her death in 1963.And Robert Lowell was also an American poet, born on

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March 1, 1917 and died on September 12, 1972. He is best known for his book *Life Studies* which has won the 1960 National Book Award and “ featured a new emphasis on intense, uninhibited discussion of personal, family, and psychological struggles”, and he was an important figure in the *Confessional poetry movement*.

This form of poetry came into existence around the mid twentieth-century, when a lot of radical and sudden changes which gradually made their way into the very vitals of literature. Eliot’s “theory of impersonality” no longer seemed to be the divine force which the poets were required to follow. It fell into its proper place and came to be regarded just a theory and nothing else. From the impersonal mode there came a shift towards the personal mode; from the “outer waste land to the wasteland within” and from global themes to personal themes. They were mainly interested in exploring their own experiences as subject matter, glorifying the personal and the private expressing their innermost secrets aloud for all to hear. They uncompromisingly expressed their own personality in poetic form.

M.L. Rosenthal defined this form of poetry as that in which “the private life of the poet, especially under stress of psychological crisis becomes a major force. (Rosenthal, 1970:221). The word “confession” has a lot many connotations. It is a private utterance, an admission made in church in order to obtain absolution. Thus; it is a private utterance, an

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admission of lapses, wrong-doings, and feelings one would not normally express in public. The confessional poetry has its firm roots in the poet's biography. The poet's self is the pivot around which his world resolves. It is an expression of personality, believing the poet's individuality to be the first reality that must be reckoned with. Only after one has come to terms with one's true self one can turn to look at the outside world. So the first task of the poet is to look at the turbulence within the self and analyze the chaotic mass of thoughts and feelings, and come to terms with them.

"....She cooks her brew in life threatening kitchen" this epilogue by Adil Jussawala fits Sylvia Plath. Both Plath and Lowell have spoken of personal failures for instance in establishing meaningful relationship with others. Plath was depressed for most of her adult life and it was Robert Lowell who encouraged her to write her experiences. They both have charted their failures, anxieties and mental traumas which they faced in their personal lives.

Robert Lowell, in the poem "Man and Wife" (*Life Studies*, 1959) speaks of the failure of marriage. The fault lies somewhere in the inability to communicate with his wife. Another poem in the same collection significantly entitled "To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage" where the husband:

Drops his disputes,
And hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes,
Free-lancing along the razor's edge. (6-9)

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Lowell locates the causes of the breakdown of communication within the psyche. He is concerned with pinpointing the exact nature of such an inadequacy. He speaks of failure not only in marriage and sexual relationship but also in filial duties. In the poem "Home after Three Months Away" he mentions his daughter and again there is a failure of communication which becomes the root cause of the tension between the father and daughter. Lowell feels that he has failed somewhere as a father. This kind of traumatic silence in the relationships with his wife and daughter created mental trauma and guilt. And once again, the reason lies within mental collapse that he suffered is the visible divider keeping him away from the child. There is desire, there is love, but there is at the same time a crippling force that nullifies all positive efforts towards a rapport with others. And this is the major issue faced Lowell's technique is the reverse of Eliot's, he does not objectify experience. On the contrary, he portrays it as naked, raw, and elemental.

During 1967 and 1968 he wrote a verse journal, published as *Notebook (1967-68)* written in blank verse. In his "Afterthought" "at the end of *Notebook* Lowell explained that:

This is not my diary, my confession, not a puritan's too literal pornographic honesty, I am glad to share private embarrassment, and triumph. The time is a summer, an autumn, a spring, another summer. My plot rolls with the seasons. The poems are inspired by impulse (1976:13).

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He reflects on his life, his past relationship, and his own morality. Again in his best known collection *Day by Day* (1977) the poem entitled “Epilogue”, in which he reflects upon the “confessional school of poetry” writes:

But sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
Seems a snapshot,
Lurid,rapid,garish,grouped,
Heightened from life,
Yet paralyzed by fact.

All’s misalliance

Yet why not say what happened (1977, 58-66)

His style lacks “objective correlative”. Emotion, as Eliot sees it, must be expressed through a suitable objective correlative, an external object becomes symbolic of the emotion to be conveyed. But Robert Lowell would rather speak of his experience directly. He also speaks of a strained relationship with his father and so do Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Their attitude vacillates between adoration and abhorrence.

The theme of mental collapse, which is partly the result of parental loss, is also dealt with by all the confessional writers. It is the absence of the father that shaped many of their poems. Sylvia Plath lost her father when she was eight years old. Her father was very strict and had an authoritarian attitude. Her poems record her reaction to this irreparable loss.

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The reaction takes on many forms: sometimes the poet seems to accept it with resignation whereas on other occasions she rages against the injustice of having to lose a parent. There is a sense of shock and betrayal, an occasional refusal to come to terms with the reality of death. Loss of the father is an autobiographical subject but she tries to impart a universal applicability to the experience through the use of myth. The father is visualized as a Greek God as in the poem titled "Full Fathom Five". She evokes the famous Electra myth to describe the strained relationship between herself and her father. She creates a figurative image of her father, using many metaphors to describe her relationship with him. She writes:

You do not do, you do not do
Anymore, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe. (*Daddy*)

(*Plath.s. 1962 :1-5*)

He is like a "black shoe" that she had to live in, like a statue that stretches across the United States; like God; like a Nazi; like a Swastika; and finally like vampire. The poem throws a good deal of light on emotional complexities and the existence of opposing forces within one's psyche. It also talks the good and the bad, the gentle and the harsh, the Jew and the Nazi. The opposing forces within the self do not owe their origin to family history: they are ingrained in human nature. As

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Plath believes that poetry, in its most powerful form, is a “ritualistic gesture “and it has a “therapeutic and cathartic” in effect.

Another very significant theme is suicidal attempt. She was depressed for most of her adult life. She tried to take her life through various means such as overdose of pills and hanging herself. Though she made several attempts but kept working throughout her depressive phases of life. Her depression had worsened and became excessively severe “marked by constant agitation, suicidal thoughts and inability to cope with daily life”(Robert, Phillips,1973:27) She constantly suffered with insomnia and medication to induce sleep proved very heavy on her mental and physical health.

Some great poetry was produced during her depressive phases of life. Sylvia Plath in her most famous poem “Lady Lazarus” talks about her fascination with the idea of death. This poem presents a terror with self. She went through inner crises many a times in her life and she attempted to commit suicide many a times. Plath’s first suicide attempt was almost successful, but she was discovered in the nick of time, hospitalized and saved. The scars, physical and psychological, were to remain forever. This is a passion she shared with her friend, the poet Anne Sexton who admits that they often talked about dying. She writes: “We talked death with burnt-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moth to an electric bulb. Sucking on it”. She has immortalized their

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camaraderie in her famous poem, "Wanting to Die" which explains her morbid attraction of death:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.

I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage,

Then the most unnamable lust returns...

(*The Collossus and Other Poems*, 1960:45)

The lust is the self-destructive passion, the desire to annihilate oneself, to return to an inanimate state. The desire behind such poetry is the urge to shock. This desire to shock is manifested in the use of unconventional themes, outspoken language, and expressions of uncontained fury. All this requires courage and it is courage that the confessional poets lay claim to: the courage to come face to face with reality, no matter what the consequences and no matter how painful the experience. Dealing with innermost recesses of the mind, it is but natural that these poets show the influence of psychoanalytical theories. Confessional poetry has a lot in common with the dramatic monologue and explored the labyrinths of mind, diving into the motives and intentions.

In another very famous poem she writes:

And I am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red(*Ariel*, October, 1962:12)

The poetry in this collection marks a clear departure from her earlier poetry into more personal domain. Robert

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Lowell's poetry deeply impacted her psyche and was the major cause for this shift in the attitude.

So to conclude, i would assert that there were a lot many similarities between the two poets, such as both of them had notable Jewish ancestors, both faced the acute pain of failed relationship, lost dear one's Sylvia Plath in 1962 in an exclusive interview with Peter Orr, and stated that "I have been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* ,this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly a taboo. Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much". This way unlike Lowell ,Sylvia Plath also gave a voice to very deep, personal and intense emotions.

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