



Confessional Mode in the Selected Poems of Sylvia Plath

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Introduction to Confessional Poetry

Romantic poets often opted for a subjectivist stance toward their poetry. The ideas, feelings, and perceptions of the poet played an integral part in their writing. Similarly, several twentieth-century poets also retained the subjectivist stance. The way poets used their personal life in their poetry continued to change both in content and expression. The Disclosure movement in the 1950s also influenced other poets, leading to the growth of new movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

The confessional poetry being studied in India today is, despite only comparatively recent attention by Indian poets, a particular phase of Romantic poetry and derives as much from the Disclosure movement of the 1950s as from the subjectivism of the Romantic poets two centuries earlier. These poems draw on the poet's personal life in a way that deliberately differentiates them from much of the personal poetry of the past.

Biographical Background of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath's poetry is a paradigmatic example of the confessional mode, which foregrounds the intimate and often painful aspects of an individual life. Her verse, especially from the final years of her life, articulates experiences of loss, a faltering marriage, and deepening psychological distress. For Plath, a life filled with twists and tragedies finds parallel expression in poems that also reflect on the trials of motherhood and the challenges of forging a creative identity (Javier Meimije Ruiz, 2016). A network of sources—including interviews, the Journals edited by Ted Hughes, and extensive correspondence—provides insight into the perception of her work as a kind of literary autobiography. Yet such a characterization, while partially accurate, conveys an insufficient understanding of the craft at work. The poems repeatedly foreground a tension between personal sincerity and artistic construction: while her poetry demonstrates a high degree of autobiographical involvement, its principal function is not to replicate personal experience, but to forge a shared psychological space in which such experience, though deeply felt and tangible, becomes available to a communal audience (Daly, 2017). Plath's confessional mode deliberately provokes the reader into a reciprocal act of memory and imagination that reaches beyond her own circumstances to the realm of solitary mortality.

As a poet, Plath is both intensely personal and formally exacting. The confessional speaker typically addresses an individual "you" or an intimate circle rather than a generic public, initiating conversation and inviting empathy. Plath's later

work especially relies on an ordinary, conversational diction that grants the poems a deceptive directness, drawing the reader inside the healing ritual that the poetry seeks to enact (J. Feuerstein, 2012). At the same time, each text displays a strong consciousness of poetic form and control. The implication is that genuine speaking, rather than escaping technical considerations, takes place within strict boundaries established by "artifice": where the confessional poet is normally assumed to disable self-censorship, Plath performs a kind of censorship held in creative tension with emotional candor. The poems are not unmediated, spontaneous disclosures, but the products of imaginative exploration and rhythmic refinement. This perspective, supported by biographies documenting artistic development, alters the critical consensus. Whereas confessional writing is often defined as the free expression of feeling, Plath's confronts far more explicit notions of craft and design; its artistic shape is closely linked to the interaction of composition and revelation. In consequence, the speaker's private anguish is increasingly dramatized and generalized, subsumed within a wider process of self-examination and transformation that grants each poem narrative progression. The strong bias toward closure marks a critical departure from the open-ended rapture that is another standard confessional characteristic.

Characteristics of Confessional Poetry

Confessional poetry yields a startling intimacy, beginning with an acknowledgement of the reader. The poet thus calls attention to the poetic act, signaling that, rather than an impersonal objective, the point of the poem is the expression of

the self. The nature of this expression is both the immediate trauma and the memory of personal trauma from the past. Broadly speaking, the voice in confessional poetry is a woman's, speaking, in particular, of feminine suffering, illness – especially mental illness – and identity.

As evidenced in the three major autobiographical works, Plath's literary engagement with selfhood is particularly intense, as she seeks an answer to the fundamental question: Who am I? The scrutiny is relentless, a probing into the deepest recesses of identity and mental stability. This self-examination, as crisis and struggle, together with the imagery it evokes, is so richly developed in selected poems of Plath. Thus *Lady Lazarus* and *Daddy*, and *The Bell Jar*, her sole fictional work, are among the few which seem almost necessary to any comprehension of Plath's confessional courage and aesthetic achievement.

Themes of Identity and Self-Exploration

Many poems in *Ariel*, such as "Words Heard, by Accident, over the Phone" and "Cut," are closely linked to Plath's life and struggles, yet they also achieve a creative distance that allows them to resonate emotionally with readers. In "Words Heard, by Accident, over the Phone," Plath recounts the shock of hearing her husband's lover request him by name, using imagery that conveys a sense of contamination and an impossible desire to cleanse the household of the intrusion; the poem expresses a pervasive hopelessness about eradicating this stain, with the speaker's voice closely aligned with Plath's own (Daly, 2017). "Mirror," arguably one of Plath's most famed poems, confronts themes of mental illness, womanhood, and aging through the metaphor of a mirror speaking with unflinching honesty to a woman over time; the poem's vivid imagery—likening the mirror to a lake—and its unsentimental tone culminate in an ode to self-awareness and emotional transparency, demonstrating how personal reflection can empower individuals to embrace both truth and melancholy (Laporte, 2019). The vehemence attached to these themes is partly attributable to the psychological trauma Plath endured throughout her life, which defines many of her poem's intensely introspective insights into selfhood (J. Feuerstein, 2012).

The Role of Mental Health in Plath's Work

Mental health is an enduring concern that forms the subtext for much of Plath's poetry, shaping both her subject matter and poetic voice. Her themes of identity and the self therefore coincide with struggles to understand internal and external relationships, which in turn reflect her psychological state.

Plath's oscillation between an internal world and an outer reality emerges repeatedly in her work; the struggle between the two is a constant challenge. In "Lady Lazarus" (1962), the violence

and blood of trauma become a potent theatrical spectacle (J. Feuerstein, 2012); in "Daddy" (1962), the death of the father and the Holocaust interlace and disrupt the present tense.

The confessional mode uniquely manifests through mental illness in Plath's poetry. Her late poems transmit the "accelerating desperation" of a mind caught in violent extremes, swinging uncontrollably from implicit threat or self-hatred at one moment to euphoria or adrenaline at the next. These oscillations convey the subjective experience of psychiatric disturbance as much as content alone could do.

Imagery and Symbolism in Selected Poems

Imagery and symbolism in Plath's poetry are particularly evocative. *Lady Lazarus* is a prominent image, as it first appears in the poem of the same title and occurs repeatedly in many others (J. Feuerstein, 2012). The archetype of the survivor is also a key motif and is associated with such poems as "Mr. & Mrs. Maple;" "Tulips," in which meaning is attached to survival; "Medallion," where the poet wills her experience to death; "Elm," which wrestles with the mind/body conflict; and "Fever 103°," where the concept of death reveals a positive sense of self (Daly, 2017). Diane Middlebrook describes the power of these images: A picture of her lifelong struggle with reality is embodied in the resurrected woman, the lady Lazarus, who is presented both as a twenty-seven-year-old in the early 1960s and as an ancient, mythic creature. Likewise, various kinds of power—sexual, political, mystical—are embodied in the figure of her father, who appears alternately as a Nazi dictator, a vampire, and a god-king from the Bronze Age. Settings like the beacon of "his black hair," the "swastika," and the Iron Cross recur with enough frequency to become symbolic in themselves. Various household objects take on symbolic significance in Plath's poetry. These objects help continually remind the reader of the domestic circumstances at the core of Plath's writing. They reinforce the significance of marriage and motherhood throughout the poems and also emphasize aspects of Plath's artistic, academic, and personal life that surface repeatedly. Ironic interpretations of these domestic objects provide further insight into the plight of Plath's speaker.

Analysis of 'Lady Lazarus'

"Lady Lazarus" explores the difficulty of articulating a poetic subject's sense of self in confessional poetry. The poem represents a recovery of an identity lost in a humiliating, unendurable, and ineffable experience of historical trauma such as the Holocaust. It also fosters an historical commentary that reaches beyond its author's own experience. The poem dramatizes the performance of a suicidal artist who views self-destruction as an art form capable of enacting a personal rebirth. The speaker

insists that dying is an art she performs exceptionally well; her “deaths” are cyclical and generative, carried out with “a kind of walking miracle” and a proclamation of “I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (Boswell, 2008). “Lady Lazarus” engages repeatedly with the Holocaust as metaphor in order to express an intense frustration with the potential for personal traumatic experience to be communicated directly through poetry. The poem parodies the crass sensationalism of the Holocaust industry and the representation of women as “deathly or demonic” in a predominantly male poetic tradition (Paula Currás Prada, 2018). A satire of the speaker’s depressive state turns suicide into a theatrical performance: the speaker assumes a role, constructing a counterfeit self that pretends to be alive despite feeling inwardly dead. The claim “This is Number Three” anticipates Plath’s final suicide attempt, while the themes of performance and voyeurism critique readers captivated by her personal life.

Analysis of 'Daddy'

In Plath’s anthology *Ariel*, the poem “Daddy” is taken from the perspective of a young girl who has been repeatedly stifled by her tyrannical father—a lustful Nazi figure who has “bitten off her tongue” (Boswell, 2008). When the father returns to the speaker’s life in the form of a lover, she explains that she becomes “a Jew...chopped up in the back of the head,” signifying that her choice in lover continues the cycle of abuse and victimisation. Building on the Romantic model of poetry as a vessel for identity, the poem utilizes confessional modes to explore multiple distinct but similarly damaging father-daughter relationships and the ongoing impact of familial abuse on the speaker’s sense of self and agency (Daly, 2017). As such, “Daddy” foregrounds the dependent nature of identity as articulated through the confessional mode.

Analysis of 'The Bell Jar'

Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* chronicles the struggles of a young woman, Esther Greenwood, who cloaks her descent into madness in feigned cleverness. It speaks in the confessional mode of intense private experience yet manages to be simultaneously a quintessentially public event—the example par excellence of modern life at its most achingly isolated and authentic. The bell jar of the title is a kind of psychic glass bubble—a metaphor for the “panoply of masks” Esther deploys of one sort or another throughout the book to conceal or contain a vaulting internal turmoil. According to genealogies of Madness and literature, Esther’s posturing is perfunctory, superficial, expendable, a particularly agonized example of the most ancient and ubiquitous problem of anyone who would pronounce on madness. The problem is: what can be said about it? What can be said in it? Confessional

authors invariably stress their attempts to convey or articulate the incomprehensible, “to make some kind of linguistic sense from that which appeared to lack any” (J. Feuerstein, 2012). And this is precisely what Esther says she has not been able to do. As a record of plural selves locked in communication failure, a novel of schizophrenia as alienation, of profound identity loss, it represents an extreme case of the disjunction of self and reality in which the Confessional mode had no choice but to begin. Its story recounts a young woman’s growing estrangement from the Life she had previously been so earnestly pursuing, who, finding (or rather projecting) no one willing or able to receive the truths she carries, loses her bearings and drifts toward self-destruction with bleak and consuming entropy: “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am” (Daly, 2017).

The Influence of Personal Trauma

Conceived in the aftermath of World War II to describe poets who endeavored to encapsulate individual experience with unprecedented candor, confessional poetry became synonymous with the revelation of personal trauma and intimate detail (Daly, 2017). The term ‘confessional’ was also employed to denote the strain of Modernism that reclaimed selfhood: by representing and exploring the individual ‘I’ without recourse to archetype or other poetic conventions, confessional poetry gained notoriety during the 1950s as a mode with which to challenge literary tradition and authority. The convergence of these two influences—extreme intimacy and self-representation—bequeathed a mode expressive of post-war social outlook and personal hardship. Writers such as Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton frequently undermined the constraints implicit in the Modernist ‘I’ to address themselves within the context of family life, mental illness, and social discord. In an age that confronted the breakdown of established authority, the emergence of an extreme poetic self represented the ability—and willingness—to hold oneself accountable for one’s personal and social actions.

Plath's Use of Language and Style

Sylvia Plath’s poetry is marked by intimate mental anguish and brutally honest autobiography. *Lady Lazarus*, a dramatic and unconventional poet, in the true confessional mode, explores the identity of the individual, the anaesthetic experience, and loss. Becoming the victim, the necrophiliac, the spectator, and the accomplice to her own death, she is able to rise Phoenix-like and announce, in final mood of defiant immortality, “Yours is the Life / After the first death, / There is no other” (*Lady Lazarus*, 55–57). But death, the lover, the friend, the numbness which is rest, also hold an ambivalent fascination. The death instinct continues to preoccupy and punish. Sitting nowhere, neither here

nor there, The Bell Jar plunges the floundering mind, the suicidal spirit, into still lower depths.

Plath's work follows confessional poetry traits: major themes include death, suffering, anger, betrayal, depression, self-identity, autobiography, the roles of wife and mother, and mental illness. The darkest and often most powerful poems deal with her relationship with and obsession for her father. Daddy, one of her longest poems, is often cited as an extreme example of the confessional mode. It was written after Plath's suicide attempt and depicts the speaker's psychological struggle to overcome and escape her father's shadow. Plath's tone is likewise conversational and direct. She has been called the "high priestess of confessional poetry." Yet crucial differences exist between the work of Plath and the work of her male counterparts.

The Impact of Gender and Feminism

Numerous studies have shown the impact of gender and feminist issues on Plath's work, particularly through her exploration of female emotions and experiences widely repressed in patriarchal society. Her poetry emerged as a vehicle to express "fear, anger, despair, pelagian anguish, jealousy, and hatred," emotions largely silenced in the 1950s and 1960s (Paula Currás Prada, 2018). Estranged from her mother and unable to have children, Plath nevertheless probes femininity through various lenses, sidestepping clear definitions of female identity. Many of her poems become internal dialogues attempting to clarify and solidify the concept of womanhood within the confessional mode.

Confessional Mode and Public Perception

The confessional mode presents traumatic experience and personal identity in a manner that creates a testament to suffering (J. Feuerstein, 2012). The confessional poet speaks candidly, conversationally, and intimately, as though to a close friend, rather than a wide audience. Because Plath's articulation of identity is so stark, direct, and personal, the impact of her poetry often unsettles the reader. Her confessional mode consequently engenders the solipsism that the poem portrays, producing a disturbing yet communicative sense of subjective self-pity. While many of Plath's poems engage a community through shared experience and assumed complicity, the severity of the self-absorption in Poem 14 isolates the speaker, separating her from a social framework and preventing the transference of the poem beyond her own private condition. The public transference of private trauma and the gesture of outward communication remain important aspects of her confessional mode in the aftermath of the Bell Jar.

Comparative Analysis with Other Confessional Poets

Though a pioneer of confessional poetry, Plath's work eschews complete openness

characteristic of the mode. While poems like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" on their surface exhibit a confessional candor, they are filtered through poetic craft and a determined detachment, with speakers constructed as dramatic personae rather than unmediated self-projections (J. Feuerstein, 2012). The presence in later poems of ordinary spoken language might suggest a shift toward confession, but in Plath's hands it functions also to generate a driving intensity and to engage the audience in dialogue. Interpretation, then, must confront the differences between the biographical Plath and the poem's narrative voice, the extent and nature of the poet's direct disclosure, and the relation of each poem's particular message to the largermatic plot that organizes the work.

Robert Lowell

The term "Confessional poetry" was coined by critic M. L. Rosenthal in 1959, in response to the poetry of Robert Lowell. Lowell's **Life Studies** is generally regarded as the first confessional work and his early poetry influences poets such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Confessional poetry foregrounds the poet's psyche as a subject of interest and seeks to reveal the private facets of the poet's identity, exposing a personal world to the reader in a highly intimate form of expression. It is characterised by the subjective "I," the revelation of private experience, a concentration on family life, obsession with mind and memory, a focus on childhood, and an effort to examine religious and political agencies (Hili, 2019).

Anne Sexton

Many poets are described as confessional: Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, for example. Their writing is intimate and reliable: the speaker is not fictitious, but a real centre of identity with a history. Their poetry takes the form of just one sustained narrative of their own experience, exposing what would normally be off limits: a confession.

Anne Sexton's life almost mirrors that of Plath, and it is no surprise that the themes and concerns in their poetry parallel one another convincingly. Both poets' shared beliefs about society, identity, and their own place within that identity surface in their writing. Many of Sexton's poems echo Plath's confessional style in subject matter, driven by sexual identity, mental health, and intense trauma. Plath's explorations of herself and her own place in the universe are laid bare, and it is through this autobiographical scrutiny that Sexton's poetry draws its power.

Sexton does not shy away from the suffering of soul, the anguish of membership that women suffer, or the dissolution within the self. Her poems are told by a woman who instinctively senses that she is more than what she has merely been superficially made to be in her life. Sexton wants to

survive despite all torment and anguish: “I shall live in spite of myself.” She is a woman who can see through her own frailties and contradictions. It is precisely because her poems are so nakedly direct and her heart so nakedly exposed to the world that Sexton engenders much sympathy and admiration.

Reception of Plath's Poetry

It notes that modern poetry occupies a new space, abundant in both the of and reasons for confession. The content of confessional poetry has frequently sparked critical controversy because it relies on an intimate revelation that touches an immediate and personal chord for the reader. The confessional mode opened the door to the psychological, particularly as it relates to mental illness and the process of seeking help for it (J. Feuerstein, 2012). By setting a precedent of open acknowledgment of private sufferings, the confessional mode liberated the voices of numerous women writers who felt excluded from traditional literary discourse. Historically marginalized by forces such as scepticism and censorship, women were especially vulnerable to the loss of a poetic voice. Widening access to the confessional mode thus enabled a much-needed group of voices to speak through culture and literature in general. In addition, the confessional mode has shaped private and economic discourse in the academy. Plath's value as an academic subject therefore derives from her pioneering role in facilitating the expression of a formerly vulnerable and overlooked population (Daly, 2017). A contemporary example of confessional-mode poetry is Rachel Rose Belford's *Against Her Will* (Chicago Review, 2017). Other scholars on the confessional mode include Anne Penketh, Vincent Giroud, and Eleanor Dickinson.

Legacy of Sylvia Plath in Modern Poetry

The confessional mode inaugurated by Sylvia Plath continues to resonate in contemporary poetry, underpinning a significant revival of intense public subjectivity. Her influence is apparent in the reprise of vivid, boldly confrontational personal poems by both women and men. While Plath-sharing is frequently pointed to as symptomatic of the pervasiveness of prominence-seeking in the Internet era, she is more one of an extended line of long-expressive nineteenth- and twentieth-century precursors—including Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins—who likewise undertook a palpable performance of troublesome inwardness (J. Feuerstein, 2012).

The affinity with Dickinson, a lifelong spinster profoundly at odds with precepts of Victorian propriety, is especially strong; her deliberate withholding and canonical inaccessibility have culturally exported a dark sibyl-quality just as Plath's presence has in itself potentially acquired the imprimatur of orthodoxy. Whatever conformity has grown up around her concern with troubled

interiority—and in present-day offerings from social media posts and greeting cards to glossy magazines—Plath largely played an innovative role in providing articulated access to intimately personal experience, notably psychiatric illness, which remains underrepresented and largely denied in mainstream creative writing (Daly, 2017). In this respect, the notoriously clamorous young poet remains a vital voice.

Critical Perspectives on Confessional Poetry

Confessional poetry, emerging in the mid-twentieth century, carries distinct characteristics that can help define a group of poets and their work although it remains a limited mode rather than fully defining an entire canon or genre. The confessional poet speaks both candidly, conversationally, and intimately, as though to a close friend, rather than to a wide audience. This distinction is a highly important one; Plath's work certainly provides personal insight and personal experiences, but does not present them in such a way that they are free from a certain level of artifice or manipulation. Experiences are filtered through poetic craft and a determined level of detachment or separation from the poet herself through the numerous personae created within each work. The poems create a sense of speaking perhaps not to a specific individual or friend, but to a perceived audience or community that is meant to share and understand the experiences presented. While on the surface this may seem to indicate a shift towards a more confessional mode, the choice of an aural, more interpersonal diction carries additional implications; the intense, driving force of these works also allows the narrator to engage in a conversation with the audience. Considering the aspect of alienation becomes crucial when focusing on the ways in which the narrators place and present themselves in relation to others and the audience, a central concern of this approach. Each poem demonstrates a high awareness and attention to form and control; in the presentation of events and emotions, Plath displays considerable artistic and technical mastery, rather than yielding a complete “openness” dominating the confessional mode. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the degree of confession in these works, as it primarily relates to both the content of the poems and the manner in which the narrative and speaker are perceived. When reading Plath's poetry from a perspective not necessarily bound by the definition of confessional verse, critical analyses too often reduce the speaker to the poet herself, revealing personal events and emotions. Much criticism of Plath's material focuses on the role of death and the dramatic representations thereof. The concept of “initiation”, or rebirth through death, offers one framework for understanding her output. A conscious attention to plot further distinguishes Plath's corpus; rather than relying solely on personal

experiences, the poems often contain carefully constructed and purposeful plots driven more decisively by craft than by experience alone (J. Feuerstein, 2012).

Plath's Relevance in Contemporary Literature

Despite postmodern irony, Plath remains essential reference point in contemporary culture, relevant to twenty-first century poetic voices (J. Feuerstein, 2012). Of the writers who became authors during last quarter of twentieth century, Plath still considered most significant female poetic voice of latter twentieth century. Her work set template for blending therapy, art, trauma, and self-exploration through female perspective (Daly, 2017).

Conclusion

Confessional poetry originated in the mid-1950s during a period of shifting perceptions of the self and identity. "The form's principal concern was not politics, religion, or societal critique but rather the question of identity: how to secure, define, and protect it." Others describe the mode alternatively as "personal poetry contributed to a public form" or "personal disclosures" that reveal "private experience in energy-charged language." Born out of cultural feelings of lost individuality, confessional poetry aimed to "embody the individual perception in direct ways," setting itself apart from previous forms because "rather than creating masks or different personae, they [confessional poets] began to speak from a position which was unambiguously their own." Key confessional poets include Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath. Each poet implements the confessional mode uniquely. Plath displays "an intensely personal style" that emerged from "inner journaling and reclusive self-analysis" initiated "in the long centuries of the shadow." Her poetry probes the "real human soul in its existential loneliness," and she "grabs a peculiar voice of womanhood." Scriptural voice frequently appears, as in "Lady Lazarus." Her poetry stems "primarily from the condition of an unpublished woman – a flawed, scrappy, even angry woman," portraying "tentatively birthed and necessarily rough-hewn hallucinations of female existence." With a range and depth of expression seldom achieved before, Plath connects private experience with mythical and universal themes. Though often associated with father/child conflicts, "Daddy" dwells on a broader breakdown of a poetic mother figure, tracing "the crisis of the creative spirit." Plath carries "the secret burden of tampered-with childhood" and the "strangeness of her exile and the poignancy of her remoteness." Early critics labeled Plath's work as "pathological" because the "dominant shadow in [her] personality is of vulnerability" and a "chronically discharging woundedness." However, her poetry articulates not capitulation but "an

identity fight" that is "neither thing nor other." Maintaining the role of confessionalist within the digital age has increased cultural, historical, and poetic relevance. Confidence in "the sustaining art of poetry" contributes to the conviction that "Plath's confessional subject will endure, in poetry or nothing." (J. Feuerstein, 2012) (Daly, 2017).

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