

SYLVIA PLATH: AN UNCONVENTIONAL CONFESSIONALIST

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Abstract

The year 1959 was a landmark in the literary history of America as a new kind of poetry called “Confessional Poetry” was introduced into American Literature with the publication of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. ‘Confessional’ was the poetic style to receive the widest recognition and popularity in late 1950’s in America. All the major poets of this moment suffered from extreme personal complications. The chief exponents of this school were Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W.D Snodgrass, Allen Ginsberg, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Sylvia Plath shares all the characteristics of the confessional school. From the very beginning she shows deep influence of Lowell and other confessional contemporaries on her poetry. Sylvia Plath experimented with language as freely as possible. By taking chance, spontaneity, sincere confession, loneliness and subjectivity as very pressing issues, she in a way promoted the modern project of expressionism and surrealism. This enabled her to tackle contemporaneous as well as individual problems and she never felt reluctant to expose her private wounds and rotten sores. There is no denying the fact that Sylvia Plath is connected with the confessional movement but she differs from other confessional poets in some respects. She was quick enough to sail enthusiastically in the direction of the tide of Confessionalism, yet, not as passionately as others exposed themselves in their poems.

Keywords: *Confessional; Subjectivity; Expressionism; Surrealism; Complications*

Introduction

Sylvia Plath’s poetry displayed her personal suffering, father fixation, humiliation, betrayal, sexual guilt, alcoholism and psychological breakdowns-the necessary characteristics of American Confessional movement, shared by all its chief exponents. The anguish of modernity deepened when Sylvia Plath got obsessed with death, horror, neurosis, narcissism and insanity. Her father died when she was just eight years old and this led her to consider everything external as the projection of herself which had become ‘pathological’ in its appearance and which culminated in her suicide in 1963.

Plath's inclusion among the Confessional movement rests on a number of factors. First, as a contemporary of the Confessional poets she showed serious keenness in their mode of poetry and the type of experience they related. Equally sharing their tortured sensibility and their history of mental breakdowns, she makes her personal emotional experiences the theme of her poetry. The confessional poets imagine their selves at the centre of their works in order to explore the external world. M. L. Rosenthal makes the point more clear: "They put the speaker himself at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization" (Rosenthal 69)

Background

Many critics consider Plath as the first major woman poet of America. Her poetry gets the attention of prominent critics like M.L. Rosenthal, A. Alvarez, Marjorie Perloff and Judith Kroll. These critics have analysed her poetry from various angles. In 'Sylvia Plath: *Method and Madness*' Edward Bustcher calls her poetry personal and confessional. While as David Holbrook in his book 'Sylvia Plath, *Poetry and Existence*' takes it as an outpouring of a disturbed psyche. In 'Sylvia Plath, *The poetry of initiation*' John Rosenblatt postulates that her poems dramatize the moment in one's life. However, her poetry is more than mere psycho-biographical or narcissistic outpouring of a schizoid personality celebrating her nostalgia. The present study is an endeavour to explore an unexplored aspect of her poetry.

Plath's Distinction from other Confessional Poets

Though Sylvia Plath is considered as a true representative and most successful and skillful of all the American Confessional poets, she carved a niche of her own and has a marked distinction from other Confessionalists. Plath's early poems like "Point Shirley" and "Hard Castle Crags" are purely confessional in character and autobiographical in nature. But her most famous poems like "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" have deeper meanings. As Brestin puts it:

They deal with extreme emotional states and sometimes with the theme of individual suffering as inner registration of outward turmoil. One can recognize the experience of the poet in them, whether by internal hints or by clues from their context among other poems, but they often leave the lateral details unspecified, to be supplied by implication or by other writings. (Brestin 50)

The element of self-dramatization makes Sylvia Plath something different from other confessional poets. Though she experienced the same age and tackles the same sort of material as the other Confessionalists, her attitude to poetry and her poetic strategy differs to a large extent from theirs. The difference in poetic strategy can be best exemplified by

comparing poems by the Confessional poets and by Plath on the same subject. The Confessionals and Plath share a common history of mental breakdown and treatment and this is a theme dealt by them in their poems. The difference in treatment is clearly observed while comparing other Confessional poems on the subject with Plath's "Poem for a Birthday." While Confessional poetry depends mainly on the factual biographical details that puts the true self in alienation, Plath's "Poem for a Birthday" is a spiritual biography that depicts the poet's pursuit for a whole self. The labour for a pure un-fragmented self-hood takes place on a deeper psychic level, the poetic mind reaches to a preconscious state and finally finding new life through death in the final section of the poem "The Stones":

Ten figures shape a bowl for shadow
 My feelings itch. There is nothing to do
 I shall be good as new. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 137).

Confessional poetry and the theme of suicide and death go hand in hand. While all the Confessional poets, though, sometimes yearn for death, mostly see towards it with deep contempt and horror, Plath on the other hand in her later poems visualizes her own death as a state of perfection and rebirth. In "Edge" she says:

The woman is perfected.
 Her dead
 Body wears the smile of accomplishment. (272)

Plath's innate desire in the gruesome gives glimpses of her swiftly approaching brutal death, so as to achieve stasis or supereminence or ecstasy. In "Fever 103°" the persona experiences her own elevation and transcendence:

I think I am going up,
 I think I may rise. (232)

Unlike other poets of the movement she does not see death as an end of life and, but believes in 'life in death' where she can emerge newer, superior and stronger. At last, the all-powerful and transformed female self, with an awareness of another world, returns to declare her triumphant emergence:

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And eat men like air. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 247)

Sylvia Plath's imagination rises to such a prolific surge of images that makes it possible for

her to give an objectivity and universality to her personal and subjective experiences. Unlike other confessionalists, Plath freely uses symbolism, mythology and Biblical references in her most important poems. All these provide the basis from which Sylvia Plath draws the imagery, symbolism, and references for her poetry.

Sylvia Plath is more successful than other confessional poets of her time. Her work shows extraordinary sense of insistence to communicate to the reader the feelings of her troubled mind which we do not find in other confessional writers. Plath's life is her work and her work is her life. Plath's poems are uninhibited, unconstrained from moral, literary and social constraints, which are part of an obsolete system. She sheds the complacent attitude of her contemporaries, and comes out boldly. To put in a sentence – while others were crawling on the confessional road to reach the goal of self-expression, she sprinted past her fellow confessional poets. Plath's imagery is more powerful, her words are more strong and electrifying than her peers. Her poems contain more hatred because she felt people hated her more. She was not afraid to stop paying people in their own coin. The confessional mode of writing finds its boldest champion in Sylvia Plath.

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