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No taboos: Confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne sexton

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Abstract

Confessional poetry in America was given the centre stage by the publication of 'Life studies' written by Robert Lowell in 1959. Both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were the students of Lowell's poetry class in Boston from 1958-59. The impact of his style and his influence is clearly seen in their works. Both the poets had personal issues – Plath with her father and later with her husband Ted Hughes, whereas Sexton had a strained relationship with her mother and later expressed guilt over her own inadequacy as a mother in many of her poems. Their poems have a raw appeal, a boldness which takes one's breath away. The universality of suffering, portrayed by these confessional poets, takes their confession beyond the private and personal.

Keywords: Confession, relationship, boldness, suffering

Introduction

The word 'confession' carries negative connotations in itself. It hints at tensions, anxieties, guilts, even sins and a need to share. Usually, an individual would prefer private audience for confession, without any recriminations or repercussions, as in a church before a Priest. But confessional poet broke away with all these set notions and traditions. They poured themselves into their poetry without any barriers. Their private sorrows, guilts, obsessions and the complexities of their psyche, even their mental illness, were for public, transported and transformed into poetry.

Robert Phillips, referring to confessional art, writes that "whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered and exposed in order to be destroyed. "(3) Robert Lowell's 'Life studies', published in 1959, was a major propagator of confessional style of poetry. Both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton adopted the style as it suited to their need for expression without boundaries. Most of the confessional poets including Plath and Sexton were struggling with either mental illness, or psychological issues.

Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Plath and Sexton, the most notable writers of the confessional school of poetry, wrote about intensely personal themes and shared their innermost feelings and fears with their readers. They also influenced and drew inspiration from one another. Referring to her friend Plath, Anne Sexton wrote, "I suppose I might have shown her something about daring – daring to tell it true. WD Snodgrass showed me in the first place. Perhaps he influenced Robert Lowell too." (178)

Sylvia Plath in a very brief life span (1932 - 64) revolutionised Poetry in America. With the publication of 'The Colossus' in 1956, she made her mark in the literary world. Her poems were full of personal details and references to her complex relationship with her parents – particularly her father Otto Plath who was a German. Plath's father was a migrant from a Polish town and her mother was of Austrian descent. Her father's early death, when she was eight, left a negative impact on her psyche. She considered it a betrayal and held her father responsible for her loss. During her school years she became obsessed with writing, probably because it provided the necessary vent for the hidden emotions and feelings. She explained it thus: "You ask me why I spend my life writing?... I write only because There is a voice within me That will not be still." (LH, 34-35).

In Plath's poems man woman relationship takes a new dimension. The woman often becomes the victim and the man victimiser.

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Whether it is a father, husband or God – all become suspect as they are all males. In 'Daddy' she berates the tendency of women to love an autocratic man: "Every woman adores a Fascist. The boot in the face, the brute Brute heart of a brute like you." (48) The daughter /wife in 'Daddy' is revengeful and almost demented with suffering when she declares: "if I have killed one man, I have killed two- The vampire who said he was you And drank my blood for a year." (50) Plath's separation from Ted Hughes due to his extramarital affair, resulted in her losing faith in the institution of marriage. In her poem 'The Couriers' she writes: "A ring of gold with the sun in it? Lies, Lies and a grief" (4) In the poem 'The applicant' Plath talks about the constraints a married woman has to put up with so much so that she loses all her individuality. She writes "but in 25 years she will be silver.

In fifty, gold. A living doll, everywhere you look
It can sew, It can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk." (7)

Confessional poets touch issues which are closer to their heart and help in pursuing the truth. Their subconscious and the psyche is revealed in the poetry. In the words of Anne Sexton "Poetry milks the unconscious." (Ciardi 67) All the confessional poets including Plath and Sexton struggled with mental illness and had a history of nervous breakdowns or visits to mental asylums. Anne Sexton (1928-1974), A Pulitzer prize winner, had a history of bipolar disorder and suicidal tendencies. She was brutally candid and open in her poems regarding her relationship with her family and about her physical and mental disorder. Writing about her work Maxine Kumin says: She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry." (438) Regarding her own themes Sexton writes "in the first book I was giving the experience of madness, in the second book, the causes of madness; and in the third book ... whether to live or to die" (13) Both Sexton and Plath Feel guilty about their parents' death. Sexton speaks of the complex relationship with her mother and somehow feels guilty about her death through cancer. On the first September she looked at me.
And said I gave her cancer
They carved her sweet hills out
And still I couldn't answer." (Bedlam 56) Both the poets frequently imagine and talk about their own death. In fact that is a recurrent theme in their poetry. In "Flee on your Donkey", Sexton talks about how she pretended to be 'dead for eight hours' outside her psychiatrist's office. (128) In the same vein Plath mentioning her prolonged hospital stay, writes, "I have wanted to efface myself." (Tulip 13) The temptation to die and a fascination with death is presented and visualised by Sexton and Plath in various ways in their poems. In the poem 'The Death Baby' Sexton writes:

"There is a death baby
For each of us.
We own him.
His smell is our smell." (DN 16)

In "For Mr Death who stands with His Door Open" Death is seen as a comic figure:

Now your beer belly hangs out like Fatso,
You Are popping your buttons and expelling gas.
How can I lie down with you, my comical beau
When you are so middle aged and lower class." (DN 6) Plath explores her death wish in "A Birthday Present", "Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger.
Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty
By the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it.
Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil,
If it were death." (44) Both Plath and Sexton constantly refer to the dubious father/male persona in their poems. Sexton in her poem 'Baby' writes:

"You have seen my father whip me,

You have seen me stroke my father's whip." (DN 16) For Plath, the imaginary killing of the Daddy/vampire/lover in the poem daddy brings a temporary relief:

"Daddy, you can live back now...
There is a stake in your fat black heart.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through." (50)

The appeal of the confessional poetry of Plath and Sexton lies in both its contemporariness and its timelessness. The references to Holocaust victims and Germany's role in World War II connect her poetry to the angst of the contemporary society. Referring to her poem Daddy, AR Jones says, "The tortured mind of the heroine reflects the tortured mind of the age... The poem is more than a personal statement for by extending itself through historical images it defines the age as schizophrenic." (236) Similarly commenting on Sexton's ability to draw the readers within her circle of shared experience, Alicia Ostriker in "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience" writes that "Sexton's vocation as a poet was determined to an extraordinary degree by an assumption of a dependence on readerly empathy." (160) Both the poets deal with emotions that everyone could relate to – hate, love, grief, anger and issues like death, illness and gender problems. For these confessional poets Poetry was an expression and outpouring of their anguish selves. They put themselves boldly and openly on the paper, not caring whether they evoked empathy or dislike. But their poetry strikes a chord with the readers. The popularity of their poems even to this age is a testimony for the same. The fact that both committed suicide hints at their mental turbulence and suffering, despite which they were able to create extraordinary poetry during a period which was marked by the aftermath of war and violence and also loss of faith in religion and God. Plath voices the lack of faith as she addresses God in the poem "Years": "Oh God, I am not like you In your vacuous black, Star stuck all over, bright stupid confetti." (68)

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