
UNIT 50 SYLVIA PLATH AND CONFESSIONAL POETRY

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50.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be aware of the kind of poetry that was written in the 'sixties of the twentieth century. You will understand the work of Sylvia Plath and be familiar with some of her representative poems which will be critically analyzed.

50.1 INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath's work will be placed in the context of the Confessional Poetry of the 'sixties. As her work is heavily autobiographical, there will be an outline of the major events of her life and how they influenced her poetic sensibility. This will be followed by a discussion of some of her representative poems.

50.2 CONFESSIONAL POETRY

The Unit on Philip Larkin told you something about the poetry of the 'fifties in England which came as a reaction to the dictates of Pound and Eliot and the "excesses" of Dylan Thomas. This reaction against the established, intellectual, academic poetry took another form in the U.S. A. and from there travelled to England with Sylvia Plath. The poets involved in this reactionary movement came to be called the Confessional Poets. Heading the group were Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke. Younger poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who studied with Lowell, learned to write in the same anti-intellectual, subjective style. So did John Berryman. Together, these poets initiated a new trend in poetry, glorifying the personal and the private, expressing their innermost secrets aloud for all to hear. When Sylvia Plath married the English poet

Ted Hughes and chose to make her home in the United Kingdom, the Confessional movement no longer remained confined to the American boundaries.

Plath

50.2.1 The Beginnings

Around mid-century in the U.S.A., a lot of changes were imperceptibly taking place. There was no single, sudden, radical change; the changes that were gradually working their way into the very vitals of literature were slow but steady. The beginnings of the change may be discerned in the works of poets like Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, and Theodore Roethke. Eliot's theory of impersonality no longer seemed to be the divine word poets were required to follow. It fell into its proper place and came to be regarded as just a theory and no more. From the impersonal mode there came a shift towards the personal mode; from the outer waste land to the waste land within; from global themes relating to Jerusalem, Athens, Vienna, London, to themes related to the heart and soul of the poet.

The year 1959 may be regarded as a watershed in the history of literature for it was in this year that two important events took place which shaped the nature of poetry to be written subsequently. The first of these events was the publication of *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell which heralded a new kind of poetry, marking a significant departure from the complex symbolism and the formal language and style of T. S. Eliot. Focusing attention on his own self, Lowell chose to look inward rather than outward. Consequently, his work moved away from the classical stance, becoming more personal, more private. Lowell became an important influence on the poets of the 'sixties, bringing about an "intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience" which had until then been partly taboo, as Sylvia Plath saw it. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton came under his direct influence when they attended Lowell's poetry classes in Boston. They looked upon Lowell as a mentor.

The second important event that took place in 1959 relates to Allen Ginsberg, a poet very different from Lowell, who also undermined the established poetic norms of the time, but in his own manner. A poetry reading by him, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky at Columbia University became a controversial public affair, "emblematic of a whole era," as Morris Dickstein put it. With his reading of *Howl*, Ginsberg changed the very concept of poetry. Hitherto, if poetry was treated as a literary construct, with Ginsberg, it came to be regarded as a performance, a ritualistic gesture accompanied by music and dance. Discarding conventional forms and themes Ginsberg imparted to poetry a new sense of freedom and spiritual intensity, taking it out of stuffy classrooms on to the open stage. The work of Eliot and Pound required a vast body of critical annotations and interpretations to be comprehended fully. Besides, it had emerged as an answer to the needs of a particular hour in history: the second decade of the twentieth century when, as a result of global wars, civilizations seemed to be breaking apart. By the late 'fifties the situation had changed.

50.2.2 The Waste Land Within

It was Robert Lowell who first saw the horror, the boredom, and the glory of Eliot's waste land paralleled within the mind. *Life Studies* connects the meaninglessness and hollowness of the outer world to the existing despair within. Unable to find order and security in the post-war world, Lowell looks for stability and reassurance in his family, his background, and the New England tradition represented by his ancestors. His poetry, thus is a regressive movement, away from the broad canvas of the world to a narrower, familial canvas. But at all times Lowell retains his commonsense attitude and keeps his feet firmly rooted in the reality of everyday life.

With Theodore Roethke there is more of an escapist movement. *The Lost Son and Other Poems* was published in 1948 but its full impact was felt only after the publication of Lowell's *Life Studies*. The difference between Lowell and Roethke lies in that whereas Lowell regresses into history -- family history and also autobiography

-- Roethke's escape is into the world of nature. It may be said that Roethke's is a return to Wordsworthian ideals. But so, in a different way, is Lowell's. If *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's spiritual autobiography, *Life Studies* is a record of Lowell's emotional history. As in Wordsworth, in Lowell's work, too, one may easily detect the presence of an "egotistical sublime." But not so in the case of Roethke where the poet's personality, more Keatsian, remains in the background while the plants, roots, and creatures of the greenhouse speak on his behalf. The personal voice, unlike that of Lowell, speaks occasionally but without asserting itself in too obtrusive a manner.

50.2.3 The Origins of "Confession"

The work of Lowell and Roethke, and other poets like Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Anne Sexton, has come to be called "Confessional Poetry," a nomenclature that is more a label of convenience for critics. 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 theme" (as M.L. Rosenthal says). The word "confession" has a host of connotations of which two may be cited for their relevance to the present context: the act of "confessing" and the intimacy of experience. "Confessional" is related to confessions made in church in order to obtain absolution. Thus, it is a private utterance, an admission of lapses, wrong-doings, and feelings one would not normally express in public. But, at the same time, it remains an utterance made before an audience, in this case the father confessor. Confessional poetry should thus have all the ingredients of confession: it would pertain to private errors and omissions, fears and phobias. Above all, it must have its roots firmly in the poet's biography. It deals with personal themes. The poet's self is the pivot around which his world revolves. 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 can one turn to look at the outside world. So the first task of the confessional poets is to look at the turbulence within the self, analyze the chaotic mass of thoughts and feelings, and come to terms with them.

50.2.4 Personal Themes

The themes, thus, are invariably related to the poet's growth and childhood. A comparison may be drawn with the autobiographical mode of Wordsworth. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth presents a long, chronological account of his evolution from an ordinary boy to a sensitive poet. He takes up selected "spots of time," key moments that stand out in his memory, analyses their importance and contribution towards the making of the poet he grew up to be. The work of the confessional poets is similar in the sense that they, too, look back at the past, picking out significant moments in their experience. But, unlike Wordsworth, their main concern is not with the road taken to fame and glory. Rather, it is the paths taken to neuroses and emotional breakdowns that fascinate them. They all seem to look back totally mesmerized, examining every hurdle encountered, every landmark on the way. There is total self-absorption, not just a commemoration of the flattering moments of personal history but also the ignoble, humiliating and demeaning experiences.

50.2.5 Failed Relationships

The Confessional Poets speak of personal failures: failure, for instance, in establishing meaningful relationships with others. Robert Lowell, in "Man and Wife" (*Life Studies*) speaks of the failure of marriage. The fault lies somewhere in the inability to communicate with his wife. Another poem in *Life Studies* is significantly entitled "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" where the husband

drops his home disputes,
and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes,
free-lancing along the razor's edge.

Lowell locates the causes of the breakdown of communication within the psyche: it is a certain inadequacy in an individual that prevents him from reaching out to others and establishing a meaningful relationship with the world outside. Lowell is concerned with pinpointing the exact nature of such an inadequacy.

Plath



Sylvia Plath

Lowell speaks of failure not only in marriage and sexual relationships but also in filial duties. In "Home After Three Months Away" he mentions his daughter. Again, there is a failure in communication: Lowell is aware that he has failed somewhere as a father. And once again, the reasons lie within: the mental collapse that he suffered is the invisible 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 establishing a rapport with others. Lowell's technique is the reverse of Eliot's: he does not objectify experience. On the contrary, he portrays it as it is, naked, raw, and elemental. This is style that Eliot would have criticized the way he criticized *Hamlet* and its problems for lacking an "objective correlative". Emotion, as Eliot sees it, must be expressed through a suitable objective correlative, an external object that becomes

BLOCK X - INTRODUCTION

This block like the first one has two subsections. In the first one we discuss the poetries of Dylan Thomas (1914-53), Philip Larkin (1922-85), and Sylvia Plath (1932-63) and in the second we do two things. In the first place (in Unit 51) we call you to look back and think in a general manner about the various aspects of poetry. This time you participate and the Teacher/Editor listens to your views. We would hope that you would also be induced to interact with your peer group on other blocks as well. In the last unit we discuss your assignments and tell you something about the type of questions you should expect at the final examination.

'The Modernists and Postmodernists' - that is how we have called this block. Ezra Pound (1885-1972) (discussed in unit 29, block 6 of MEG06 on *American Literature*), W.B. Yeats (1865-1965), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and W.H. Auden (1907-73) have generally been considered by literary historians and critics as the great Modernist British poets. Pound, who came to London in 1908, profoundly influenced the modernist writers and artists such as James Joyce (1882-1941) Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), Henri Gaudier - Brzeska (1891-1915) and T.S. Eliot. According to Eliot Pound was 'more responsible for the XXth century revolution in poetry than any other individual'. You have already read Yeats and Eliot in the previous block but you must read Auden on your own. He was brought up at Birmingham and educated at Gresham's school, Holt and Christ Church, Oxford but left Europe for the U.S. in 1939 with Christopher Isherwood (1904-86) and became an American citizen in 1946. He was elected professor of poetry at Oxford in 1956 and in 1962 he became Fellow of Christ Church where he spent most of his last years.

'The Modernist' tag is useful as a cover-term for a group of poets on this course. However, it would be good to understand what it was. It incorporated a variety of cultural tendencies post-dating Naturalism. It was anti-positivistic and anti-representational such as you find in the (a) French Symbolist poetry (c.1880-95) of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98), Paul Verlaine (1844-96), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91) and Jules Laforgue (1860-87) who exercised great influence on British poetry of the twentieth century; (b) the Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet (1840-1926), Edward Manet (1832-83), Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917); and (c) the Decadent British writers such as Walter Pater (1839-94), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Lionel Johnson (1867-1902) and Ernest Dowson (1867-1900). While the Symbolists wished to distil a private mood and their experience of subtle relationships between material and spiritual worlds through evocative symbols the Impressionists aimed to render the effects of light on objects rather than the objects themselves. The British Aesthetes took the phrase *l'art pour l'art*, current in the first half of the 19th century in France and popularized by Theophile Gautier (1811-72) as their creed.

Early in the last century and during the First World War Modernism found expression in movements such as Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Imagism and Vorticism and later in Expressionism, Dada and Surrealism. The dominant tendencies of the modern experience could be seen in music in its atonalism, in *vers libre* in poetry, in the stream of consciousness and interior monologue in the novel and collage in painting. After 1939 the Modernist movement began to slope off.

The Modernists represented, as Herbert Read wrote (*Art Now*, 1933) 'an abrupt break with all tradition ... The aim of five centuries of European effort [was] openly abandoned.' That is the impression that the painting of Picasso and the poetry of Eliot creates on our mind. The Modernists believed in the aesthetic autonomy of a work of art, as it is clear from Eliot's views on poetry. The visual artists claimed justification for their techniques for having fulfilled Immanuel Kant's advice in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) to make works of art entirely disinterested, i.e. independent of the desires, conflicts and interest of daily life. However, this led to increasing dehumanization of art, away from the 'human, all too human elements

symbolic of the emotion to be conveyed. But Robert Lowell would rather speak of his experience directly

50.2.6 Father Complex



Ted Hughes

Failed filial relationships in confessional poetry take on another form, this time the poet in the role not of parent but offspring: the child mourning for a lost father. The theme is not new. Eliot often makes a reference to Ferdinand of *The Tempest*, weeping over the supposed demise of his father and Ariel's consoling dirge is repeatedly invoked: "Full fathom five thy father lies..." Robert Lowell speaks of a strained relationship with his father, and so does Theodore Roethke. Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton, all seem to suffer from a father complex. Their attitude vacillates between adoration and abhorrence. It is, no doubt, a part of the natural process that they, as members of the younger generation, should outlive their parents. But their response to their bereavement is unnaturally intense. There is an inability to accept the

loss of the father, a failure to cope with a world removed from his benign influence. In fact, so deep is the sense of loss that the poet is left at a breaking point, teetering between sanity and a total loss of emotional balance.

50.2.7 Nervous Breakdowns

The theme of mental collapse, which is partly the result of parental loss, is dealt with by Anne Sexton who remembers her father with pangs of a guilty conscience. She considers herself a failure not simply as a daughter, but also as a mother. The mother of two daughters, Sexton could never forgive herself for being a failed parent, as she thought. At the same time, she irrationally blamed herself for the death of her parents. Such feelings of guilt are recounted in the poems of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Lowell speaks of his mental breakdown in "Home After Three Months Away" and "Waking in the Blue." Roethke and Berryman, too, frequently refer to their nervous breakdowns unabashedly. In fact, Roethke even seems to glorify madness: "What's madness but nobility of soul / At odds with circumstance."

50.2.8 Suicide, Death, and Disease

When these Confessional Poets speak of their breakdowns and personal failures, they seem to be drawn more and more deep into sorrow and despair. Not surprisingly, their thoughts often turn to self-destruction. Self-annihilation or suicide forms a major theme in their poems. In their personal lives, too, most of them remained suicidal. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman died self-inflicted deaths. In the works of the other confessional poets, too, suicide and death are always around the corner.

It is not simply death that their poetry speaks of. It also deals with physical sickness, disease and decay. Consequently, a lot of unromantic element creeps into poetry. As Robert Phillips puts it, there is no longer any "poetic" or unpoetic" material, nothing is taboo in confessional poetry. Lowell speaks of myopia, Roethke of hydrotherapy, Sexton of the personal, private experiences of being a woman of topics as controversial as masturbation or menstruation. The ugly and the grotesque inspire poetry in the same manner as the beautiful and the good.

50.2.9 The Desire to Shock

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, no matter how painful the experience. In this connection a reference may be made to Sexton's epigraph to *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* which is a quotation from a letter to Goethe from Schopenhauer:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes a philosopher. He must be like Sophocles' Oedipus who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable inquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our hearts the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further.

The poet is forever seeking answers to questions that plague him on matters pertaining to his identity and situation in a larger scheme of things.

50.2.10 The Question of Authenticity

However, after reading the work of Lowell, or Sexton, or the other confessional poets, the question that arises is: how much of their work is related to authentic experience?

How much of it is fiction? "Confession," after all, is assumed to be true. But not so in the case of these poets. It is not always first-hand experience that the poets write of. "There is a good deal of tinkering with fact," as Robert Lowell explained in an interview. Such a statement, combining fact with fiction, answers many other doubts that may arise regarding the nature of confessional poetry. It should simply *sound* as if it were true, says Lowell. Sexton, for instance, brings in a lot of fictitious events and experiences into her work and yet her work reads like an authentic account.

50.2.11 Going Beyond the Personal

If confessional poetry were simply "confession," the admission of private guilt, sorrow, and loss, it would have a very limited appeal. For one wearies of hearing the private whining and moaning of individuals dissatisfied with their lot. But, the work of the poets of the 'sixties has a wide appeal for several reasons. Because of the "I," the first-person singular orientation, the poetry conveys a sense of immediacy and urgency. Confessional poetry has a lot in common with the dramatic monologue, exploring as it does the labyrinths of the mind, diving into motives and intentions. In the use of the first person singular there is another advantage: it is like one person talking to another, a sharing of confidences, an "I" engaged in a conversation with "you." It also encourages the imaginative identification of the reader with the writer, so that it is easier to understand and respond to the sufferings of the poet / narrator. At the same time, despite the personal themes, there are certain devices by which an attempt is made to impart some kind of universality to the poetry. "Cries of the heart," as Sylvia Plath calls them, would have a limited audience. So, the poet sometimes uses a persona that is universally recognized and accepted. In Sylvia Plath's case, for example, the poet often evokes the figure of Electra, borrowed from Greek mythology. The poem "Daddy," she says, is spoken by "a girl with an Electra complex." Other confessional poets adopt different devices. John Berryman creates a private persona for the same effect and makes use of the third person singular. His *Dream Songs* are the rambling thoughts of a certain Henry who is a device that provides an aesthetic distance between the poet and the experience he writes of. In the guise of Henry, Berryman feels free to speak of experiences that would otherwise be hard to recount in the first person. Lowell tries to ensure a wider appeal for his poetry by establishing a link between private experience and public. Events from history and politics are brought into the poems and related to individual experience. This linking of the personal with the public helps to situate the experience in a particular locale and time. The poet is thus seen not as an independent entity detached from the rest of the world, but, paradoxically, as a private individual in a public milieu. So Confessional poetry is not simply confession: it seeks to establish connections between the outer and the inner world of man.

50.2.12 Influence of Psychoanalysis

Dealing with the innermost recesses of the mind, it is but natural that these poets show the influence of psychoanalytical theories that have come to stay in the twentieth century. Anne Sexton's work is a good illustration of this point. As the critic Robert Phillips points out, there is a strong Jungian influence in her work. In her *Transformations* of the innocuous fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers, Sexton resorts to psychoanalysis to interpret, in an adult way, stories that were originally meant for children. Psychoanalysis may also be applied to the strong sexual imagery that is found in the work of Plath, Berryman, Lowell and Roethke.

50.3 SYLVIA PLATH : HER LIFE AND WORKS

In order to understand the poetry of Sylvia Plath (1933 - 63), we need to be aware of the personal and social factors which cast their shadow on her work: one, the physical and mental illness which she suffered when she was barely eight; two, the separation from her husband, Ted Hughes, who took on the role of a father surrogate; and, three, her

suicide attempts, the first unsuccessful one at the age of twenty-one, and the final successful attempt in her thirtieth year. On these three events is based the major poetry of Sylvia Plath, its cries of helpless rage alternating with gloomy despair, its narcissistic concern with the individual self colouring all themes and subjects she chooses to write of.

Plath's first collection of poems, *The Colossus*, published in 1956, comprises poems that may best be described as "apprentice poems" because they seem docile, well-behaved, and contain no innovations and surprises. True, they give some evidence of her poetic talent, but are too self-consciously thesaurus-oriented to be treated as much more than clever exercises in verse that one would perhaps write to please an exacting mentor. It was the poetry of the last months of her life in which Plath let go of all restraints and, without bothering about irrelevant concerns, spoke in a highly individualized voice. These powerful poems are collected in *Ariel*, published posthumously. The poems in between these two volumes belong to a transitory phase and are collected in *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*. There is also a fictionalized autobiography entitled *The Bell Jar*, that Plath published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas in 1963, and a collection of short stories and prose pieces, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. It is on these few volumes that Sylvia Plath's fame rests today. The Plath cult flourished in the 'sixties, after her suicide, and fanned the feminist movement. It has cooled since then and we may now make an objective assessment of the merits of Sylvia Plath's achievements.

50.3.1 The Poems

"The Colossus"

Sylvia Plath's first volume of verse is appropriately called *The Colossus*. Although Plath does not refer to it, the title brings to mind the well-known lines from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, describing the eponymous hero of the play: "...Why, man, he doth stride this narrow world / Like a colossus." The reference is to the legendary bronze statue of Apollo at Rhodes. It is such a gigantic figure that towers over the landscape of Sylvia Plath's early work, representing none other than the poet's dead father, much missed, much grieved for. It is the absence of the father that shapes much of Plath's work. Her poems record her reaction to this irreparable personal loss. 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.

The father's absence is one that grows like a tree, as a later poem puts it. It grows to the towering height of a colossus, sometimes seen as a "Man in Black," or as a cruel tyrant. Thus he is not just a benevolent father-figure, but also a malevolent force portending doom and destruction. The poet's attitude towards this colossus is an ambiguous one. In the first place, because it is modelled on her father, there is a filial attachment and love. But, at the same time, because the father, by dying, has deserted his child, there is a resentment against him. Such are the dichotomous feelings that Plath expresses in relation to her father through the colossus image.

This title poem of *The Colossus* (CPP 129-30) speaks of a dilapidated fallen statue of gigantic proportions, with weeds and wild grass growing all over it. Plath establishes a contrast between past glory and present downfall, and also between the big and the small. Presented in the same framework as the fallen god, is a diminutive persona, who, in contrast with the massive statue, is "an ant in mourning," and must tend it as best as she can. In the contrast between the statue's bulk and the attendant's puniness one is reminded of Swift's portrayal of Gulliver in the land of Lilliputians. The relationship between the statue and the attendant is akin to that between a master and his slave, the latter in servile obedience to the former: "Thirty years now I have laboured / To dredge the silt from your throat." There is an acceptance by the speaker

of her inferior role. Engaged in a thankless job, with no hope of ever being free of it, she resigns herself to fate:

My hours are married to shadow
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

It is a private experience that Plath speaks of but she takes it beyond personal history and gives it universal dimensions by employing the Electra myth with the reference to the Oresteia.

It may be noted that Plath is here dealing with the lost father theme. Loss of the father is one of the many autobiographical subjects that Plath writes her poetry on. But she tries to impart a universal applicability to the experience through the use of myth. For this reason, the father is visualized as a Greek God as in "Full Fathom Five." Elsewhere, for the same effect, she evokes the Electra myth to describe the relationship between herself and her father.

"Daddy"

"Daddy," a late poem, is one such example. In a note to the poem, Plath herself draws our attention to the connection with the story of Electra:

[The poem] is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other -- she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (CPP 293)

This statement is important for several reasons that may apply to the other poems of Plath as well. In the first place, we may note the deliberate effort to go beyond the self by employing on the one hand Greek myth and, on the other, events from world history (the Nazi-Jew animosity). Secondly, it is easy to discern the awareness of psychoanalytical theories and their application to personal relationships. This poem speaks of the father-daughter relationship but in another poem ("Medusa," for instance) it is the relationship with the mother that the poet is concerned with. In yet another poem, it may be the ambiguous mother-child bond that she focuses on (as in "Lesbos"). Third, the poem takes a close look at not just the relationships, but the emotional complexities of a person, the existence of opposing forces within one's psyche, the good and the bad, the gentle and the harsh, the Jew and the Nazi. And finally, Plath's note puts forward a subtle suggestion that poetry, in its most powerful form, is a ritualistic gesture. It is an exorcism of the demons that haunt the poet. It is therapeutic; it has a cathartic effect. In such poems there is generally an inner, psychological conflict the persona is engaged in.

"Daddy," speaking of the two conflicting strains within the girl which marry and paralyse each other, deals with such a conflict. Plath is here dealing with the influence of heredity on an individual as these psychological tensions are hereditary, a legacy from the Electra-like girl's mixed parental background, part Nazi, part Jewish. Given such a parentage, the girl cannot help being a victim of clashing characteristics. But, often, the opposing forces within the self do not owe their origin to family history; they are ingrained in human nature. It may be noted, however, that, the lines of "Daddy," though they storm and curse against one who has betrayed the persona, could only be uttered by one who cares, one who has loved deeply and truly, and who has been hurt because her love has come to nothing. Such are the ambivalent feelings that "Daddy" expresses against the dead father.

"Lady Lazarus":

In "Lady Lazarus" Plath speaks of her previous suicide attempts. Biographical accounts of Sylvia Plath tell us how the poet was fascinated with the idea of dying and

attempted suicide more than once. This is a passion she shared with her friend, the poet Anne Sexton who admits that they often talked about dying: "We talked death with burnt-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!" Sexton has immortalized their camaraderie in her famous poem, "Wanting to Die" which explains the morbid attraction of death:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the most unnameable lust returns....

(Anne Sexton)

The lust is the self-destructive passion, the desire to annihilate oneself, to return to an inanimate state. This is a passion that Sexton shared with Sylvia Plath. 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. "Lady Lazarus," written almost a decade after the abortive suicide attempt, recounts the experience with all its intensity:

It is a personal experience Plath speaks of but again it is given a wider applicability. This time she invokes an Egyptian myth: the legendary Phoenix who periodically destroys herself and then is reborn from the ashes.

It is easy to see that Plath is inspired by her own experience: striving for death time and again, and then being symbolically reborn. But the Phoenix myth places it at an aesthetic distance. And again, private suffering is equated with events of public importance: the suffering of the Jews, for instance: "my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade," ... "My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen." When parallels are thus drawn with the sufferings of a section of humanity discriminated against, there is some attempt at universality. However, the autobiographical element in the poem is strong and Sylvia Plath's poems remain, despite her attempts to camouflage them, a record of scars gathered over the years in her short life span. "Lady Lazarus," like "Daddy," speaks of an autobiographical experience even though there is an attempt to go beyond autobiography.

What "Daddy" and "The Colossus" have in common is the underlying theme of bondage and slavery. It is without exception, a woman who is made to take on a subservient role in Plath's poems. The victim expresses a resentment against the patriarchal authority that the father or the husband represents. Between the victim and the oppressor there is an uneasy power relationship. At first hers is an attitude of passive acceptance of the inferior role, as in "The Colossus." The woman in Plath's poems, who is more a slave than a companion, strongly resents having to adhere "to rules, to rules, to rules" laid down by the master / husband. In the later stages of the relationship, however, there is a change and the woman, having decided not to let herself be tyrannized any more, emerges as a fury to wreak vengeance on the men who have victimized her. In "Daddy" it is the father whose memory holds her in thrall and which must be shaken off if the protagonist is to breathe freely again. The struggle in Plath's poems is against the phallogocentric point of view which sees women as marginal characters and the relationship of the sexes as one of power and denial. But such a relationship cannot be a permanent one for a time comes when the victim must rise in revolt.

"Purdah":

The transformation of woman from weakling to superwoman is best charted in Plath's poem entitled "Purdah" where the female protagonist, throwing off all shackles, tries to shake off the hegemonic centre of male dominance:

The doll-like bride is metamorphosed into a lioness that brings about the death of her oppressor. In the Bee poems of Plath, the militant woman is represented by the flying

queen bee, and in "Ariel" by the shooting arrow and the "dew that flies." Flying is woman's gesture of defiance, her bid for total emancipation.

Sylvia Plath, no matter what her subject, a cut thumb (in "Cut"), deformed babies (in "Thalidomide"), a fever (in "Fever 103°"), an adventure on a runaway horse (in "Ariel"), or a morbid fascination with death (in "Edge"), always writes as a woman. She writes of personal experiences but she has a place in poetic tradition. She makes use of myth but she breaks with the mythic tradition of Eliot. She does try to move from the personal to the impersonal/public stance, but the autobiographical element in her work is so strong that she is unable to rise much above the self. Emotion is presented directly most of the time in her work, or sometimes through the flimsy veil of a persona. There is no objective correlative in Eliot's sense. True, we may take the flying bee or the horse as symbolic figures, but they are not objective correlatives as Eliot would have them. "I must fly around," "I must shriek," says the poet. This is closer to the passionate intensity of romantic poetry that goes "I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed".... The work of Sylvia Plath, thus, picks up stray strands of earlier traditions and weaves out of them a distinctive fabric.

"ARIEL":

Ariel was the name of the horse on which Plath went riding. Ted Hughes, in his "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," tells us that on one occasion the horse bolted and the poet was almost thrown off the saddle. It is such an experience of being astride a runaway horse that the poem "Ariel" describes.

What Plath writes is not straightforward, uncomplicated verse. It has many dimensions. There is an attempt to relate private experience to public experience. So, personal experience, injury and hurt are viewed in a much larger context. The starting point of a Plath poem may be a personal event, but it is related to an event of global significance in such a way that it grows rapidly to bigger proportions and finally has a common application. This is a technique Plath learned from Robert Lowell.

50.4 EXERCISES IN COMPREHENSION

1. How did Confessional Poetry differ from the kind of poetry that was written in the early decades or the twentieth century?

[In order to answer this question you should refer to that section of the unit that speaks of how the Confessional poets focus on personal themes rather than public ones. This was against the theory of impersonality advocated by T. S. Eliot.]

2. Analyze critically the role played by Sylvia Plath's father in her poems.

[Refer in particular to "The Colossus" and "Daddy." Relate it to the father fixation found in the work of other confessional poets.]

3. With reference to the poems you have read, trace the development of Sylvia Plath's persona from a docile, submissive woman into a fury raging for revenge.

[Beginning with "The Colossus," you will discuss "Daddy," "Ariel," and "Purdah." You may also wish to read up "The Applicant," the Bee Poems and "Pursuit."]

4. Show how death and suicide are important themes in Sylvia Plath's poems.

[First you will speak of the tendency among Confessional Poets to speak of these subjects. Then you will refer to Sylvia Plath's morbid fascination with death, her obsession with self-annihilation, and her suicide attempts. Then you will focus on "Lady Lazarus" in particular. You may also wish to focus on the concluding lines of "Ariel." Other poems you may read are "Death and Co.," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," and "Pursuit."]

50.5 LET'S SUM UP

Now that you have read this unit, you should be able to

- *Understand what is meant by Confessional Poetry.*
- *Write about the main themes that inspired the Confessional Poets.*
- *Assess the importance of Sylvia Plath in the twentieth-century poetic tradition.*
- *Be familiar with some of her important poems.*

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Some more poems for further reading