

## Confessional mode in the works of Sylvia Plath

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### Abstract

The paper informs us about Sylvia Plath's Sensible Conscience and how does she cope with many ups and downs in her life. She makes use of poetic genre to reveal her philosophy and life style. Plath expressed her deep feelings about death, nature, identity, and her opinion about the world. She believed that writing is one of the highest forms of art that pleases the sense of the human beings. Sylvia Plath adopted the Confessional mode to express her turbid life, depressed self, etc. In confessional writings, the writer candidly admits his or her past experiences, frustrations, desires, motives, failures, triumphs and all those things which require courage to admit. Confessional art persuades to writer to face his or her real self and to try to console himself or herself by his or her own faults.

**Keywords:** Confessional mode, Sensible Conscience, frustrations, motives, failures, triumphs etc.

### Introduction

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston. She was the daughter of Austrian mother and German father. Her father Otto Emil Plath was a Professor of Biology and her mother Aurelia Schober, was an English teacher. Sylvia Plath, one of the most prominent American poetesses has given a fresh impetus to a particular kind of poetry known as confessional poetry. A confessional poem is one in which the poet truthfully admits his or her past, frustrations, desires, experiences, motives, failures, triumph and all those things which require courage to acknowledge. In fact, the origin of confessional poetry can be traced back to the primordial urge of man to face his real self and to try to console him by admitting his own faults. In America Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton brought this kind of poetry to perfection.

According to A. Alvarez "a confessional poet is a frustrated individual who tries to remove the dust of his frustration by giving artistic utterance to his frustrations" (208). In most cases, a confessional poet longs for death because he or she finds life intolerable. Majumdar has been very rightly noted: "Is not the existence itself totally meaningless, destined to wither away each day?" (24) Death is a kind of remedy for all the sufferings, problems, and sorrows of this world can never reach. Death, for such an individual brings peace, harmony and a kind of permanent relax without any turmoil or disturbance. It is not the end of life but an opening of a new life, full of hope and new prospects. While facing the challenges of life man has to be strongly determined and full of courage and passion but sometimes man's will power gives way and he falls victim to the darkness, corrupting whole humanity. It is only when a person meets sorrows one after another then he starts thinking that death is better than life. This is what happens with Sylvia Plath whose poetry is replete with a pining for the unknown; it may be a perfect life, it may be true love which leads her to a wish for death because human being is the most sensitive creature and when rejected, he turns to death for consolation.

Sylvia Plath, the modern American poetess, is most commonly designated as a confessional poetess. A. Alvarez regards confessional poetry as the product of our age, the age of war, psycho-analysis and urban distress. The incredible violence of

two world wars, the destruction of Hiroshima; and the tortures of concentration camps led to the disillusionment and frustration on a large scale because Plath was very sensitive by nature. In the absence of the natural self of the English and support of the Church, the confessional poets of America turned to Martin Heidegger's concept of Being-Towards-Death; in his volume *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger has been very rightly remarked: "We do not have in view an actualizing of death, neither can we mean dwelling upon the end its possibility" (305).

Thus obsession with death can be observed in an intensified form in the poetry of confessional poets. It was not merely a possibility that many a confessional poets like Anne Sexton, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath committed suicide. Anne Sexton refers to herself and her friend Sylvia Plath as both of them believed that life is transitory and temporal. Sexton notes rightly that: "We talked of death with burnt up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light-bulb" (175).

In his book *The Savage God* A. Alvarez has been very strongly remarked about confessional poets: "These poets were determined to confront intimations of mortality, not immortality, and this determination is finally what distinguishes advanced art from the fashionable crowds of pseudo-avant-gardes" (218).

According to M.L. Rosenthal, in confessional poetry "...the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme" (15).

Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* is a controlled and compelling account of author's mental breakdown and subsequent electro-convulsive treatment and psycho-therapy.

This abnormality is often accompanied by a father complex. In Plath's poetry, the persona is often represented as the victim of Electra complex. Electra complex is defined in *The Cassell Pocket English Dictionary*: "the attraction of daughter for her father accompanied by hostility to her mother" (*The Cassell* 260).

In almost all her poems, the deceased father is referred to as a presence which haunts her continuously. Memory of her dead father arouses the ambivalent feelings of love and hate in poem "Daddy". Plath once recalled her feelings and

experiences for her father to her friend, Nancy Steiner. Steiner quotes that moment in which Plath describes about her father: "He was an autocrat. I adored him and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him" (21).

Allied to mental illness there is a sense of failure, which finds expression in confessional poetry. This failure may be failure in love, in marriage, in career etc. for example, Sylvia Plath rejects marriage as artificiality, which only brings anguish, pain and tension. In her novel *The Bell Jar*, Esther (heroine) feels that getting marriage is like "being brainwashed and afterward you went about in some private, totalitarian state" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 89)

The sense of failure in relationship leads to an alienation of poet from the world. There is none a person with whom she can share her grieves and distresses etc. Not only Sylvia Plath but the other confessional poets, also seems to be enclosed in *The Bell Jar*, alienated from the world. Away from the world, the confessional poet indulges in a search for identify and self-probing which reveals to the public their frayed nerves. Sylvia often speaks of her two selves in her poetry, which is her anxious and conscious groping for knowing her real self. "In Plaster" she speaks about her two selves, the old yellow and the plaster saint:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:  
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one.  
(Plath, *Collected Poems* 244)

In this psychological state of mind, hostility coupled with the awareness of the universe, death seems to be the only medium to seek relief. Motif of death is a sort of catharsis for the mentally deranged schizophrenic and neurotic poet, where the poet tries to seek 'calm of mind' and all passions spent. Thus, the theme of suicide and death become an obsession with the confessional poet.

The death of her father, the separation from her husband, responsibility of two small children and financial insecurity etc. may be various worldly and personal reasons for her fascination of death. But Plath's treatment of death in her poetry is artistic; in this case Sexton rightly notes: "not just turning losses of emotions" (112). Plath herself said in an interview with Peter Orr, Plath remarks in the article *The Poet Speaks*: "I believe one should be able to control and manipulate experiences even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured this sort of experience with an informed and intelligent mind" (Plath 168).

Failure in love is the central theme of the confessional poetry. The search for true love is continued throughout her poetry. For Sylvia Plath dying is not a painful end, but an art.

Dying is an art, like everything else,  
I do it exceptionally well.  
(Plath, *Collected Poems* 245)

In her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* Plath has remarked about her painful life. She says that her physical energy depleted by illness, anxiety and overwork. She was finally unable to cope with problems and decided to put an end to her life on February 11, 1963. She was found dead with her head in the gas oven. The present study is a humble attempt to study

Sylvia Plath's confessional mode of life through her writings and artistic approach.

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