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Confessional Poetry: Understanding Strength through Words

Literature has always been a reflection of cultures, societies, histories, and events since oral and written stories have been around. As society grows and alters, so do the different literary movements. As literary movements develop, they too change society. When it comes to confessional poetry of the late 1940s, 50s, and 60s, there is a drastic transformation in content that literature had not been exposed to. With the movement of confessionalist poetry, authors begin to open some doors, often dark and hidden, to some of the topics American society had been avoiding for decades. With this new realm of authorship, a new era of writing began that would change the idea of self-expression through writing and literature forever.

*History*

Before the confessional poetry movement, there was an era of modernist poetry that came out of the two World Wars. The graphic scenes and depressing nature of these poems really hit home to those who may not have been directly affected by the wars. They effectively moved the nation in understanding more of the internal, emotional, and gut-wrenching aspects of the wars that any reader could feel empathy and sympathy towards as well. A great example of this comes from “Champs d’Honneur,” a poem by Ernest Hemingway in 1923:

“Soldiers never do die well;

Crosses mark the places—

Wooden crosses where they fell,

Stuck above their faces.

Soldiers pitch and cough and twitch—

All the world roars red and black;

Soldiers smother in a ditch,

Choking through the whole attack” (195).

In this, Hemingway recounts images of World War I, where he was an ambulance driver in Italy (Biography.com Editors). Bringing the spotlight on bleak and gruesome events in the way these poets do, the modernist movement led into the end of the 1940s, where confessional poets started lending their minds to readers everywhere.

When defining confessional poetry, there are a variety of aspects that can be placed within the genre, but one of the most crucial would be the idea of exposing the deeper side of oneself and allowing any details, gruesome or not, to be freely heard. Many of the poets coming out of this period did so magnificently. Poets, like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, discussed the dirtiness of mental anguish and the sensuality of sexuality; topics that many had never dared to openly write or talk about. The ability to open up and talk about the issues, feelings, and “taboo” topics in a way no one else had before, created a path for authorship and literature to take a raw, internal level.

The term ‘confessional poetry’ was first used by M. L. Rosenthal in a 1959 review of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (Poetry Foundation).According to Robert Phillips, poet, critic, and professor, he states that,

“[Confessional poems] ask rather than answer questions. . . The confessional poets chiefly employ the Self as sole poetic symbol. . . Nevertheless, as its name implies, confessional poetry springs from the need to confess. Each poem is in some way a declaration of dependence. Or of guilt. Or of anguish and suffering." (7-8)

The idea that one can openly express themselves in such a liberating, uncensored way, is completely revolutionary to the world of literature.

This newfound ability these poets developed, possibly unconsciously doing so, brought forth a lot of material and questions going forward, not only in literature but in mental health and therapy as well. Phillips explains confessional writing being, “the writing of each such poem is an ego-centered, though not an egocentric, act; it’s a goal of self-therapy and a certain purgation” (8). Using writing as a form of therapy and overcoming struggles in a direct and purposeful way changed multiple fields of study from this period forward.

The mental health world was neither efficient nor productive in the late 40s to early 60s. Sylvia Plath, for example, had a long fight with mental health, which ultimately ended her life in February of 1963. Throughout life, she attempted suicide and tried to deal with her mind’s battles. During different parts of her life, Plath tried therapy, which resulted in electroshock treatments. These proved to be more harmful than good, at least for Plath. What seemed to really keep Sylvia going was her writing. Writing has, in the past few decades, become a prime point of therapy in the medical world. Laura A. King, PhD, at the University of Missouri, Colombia, states that there is an assumption as to why writing works, which is that “unexpressed emotion” would lead to issues with mental health (121). By releasing all emotions, either privately or publicly through writing, can be cathartic. In a multitude of studies that Kind cites, writing about trauma or traumatic events have shown, “positive outcomes like enhanced immune function, reduced health problems, and better judgement to college” (121). As well, refusing to let go of certain emotions resulted in research participants having no positive effects. Although these studies have shown positive results, Kind argues the writing topic seems to not change the outcome. King notes,

“these results indicate that the writing topic need not be rooted in the individual’s own life for benefits to occur. . . rather, the simple act of confronting a negative emotion and being able to control it led to increased affective regulation, which in turn led to health benefits.” (123)

The continuation of study as to how writing can heal and help those with mental health conditions is a largely developing field. It could easily be traced to these poets. The way they confronted these dark emotions, hard traumas, and frustrations, definitely defined an era.

*Analysis*

Going through confessional poetry, there are three prime contributors: Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath. There are more, like W. D. Snodgrass, who actually did not enjoy the term because he felt that poets had been doing so since poetry began (Poetry Foundation). There are also contemporary confessional poets, such as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, who also delve into sensitive emotions, material, and questions, which will also be analyzed.

Beginning with Anne Sexton (1928-1974), we see a lot of her poems questioning God, Jesus and Christianity. Not so much that she does not believe in the concept of religion and belief, but why she cannot quite grasp the faith she is looking for. This is evident in “With Mercy for the Greedy” when she writes about the cross necklace she’s holding: “How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes! / But I can’t. Need is not quite belief” (18-19). Here, it seems like she desires Jesus and to possibly help him from the cross he lays on, she could better get in touch with her faith, but since this is built out of want or need, this is not quite what religion is, in her eyes. This is the questioning that Phillips refers to. Sexton does not definitively say what she knows religion to be or what faith truly is, rather she poses the question what is religious belief, and what do I do to achieve the answers and faith I’m looking for?

In her later writing, she discusses the female form and very personal experiences depicting sexuality and sensuality, such as masturbation, menstruation, breasts, child birth and abortion, her uterus, and sex. Two prime examples from her book, *Love Poems* (1968), “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” and “In Celebration of My Uterus,” both concern provocative topics that typical Americans did not discuss in the 50s and 60s; even in some societies today do not talk about these concepts. This was especially due to the rigid sex education system in the public schools, when “parents continued to be concerned that teaching about sex. . . could lead teens to experiment sexually” (Huber and Firmin 36). In an even more taboo discussion, Sexton speaks about the concept of abortion in her poem, “The Abortion,” which starts off, in italics: “Somebody who should have been born / is gone” (1-2). This line repeats two more times within. The poem talks rather harshly on abortion, using unpleasant and dark imagery and metaphors to discuss the death of a fetus or infant through the abortion process. This poem, even today, can create some controversy as to appropriateness and the abortion debate itself.

A fellow colleague and confessional poet of Sexton, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), also took a darker side to questioning and addressing her inner emotions and concerns. Many of Plath’s well-known poems, such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” allude to, and sometimes directly, death, suicide, or the act of dying. Much of her life was affected by death and suicide. Her father died when she was eight and by adolescence, she had taken a bottle of sleeping pills and laid underneath the front porch of her house in her first suicide attempt. These aspects, among others, were strong influences on her poetry.

In “Daddy,” Plath uses imagery and symbolism of WWII Germany and Nazis and Jews to metaphorically set up the relationship between herself and her father. Her father, Otto Plath, being a German immigrant and biology professor, had a lot of influence on Plath in her lifetime. In the poem, she equates him to a Nazi, herself being a Jew:

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.” (35-39)

Here, we see Plath breakdown images she sees herself as, confessing her feelings and trauma and equating them to being a Jewish person in the Holocaust. The message correlates well with the relationship between herself and her father and the symbolisms and metaphors she provides.

In “Lady Lazarus,” Plath alludes to her own death, specifically suicide, which ultimately becomes her cause of death. The way she speaks of dying, eerily displays her subconscious knowledge that she will probably not survive her mental turmoil:

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is number three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade. (20-24)

By this point in Plath’s life, she had attempted suicide more than once and had tried different forms of therapy. To accept her mental illnesses, discuss death and suicide in a direct and harsh way, and speak of her almost indifference of these negative feelings, is unprecedented. How Plath seems so mundane about these thoughts of death, but actively uses metaphor and powerful word choice has been a prime reason why she continues to be a well-known poet and author. This was also why she is one of the main faces of the confessional poetry movement.

The last poet of focus is Robert Lowell (1917-1977), who taught both Sexton and Plath in Boston. The interesting part of Lowell and his contributions to the confessional poetry movement is his thoughts and ideas on civil rights and anti-war movements, especially writing before the bulk of the Civil Rights movement had begun. As the others previously mentioned, Lowell often shows details about his personal life. The one poem of his that stands out to most is “For the Union Dead,” which addresses his views and mindset of war and civil rights. Conversely, in another poem titled, “Suicide,” we see the grim details of personal emotions and thoughts.

In “For the Union Dead,” we see a transition from the modernist poetry focused on WWI and WWII, to not only incorporating those war-like images but add the introspection from the poet as well. In the poem Lowell plays with time and often jumps timeframes. As he is recalling a past memory and relating it to a more current memory, he jumps back to a Civil War era thought about Colonel Shaw and his infantry comprised of men of color. Addressing how the Civil War has started to vanish from people’s memories, Lowell relates the fallen black soldiers to the black children he sees on the television—metaphorically reminding the importance and significance of people of color to our country. Lines 52 through 55 and lines 62 and 63 demonstrate this:

Shaw's father wanted no monument

except the ditch,

where his son's body was thrown

and lost with his ‘niggers’. (52-55)

Showing the hostility of Colonel Shaw’s father’s comment about African American soldiers and deciding to show no respect for his son by not creating a monument to him, but rather placing him lower because Shaw honored his black soldiers, this stanzadisplays the idea of racism to Lowell’s audience. He reflects this racism with the image of his television screen a couple stanzas later:

When I crouch to my television set,

the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons. (62-63)

This image is in response to what Lowell saw in regards to the bombing of Hiroshima, and seeing the children of color responding to the blast. He definitely found the images powerful and his inner thoughts about the whole idea of racism to be hurtful to our country. To him, to treat people of color so poorly when they did so much in the wars America had participated in, was also an attack on the country. By mentioning these mental images and daydreams, Lowell brings forward many questions about race, humanity, civil rights, and more.

In his poem, “Suicide,” we see more of the harsher words and emotions of Lowell. As the title suggests, he has these dreams and images of suicide, which he separates from his reality by using italics. He states:

*Sometimes in dreams*

*my hair comes out in tufts*

*from my scalp. . .*

*. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .*

*Sometimes in my dreams*

*my teeth got loose in my mouth. . .*

*. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .*

*as I spit them out. . .* (6-8, 11-12, 15)

These grotesque and painful images paint a disturbing picture of Lowell’s mind. His grim and gory nightmare-like dream sequences, which he purposefully places in italics, openly confesses the suffering Lowell is dealing with internally.

The three of these poets, the forefront of the confessional poetry movement, became so influential by using active and often horrifying images and metaphors. The way they manipulate language and openly confess and express their inner emotions and demons really resonate with readers as well as future writers. To allow oneself to be uncensored and let out the often taboo and quieted topics that many people deal with internally in such a public way was unparalleled in the fashion these three had done. Discussing topics like abortion, suicide, civil rights, death, war, and sex in such poetic and gritty ways that really spoke to the deeper side of these issues, was absolutely innovative for their time.

*Impact: The Early 60s Going Forward*

There are other poetry movements around this time and going forward that had influence to and were influenced by the confessionalist poetry movement. Before the movement, and even during, there were the Blues poets and the Beat poets. Both groups also talked about concerning issues at the time. Though they do not always go into the mental processes of thought and inner emotions; rather, they go through the outward appearance of emotion. Their contributions should not be ignored. Their ability to be open about rebelling against the “common society” really put a groundbreaking pressure within literature. These movements also sparked questions and could very well also fall under the confessional poetry movement.

As confessionalist writing moved forward, alongside movements like the civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements, more authors and poets started to break the rigid shell placed on literature, what topics they thought they could discuss, and how deeply they could get into them. Moving forward, we have a large range of literature coming out of this movement. Two scholars and poets that were highly influential in their time and currently remain a strong voice in their communities today are Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) and Audre Lorde (1934-1992). Both have done a plethora of work, essays, poetry, articles, and so on, focusing on a wide range of topics and categories, like feminism, race, homosexuality, and much more. These two, among so many others during their time, continue to dive deep into those internal feelings and thoughts, no matter how harsh they might be, to cover topics that need to be discussed.

For example, Adrienne Rich, a well-known poet and feminist, wrote a poem called “Rape” in 1972. In this fast-paced and heart-pounding poem, Rich depicts a night where a woman, who was just raped, must go to a policeman and recall what had just happened to her:

And so, the time comes, you have to turn to him,

the maniac’s sperm still greasing your thighs,

your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess

to him, you are guilty of the crime

of having been forced. (11-15)

Continuing this confessionalist idea of openly expressing one’s consciousness and inner emotions, regardless of how hard they might be, is a pivotal aspect of the movement. As we see here, the power of these poems has grown since the initial beginnings of this movement in the 1950s. Furthermore, Rich also asks questions as to why rape is so difficult to discuss as a society but we still expect the victim to come forward so easily, and why does society not believe and honor the victim, but instead put the blame and guilt on them. The continuation of expansion and depth of the topics, details, sincerity, and truth being brought out of these types of poetry and literature continue to inspire and broaden the abilities for current and future authors to write and talk about.

In Audre Lorde’s poem, “The Black Unicorn,” Lorde discusses race, gender, sexuality, and feminism and how powerful one can be against what society may think. In the poem, Lorde searches for herself and the power she holds within a society that tries to oppress her:

The black unicorn was mistaken

for a shadow

or symbol

and taken

through a cold country

where mist painted mockeries

of my fury. (3-9)

This poem starts off the rest of the collection, which dives even deeper with the issues and topics Lorde does so well discussing. The black unicorn could be many things, but the idea of the black unicorn being people of color, being mistaken for just another part of society or a symbol to society of a certain stereotype or idea, and mocked, and Lorde pressing against all of that by saying they are not affecting “my fury” is extremely powerful. To take the concepts of society and how it’s norms portray those of a certain race, gender, or identity and not allow all of that to take over her or the groups she’s standing up for in the poem, demonstrates her inner emotion and belief in a strong way.

Both of these examples are just a small sample of the ever-growing body of confessional works that have been built out of the confessional movement of the 50s and 60s, where Plath, Sexton, and Lowell came out of.

*Conclusion*

After researching and analyzing poems from the confessionalist poetry era and seeing the aftermath shows its immense impact on literature as well as other fields. The ability to express one’s mind in an uncensored way, regardless of topic or how painful the detail, shows the capability an author can achieve with their writing, if they choose to do so. The revolutionary foundations the confessional poets placed ultimately changed literature forever. We can see, even today, that modern poetry and writing has grown even further in expression of the inner-self and discussions that can be provocative or hard to deal with at times.

This movement has even impacted other fields besides literature and English. Research has shown there are benefits in the expression of personal and emotional thoughts. In medical and social fields, such as different forms of therapy, social work, sociology, and psychology, the use of confessional writing has grown as a successful tool to recover and build from one’s traumatic and negative experiences and feelings. As one allows themselves to open their minds and write what they are thinking or dealing with internally, studies have found that releasing these tensions have displayed health benefits across the board.

The confessional poetry movement has grown larger than Plath, Sexton, and Lowell had probably imagined. To create a big enough wave that future generations have taken it to newer heights and different fields is extraordinary. The movement’s lasting impacts continue to drive current and future writers to express themselves, regardless of how rough the subject.

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