

# The Outlooks on Confessional Poetry

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
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## **THE OUTLOOKS ON CONFESSIONAL POETRY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The main aim of this thesis is to present the Confessional school of poetry starting by introducing its historical and social background of the late 1950s and 1960s Cold-War America and continuing with the development of the Confessional mode in the literary history. Hence, it will be necessary to define the term and point out its central features. Apart from the theoretical part I will examine the four most prominent poets – Robert Lowell, Jon Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. What is more, their best-known collections will be used to demonstrate and analyze the outlooks on Confessional poetry discussed in the first section.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis will cover the development and features of Confessional poetry as a distinguished poetic movement of postmodernist literature. It emerged in the United States during the late 1950s and lasted through the late 1960s. Among the most prominent poets associated with this poetic genre were Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath whose confessional works marked a turning point in the history of poetry. It has been described as poetry of the personal or of the “I” that focuses on private experiences and feelings about death, trauma, depression, sexuality and relationships, often addressed in autobiographical manner. It was initiated with the publication of Robert Lowell’s volume *Life Studies* (1959), Confessional book of poetry that was first labeled as such. The intention of this thesis is to show what kind of poetry this is, what differentiates it from the other styles, who are the key authors as well as its distinct characteristics, social and lyrical contexts and influences.

I have chosen to concentrate on this particular school of poetry because, like many of the postmodernist literary movements such as the Beat generation, it represents an anomaly in the myriad of poetic styles and forms. However, in my opinion, unlike the Beat poetry it is not sufficiently depicted nor discussed among literary scholars. Another reason I have decided to write about Confessionals is its prominent female poets, namely Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, who have greatly contributed to the rise of feminist movement and literature, as opposed to the Beat poetry that was principally male centric. I was also intrigued by its controversial content which boldly reveals the poet’s inner demons and deepest feelings and traumatic experiences. And while such content might have been condemned at the time, it introduced the importance of breaking and examining taboos.

The first section of the thesis will discuss some of the most important outlooks on Confessional poetry in theory. Firstly, I intend to place the poetic school in the historical, social and political contexts of the postwar America and proceed to discuss its development as a

specific literary genre in the postmodernist period. In addition, I will define the movement and present its most distinct traits. In the second part of the thesis I intend to apply those characteristics on the works of individual poets that represent the confessional mode the best. The poets and works I have chosen are Robert Lowell (*Life Studies*), John Berryman (*77 Dream Songs*), Anne Sexton (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back, All My Pretty Ones*) and Sylvia Plath (*Ariel*).

## **1. The outlooks on Confessional poetry**

### 1.1. The sociopolitical context

In order to get familiar with the outlooks on Confessional poetry, I will briefly introduce the sociopolitical atmosphere of the late 1950s and 1960s in America, marked by the aftermaths of World War II and its contrasting characteristics. On the one hand those were the years of Cold War, constant threat of nuclear weapons, the spread of anticommunism and economic uncertainty, but on the other technological development, commercialism, visual media and pop culture. Under these circumstances the period was marked by anxiety and retreatment to family and home. Nearly two-thirds of white US citizens moved to suburbs causing one of the biggest cultural shifts in America and shaping the new domestic ideology that caused many issues concerning gender roles. Women were especially affected by those new values where family and home were deemed their only preoccupations and started to express their frustrations with the history of oppression louder than ever before. (*Poetry of Liberation* 2-34).

This is evident in Confessional poetry, namely in the works of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, but especially in the prominent feminist book by Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that brings into focus the struggles and pressures of suburban housewives and sparks the

beginning of second-wave feminism. The feminist movement, along with the emergence of popular psychology and the need of self-improvement, helped in shaping the nation's and people's sense of identity, mostly expressed through countercultural and literary movements. Those postmodernist literary movements reacting to the social changes were The Beats, The Black Mountain Poets, Black Arts, The New York School, but most importantly for this thesis, Confessional Poets. (Poetry of Liberation 21-43) This sociopolitical context shaped the Confessional poetry regarding its feminist and antiwar content, combining personal themes with the social ones as well as the criticism of the Cold War and its desire to keep the realms of politics and art separate. (Fredman 2005: 242-243).

Overall, the sixties were the age of individualism, revolutions and inventive literary movements that, according to American literary scholar Morris Dickstein, created "*one of those deep-seated shifts of sensibility that alerts the whole moral terrain*". (Dickstein 1977: x) This conflict between traditional and authentic notion of the self often resulted in Confessional poet's mental breakdowns and the need to create their new poetic selves, which Dickstein commented on: "*The authentic person aims to become himself, not simply to be himself. The self must be created and won, not simply excavated.*" (Dickstein 1977:191) Therefore, contrary to many misconceptions and criticisms that deem Confessional poetry as egocentric, Confessional poets aim to remake and construct the new selves rather than just write about themselves.

After getting familiar with the social and political background of Confessional poetry and how it influenced its poets and their poetic content, in the next section I will present the literary atmosphere leading up to the period of Confessional movement.

## 1.2. Development of Confessional poetry

In this section, I want to address the origins of confession in literature and development of Confessional mode in the long history of different poetic methods with the intention of showing what differentiates Confessional poetry from other personal and autobiographical styles. The practice of confession in literature can be traced back to Europe and Augustine's *Confessions*, a documentation of his experiences, beliefs and feelings. It continues with Rousseau's *The Confessions* that established the confessional mode of searching for the real self and affirming one's existence as a specific literary genre. However, it is Romantic period that stands out when it comes to developing confessional mode in poetry. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth were among many poets that started to express their personal experiences and feelings through poetry. Particularly William Wordsworth, who combined Romanticism and autobiography in his *Prelude*, which made him, as Roy Pascal puts it: „the first autobiographer to realize ... that the deepest purpose of autobiography is the account of a life as a projection of the real self”. (Pascal 1960: 45) In America, the beginnings are traced in Thoreau's *Walden* and Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, both autobiographical and confessional documents of men who deliberately alienated themselves from society, in order to understand their place in it. (Chapter III: Confessional Poetry 78-85)

However, 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry moved away from confessional mode developing the impersonal approach in the new formalist movement called New Criticism. It emphasized focusing on the text, particularly poetry, and close reading without consideration of outside sources such as author's biography. The formation of the New Critical canon was influenced by T.S. Eliot and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal which he presented in his critical essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919). (Gill 2008: 15-16) But, as a direct opposite to New Criticism and T.S. Eliot's theory of impersonality, in late 1950s emerged Confessional mode, developing a new personal approach to writing poetry that was more intimate than ever



before. What distinguishes postmodernist Confessional poetry from the previous styles, is its risqué content which deals with shocking and traumatic subject matter once considered taboo; mental illness, sexuality, addictions, death and suicide, to name a few.

The difference between Romanticism and the Confession of 20th-century America can also be seen in poet's involvement in society which was affirmative in Romanticism. In contrast, Confessional poet in 20th-century America rejects his social role and searches for the alternatives. For example, Theodore Roethke prefers to live like a "lost son" in his eminent poem of the same name just like Sylvia Plath who becomes the lost daughter in her love-hate relationship with her late father. Likewise, Robert Lowell, in his destructive relationship with his family, ancestors and American culture, distances himself from society during the World War II and later joins the anti-Vietnam War movement. In other words, Confessionals do not conform to traditional and cultural values of postwar America, they reject the myth of American dream and criticize socially constructed roles, such as gender ones. (Chapter III: Confessional Poetry 84- 86)

Another major difference between Romanticism and Confessionalism is in the poetic self. The *I* in Romantic poetry is universal, generic and can represent many identities, whereas in the confessional the *I* plays the role of a character, it is "self-doubting" and stands between the reader and the poetic content. (Chapter III: Confessional Poetry 86-88) The poetic self is based on traumatic moments of poet's personal experiences but it is also a result of the period in which it was written, being under the stress of psychological crisis that marked the postwar American society – as demonstrated in the first section. Now that I have introduced the social and literary background of Confessionalism, in the following section I can focus on defining the term.

### 1.3. Definition of Confessional poetry

Before I discuss Confessional poetry in greater detail I should define the term, thus differentiating it from other postmodernist poetic styles and movements. In doing so, I will refer to some of the different scholarly definitions. In 1959 Robert Lowell published his groundbreaking collection *Life Studies*, taking a new direction in his poetic style by stepping away from impersonal and formal influences of New Criticism. Instead, the collection dealt with many of his personal experiences thereby breaking with former poetic tradition. (Dowling Price 2010: 5) However, the first one to identify and define this new confessional mode, was M.L. Rosenthal in his review of Lowell's *Life Studies*, entitled *Poetry as Confession*, labeling the collection "Confessional". He defined it as autobiographical, therapeutic and unflinchingly truthful, which was evident in "*the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings and psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies.*" (Rosenthal) Also, in the chapter Other Confessional Poets Rosenthal concludes that they tend to "*place the literal Self at the center of the poem*", but he also points out the importance of personal and political significance of confessional poetry noting that there is "*a magnificent fusion of private and universal motifs*" in the confessional poem. (Crosbie 1996: 51-53).

With this collection Lowell influenced many of his contemporaries such as Sylvia Plath who remarked upon the impact of *Life Studies* and Confessional movement: „*I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's Life Studies, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo.*" (Gill 2008: 20) It is evident from Plath's quote that it is the unprecedented depiction of personal traumatic experiences what makes Confessional movement so influential and different from preceding genres or other postmodernist movements. Allowing poets to reveal extremely personal and uncensored details of their lives

and psyche, confessional poetry serves as a means of expressing poet`s frustrations, desires and feelings, almost serving as a therapy. What`s more, it allows poets to connect to their audience on a deeper level since their experiences can resonate with human life in general. (Jahan 2015: 3-6)

Apart from Rosenthal`s definition and understanding of the term confessional, there are few of other literary critics who attempted to give their own definitions of Confessional poetry. I will briefly present some of them with the intention of broadening our own understanding of the term. For instance, in his essay *Sincerity and Poetry* (1966), Donald Davie raises some noteworthy questions about sincerity in poetry. He states that, by being honest and sharing their traumas with the audience, Confessional poets are taking a risk by acknowledging their experiences, ideas and emotions as meaningful, and that risk „*has artistic and political significance.*” Similarly, W. David Shaw`s essay in *In Memoriam and the Rhetoric of Confession* highlights two contrasting characteristics of Confessional poetry – personal and rhetorical. He refers to Davie`s essay on sincerity when he describes confessional poets as artists “*trying to break out of the world of rhetoric*” and bring together “*the world of literature*” and the “*adjacent world of biography, history and geography.*” In doing so, confessional poet becomes his/her own “*biographer, cultural commentator and public speaker.*” (Crosbie 1996: 47-49)

Furthermore, in his essay *Modernism*, Alvarez classifies confessional poetry as an “extremist” poetry. As I previously stated, Confessional poet is a non-conformist and tries to distance himself from artificial social constructions. However, Alvarez argues that the postmodernist poet is not, in fact “*alienated, but simply lost*” because there is no religious or political ideology he can rely on like the previous generation. Therefore, he defines Confessional poetry as non-Modernist, extremist and both personal and political in nature. In addition, Robert Phillips acknowledges its open form and points out, what he considers to be

key features of Confessional poetry in his book *The Confessional Poets* (1973). Those are “moral courage”, as both Davie and Alvarez already recognized, “the expression of personality”, extremist themes, “antiestablishment” and the lack of “barriers between the reader and poet”. He concludes by describing Confessional poets as alienated and sensitive generation exposing darkness of postwar American life. (Crosbie 1996: 49-54)

More recently, in his work *Crisis and Confession*, E.V. Ramakrishnan defines Confessional poetry as “highly political and contemporary mode, which conflates the personal and public, and which strategically constructs a social and political critique.” Accordingly, by confessing their personal struggles, Confessionals simultaneously address concerns and troubles of others, which makes their content universally relevant. Finally, Laurence Lerner in his book *Frontiers Fiction* (1988), lists three dominant characteristics of Confessional poetry. According to him, this mode contains a “factual element”; the experiences it describes are often “sordid and degrading” and “there is a peculiar and disturbing intensity in the language”. (Crosbie 1996: 54-57) All of these definitions introduced some of the main characteristic of Confessional poetry which I will discuss more thoroughly in the following section.

#### 1.4. Features of Confessional poetry

So far, I have presented Confessional poetry addressing its sociopolitical context, literary development and definitions, therefore demonstrating that Confessional movement represented an important change in American literary tradition. In the following lines, I will concentrate on its most important features, regarding its unique content.

In *Cambridge Introduction to 20th Century American Poetry*, Christopher Beach describes the content of confessional poems, stating its essence clearly: “The poems were presented in the first-person voice with little apparent distance between the speaker and the poet; they were highly emotional in tone, autobiographical in content, and narrative in

*structure*". (Beach 2003: 154-155) Such content clearly stems from the need for self-expression in the postwar America where social norms encouraged the suppression of psychological needs, desires, grief and traumatic experiences. However, Confessional poets found the way to express them freely in the form of Confessional poetry. (Beach 2003: 154-156) In other words, Confessionalism was often used as a form of self-therapy, focusing on extremely personal content and dealing with damaged, imbalanced and suffering lyrical subject through which poets attempted to create their new and healthier selves. In his reply to Anne Sexton's application for his seminar on creative writing, Robert Lowell reveals why Confessionals feel the need for self-disclosure: "*Of course your poems qualify. They move with ease and are filled with experience, like good prose. ... You stick to truth and the simple expression of very difficult feelings, and this is the line in poetry that I am most interested in.*" (Horvath 2005: 13-14)

Furthermore, it is important for Confessionals to connect with their audience which they accomplished by breaking and examining taboos like mental illness, sexuality, addictions, gender roles, perversions, death or suicide. The lyrical subject, as already stated, is often alienated and lost, expressing resistance towards the establishment. Because of this defiance and inability to comply with the status quo, many Confessional poets suffered from mental illness and most of them committed suicide— Sylvia Plath (oven gas poisoning), Anne Sexton (car gas poisoning) and John Berryman (jumping off a bridge). (Beach 2003: 155) Even though, most of these poets discovered Confessional style as a therapy, the high suicide rate has proven that poetry is not a cure for mental illness, merely a distraction. Nevertheless, they did succeed in creating a unique poetic style which placed a great value in psychological concept of the self. For this reason, however, many critics view this lyrical self as a manifestation of poet's ego, deeming the confessional style as narcissistic or egocentric. In my opinion, this is not the case. The foregoing discussion has stated that Confessionals valued a therapeutic side of writing, wanting to free themselves from their sufferings by becoming better versions of themselves.

Therefore, I view Confessional poetry as an attempt at constructing rather than exposing the self. (Horvath 2005: 9-10)

Moreover, in her essay *Illness as a Metaphor*, Susan Sontag attempted to explain why so many poets suffered from depression, nervous breakdowns or committed suicides by arguing that madness is a disease of the 20th century: "*In the twentieth century, the repellent, harrowing disease that is made the index of a superior sensitivity, the vehicle of 'spiritual' feelings and critical discontent, is insanity*". (Sontag 1978: 35) Unlike their predecessors, Confessionals have no religious beliefs or any real sense of self, which Lowell confirmed when he said: "*Freud seems the only religious teacher .... Freud is a prophet .... he continues both the Jewish and Christian tradition, and puts it, may be in a much more rational position*". (Alvarez 1965: 40) Apart from madness, self-therapy and construction of the self, confessional poetry centered around the issues such as familial and marital turmoil, child neglect or mental disorders caused by deep childhood traumas. Thus, according to Diane Middlebrook - biographer of Anne Sexton - one of the prominent features of Confessional poetry was the content dealing with the pressures of middle-class family lives, especially those put upon the housewives. (Beach 2003: 155)

These features are what makes confessional poetry simultaneously controversial, original and influential. Confessional mode continued to influence writers through the 1980s and beyond. In fact, Post-Confessionalism became the dominant mode of American poetry. "*Poems dealing with relationships, sex, marriage, and domestic life became so common in the wake of the confessionals that they were no longer seen as daringly provocative*." (Beach 2003: 155) Some of the more prominent contemporary Post-Confessional poets are Louise Gluck and Sharon Olds. This brings me to the next section where I will finally introduce the key authors of Confessional school and their most distinguished works.

## 2. Confessional poets and collections

This section provides a brief introduction to Confessional poets and those who were associated with the school before I move on to discuss the most prominent ones in the following subsections. Previously, I have established that the shift from New Criticism towards the new Confessional mode officially begins in the late 1950s with Robert Lowell's collection *Life Studies* which M. L. Rosenthal labelled "Confessional". According to him, Lowell removed the mask that many poets have previously hidden behind. In other words, poets never truly revealed their real selves until Lowell decided to use his poetry as a confession, showing the true self, including its bad and shameful parts. However, beginnings of Confessional poetry can be traced even before, in writers such as John Berryman and his famous collection *Dream Songs*. (Beach 2003: 154-167)

The Confessional movement lasted until the mid-1960s and included many poets following Berryman's and Lowell's example, the most prominent being W.D. Snodgrass with his collection *Heart's Needle*, Sylvia Plath with *Ariel* and Anne Sexton with her collections *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones*. (Beach 2003: 154-167) Other contemporary poets, or near-contemporaries, that were grouped with the Confessional school and proved to be huge influences are Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich. Often connected to Confessionals was also Allen Ginsberg, a renowned poet of the Beat Generation which, as a contemporary movement, had a great influence on Lowell and the whole Confessional style. This connection is based on the portrayal of personal struggles and often obscene content they had in common. Such was Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, famous for its controversial and self-revelatory content dealing with his homosexuality, madness and drug abuse.

Another poet who was particularly often linked with the Confessional group was Theodore Roethke. Like most of the Confessionals, Roethke suffered from severe psychological disorder and mental breakdowns. He was also a nonconformist, introspective and hypersensitive. Consequently, his poetry is self-analyzing and confessional, but according to Robert Phillips, author of *Confessional Poets*, Roethke should not be labeled as a confessional because in his poems he refers only to the “*interior of self*”, *he does not refer to history or the exterior world.*” (Crosbie 1996: 45-46) Moreover, according to Diane W. Middlebrook, whom I previously mentioned, “*the only Confessional poets are Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and W.D. Snodgrass.*” Her argument is based on many similarities those poets share with each other: “*What they had in common were several definitive social conditions. First, they had developed close personal affiliations. Lowell was the teacher and mentor of Snodgrass, Sexton, and Plath, who also knew each other’s work very well. Second, they had all been through early psychological breakdowns and treatment, following rather early marriages. Third, all four poets had become parents – of daughters, as it happens – not long before writing their confessional poems...*” (Parini 1993: 636)

However, Snodgrass actually rejected the confessional label saying: “*It’s a term I dislike intensely, because I don’t think I was doing anything very different from what poets have done for years....*” He also stated that he did not use the poetry as a form of self-therapy because he wasn’t sure it could really serve the purpose, instead, he just wanted to capture his feeling at the time in hope that his estranged daughter would eventually read them. (Holladay 2009) Nevertheless, Snodgrass remained a prominent figure in Confessional Poetry, even winning a Pulitzer Prize for his first collection *Heart’s Needle*, and influencing his contemporaries, especially Lowell, Sexton and Plath.



Both Sexton and Plath played an important role in Confessional movement as great female writers, discussing feminist themes, questioning gender roles and portraying the lives of women in postwar America. Plath's *Ariel* became one of the key texts of the American confessional school of poetry and with her collection *The Collected Poems* (1982) she became the first poet to win a Pulitzer Prize posthumously. Unfortunately, her long struggle with depression and frequent mental breakdowns inevitably led to her suicide. Likewise, Anne Sexton suffered the same fate when she eventually lost the battle with mental illness. Because of her ill mental state her doctor suggested writing a poetry which gave her a way to channel her struggles into something productive. This resulted in a successful poetic career and brought her the Pulitzer Prize. (Horvath 2005: 9-19)

After discussing some important outlooks on Confessional poetry in theory, in the following sections I shall apply them on the works of the four most prominent Confessionals: Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

### 2.1. Robert Lowell: *Life Studies*

Before Confessionalism, Robert Lowell was writing classical poetry with traditional meter and rhyme under the influence of modernist poets like Yeats, Eliot and Pound as well as New Criticism. However, he soon felt the need to abandon the style describing it “*distant, symbol-ridden, and willfully difficult*”. He felt that his poems became too rhetorical and meaningless, as he stated: “*My own poems seemed like prehistoric monsters dragged down into a bog and death by their ponderous armor, ... I was reciting what I no longer felt*”. (Wallace 1989: 35-36) Instead, he began to write from personal experience in much looser forms, meters and colloquial diction, following the footsteps of young poets like W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman and Allen Ginsberg. Apart from being divorced, imprisoned for a year as a

conscientious objector and having crisis of faith, Lowell suffered from severe manic depression and was consequently frequently hospitalized. As a result, he wrote *Life Studies* (1959) which, according to many critics, founded the Confessional movement and marked a watershed in the direction of modern poetry. The book was named groundbreaking by the Academy of American Poets and won the National Book Award for Poetry.

The collection is divided into four parts, but only the last one contains confessional poems and carries the title *Life Studies*. Several of these poems deal with Lowell's reminiscence of his childhood and family dysfunctions while others reveal his personal struggles with mental illness, alcoholism, hospitalization, and marriage. The ones that stand out, among many, are *Skunk Hour*, *Home After Three Months Away* and *Walking in Blue*. He also writes about his affection towards his grandfather in poems like *My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow*, *Dunbarton* and *Grandparents*. Furthermore, it is important to mention his friendship with Elizabeth Bishop and William Carlos Williams who, among others, helped him find and shape a suitable personal poetic style which he struggled with while writing *Life Studies* due to his bipolar disorder, as he later revealed: „*When I was working on Life Studies, I found I had no language or meter that would allow me to approximate what I saw or remembered. Yet in prose I had already found what I wanted, the conventional style of autobiography and reminiscence. So, I wrote my autobiographical poetry in a style I thought I had discovered in Flaubert, one that used images and ironic or amusing particulars.*” (Hamilton 1982)

However, the most significant influence on *Life Studies* was his childhood. He was born into a family dominated by unstable relationship between his apathetic father and imperious mother, both of whom took pride in their prominent familial roots and Puritan beliefs, wanting to pass them on to their son. The pressure to conform to his parent's expectations was just the beginning of his mental turmoil that eventually developed into depression, divorce and alcoholism along with religious and political transformations, Oedipus Complex and

simultaneous respect and hatred towards his own father, all of which he frankly discusses in *Life Studies*. (Marcus 2016)

The fourth part of the collection begins with the particularly biographical poem *My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow* that focuses on Lowell's affection for his grandfather and the distance from his own parents, expressed already in the first line: "*I won't go with you! I want to stay with Grandpa!*" (Lines: 1) The poetic subject is expressing the raw emotion Lowell developed in his new style: "*it is a child's guileless cry, ... But it is also a hint of the defiance to come. For it is the poet's own voice we are hearing, and his preference for his grandfather over his parents is a symptom of domestic misery*". (Kirsch 2008: 3) Accordingly, this poem introduces the motifs of depression and anxiety that are central to the book's narrative.

The last and the most famous poem of the collection is *Skunk Hour*, dedicated to his friend and fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop. In the poem Lowell confesses that his life is meaningless for he lost the faith, courage and desire to live. He refers to this depressing period as a "skunk hour". The first six stanzas of the poem are pessimistic and express narrator's disturbed mind, loneliness and spiritual crisis: *My mind's not right // ...my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat. ... / I myself am hell; / nobody's here—*. (Lines 30-36) However, in the last two stanzas mother skunk appears with her cubs as a symbol of persistence and survival: "*She jabs her wedge-head in a cup / of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail, / and will not scare.*" (Lines:46-48) Essentially, the speaker's mental illness, his loneliness and anxiety represent the general modern man living in a postwar America who, unlike mother skunk, lacks the inner energy to fight his demons. (Marcus 2016)

After getting familiar with Lowell's life and the motivations behind his poetic style we can conclude that the most intimate and traumatic life experiences can result in the creation of

great poetry such as *Life Studies*. He was the first to remove the mask thereby living up to his label as “The Father of Confession”. (Marcus 2016)

## 2.2. John Berryman: *77 Dream Songs*

Even though the Confessional breakthrough came with Lowell’s *Life Studies* because of its confessional label, he was influenced by his friend and fellow poet John Berryman and his best-known collection *The Dream Songs* which brought him the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Berryman’s poetic breakthrough came with the publication of the collection’s first volume, *77 Dream Songs*. In this volume, the poet captures his lifelong struggles with depression and alcoholism that eventually led to his suicide. (Beach 2003: 164-167) His emotional distress and heavy drinking were consequences of a great loss he suffered at the age of 12 when his father shot himself outside his window. This traumatic event haunted him throughout his life thus appearing as a recurrent theme in the *Dream Songs*. For example, in *Dream Song 143*, he wrote: “*That mad drive [to commit suicide] wiped out my childhood. I put him down/while all the same on forty years I love him/stashed in Oklahoma/besides his brother Will.*” (Berryman 1969)

The collection is a compilation of two poetry books, *77 Dream Songs* (1964) and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968). In total, the collection consists of 385 poems which he wrote over 13 years. During this period, his mental and physical health deteriorated because of the alcoholism and marital distress. In the words of his close friend Saul Bellow: “*The poems somehow got written amid the exuberant highs and the inevitable breakdowns, both nervous and marital. ... he divided his life among drinking sprees, hospitalizations, and university classes.*” (Benfey 2015)

Each poem in the collection has a sonnet-like structure composed in three stanzas and eighteen lines, mostly written in free verse. They portray the character named Henry, a white

middle-aged American, resembling John Berryman, who talks about himself in first, second and third voice, but is also referred to as Mr. Bones by an unnamed friend. Berryman himself describes the character: "*Henry has a hard time. People don't like him, and he doesn't like himself. In fact, he doesn't even know what his name is. His name at one point seems to be Henry House, and at another point it seems to be Henry Pussycat. . .He [also] has a 'friend' ... and I use friend in quotation marks because this is one of the most hostile friends who ever lived.*" (Berryman 2014: xiii) What is more, Henry is alienated, distressed and self-destructive, but also greedy and petulant, essentially resembling Freud's Id. Following this, his friend could be interpreted as a representation of Henry's conscience and their dialogue as a session between a therapist and his patient. Through Henry, Berryman is offloading his personal baggage; father's suicide, alcohol abuse and sexual guilt. (Athey 199)

However, despite their similarities Berryman claimed that Henry does not represent him and that the collection should not be interpreted as an autobiography, stating that: "*The poem then, whatever its cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, ... who has suffered an irreversible loss...*" (Plotz 1988) Still, in other statements Berryman does acknowledge some similarities: "*Henry does resemble me, and I resemble Henry; but on the other hand I am not Henry. You know, I pay income tax; Henry pays no income tax...*" (Ellman & O'Clair 1973) Whether he identified with Henry or not, it is undisputable that through his rants and insightful observations, Berryman created one of the most interesting characters in the postmodernist literature.

Furthermore, apart from his personal struggles, one of Berryman's biggest poetic inspirations was American spoken English. Studying Mencken's *The American Language*, playing old-blues albums, rereading Whitman and Dickinson, listening to broadcast of Adlai Stevenson and Eisenhower, he became a connoisseur of his native tongue. Hence, *The New York Times* described his poetic style as "*jaunty, jazzy, colloquial ... full of awkward turns and*

*bent syntax*". (Athey 1999) He understood that American language is a mixture of many linguistic origins: oral and literary, black and white, immigrant and native, musical and political, etc. Berryman wanted to experiment with language, just like Whitman in *Song of Myself*, which he used as a model for his collection. (Benfey 2015) He also drew inspiration from folklore, children`s rhymes, idioms and slang, developing both humorous and profound, complex and sometimes perplexing poetic style which he described as "*hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry*", (Berryman 2014: xvii) adding that "*these songs are not meant to be understood, ... /They are only meant to terrify & comfort.*" Berryman Dream Song 366: Lines: 16-17)

### 2.3. Anne Sexton: *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones*

Encouraged by her therapist, Anne Sexton started writing poetry as a coping mechanism for her mental illness, providing her with something productive to focus on and prolonging her life for a little longer before she committed suicide. Enrolling in a poetry course, she met many fellow poets who inspired her and helped her in developing successful poetic career. (Crosbie 1996: 81) For instance, Lowell was Sexton`s poetry instructor and helped her with the editing of her first book. Sexton was also influenced by Berryman and even though she did not know him personally, she was aware of his work and referred to it in her poetry. However, it was Snodgrass`s *Heart`s Needle* that had profound influence on her writing; it inspired her famous poem *The Double Image*, and essentially prompted her to adopt the confessional style which she stated in an interview: "*If anything influenced me it was W. D. Snodgrass' Heart's Needle.... It so changed me, and undoubtedly it must have influenced my poetry. At the same time everyone said, 'You can't write this way. It's too personal; it's confessional; .... But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission.*" (Marx 30-39).

What is more, Sexton developed a friendship with Sylvia Plath and their influences on each other lasted for a long time. Plath even told in an interview how much she admired Sexton as a poet: “*I think particularly the poetess Ann Sexton [sic], who writes about her experiences as a mother, ... who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth....*” (Gill 2008: 20) Leslie Ullman, in her book *American Poetry in the 1960s*, observes that both poets “*firmly grounded the Confessional movement in a more direct and intense use of the personal*” and more importantly they “*broke ground for women writers and also expanded experiential territory for all writers by making female experience and sensibility not only visible but powerful subjects for poetry* “. (Crosbie 1996: 16-17) She was the first one to introduce issues specific to women into poetic discourse such as menstruation, abortion and post-partum depression, making the first step towards acknowledging that no part of woman’s body or her struggles should be shameful or obscene. Other themes include her battle with depression, suicidal tendencies, despair and isolation, as well as her relationships with her husband and children.

Sexton’s struggles with mental illness are addressed in her first book *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) which recounts the experiences “*of madness and near-madness, of the pathetic, well-meaning, necessarily tentative and perilous attempts at cure, and of the patient’s slow coming back into the human associations and responsibilities which the old, previous self still demands*” (James Dickey). (Colburn (1988: 63) In her second collection, *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton continues her determination to break taboos, accompanied with the usage of melodic rhythm and striking imagery. Her third book *Live or Die* (1966) is a fictionalized account of her recovery that won a Pulitzer Prize. Both collections primary focus on her experiences with death and the deaths of her loved ones - her “pretty ones”- as well as her suicide contemplations. (Beach 2003: 162-164)

In *Bedlam and Part Way Back* Sexton retails her journey into madness, consequent institutionalization and ultimate recovery, including the deaths of her parents, her relationship with her daughters and suicidal tendencies. However, the collection is not as autobiographical as it may seem. Sexton connects facts with imagination and presents herself through multiple speakers. As we have already seen, in the case of Berryman's *Dream Songs*, both readers and critics frequently equate confessional poetry with autobiography, forgetting that poems are not in fact memoirs, but works of fiction. Therefore, aside from being Confessional poet, Sexton described herself as a "storyteller" who differentiates poetic from literal truth.

The essential trait of Confessional poetry is, in fact, its unprecedented depiction of controversial themes, that simultaneously disturb and represent its readers. According to that, *Bedlam and Part Way Back* represents female experiences, mostly in relation to mental illness and creativity. She remarked upon this connection between her gender and her creativity in an interview: "I think they are really very closely allied... It's within a woman to create, to make order, to be an emotional, full human being." (Crosbie 1996: 83) Furthermore, the collection represents poet's struggle for self-definition and her determination to continue the usage of the confessional poetic mode which she addresses in the first poem of the collection's second part *For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further*. The poem is addressed to John Holmes, Sexton's poetry instructor at the time who criticized her confessional poetic style and advised her against using it, but she stayed determined in doing so. (Crosbie 1996: 82-99)

In addition, the themes of self-definition and women's experience are central in her famous poem *Her Kind*. In the poem Sexton identifies herself with three kinds of women: "possessed witch" who is "not a woman quite", a "misunderstood" homemaker who "fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves" and a "survivor" who "is not ashamed to die". Through the portrayal of these women, Sexton criticizes social construction of gender roles and identifies negative consequences it has on women like alienation and identity-negation. In representation



of her experiences and women in general she uses the strong imagery, language of folklore and fairytales. Overall, Anne Sexton has left a great mark on both Confessional poetry and feminist literature, being the first poet to introduce personal and, at the time, controversial female subjects that still resonate with women all over the world. (Crosbie 1996: 94-95)

#### 2.4. Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*

In her lifetime, Sylvia Plath has only published one collection of poems, *The Colossus*, and the novel *The Bell Jar*, but her posthumous publication consisted of collections *Ariel*, *Letters Home* and *Journals*, among other stories and sketches, making her one of the leading figures of the Confessional movement. In her Confessional poems, Plath writes about her traumatic life; her psychological turmoil, turbulent marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes and unresolved issues with her parents. She uses intense, violent and often disturbed images coupled with playful alliteration and rhyme. And, even though at times, she romanticizes death and self-harming it becomes overshadowed by emotional authenticity and astonishing sincerity. (Gill 2008: ix) Former American Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky described her poems more eloquently: “*Thrashing, hyperactive, perpetually accelerated, the poems of Sylvia Plath catch the feeling of a profligate, hurt imagination, throwing off images and phrases with the energy of a runaway horse or a machine with its throttle stuck wide open. All the violence in her work returns to that violence of imagination, a frenzied brilliance and conviction.*” (Pinsky 1989)

Moreover, as a female author writing between first two waves of modern feminism, Plath expresses her rejection and anger towards socially constructed female roles thereby influencing other feminist writers. For example, in the poem *Ariel*, she discloses the war on genders and regains her poetic self. Being a successful writer and a mother in a postwar America, she did not fit into these prescribed roles. However, all the pressures that weighted on her - being a woman in a patriarchal society, suffering from bipolar disorder, marital distress,

childbearing- resulted in an everlasting poetry that manages to make us feel less alone in our own personal struggles. (Gill 2008: 15)

Such impact is realized in her most notable book of poems *Ariel* (1965). The collection deals with personal issues of suicide, sex, her children, and especially complicated relationship with her ex-husband and deceased father. Poems like *Lady Lazarus*, *Ariel*, *Tulips* and *Daddy* are stunning in their originality, wit, brutality and descriptions of mental illness. Many of those poems Plath wrote after her husband had left her for another woman, documenting her rage, despair, love and vengeance. They also include recurring confessional themes such as mental illness, and suicide which are often set in relation to broader social themes. The poems express the climate of the postwar America when personal revelations were simultaneously encouraged and shamed. This “double-vision”, as Nelson describes the decade of 1950s in America, is for instance represented in *Lady Lazarus* who must perform a striptease for which she is condemned. In addition, the collection includes several poems collectively referred to as *The Bee Poems* that essentially express Plath’s self-assertion as a woman. These include: *The Swarm*, *The Bee Meeting*, *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, *Stings* and *Wintering*. (Gill 2008: 19-58)

Among Plath’s most famous poems is certainly *Daddy* which is commonly understood to be about her late father Otto Plath. It is a brutal poem about their problematic relationship and the feeling of betrayal when he died. The speaker begins by saying that he “*does not do anymore*” and that she feels as she has “*lived like a foot*” in “*the black shoe*” of her father’s shadow for the past 30 years. She casts herself a victim and creates many different metaphors for her father, including black shoe, God, a Nazi, devil, and finally her husband. She displays a disturbing portrait of their marriage in the following lines: “*The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year, / Seven year, if you want to know*” (Lines 72-74). Yet, the speaker gets her revenge on both her father and husband by metaphorically killing them, indicated by the “*I’m through*” at the close of the poem. Death is, in fact, a recurrent theme in

this and many other Ariel poems which were hugely influenced by Emily Dickinson. They both share a preoccupation with death, but they also write from the perspective of women who find themselves trapped by the lack of opportunity. From this perspective, *Daddy* can also be interpreted as an allegorical representation of her fears of creative paralysis and her frustration with limited female creativity in a literary world led by men. Her main goal is to regain her creative identity taken by authoritative males in her life which she accomplishes in the following lines: “*So daddy, I’m finally through. / The black telephone’s off at the root, / The voices just can’t worm through*” (Lines 73-75). She plucked the phone out of the wall making clear her intention of establishing war to the rest of the world which ultimately makes *Daddy* a liberating poem of regaining one’s poetic self. (Gill 2008: 59-63)

In conclusion, Plath was a feminist writer disclosing war on genders and capturing a nature of female position in the patriarchal society as well as regaining her poetic “*P*”. In summary, writer Charles Newman believed, Plath “*evolved in poetic voice from the precocious girl, to the disturbed modern woman, to the vengeful magician, to Ariel—God’s Lioness.*” (Newman 1970: 55)

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to present a detailed overview of Confessional poetry, to introduce its key poets and examine the works that best reflect the Confessional mode. The poetic collections I have chosen to analyze were Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*, Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* as well as *All My Pretty Ones* and finally, *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath. The thesis considered some of the most significant aspects of Confessional school of poetry with the intention to show how much its legacy has contributed to literature in general.

In the first subsection, my aim was to show how this deeply personal and brooding content of Confessional style is the consequence of social and political atmosphere in the American postwar period which goes to show that Confessional style „*is not ahistorical or value free; it operates in particular time and place: postwar, Cold War and suburban America*“ (Gill 2008: 21) Second subsection demonstrated the development of the long history of Confession and how it led to forming a distinct poetic genre and the third one centered around the definitions of Confessional poetry. This led me to conclude that it is essentially the content and technique that differentiate confessional styles from the preceding ones.

In the practical part I aimed to apply the discussed theory to the authors and their poetry collections that best reflect the confessional period. I started with Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* because it was the first work of poetry labeled „Confessional“. Secondly, I examined *77 Dream Songs* by John Berryman for he was one of the poets who influenced Lowell's famous collection. They both struggled with depression, alcohol abuse, familial dysfunctions and childhood traumas. However, Berryman chose to confess his struggles through an imaginary character named Henry who became one of the most thought - provoking poetic subjects in postmodernism. Lastly, I introduced Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, two of the most influential female confessionals. In her engaging collections *To Bedlam* and *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton

deals with her severe depression as well as trial and tribulations of being a woman. Similarly, in *Ariel*, Plath stays determined in expressing her self-assertive femininity and accomplishes the balance between the brutal imagery and playful prosody, best demonstrated in the poem *Daddy*. In conclusion, it is safe to say that Confessional poetry left an indelible mark on both Confessional and feminist literature bringing to the forefront, in my opinion, two of the biggest struggles in the postmodernist period – being mentally ill and being a woman, but more importantly being both.

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