

## Sylvia Plath's Fits and Her Confessional Poetry

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**ABSTRACT:** Confessional poetry designates a type of narrative or lyric verse which deals with the factual and intimate mental and physical experience of a poet's own life. Much of this kind of poetry was written against the demand of impersonality by T.S. Eliot. Its subject matter is secular and so we do not find anything religious in it as in Augustine's 'Confessions' (AD 400). Confessional poetry, then, differs from Romantic poetry too, even though, the Romantic poets represent their own circumstances, experiences and feelings. It is so because in Confessional poetry, the poets give startling details including sexual experiences, private or clinical matters about themselves, mental anguish, drug-usage and suicidal impulses. It is the poetry which springs from the personal life of the poet. The poet expresses his/her private experiences, Alcoholism, Masturbation as well as, feelings of depression and suicidal attempts without any shame and fear. This sort of expression gives the poet a feeling of relief and truthfulness. The confessional poets adopt personal history or autobiography as their central theme and their method is that of direct expression. This style of writing is greatly associated with such poets as Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Confessional poetry gave a new direction to poetry and thus, influenced a good number of young poets. It may be safely said that these poets are not simply interested in recording their emotional-selves. They pay good attention to craft and construction of their poetry. They make their souls naked to get a psychic relief which is of great therapeutic value to them.

**Key Words:** Confessional poetry, psychic relief, Emotional-selves, private experiences, Alcoholism

### Introduction:

Coming back to Sylvia Plath's life and works a reader gets wonder-struck to see such a young woman with girlish features wholly dipped into a sea of confessional poetry. In her poetry Plath breaks the taboos that were not supposed to be broken by women writers in the fifties. For Plath this type of poetry provided the most intimate type of communication with her readers, creating a strong empathy with them. The whole range of Sylvia Plath's Confessional poetry is full of her exposure of her own life and her feelings. It is closely linked to her personal life including her father's death and her marriage, rather miss-marriage to Ted Hughes. These poems are touching and Confessional in style and construction as well. They express her lack of interest in life and show her great desire to die. Plath says what she is internally forced to say. She cannot help it. Even her husband, Hughes admits in an interview to 'The Paris Review' that Confession represents something that needs to be said. He further says that confessing is somehow similar to breathing and this is one of the reasons why Confessional poetry has become so valuable, because it speaks from the heart. M.L Rosenthal himself admits that one of the greatest themes of modernity and therefore, of the Confessional poetry, is the description of the poet's private life, especially when submitted to the stress of psychic crises. It is agreed upon by all hands that her contribution to English poetry is great. She published her first poem at the age of eight in the 'Boston Sunday Herald' the time round about her father's death. While she continued to write afterwards, she was a professional writer for only the last seven years of her short life span of about thirty years. During these seven years she had composed about two hundred and fifty poems, all burdened with imagination, pathos and imaginary. Considering her short life-span, we can say that she has contributed much to English poetry and her poetry is so rich that many of her poems can stand so high as the poetry of the great Classical and Romantic poets. One wonders how an immature person could give such great thoughts. Her poetry has even baffled great critics. Tim Kendall writes in his book 'Sylvia Plath. A critical study', "We are still learning how to read Plath's later work. Poetry offers few more challenging and unsettling experience." Elena Ciobanu expresses the same thoughts about Plath's poetry, when she says in her study 'Sylvia Plath's poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic self'. The essence of her poetic being has remained fundamentally unapprehended and the necessary aesthetics we need in order to understand Plath's poetics has not yet been invented. All this suggests that much of her poetry remains an enigma even till today. Here, like many other critics, Jocqueline Rose Comes to our rescue and she prescribes a safe course for us when she says in her book 'The Hunting of Sylvia Plath', "It is impossible to read Plath independently of the frame, the surrounding discourses, through which her

writing is presented. The word 'frame' in the statement of Rose surely means the biographical data concerning Plath's life and death. It is but natural that the critics largely should be driven to this point. So splendid poetry and so early a death give pertinent clues to these critics. She suffered depression all her life.

So, Plath's poetry in relation to her Psychic crises gives me the title of this paper. I got helped in this connection by Brian Cooper's book 'Sylvia Plath and the depression Continuum' which impressed upon me that she suffered fits of depression continuously. Jane Feinman also wrote a book called 'Ryme, Reasons and Depression' to this effect. Vanessa Thorpe is sorry for not helping Sylvia Plath in her worst days of depression for not helping her. He says, "I failed her. I was thirty and stupid" She was a promising child and she got her first poem published when aged eight only around the time when her father died. Otto Plath died shortly after a close friend had died of lung cancer. Otto Plath had become convinced that he too was suffering from lung cancer. He proved superstitious and did not seek treatment until his diabetes had progressed beyond cure. Her father's death affected Plath much. She had been raised as a Unitarian Christian and after her father's loss she remained ambivalent about religion throughout her life. There is no denying that one of Plath's main lyrical occupations was "Death". Her first volume of poetry 'The Colossus and other Poems' displays an obsession with estrangement, motherhood and destruction in contemporary world. In the poem 'Daddy' much of her anger is directed against her father whom she cities as a muse and target of scorn. Sylvia says,

O father, all by yourself

You are pithy and historical as the forum

And, then she confers historical and mythical allusions to Nazis and the Holocaust. In this way she offers depth and closeness to her psychic distress. In this poem, the speaker compares her father and husband with vampires saying they betrayed her and drank her blood dry.

The Vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a y ear

Seven, years, if you want to know

She tells her father to give up and be done. She even goes beyond it and says:

Daddy, Daddy you bastard

"Daddy" actually gives us a story for her volatile opinion of men. It gives us the roots of Plath's relationship with the first man of her life----her father. Moreover, she makes the use of Holocaust imagery in this poem and, in this way promotes the idea of an oppressor and an oppressed. Her father, being overbearing, is linked to a Nazi and she herself is linked to a Jew. One should not presume that she hated her father as such though she never missed his stern attitude. Commenting up her first nine years, she writes in one of her last prose pieces, 'they sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle- beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a white flying mith'. She gave these comments when she was mature in age, but in actual sense, this period of her childhood was never a 'myth' for her. This period had left a deep impression upon her heart.

Plath attended Smith College in 1950, where she excelled academically. This was rather a benign period for her after her childhood disturbance. She edited 'The Smith Review', and was awarded a much-coveted position as guest editor at 'Mademoiselle' magazine after her third year in the college. Unfortunately, the fit of depression came over her again and she slashed her leg to see if she had enough courage to commit suicide. We cannot say that she was turned mad but we cannot deny the fact that she was highly disturbed inwardly. Many of the events that took place that summer were used later in her semi-autobiographical novel 'The Bell Jar'. The heroine of the novel is surely the duplicate of Plath of this period.

She was treated for depression by electroconvulsive therapy. The fit was so great that Plath made her first medically documented suicide attempt by taking her mother's pills and then crawling under her house. This happened in August1953 when she was barely 21 years old. The theory of "cause and effect" fails here. She is a brilliant student and tender of age and cannot possibly be blamed of love sickness, often a precedent of light-mindedness. Then she spent about six months in psychiatric care under the guidance of Ruth Beuscher and received more and more electric and insulin shock treatment. Strange it seems that her stay at Melean Hospital was paid for by Olive Higgins, who had recovered from a mental breakdown herself. Her mental graph takes a zigzag structure, sometimes up and sometime down. She again feels good and she is talking in terms of literature, again productive. She works hard on her thesis 'The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoyevsky's Novels'. Thus, she graduated from Smith College with highest honors. It seemed strange that a depressed mind like that of Plath works hard on the works of Dostoyevsky, a man whose mind was fall of Hallucinations and who was often called mad. It shows that Plath's mind was an abnormal one, not in the negative sense but in positive sense. Certainly her mind was the one with above normal capacity. She was having a sensitive heart to feel in high measures anything good

or bad. This sensitivity of heart shook Plath's mind and soul from early childhood to her virtual end. Rather ended her life too soon. It was a period of less stress and strain for Plath and she got a scholarship to study at Newham College, where she actively wrote her poetry and got it published in the student newspaper "Varsity." Everyone can see that it was a period of 'ease' with her. She spent her first year winter and spring holidays travelling around Europe. She met poet Ted Huggins in February 1956 at a party in Cambridge and married him in June 1956. She returned to Newham to start her second year. Unfortunately, Plath, as well as her husband becomes interested in astrology and the supernatural. All this shows that the strain of light-mindedness was still there and that too on its upward motion .The couple moved to Boston where Plath took a job as a receptionist in the psychiatric unit of Massachusetts General Hospital. It shows some psychic tendency of Plath to be interested in psychiatric Hospitals. In the evenings she sat on seminars given by Robert Lowell and attended by such writers as Anne Sexton and Starbuck. Her 'fit' again comes over her and she openly discussed her depression with Lowell and told of her suicide attempts to Sexton. Here Sexton advised her to write from a more female perspective and Plath began to do so. Plath resumed psychoanalytic treatment. In 1959, the pair reached to New York State. Here she learns to be true to her 'Weird nesses' but still anxious to write confessionally from deeply personal and private material. How was she interested in Sexton. It is not so simple as to say that both of them were simply confessionalists. 'Ariel's' publication in 1965 precipitated her rise of fame and the critics saw the collection as the charting of Plath's increasingly desperation or death wish. She simply did not wish for death, she proved it by her suicide. She knew the art of 'dying'.

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