CONFESSIONAL POETRY

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Abstract

Confessional poetry means an autobiographical verse style that with unusual frankness exhibits personal dilemmas of poet. According to J.A. Cutton, in The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, Confessional poetry is a “record of a poet’s states of mind and feelings and his vision of life” (175). Primarily, from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, certain U.S. poets used this phrase.

Keywords: Confessional poetry, autobiographical, personal, emotional.

M.L. Rosenthal in his study of Robert Lowell's book Life Studies, coined the phrase Confessional poetry, by listing three characteristics of confessional poetry:

1. It should be autobiographical.
2. The style of the poem should demonstrate “painful immediacy”.
3. The speaker is to be a symbolic portrayal of mankind.

Robert Lowell deals with his divorce and emotional breakdowns in his books Life Studies (1959), and For the Union Dead (1964). Lowell’s sincerity had been inspired in part by Theodore Roethke’s deeply personal poetry and by that of the gay poet Allen Ginsberg in Howl (1956). Anne Sexton’s To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960) and All My Pretty Ones (1962) are other notable examples of confessional poetry, including poems on abortion and life in psychiatric wards; Dream Songs (1964) by John Berryman on intoxication and foolishness; poems in Ariel (1965) on suicide by Sylvia Plath; and Heart’s Needle (1969) by W.D. Snodgrass on his divorce. Often, the phrase is more broadly used in reference to some autobiographical or personal poetry, but its distinctive significance depends on the direct analysis of what were practically unmentionable kinds of private misery at the time of writing. Combined with the sympathy evoked by their high rates of suicide, the sincere strengths of confessional poets promoted a romantic ambiguity between literary greatness and inner sufferings in the readers.

Confessional poem is not just about family, sex, intoxication, folly or self-emphasis, but also about the directness with which these issues are dealt with. The poems of Snodgrass, Lowell, Sexton, and Sylvia, unflinching and typically harsh in their syntax and speech, contain a broad variety of tones from sad whisper to hectoring squawk. What they have in common is their sense of worn-on-the-sleeve self-revelation and their
artful simulation of sincerity which distinguishes them from other poems which integrate details of life. By relying on truth for the emotional validity of a poem, on actual circumstances and relationships, the poet makes an artifice of honesty. To put it another way, confessional poems lie like facts.

According to several poets, who write within this style, believe that Confessional poetry is not confession, but poetry. It has to be authentic to the literature and culture, but not always authentic to the life of the author. It must sound real. A Confessional poem mythologizes the personal life of a poet. As every other poem, it has fanciful elements. During war, the brother of Anne Sexton was not killed. Jerome Mazzaro does not have a twin sister who is a nun, but each one of them has poems that seem to suggest that such things are real.

Confessional poetry deals with the following themes: Mental illness, disorder, Parent-child conflict, Marriage, especially bad marriages; divorce, Autobiographies.


Confessional poetry movement includes poets such as Robert Lowell who is the father of this movement, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath. The face of poetry and culture itself was transformed by this movement, using the poet’s own perspective to tackle subjects that were deemed to be taboos by the society at that time. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, divorce, abortion, mental illness, and drug abuse were certainly not discussed in civilized society, they were rarely written about. Such courageous poets are seen as authors with some of the best poetry to emerge in the later 20th century. Their personal handling of unusual topics allowed poets to express themselves in poetry today, as they had never before imagined. There are a few ideas that will help make the most out of one’s writing, if one wants to write confessional poetry in publication hopes or as a means of relaxation.

Confessional poetry deals autobiographically with the private experiences and emotions. And it is beautifully constructed, breaking ground yet maintaining the conventional poetic structure. This is not light-hearted, funny or even inspiring. It’s moody, intense, filled with some of the harshest emotions a person can feel with dark undercurrents. The tradition of confessional poetry has had a profound influence on generations of authors, and continues until this day.

Works Cited


