From Confession to Death: A Study in the Poetry of

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton

By

Safiya Mohammed Al-Shamiri

Supervisor

Prof. Nasser Athamneh

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English Language and Literature

Department of English Language and Literature

Faculty of Arts

Yarmouk University

May 2012
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Thesis Examination Committee

Prof. Nasser Athannah (Chairman)
Dr. Ibrahim Duwoed (Member)
Dr. Khalid Baikahner (Member)
Dedication

With love and tenderness to:

My sweet, lovely mother, my great father, my dearest nearest brother, Dr. Mohammed Batwaih, my great teachers: Dr. Nirmala B. Nair, Dr. Ravi S. Nair, Dr. Vijayendra Bhas and friends.
Acknowledgements

Immediate thanks – of which there will never be enough – are owed to Professor Nasser Athamneh, who has been unfailing in his support and advice to me. At each step of writing, he nurtured the growth of this work. From the earliest and most inarticulate of drafts, I have been coached onward by him. I'm thankful to have him as my thesis director, and I'm so grateful to him.

I owe an incalculable debt of gratitude to Dr. Ibrahim Dawood, member of the committee, who was of great help and support during the writing of my proposal.

Immense thanks are owed to Dr. Khalid Belkhasher for his advice and insights that help to develop this work.

I owe an incalculable debt of gratitude to my teacher Dr. Ravisankar S. Nair, without him I would not have made it from the beginning, my thanks to him is inexpressible.

I have received much love and support from my family, and my friend Amel, without them I would have stopped everything earlier. I am extremely grateful for their help and interest.
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This study aims at exploring the theme of death in Plath's and Sexton's poetry. There is an obvious interest in death in their poetry and works, and dramatically both of them ended their lives by their own hands, committing suicide.

As human beings, we are unique in our awareness of death. "We know that we will die, and that knowledge invades our consciousness,.it will not let us rest until we have found ways, through rituals and stories, theologies and philosophies, either to make sense of death, or, failing that, to make sense of ourselves in the face of death" (Carel 12). Fearing our ultimate annihilation, we form belief systems to reassure us in the face of death. Religion provides us with elaborate rituals at times of death and faith assists believers at those crucial moments. No matter how useful this is, death remains a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death
is a universal truth. With these ideas in mind, Plath's and Sexton's poetry and lives seem unique, since both of them in their poetry, imagery in poetry and actual lives had been seeking to rush toward death. The power behind the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton is found in their ability to remain perpetually and actively open to life, even in the face of death. Both poets dealt with death as a theme or motif within their poetry to better understand their world, and their relationship to it. To tap into the very power of death is to serve propel the success of their images. This thesis is an attempt to understand Plath's and Sexton's fascination with death, in a culture that dedicates itself to "sanctity of life" (George 124). The thesis proposes two hypotheses about those poets' interest in death as theme in their poetry. First, the connection of the death-wish to female's desire for power and control, and second, using death as a tool to protest against human mortality. The proximity to death allows both poets to achieve unparalleled power in their poems. This latent power is always awaiting the reader to experience and breathe new life into their words rather than being held back by death.

I started with introducing the genre to which Plath's and Sexton's poetry belongs, namely, confessional poetry. Chapter one gives a brief introduction to different philosophical, cultural and psychological views about death from the ancient Greeks to the modern era. Chapter two provides the biographies of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and a brief survey of their works. In chapter three the theme of death in Plath's and Sexton's poetry is treated with Freud's ideas and thoughts about death in mind. Finally the thesis closes with a retrospection that offers my closing thoughts on death as a theme in Plath's and Sexton's poetry.
Introduction

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton though separated by four years in the time of their birth established a strong friendship and a poetic kinship between them. In poetry lies their greatest and most interesting similarity. The subject matter of their poetry, as well as the shadows cast upon that poetry by their deaths, had led to their poetry remaining vibrant and crucial to 20th century American poetry. The way in which they died (suicide) has made more dramatic concern for the reading public, and it figures prominently in the examinations of their poetry, and how it is read. This status is not the end-all approach to their poems, but it is an element of Plath and Sexton scholarship.

The impact of Plath’s and Sexton’s deaths upon their poems is as important as their view and use of death in creating poetry that remains alive, and forever pushing itself into the future. Plath and Sexton incorporated death as a tool in their writing, using the images and residual influence of death to understand life and thus have control over their own decisions, lives, and produce poems of extreme energy. To read the poems of either Sexton or Plath is to be placed forthwith into the struggle to understand death, which both dominated and liberated the poets’ lives and their poetry.

To put the readers in the mood of this work and to help understand Plath’s and Sexton’s work it will be useful to start with a brief introduction to confessional poetry, a type of poetry which both Plath and Sexton wrote.
Confessional Poetry:

Rejected yet confessing out the soul
to conform to the rhythm of thought
in his naked and endless head.

[Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"]

The confessional school in American poetry denoted a genre of highly expressive poets, who wrote the majority of their work between the 1950s and the 1970s. Confessional poetry is thought to begin with the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959. Lowell is credited as the founder of confessional poetry, it has been said that his "intensity and force redeemed contemporary poetry" (Perkins 408).

Any discussion of confessional poetry must begin with M.L. Rosenthal. Not only because he is the self-proclaimed originator of the label, but he is also the "most prolific critic" (Phillip 54) on the subject, authoring at least seven individual reviews, articles, and books about the poetry he first described as the "poetry of confession" (Phillip 78). In his book *The New Poets* (1963), Rosenthal stated that "the term 'confessional poetry' came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, and perhaps it came to the minds of others just as naturally " (25).

Confessional poets balance strong emotions with imagery, using the personal to express reaction to common situations or emotions. Imagery becomes the element that balances the personal, as imagery uses archetypal and dream material (Phillip 120). Using human
experience such as relationships, discovering sexuality, parenthood, growing up, and death, things all people share, confessional poetry links personal events to those of human experiences (Phillip 120).

The confessional group consists of five poets: W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath. The major confessional volumes are Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* (1959), Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* (1964), and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1965) which was written in 1962. Confessional poems are intensely personal, highly subjective. ‘I’ in the poem is the poet and nobody else. The themes are nakedly embarrassing and focus too exclusively upon the pain, anguish and ugliness of life at the expense of its pleasure and beauty. The confessional poets were also influenced by, and related to, a number of their contemporaries, including Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich and Theodore Roethke (Phillip 60).

Confessional poetry began with poets who dealt with emotions and topics such as depression and suicide. Beginning with Robert Lowell and continued with his students Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, confessional poetry began to reveal struggles with these types of emotions and raised an awareness of the complexity of these troubling afflictions. David Perkins, author of *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*, established that: "Confession indicates a poetry, in which the expression is personal, or is conventionally accepted as personal, and reveals experience or emotions that are more or less shocking, hatred of one's parents, children, spouse, or self, lust voyeurism, suicidal fantasies, madness, horror and fascination with death" (410).
The expression of deep emotions, or personal confession influenced many poets and changed the subject matter and focus in modern poetry. Confessional poetry operates on the assumption that no subject is off limits to the poet. "The connection to the personal allows confessional poetry to be mode of revelation. The inclusion of a personal confession of feeling, emotion, or action reflects the author's self" (Philip 63). This intensified link to self sets confessional poetry apart from most of the forms that preceded it, and allows for a more personal connection to emotions both for the reader and for the reader.

Many of the subjects that the confessional poets chose to write about are part of common experience, including death, childbirth, and other emotional situations which many readers can understand and appreciate. Such poetry is self-revelatory in nature. It seeks to reveal the poet's state of mind and feelings and his or her vision of life. Though this poetry tends to offer a very personal and subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings, ideas, and anguish, it also addresses issues which have universal significance. "Confessional poetry seeks to enact tension in the psyche of the poet. Needless to say, confessional poetry initiated a new direction in American poetry, and influenced a good number of young poets", (Rosenthal 19) like Sharon Olds, Kim Addonizio and others.

The poetry of this group of confessional poets (Lowell, Plath and Sexton) is characterized by homogeneous practices that is, they all employed similar strategies, style, diction, and they all wrote autobiographical poetry (Rosenthal 120). In many respects all poetry is confessional, insofar as it is a record of a poet's state of mind and feelings and vision of life, but the confessional group is distinguished by their method of recording life, and the quality of life they describe (Cuddon 152). The confessional poets then may be defined as a
small group of twentieth-century poets who wrote first person accounts of their (often powerful) experience, and who attempted to address personal and public issues in their writings. "Confessional poetry is a branch of modern poetry. There is no place either for religion or morals in this poetry. The poet does not expect any redemption or retribution as there is no remorse. It is just that they bare their souls to get a psychic relief. It is of some therapeutic value" (Philip 19).

Confessional poetry also symbolizes to the meaning and consequence of personal experience, ideas and emotions, and such gesturing has artistic and political significance. In *In Memoriam and the Rhetoric of Confession*, David Shaw lists the "characteristic features of confessional writing" (80). One characteristic is the personal, and often private nature of confessional writing; another is its "polemical nature"; the confessor, Shaw adds, is "often the advocate in disguise" (83). A "genuine confessional poem," according to Rosenthal, achieves the "fusion of the private and the culturally symbolic" (81). Confessional poetry is "poetry of suffering," Rosenthal observes, which expresses a "heightened sensitivity to the human predicament in general" (130).

Phillip mentioned other characteristics of confessional writing including characteristics which Rosenthal also mentioned, such as "moral courage", the subjective presentation of the "afflicted protagonist" and extremist themes, the "expression of the personality", "anti establishment" ideas, and the lack of barriers between the reader and the poet (171). After discussing each of the distinguishing characteristics of confessional poetry, Philips concludes that these poets are a "magnificent" group who has "penetrated to the heart of darkness; that is American life" (179). He compares the confessional poets to the discontented and alienated post-war American youth, and claims that these poets are especially "alienated" (13).
The confessional style was clearly marked by the presence of autobiographical content. Confessional poetry allowed a shift from formalist poetry and the new critical mode into a new overt expression of emotions that changed the way much of modern poetry functions (Phillip 90). The poets used examples from their own lives, fears, and perceptions as their starting point to identify with other human beings. It may not be purely coincidental that confessional poetry emerged during the 1950s amidst the anxieties of the cold war and societal mandates to conform to an optimistic belief in technological progress. In such an environment the sublime, disturbing questions of human existence seemed to demand answers more loudly than ever (Phillip 76). The employment of the confessional voice for women writers and for Sylvia and Sexton specifically, represents a shift from object to subject in women's poetry (Perkins 341). Sylvia Plath and Anne sexton are among the noted figures of this confessional style. These two women responded in a similar way to similar themes. Both have chosen poetry as their genre to express their intense feelings, as it gives them a wide-enough scope for self expression. Plath's and Sexton's poetry do not attend to any tradition nor respected any conventions (Middlebrook 19). They wanted to be unique and not a part of the conventional social set up.

This conflict with the society leads them to introspection. In the process, there comes a breaking point when they could not compromise with themselves. They lose themselves in the battle and start searching for the lost self (Middlebrook 25). This conflict has given birth to a number of beautiful poems. The sensitive poet cannot take failure for granted. At this juncture, life becomes unbearable and the call of death becomes irresistible. They are more than convinced that death can offer them more solace than life. By adopting the first person confessional voice, Plath and Sexton were able to inscribe their subjectivity in their work, and use their work as a means of disseminating information and ideas about female experience.
Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton use poetry to explore the nature of the self, the individual, and through that individual identity, they connect to human experiences and labels assigned to women. When Plath and Sexton used such distinctly confessional topics as institutionalization, suicide and so on, they encoded them with reference to gender and created discrete and alternative female readings of these topics (Middlebrook 50). In his book, *A History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins notes that, it is because of this quality of unconscious awareness that confessionalism holds "documentary value" – not only as a benefit to the poet, but to the follower also (589).

For many, Plath's and Sexton's use of confessionalistic discourse helped to "invent a new form of women's truth" (Heilburn 71). Whether their confessionalism helped others or not, first and foremost it helped Plath and Sexton cope with what Mary Pipher calls "the wreckage of life" (19). In discovering their "inner selves" through poetry, not only did Plath and Sexton begin to comprehend the growing awareness of the self but, also as Carolyn Heilburn writes, "Plath and Sexton were able to seize upon their own stories, they were beginning to tell them with a directness that shocks as it enlightens" (64). They would begin enlightening each other about their childhoods, those first few Tuesdays at The Ritz, and over time they would connect even more (Middlebrook 102). Plath and Sexton helped to create a mode of poetry that allows them to express their emotions in raw form. Their poems do not show fear of the secrets exposed in their work. As an example of this their poetry were loaded with many images and ideas about death and suicide. Death, death wish and suicide were to some extent, a taboo, a fear to talk and write about, and in more degree for women to tackle such issue. Death has somehow, along the way, become their camp. And this provokes our minds with many questions about death. So, what is death? Well, it has never been an easy task
to define death, maybe because life is not easy to define. We are not conscious about being something else other than living and therefore the limitation of our minds does not allow us to explore what may come after death, even though if we all are interested in this question, because we all have to die one day. Death is one of the great mysteries and puzzling issues that human beings have to encounter. It is the central event which religion, philosophy, and science have wrestled about since the beginning of human history.
Objectives of the study:

The main objective of the study is to explore how the theme of death is expressed by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton in their poems and compare and contrast their ideas and approaches to death. To realize this main objective the study proposes to progress through the following subsidiary objectives:

- To list and classify the major poems relating to the theme of death written by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.
- To analyze the theme of death in these poems based on the life experiences of these two poets as evidenced by authoritative biographical studies.
- To analyze the theme of death in these poems based on psychoanalytic theories.
- To explore how the two poets are similar or different in their poetic expression of the theme of death.
- To provide a literary evaluation of their poetic expression of death based on the foregoing analyses.

Methodology of the study:

The study proposes to use the comparative method of reviewing available studies on confessional poetry, critical studies on the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and biographical literature on them. Categories for comparison would be drawn up. Poems which fit in these categories would be selected from each poet to provide a corpus for comparison.
Themes like death, death wish, suicide wish, suicide experience and psychological trauma would be examined in each of the poems. This analysis would make use of biographical information about the poets and insights from psychology and psychoanalytical criticism. The outcome of this analysis would provide the basis for comparing these two poets. During this stage of the study, it would be attempted to show how the poets are similar or different in the expression of these categories. The study would also attempt to propose literary or psychological explanations for the divergences and convergences that become evident in these poets.