INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that the confessional wave in poetry was ushered in with the publication of *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell in 1959. The outpouring of human emotions which was hitherto considered objectionable acquired a new dignity and acceptance. Among the poets who adopted this new style of self-expression are Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. In his/her own individual manner each poet tries to express the innermost feelings of the heart, for example, those of failure, guilt, disappointment, incestuous desires and experiences in mental asylums. The object of such candid verse seems to be to shock the reading public into an awareness of changed circumstances in which nothing should be considered taboo or too base to be brought into public view.

Sylvia Plath shot into prominence soon after her suicide in 1963 and has remained an important focus of attention in the literary world. Her life history is as fascinating as her poetry, especially the morbid interest she took in death and suicide, and the attachment that she displays towards her dead father. As there is a lot of autobiographical element contained in her work, it is very tempting to read her poems as purely "confessional", speaking
of little beyond her own experiences, distorting them out of proportion. This is what E. Butscher does in Method and Madness. At the same time, it also tempting to read her poems from the psychoanalytical point of view and interpret them as expressions of a schizoid personality - as David Holbrook does in his Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence. However, if one takes such a limited view of her poetry, one tends to overlook a lot that is important - in fact more important than the autobiography contained in the work or the psychological compulsions underlying it.

This point has, no doubt, come to the notice of critics who have made an effort to set right the image of Sylvia Plath by interpreting her poems not as purely personal or confessional or as the expressions of a psychic personality, but as containing a theme that transcends the world of subjective speculation. Judith Kroll believes that the theme of "transcendence" is to be found in Plath's work and in her book, Chapters in a Mythology, traces the mythic patterns contained in it. Similarly, Jon Rosenblatt calls Sylvia Plath's poetry "the poetry of initiation" in his Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation and feels that the poems dramatize the moment of choice in one's life. Viewpoints such as these, which tackle a particular idea or theme in the work of a poet, are no doubt more valuable than those which
dwell only on the personal element in the work. However, an over-zealous attempt has its own pitfalls; it can make the criticism unconvincing, giving the impression that the critic is trying to read his own meaning into the poetry, superimposing ideas that are not applicable. It also takes the reader away from the poetry itself and makes him focus attention on extraneous matters. While studying the work of a writer, one has to read it as a totality that includes all - the compulsive urges underlying the work, the thought contained in it and the manner in which the thought is expressed.

The object of my study is to highlight the main aspects of Sylvia Plath's work, study the influences on her, place her in the perspective of the poetry of the sixties, and point out why it would be gross injustice to dismiss her merely as a "confessional" poet as her work contains not only what is called "confession" but much more than that. It is also my effort to reason why in spite of the gloomy darkness of her poems she has managed to capture the attention of the literary world.

Chapter One is an attempt to highlight the nature and meaning of confessional poetry and distinguish it from mere confession. It is also maintained that confessional
poetry is not a fad confined to the sixties of the present century; poetry has always contained an element of confession. The confessions of Rousseau, St. Augustine and DeQuincey are referred to and compared with the poetry of confession as it is found in the works of Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman.

In Chapter Two the influences that shaped the personality of Sylvia Plath and led her to express herself in the confessional form are dealt with. Her life and background are studied as her work is based on autobiography. The same chapter studies the temperament of Sylvia Plath as responsible for the confessional tone of her work. Her hypersensitive soul not only perceived all but also magnified events and experiences so much that they were blown out of proportion. Her vivid imagination transmuted down-to-earth themes into poetic subjects and celebrated them in verse. Her ability to convert public horrors into private fears is also studied here.

In Chapter Three the confessional element in the themes of Sylvia Plath is brought out. The underlying theme is that of conflict: man is placed in a world of struggles and his life is a series of battles against odds. This predominating theme is studied in great detail. In Chapter Four the contents of the poems are related to the stylistic devices adopted by Sylvia Plath. The highly
individualised use of syntactical and technical devices is scrutinised. Plath manipulates style with confidence and makes it a tool with which she depicts states of consciousness.

Chapter Five compares Sylvia Plath with the other confessional poets - Lowell, Roethke, Sexton and Berryman. The points of similarity and dissimilarity are brought out to prove that among the confessional poets we have unity in diversity. The themes may be similar but there are differences in the approach to style and expression. Each poet displays his/her own individuality through the poetry.

The concluding Chapter Six highlights the elements of universality in the work of Sylvia Plath. For this reason the philosophy underlying her work is compared with important schools of thought. For example, parallels are drawn between her concept of death and rebirth and the Hindu view of life, transmigration of souls and reincarnation. The existential streak in Plath's work is brought out with reference to the theistic existentialists. Finally, her use of myth in order to give her work a universal appeal is discussed. This chapter is an attempt to prove that Sylvia Plath does not stop at mere confession; she goes beyond confession. The universal applicability of her work
is brought out so that the reason why her work, despite its tragic overtones, appeals to the reading public is clear.