The confessional poets, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath are grouped together because there is a similarity in their general outlook on life, in the problems that interested them most and in their mode of expressing their ideas through the medium of the self. These poets (sometimes Ginsberg and Snodgrass are also included among them) focus their attention on the individual and his response to the external world. Their themes are unconventionally bold, almost as if they were trying to shock their readers into an awareness of changed circumstances in a new world. Sylvia Plath's work shows the influence of the older poets of the confessional school. She herself admitted being influenced by them. In a British Council interview she said:

"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. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much. These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly the poetess Anne Saxton (sic!), who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems... have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting."

1
Lowell and Sexton were two poets whom Sylvia Plath admired. Inevitably, this admiration expressed itself in an emulation of these two poets, consciously or unconsciously. The influence of Theodore Roethke, too, was encountered when her poetry was at a very formative stage. As a result, the Roethkean world of the greenhouse, seedlings, saplings and shoots becomes for a while an important feature of her poetry. With John Berryman, Sylvia Plath shares a few common themes and attitudes. In each case, however, there are differences which show that though she borrowed freely from the poets she admired, yet she did not lose her own individuality: adapting from other sources, she created her own unique style and spoke in an inimitable voice that was unmistakably her own.

ROBERT LOWELL:

As the title itself indicates, Lowell's Life Studies is an attempt to communicate personal history. The book is divided into four parts: Part One deals with the chaos outside the poet's self. Robert Lowell's vision of the breakdown of the world is presented through the four poems of this section, the chaos of the external world fore­shadowing the inner breakdown of the poet. Part Two, "91 Revere Street", is an autobiographical fragment that shows Lowell's fascination with a distant Jewish relative, Major
Mordecai Myers, and a sort of compassion for his weak-willed father who was easily dominated at home by his wife and at work by his boss, the Admiral De Stahl. Part Three comprises four poems dedicated to writers with whom Lowell felt emotionally involved. Part Four, "Life Studies", contains two sections: the first dealing with the poet's childhood and past in eleven poems and the second consisting of four poems which are analogous to the four of Part One. Instead of exploring the outer world beyond the Alps, Robert Lowell explores his own self, his failures and weaknesses in the last four poems of this volume. Thus Life Studies, which begins with the public disintegration of political, social and religious values, ends with the emotional disintegration of an individual. Poems like "Waking in the Blue", "Home After Three Months Away", "Man and Wife", "To Speak of the Woe that is in Marriage" and "Skunk Hour" speak of failures — failure in marriage, failure to keep a healthy mind, failure in the professional sphere — and of the degradation of the self in one's own eyes for which there can be no cure.

In For the Union Dead (1964) Robert Lowell extends the confessional autobiography that he had started in Life Studies. With a certain dignity he confronts the major themes of the times and relates them to himself: love, death, sorrow and failure are studied from the personal
perspective, keeping in mind the historical situation. And, as Robert Phillips points out, the psychic wounds of the poet are given physical manifestations in poems that deal with physical injuries and discomforts. The theme of death predominates: the poet ponders over what the aim of life could be if it is just a journey from birth to death; he thinks of those parted from him by death, "those before us", and wondering "what next, what next?" sees the "death-steps on the crust / where (he) must walk." Along with *Life Studies*, *For the Union Dead* is considered to be representative of the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell and for this reason it would be worthwhile comparing the themes that occur in these two books with those of Sylvia Plath's work.

Robert Lowell had read and admired the unpublished poems of Sylvia Plath who, along with Anne Sexton and George Starbuck, had audited his poetry classes for a year in Boston. Lowell said he "liked her work and that her poems got right to the point." It is possible that he unconsciously emulated the features he liked the most in Plath's poetry. Or, the case could be reversed: it could have been Sylvia Plath who was more influenced by the work of the older poet. Whatever it may have been, both wrote intensely subjective, confessional work which they raised above the level of mere self-indulgence. According to D.B. Stauffer, "What raises
Lovell's confessional poetry above the level of self-indulgence or self-therapy is his own acute awareness of the link between the public and the private sensibility. Even in his most personal and painful revelations he manages to suggest the universality of his anguish, a quality that he recognised and admired in the poems of Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath, in turn, registered the influence of Lowell in the poems of her first volume, *The Colossus*. Both poets focus on the anarchy that is contemporary history. If Plath's poems speak of Hiroshima and the atrocities perpetrated on the Jews, Lowell speaks of a mad negro confined at Munich, of Mussolini the Duce, Pius XII, Marie de Medici and Eisenhower in *Life Studies*. Like Lowell, Plath searches for public symbols to depict a suffering that is intensely private.

In *Life Studies*, the book that influenced Sylvia Plath the most, there are two poems that deal with mental breakdown and subsequent recovery - themes that fascinated Sylvia Plath (and Anne Sexton, too). "Waking in the Blue" shows Robert Lowell in McLean's Asylum, recovering from a nervous breakdown. The same theme is tackled in "The Stones" by Sylvia Plath. Lowell's parenthetical statement informing us that this is the house for the "mentally ill", is echoed in the first line of Plath's poem: "This is the city where
"men are mended", which is again a reference to McLean's where her shattered self was reconstructed after her attempt at suicide. Both poems describe the experiences of the two poets during their hospitalisation. The last two lines of "Waking in the Blue", "We are all old-timers, / each of us holds a locked razor", shows the razor as an instrument of attempted suicide, an image which is repeated in Plath's "Electra on Azalea Path" where the persona says, "I am the ghost of an infamous suicide, / My own blue razor rusting in my throat." The second poem that deals with mental disintegration is "Home After Three Months Away" in which the poet, returning from the mental asylum, wonders, "Is Richard now himself again?" The sight of his young daughter does help his return to normalcy but the recovery is only partial. Though the doctor's verdict declares him cured, he is aware of being emotionally numb: "Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small." In "The Stones", Sylvia Plath speaks of the same kind of psychic regeneration: "The vas, reconstructed, houses / The elusive rose ..... I shall be good as new." Here, too, the patient does not recover completely. Like Esther of The Bell Jar, she is merely "patched and retreaded, ready for the road". The disintegration of personality that is expressed by Lowell through the symbolic horizontal tulips is depicted by Sylvia Plath through the oft-repeated images of the scattered pieces of mercury and shattered mirrors.
Like Sylvia Plath, Lowell speaks of death. In Life Studies there are direct accounts of the deaths of his uncle, his grandfather and his parents. In For the Union Dead, however, death is presented symbolically as a severed head that surfaces time and again in the poems. "Lady Raleigh's Lament" (FUD, 28) speaks of "Sir Walter's head, / still dangling in its scarlet, tangled twine, as if beseeching voyage", and "The Severed Head" (FUD, 52-54) again symbolic of the snapped link between life and death, speaks of "Sisera's idolatrous, nailed head". In "Florence" there is the severed head of the Gorgon (FUD, 14). Death appears as a terrifying monster at which Lowell, in spite of himself, cannot help looking with curiosity. This obsession with death is more pronounced in Plath's work though it does not manifest itself through severed heads except for the stray example of the "Holofernes' head" in "Leaving Early".

Both, Lowell and Plath, mourn for those snatched away by the cruel hands of death. "Grandparents" (LS, 82) is a lament for the poet's grandfather with whom he wishes to be reunited. "The Scream" and "Those Before Us" (FUD, 8-9, 16-17) also speak of ancestors dead but not forgotten and may be compared with Plath's "All the Dead Deers". The following lines from "The Scream":
"..... But they are all gone, those aunts and aunts, a grandfather, a grandmother, my mother — even her scream — too frail for us to hear their voices long"

are reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's "Mother, grandmother, great-grandmother ....... All the long gone darlings" in "All the Dead Dears". The "gross eating game" that is symbolised in Plath's poem by the mouse, the shrew and the gnawed ankle-bone, occurs in "Those Before Us" in the form of a muskrat that slices a thumb. In all three poems the idea that is presented is that the present generation, like the previous one, will one day have to enter the kingdom of the dead.

Like Sylvia Plath in "Event", "The Couriers" and "A Birthday Present", Robert Lowell depicts the failure of marriage and the accompanying sense of disillusionment. He speaks of the utter lack of marital love between his own parents who would keep "arguing, arguing one another to exhaustion" (LS, 28). In "Man and Wife" (LS, 101) the wife finds security not in the arms of her husband but by turning her back towards him, hugging a pillow sleeplessly; in "To Speak of the Woe that is in Marriage" where the title itself is self-explanatory, the "hopped up husband drops his home disputes, / and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes".
Similarly, in "The Banker's Daughter" (LS, 13) the wife drives her husband "to sleep in single lodgings on the town". This is echoed in a line in Plath's "Lesbos" where the "impotent husband slumps out for coffee". Nowhere in the works of these two poets is the sense of blissful fulfilment in marriage. Like all other relationships, this too fails miserably and a human being remains alienated from his so-called life partner. Children, however, do provide a temporary solace. If Sylvia Plath feels that her child is "the baby in the barn" and his smiles "found money", Lowell compares his daughter with the sun, bringing a ray of happiness into a dreary world: "Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear." (LS, 99).

The father/colossus figure that looms large in much of Sylvia Plath's work has its counterpart in the poems of Robert Lowell. "At every corner, / I meet my Father," confesses Lowell (FUD, 7) and his ghost haunts him, making him feel guilty at being the survivor (just as Plath's Electra seems to feel guilty at the death of her father). Seeing his father through the eyes of his mother, Lowell remembers him as a weak-willed, spineless man, "savourless, unmasterful, merely considerate" (LS, 27) who would keep "living in the fool's paradise of habitual retarding and
retarded do-nothing inertia" (LS, 28) and tried to drown his sorrows in liquor and spurts of financial extravaganza. In a poem like "Dunbarton" (LS, 79) it is the grandfather who appears as the father figure and with whom he longs to be reunited in "Grandparents" (LS, 82). Like Sylvia Plath's colossus who rises from the sea dripping salt water, Lowell's grandfather is an imposing figure and "waves his stick / like a policeman". Sylvia Plath, finding this thick air murderous, "could breathe water" if she were able to unite with her father. Lowell, too, cries out in the same manner, "Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!" The note of world-weariness is also struck in "Eye and Tooth" when the poet says, "I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil" (FUD, 19). He often longs to leave this world even if it meant entering the kingdom "of the fish and reptile":

"...... I often sigh still for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom of the fish and reptile." (FUD, 70)

This sense of world-weariness comes from an awareness of a meaninglessness in the world. Lowell feels that "there is no utility or inspiration / in the wind smashing without direction" (FUD, 64). This wind is very similar to that of Plath's "Wuthering Heights" where it "Pours by like destiny, bending / Everything in one direction". The wind, symbolic of the hostile forces in the
world, heightens the sense of precariousness in human life. The hostility of the universe is expressed in Lowell, too. A "glass sky" looks down at man indifferently and his despair has "the galvanized color/of the mop and water in the galvanized bucket" (**FUD**, 36). Human beings remain alienated from each other. In Plath "the deaf and dumb / Signal the blind, and are ignored" ("Little Fugue"), whereas in Lowell's work this thought is more explicitly expressed: "We are like a lot of wild / spiders crying together, / but without tears" (**FUD**, 11).

Since the world seems anarchic, meaningless and futile, it is but natural that Robert Lowell should search for a way out of this chaos. Robert Phillips says that in his search for salvation Robert Lowell is a "poet of voyages, always traveling somewhere in search of meaning - Rome to Paris, Boston to Dunbarton, home lovers' lane." Land of Unlikeness (1944) shows the modern man as alienated from God, driven by greed and cruelty, wondering, "Is there no way to cast my hook / Out of this dynamited brook ?" ("The Drunken Fisherman"). Just as Sylvia Plath searches for a "still centre", a moment of respite in the midst of confusion, Lowell too appears to be in the process of explaining life and the universe to himself. But, whereas Sylvia Plath finds salvation in rebirth through death, Lowell does not touch upon this subject at all. He explains life in the context
of this world and its history. He finds it easiest to make his personal history the story of mankind in general and derives some consolation from the fact that there are others in the world who suffer the way he does.

Other similarities between Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath could be cited and individual poems could be compared. There is a notable kinship of phrases and images between the two. First of all the landscape, rather seascape, that Lowell paints in his poems bears a close resemblance to that of Plath's poems, particularly in two poems of *The Colossus*, "Point Shirley" and "Suicide Off Egg Rock". The sea that is described in "Water" (FUD, 3-4) is the same as that of "Point Shirley" which, according to Ted Hughes, was an exercise in Lowell's early style. In "Suicide Off Egg Rock" there are

"...... the public grills, and the ochreous salt flats, Gas tanks, factory stacks - that landscape Of imperfections."

Similarly, in "The Mouth of the Hudson", there is a suburban scene juxtaposed against a seascape:

"Across the river, ledges of suburban factories tan in the sulphur-yellow sun of the unforgivable landscape." (FUD, 10)

It is difficult to overlook the affinity between Sylvia Plath's "landscape of imperfections" and Lowell's
"unforgivable landscape". In "Going to and fro" (FUD, 29-30), the same scene occurs again with "the hot-dog and coca cola bar". The stubborn pulse-beat of Sylvia Plath's suicide, "the old tattoo / I am, I am, I am" becomes Robert Lowell's "going to and fro / and up and down". Interestingly, like Plath's line in "Morning Song", "Love set you going like a fat gold watch", Lowell's poem says, "The love that moves the stars // moved you! / It set you going to and fro ......."

If Sylvia Plath speaks of physical injuries and discomforts like a cut thumb, a splinter in the eye, a bruise, a fever, loss of memory or sleeplessness (as in "Cut", "The Eye-mote", "Contusion", "Fever 103°", "Amnesiac", "Insomniac") Robert Lowell speaks of a cut cornea, a broken tooth, impaired vision and night sweats in "Eye and Tooth", "Myopia: a Night" and "Night Sweat" (all three poems from FUD) and of fever in "During Fever" (LS, 93). Robert Lowell views good health and sickness as two antipodal countries. In "During Fever" the fever takes the child from "the healthy country to the sick city" (LS, 93). Similarly, in Plath's "Tulips" the last line of the poem considers health to be a country far away from an ailing person: "The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea, / And comes from a country far away as health." Then there is the dream country, the no-man's land between sleep and
waking which Sylvia Plath explores in "The Ghost's Leavetaking" and Robert Lowell in "Myopia: a Night" in which he refers to "the departure strip, / the dream road" where all is blurred (FUD, 31). The surreal landscape of both poems is similar, though presented in different contexts.

Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell speak of evil forces that threaten the existence of a person. Plath's Medusa threatens to stifle its offspring in its poisonous placenta and eely tentacles; Lowell's Gorgon is equally terrifying, threatening to petrify the on-looker:

"I have seen the Gorgon.  
The erotic terror  
of her helpless, big bosomed body  
lay like a slop.  
Wall-eyed, staring the despot to stone....."(FUD, 14)

Plath invokes the spirit of the father as devil and calls up "Herr God, Herr Lucifer". Lowell, too, speaks of wanting "to give the devil his due" and invokes Lucifer in "Going to and fro" (FUD, 30). In his work too we have a reference to a "boot - / black heart" (LS, 16) which resounds in "Daddy" as "The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart ....."

However, in Lowell's work the evil spirit does not surface as often as it does in the work of Plath.
In spite of these similarities, there are some important differences that deserve mention. First of all, in Lowell's work the attention of the poet is focused primarily on the landscape to which human beings are subordinated. Sylvia Plath makes man the pivot of her poems and views the world through his eyes; on the other hand, Robert Lowell focuses first on the background and the landscape, human life being his secondary concern. In fact, as Marjorie Perloff says, Lowell's hero is difficult to discern because more importance is given to topography. Referring to another critic's judgement on Pasternak's early prose, she compares the hero of Lowell's poems to the characters of Pasternak. Lowell's hero, too, "disintegrates into a series of elements and attributes; he is replaced by a network of externalizations of his own states of mind, and by the objects, animate or inanimate, that surround him.... what properly constitutes him as a hero - his activity - escapes our perception; action disappears behind topography." Sylvia Plath gives a lot of importance to the complexities of the mind, the conflict that is ever present between one's 'I' and 'you'. This is noticeably lacking in Lowell whose narrative takes on a documentary nature. He seems to be more factual and detached in his expression of emotion. Inevitably, his poetry loses its 'poetic' value for this reason and lacks the lyrical quality of Sylvia Plath's Ariel. In fact, as Homberger says, Robert Lowell "seems a dawdler beside Sylvia
Plath". The hectic pace of Ariel is nowhere found in the work of Lowell. Their individual approaches to style and technique also highlight this difference.

Another point of departure from Lowell's work is that Sylvia Plath did not dedicate her poems to anyone in particular. Lowell, in Life Studies, has dedicated a poem each to Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz and Hart Crane; in For the Union Dead there are poems dedicated to Alfred Corning Clark, Hawthorne and Jonathan Edwards. This is an important artistic difference: whereas Lowell's poetry is concerned not only with himself but also with other people, Sylvia Plath's concern, which is basically egocentric, does not allow her to shift the focus of her poetry from her own self to another.

THEODORE ROETHKE

Sylvia Plath came under Roethke's influence when she was at a very crucial stage of her poetic development. Her earlier work had been mainly descriptive in the early style of Robert Lowell. On reading Theodore Roethke's work, she was made aware of the inner world that could not be overlooked. The last group of poems in The Colossus, those comprising "Poem for a Birthday", are generally considered to be those that are most influenced by Roethke. Regarding these poems,
Ted Hughes says that at the time she wrote them, "she was reading closely and sympathetically for the first time Roethke’s poems. The result was a series of pieces, each a monologue of some character in an underground, primitive drama. "Stones" was the last of them, and the only one not obviously influenced by Roethke." Sylvia Plath herself, in a letter to her mother, acknowledged Roethke as an important influence on her work. Referring to him as "the American poet I admire next to Robert Lowell - Ted (for Theodore) Roethke," she said, "I've always wanted to meet him, as I find he is my influence." She thought his work, Words for the Wind in particular, to be "marvellous". To her friend, Anne Sexton, too, Sylvia Plath admitted Roethke's "strong influence on her work".

Roethke's greenhouse poems are autobiographical in nature and refer to his father's greenhouse in Michigan. Using imagery from the greenhouse, the garden and the cellar, Roethke explores the movements of the psyche. He compares the development of the mind to the growth of a plant from a sapling to a tree, a rather unusual but beautifully expressed metaphor:

"And soon a branch, part of a hidden scene,  
The leafy mind, that long was tightly furled,  
Will turn its private substance into green,  
And young shoots spread upon our inner world." (CP,11)
Taking the cue from Roethke, Sylvia Plath tried for a while to adapt symbols from the vegetable kingdom in order to bring out her private response to the world. This attempt led to the composition of poems like "Mushrooms" and those grouped under the title "Poem for a Birthday".

By the time "The Stones" was written, Sylvia Plath had realised that the vegetable kingdom did not suit her needs the way it did Roethke's and began casting about for another symbol that would be clearly her own. In the poems of her later volume she turned to the self and its problems in a hostile universe, a theme that had been tackled by Roethke, too, with success. The inward journey that he undertook in his long psychological sequence showed Plath how to tap the sources of the mind in which she found greater scope for exploration than in the greenhouse world.

Theodore Roethke's parents were German immigrants who had settled in Saginaw, Michigan. A coincidence is that, as in the case of Sylvia Plath, Roethke's father too was called Otto and there are several poems dedicated to him. Roethke seems to be considerably influenced by his father. His quest for identity which is charted in his works revolves around the dead parent with whom he seeks psychic unity. Robert Lowell meets his father's ghost at every corner; Sylvia Plath is haunted by the memory of her father;
Roethke, too, remembers his father nostalgically at every step. "I found my father when I did my work," he says (CP, p. 154). In "My Papa's Waltz" (p. 45), he remembers the closeness - spiritual and physical - that existed between him and his father. In moments of dejection he thinks of him longingly:

"Father, I'm far from home
And I have gone nowhere." (p. 137)

His father sounds very much like Sylvia Plath's father as she immortalises him in her prose piece, "Among the Bumblebees", describing him as a fearless man who had full command over man and nature because of his superior intellectual powers. Roethke's father, too, is a master of his craft (which is not bee-keeping but gardening) and has no patience for those of lesser intelligence, "fools and frauds" ("Otto", p. 224). In "Premonition" (p. 6), Roethke narrates how, as a child, he used to keep close to his father's heels, trying to match his stride. Sylvia Plath tackles the same subject in a similar manner in "Among the Bumble-bees"; speaking of filial love the same way, shows her little heroine following her father around in admiration and awe, trying to win his favour somehow.

During his lifetime, Roethke suffered several mental breakdowns but with an effort he would return to normalcy.
In his poetry madness is referred to as a state that is not abnormal. It is "nobility of the soul / At odds with circumstance" (p. 239), and should be treated like any other ailment that afflicts man. Just as Lowell speaks of returning home after three months at the asylum, Roethke writes "Lines Upon Leaving a Sanitorium", having been "sick in flesh and spirit both" (p. 257). Mental affliction for both poets — and also for Plath and Sexton — is nothing taboo. The same is their attitude towards death. Roethke feels that death is an inevitability that man must learn to accept. His attention wanders to death time and again; he appears frightened of the unknown kingdom of death but at the same time, keeps pondering over it almost involuntarily. Like Sylvia Plath, he considers himself to be a connoisseur of death:

"I have moved closer to death, lived with death;
Like a nurse he sat with me for weeks." (p. 220)

He, too, does not view death as The End but as a form of renewal. Like the strip-tease artist, Lady Lazarus, who is good at the art of dying and is reborn time and again, Roethke feels that death merely opens the doors to another form of life. "I am renewed by death," he says (p. 201). He even muses on the kind of life he must have lived earlier, identifying himself with the small and fragile forms of life,
animate and inanimate. For example, he fingers a shell and thinks:

"Once I was something like this, mindless,
I'll return again,
As a snake or a raucous bird,
Or, with luck, as a lion." (p. 200)

The spirit, being immortal, "tries for another life, / Another way and place in which to continue" (p. 159). While Sylvia Plath does believe in the transmigration of souls and does identify herself with animal and plant life, she does not go as far as Roethke does and her belief in being reborn into a different form of life is not explicitly stated.

In his journeys to the interior Roethke searches for an identity and probes the various complexities of the self. He sees himself split up into conflicting forces and wonders which part of him is his true self. This is a concern common among the confessional poets for the obvious reason that their main concern is with themselves. Roethke says, "Sometimes I think I'm several" (p. 173), and wonders, "Which I is I ?" (p. 239). Often, he cannot recognise his true self as it keeps changing its identity or getting lost in a chaotic world. "I am somebody else now," he says (p. 74) when thinking of his parents in
"Where Knock is Open Wide", implying that as an adult he has taken up a new role in life and new responsibilities that have obliterated the child in him. The child is identified with the true self that is lost, leaving the unreal self to play-act through life. Caught in such a role, a part of Roethke often stands apart from him to comment detachedly upon his own actions in daily life. He says that it often happens

"As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,  
And I stood outside myself,  
Beyond becoming and perishing,  
A something wholly other" (p. 205).

And in "The Long Waters", he says,

"I, who came back from the depths laughing too loudly,  
Became another thing" (p. 198)

(an idea early echoed by Plath's Lady Lazarus who comes back triumphantly every time she dies). The true self of the poet seems to elude him and he remains lost amid the conflicting forces of the mind. The clash between the true self and the false self is a theme that is also explored by Sylvia Plath when she speaks of the "old yellow" and the new "white person" in "In Plaster", and in "Fever 103°" when she refers to her "selves" (true and false) as "old whore petticoats". However, it is in The Bell Jar that
this theme is explored to its fullest depth. In this novel the clash between the characters created by Sylvia Plath serves to highlight the conflict within Esther, the heroine. For example, Betsy and Doreen, both serve as doppelgangers, representing different aspects of herself. At times Esther would like to be like the extrovert Doreen, able to mix freely with the opposite sex; on other occasions she would realise that it was Betsy she resembled most at heart and would rather be like the "Pollyanna cowgirl". The poems of Plath are sung alternately by the false self that lives an unreal life in the murderous "thick air" of the world and the true self that yearns to be set free and utters passionate cries for emancipation in poems like "Lady Lazarus", "Purdah", and "Daddy".

An individual in the world of Plath and Roethke remains alienated from the rest of mankind. Roethke's poems speak of the "immense immeasurable emptiness of things" (p. 156). The lost son, a lonely figure found in all of Roethke's poems, is none other than the poet himself in search of identity. In The Lost Son he is shown amid the pots and plants of a garden shed, allying himself with the vegetable kingdom. Open House shows him in the world of nature, speaking of birds, bats, the seasons and the landscape. Words for the Wind shifts the focus from a lost male figure to a female one who also remains aloof from the rest
of the world. And in *The Far Field* once again there are interior monologues, a lost self pondering on the mystery of life and death. Roethke's protagonist is always alone: "I was always one for being alone," he says as the old woman in "Meditations of an Old woman" (p. 168). In "A Field of Light" he closely examines the ground, the stones, the ferns, the lizards, the plants and the soil, and says, "I saw the separateness of all things!" (p. 63). This awareness of "separateness" makes him realise how awfully alienated man is from the rest of his surroundings. It is such an awareness of all animate and inanimate objects possessing their own identity that makes Sylvia Plath as a child realise the "separateness" of everything, the recollection of which is recorded in "Ocean-1212W":

"As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin; I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over." 15

She had felt the birth of "otherness" at a very early age and was made aware of the loneliness that would be in store for her later as an adult. The awareness that not only does man remain alienated but he also has to face the despair and doubt that are a part of his lot runs through the work of both, Plath and Roethke. Just as Plath's Electra confesses, "My hours are married to a shadow. / No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing," Roethke's lost son says, "I have married my hands
to perpetual agitation" (p. 56) and "I no longer cry for green in the midst of cinders" (p. 173) Both seem to calmly accept the fact that they have to face pain in life. The only possible escape could be through death. Roethke would like to sink into a deep sleep (death) and be oblivious of all suffering: "Rock me to sleep, the weather's wrong" (p. 86). This tendency towards escapism is something that rubbed off on Sylvia Plath who ponders on how she can possibly get away from the pain of the world. As in "Poppies in July",

"If I could bleed, or sleep! —
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!
Or your liquor seep to me in this glass capsule,
Dulling and stilling".

Anything, as long as it would put an end to her sorrows.

Two poems that would make an interesting comparative study are "The Exorcism" by Roethke and "Fever 103°" by Sylvia Plath. Both depict a tortured soul caught in the fire of suffering. But this suffering is the sort that purifies, purging one of all evil. In "The Exorcism" (from *Words for the Wind*, CP. 147) the sufferer is purified after all his "several selves", the evil traits or demons that possessed him are driven out. In "Fever 103°" the issue is once again purity: the "tongues of hell", the high fever, leaves the patient feeling absolutely pure, "too pure for you or anyone". Her "selves", too, dissolve, leaving her "a pure
acetylene / Virgin". The similarity of mood in the two poems cannot be ignored. The tortured spirit of "The Exorcism" seems to pervade "Fever 103°":

"I turned upon my spine,
I turned and turned again,
A cold God-furious man
Wringing until the last
Forms of his secret life
Lay with the dross of death." ("The Exorcism")

"Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss." (Fever 103°)

Both the sufferers seem to experience the same kind of restless agony.

Another poem by Roethke that strongly resembles one by Plath is "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze" (CP, 44) from The Lost Son. In this poem three old German women who worked in the floral business of Roethke's father become good witches, fairy godmothers. The "three ancient ladies" moved about in the greenhouse gracefully, tending all the pots and plants. They would also devote time and attention to Roethke who was a little boy then. Picking him up, they would tickle him and make him laugh. They become his guardians, always hovering around him. As an adult he remembers them and still feels their influence:
"Now, when I'm alone and cold in my bed,
They still hover over me,
These ancient leathery crones,
With their bandannas stiffened with sweat,
And their thorn-bitten wrists,
And their snuff-laden breath blowing lightly over me
in my first sleep."

Turning to Plath's poem, "The Disquieting Muses" from The Colossus, we find three similar aged crones. They are unsightly figures, with "heads like darning eggs", "mouthless, eyeless" creatures that just keep nodding at the side of the crib in which the poet as a baby slept. The godmothers of Plath differ from those of Roethke in the sense that there is something evil about them. Roethke feels his old women are a benign presence looking down at him protectively but Sylvia Plath is aware of the dismal world of the muses in which she is forced to live. Hers are the evil counterparts of Roethke's fairy godmothers. The presence of her muses is malevolent but she has to accept them as her ill-fated lot since no benign power - not even that of her mother - can rescue her from their shadow. Plath's poem ends on the same note as Roethke's:

"Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.

But no frown of mine
Will betray the company I keep."

In Sylvia Plath's poems it is, almost without
exception, a female character that speaks out, voicing the views of the poet. Woman, as she emerges in her poems, is a multifaceted creature, depicted in her various unpredictable moods, now wishing for the oblivion of death and then, transformed beyond recognition, rising free from all bonds, soaring towards a liberty she aspires for. It is when Sylvia Plath speaks of women that she can shed all her inhibitions and probe the complexity of the psyche. When she deals with men she is not so successful: poems like "Suicide Off Egg Rock", "Gulliver", and "Daddy" do have a male character at the focal point but they tell us little or nothing at all about the how and why of their mental make-up, the male character being viewed entirely through the feminine eyes of the poet. This lack of insight into the thoughts and problems of the opposite sex is not to be found in the work of Roethke who tackles women characters with as much success as he does his own self. Some of his poems, especially the sequence entitled "Meditations of an Old Woman" in Words for the Wind, present a true-to-life picture of woman. In fact, there seems to be a haunting presence, the female counterpart of Sylvia Plath's Colossus, that pursues Roethke; he seems obsessed by her. Voicing her thoughts in the first person, Roethke contemplates the significance of being a woman:
"What is it to be a woman?
To be contained, to be a vessel?
To prefer a window to a door?
A pool to a river?
To become lost in love,
Yet remain only half aware of the intransient glory?
To be a mouth, a meal of meat?
To gaze at a face with the fixed eyes of a spaniel?"

Roethke's woman is acutely aware of her surroundings; there is a sensuousness in her perception of nature; she can get the scent of half-opened buds when she bends to untangle her dress from the rose-brier; she is "in love with stuffs, silks, / Rubbing (her) nose in the wool of blankets" (p. 162); she, like a "raw, tumultuous girl", makes her way over wet stones to a little wood that invites her (p. 166). Even though it is an "old woman" that Roethke sets out to describe, the impression we get from the poems is different. Instead of a wizened, raspy creature, we can sense the powerful presence of one who has unearthly grace and even supernatural powers. Like Lady Lazarus, she does not fit into the ordinary world that we are familiar with, especially when she says:

"I am benign in my own company,
A shape without a shade, or almost none,
I hum in pure vibration, like a saw.
The grandeur of a crazy one alone! —
By swoops of bird, by leaps of fish, I live.
My shadow steadies in a shifting stream;
I live in air; the long light is my home;
I dare caress the stones, the field my friend;
A light wind rises: I become the wind."

(CP, p. 167)
To sum up, parallels may be drawn between the works of Sylvia Plath and Theodore Roethke, on the basis of which one may safely say that Plath was influenced to a considerable extent by the older poet and did try to emulate him consciously for a while. The influence is perceptible even after she turned away from subjects like mushrooms and frogs; it continues right up to her last poems in which, time and again, Sylvia Plath turns to Roethke's technique of controlling the chaos of the mind. But Roethke's "I" is more in tune with the externals than Plath's. In his journeys in and out of himself he far surpasses Sylvia Plath.

Thus we see that though there is a lot of similarity in the works of Plath and Roethke, it would not be fair to dismiss Plath's work as a mere imitation of the older poet's work. There is a lot in Roethke that she did not emulate. Both show man in his various roles: the alienated man, full of despair; man as an animal full of passions; and man in relation with others. However, in Roethke, there are moments of mirth, too, as in his "Nonsense Poems" of I am! Says the Lamb - mirth that is not found in Plath.
What Anne Sexton has in common with Sylvia Plath is the insistence on a female persona. Both write poetry that could only be written by a woman, exploring the female psyche, its contact with and response to the outer world. Anne Sexton's boldness is a step ahead of Plath's. Her themes are madness, death, womanhood in its various roles, disease and deformity, and finally, a yearning or "rowing" toward God. These are subjects that Sylvia Plath, too, deals with. Probably they influenced each other, being friends who attended Robert Lowell's poetry classes together in Boston in 1958.

Regarding her themes, Sexton says, "in the first book I was giving the experience of madness; in the second book, the causes of madness; and in the third book .... whether to live or to die." The theme of madness is explored in To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960). Anne Sexton analyses her breakdown which was the result of guilt - guilt that she was responsible when her daughter fell seriously ill:

".....a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomine
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine."

("The Double Image")
Again, the poet feels guilty when she thinks of the deaths of her parents. In the same poem she mentions her mother dying of cancer:

"On the first of September she looked at me and said I gave her cancer. They carved her sweet hills out and still I couldn't answer." (BPWB, 56)\(^{17}\)

In "The Truth the Dead Know" she feels that she has caused her father's death too:

"This year, solvent but sick, you meant to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush. But before you had that second chance, I cried on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died."

Clearly, it is guilt that leads Anne Sexton to madness and the people responsible are her own near and dear ones. The theme of guilt is also explored by Sylvia Plath. As a mother she feels guilty that the child she has given birth to will have to face a world that is full of meaningless suffering. In "Mary's Song" she laments that her child will have to live in a "holocaust" and will be called upon to make a tremendous sacrifice. In "Three Women" the Girl (third voice) voices her guilt when she leaves behind her illegitimate child in the hospital: "I leave someone / Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go."

Like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton speaks of strained relationships with her parents - mainly her mother - but in
Anne Sexton's poetry there is a sense of sadness, a regret that their relations were not better - probably because, unlike Sylvia Plath, she was separated by the finality of death from her mother and the bitterness had time to mellow to a feeling of sorrow. Just as Anne Sexton feels responsible for the death of her father, Sylvia Plath feels that she is the cause of her father's death:

"O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at Your gate, father - your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. It was my love that did us both to death."

("Electra on Azalea Path")

At the same time, by identifying herself as Electra, she lays bare her animosity towards her mother.

Anne Sexton suffered several nervous breakdowns and spent a lot of time in mental asylums and in undergoing psychotherapy. In fact, she came to poetry through psycho-therapy. "Your poems might mean something to someone else someday," her psychiatrist had told her. With encouragement from Dr. Martin, she started writing. Poems like "You, Dr. Martin", "Ringing the Bells" and "Music Swims Back to me" give an account of her experiences in mental asylums just as Lowell does in "Waking in the Blue" and Plath in "The Stones". Sexton explains the purpose of the painstaking account of her breakdown in "For John who Begs me not to Enquire Further":


"Not that it was beautiful, 
but that, in the end, there was 
a certain sense of order there; 
something worth learning 
in that narrow diary of my mind, 
in the commonplaces of the asylum." (BFWB, 51)

Thus, probing into the "narrow diary" of her mind, Anne Sexton feels that her experience may help another soul in similar circumstances, since "the worst of anyone / can be, 
finally, / an accident of hope." It is for this very reason 
that Sylvia Plath describes her own experiences in a mental 
asylum. Her book, The Bell Jar, Is an attempt to depict the 
world distorted by an unhinged mind. As she says in a letter to 
her mother, the world does not require "cheerful stuff"!
"What the person out of Belson - physical or psychological - 
wants is nobody saying that birdies still go tweet tweet, 
but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and 
knows the worst, just what it is like."19 The Belson 
described is that of the psyche. Sylvia Plath's aim, like 
Anne Sexton's, is to reach out to one who has suffered a 
similar breakdown with the consolation that there is some­ 
one else who has seen the worst.

Not only does Anne Sexton speak of the madness that 
is found in the mind, she brings into focus the madness that 
is found in everyday world - madness that goes unnoticed and 
is mistaken for custom. Such is the theme of Transformations.
(1971) In which she retells Grimm's fairy tales in such a way as to make them relevant to an age that is fed on Freud and Jung. Again, the tales that she chooses deal with her favourite themes - madness, death and women. In "One-eye, Two-eyes, Three-eyes" she speaks of the tendency of parents to glorify children who are handicapped, thinking that they have "a special pipeline to the mystical / .... a large ear on the God-horn", thus turning "a radish into a ruby". The weak offspring is unduly over-protected whereas the normal is neglected. Similarly, in "The Maiden Without Hands" the king who marries a girl with no arms feels that he has obtained a lucky mascot. Later, when her arms grow back and she is "now unfortunately whole", he is afraid that he has lost his good fortune. As Susan Juhasz says, these tales "attempt to create the truth by bridging the gap between the present of adult experience and the potential madness underlying the everyday."20

Sylvia Plath also makes use of stories recollected from childhood. But, instead of being drawn towards fairy tales, she turns to nursery rhymes in some of her poems. For example, in "Daddy" she has in mind the rhyme about the old lady who lived in a shoe, who had so many children that she didn't know what to do. And "This is the house that Jack built" becomes "This is the city where men are mended"
in "The Stones". Just as Anne Sexton 'transforms' the fairy tales, retelling them in her own inimitable style, Sylvia Plath transforms the nursery rhymes from childish poems to grim commentaries on the harrowing ordeals one has to face - e.g. the electro-convulsive therapy in "The Stones" and the ambivalent emotions that one can experience for a dead parent in "Daddy".

Among the causes of madness, Anne Sexton gives priority to death. It is a vicious circle that she draws - the deaths of her close associates, recounted in All My Pretty Ones (1962), upsets her mental balance and draws her, too, towards death. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are lured towards death, "drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb," as Sexton herself says. Her obsession with death is evident from The Death Notebooks (1974), a volume that one may say is dedicated to death - originally not intended for publication during her lifetime, as the blurb on the jacket tells us. The key-note is struck in the epigraph which is a line from Hemingway's A Moveable Feast: "Look, you con man, make a living out of your death." This is what Anne Sexton tries to do: she makes a living not only out of her death but also out of her grief, her madness and her womanhood. Lois Ames, her friend and biographer, recalls the advice that Sexton once gave her: "You should use your grief. No matter what happens, you should swim
out of your pain with a finished book held high in your hands!"²²

The pain that she suffered in life and her obsession with
death are expressed in her poetry. She seems to turn towards
death naturally. "What is death, I ask / What is life,
you ask," she says in The Death Notebooks (p. 62). Others
may turn to life but it is death that stimulates her imagination.

In this connection it would be worthwhile to pause
and recollect Sylvia Plath's attitude towards death. In
Plath's poems death is presented in various forms: sometimes
it appears as an unexpected gift (as in "A Birthday Present"),
as a man in ominous black (as in "Man in Black"), as a
white moon ("Three Women"), or as an old man crawling out of
the sea to claim her ("A Life"). Similarly, in Sexton, too,
death is personified in more than one form. In "The Death
Baby" (DN, 11-17) death is visualised as a child. Sexton
says that the death wish is present in all:

"There is a death baby
for each of us.
We own him.
His smell is our smell.
Beware. Beware.
There is a tenderness.
There is a love
for this dumb traveller
waiting in his pink covers." (DN, 16)

These lines echo Sylvia Plath so much that we almost feel that
it is Lady Lazarus who voices them, especially when she warns,
"Beware. Beware."
In "For Mr. Death Who Stands With His Door Open" (DN, 5-6), death is personified as a father/lover. It is a lover that Anne Sexton speaks of, associating her father's drunkenness with him. Mr. Death is a ludicrous figure:

"Now your belly hangs out like Fatso.
You are popping your buttons and expelling gas.
How can I lie down with you, my comical beau
When you are so middle-aged and lower-class." (DN, 6)

This approach is different from that of Sylvia Plath who always remains serious when speaking of death. However, there are moments when, like Plath, Sexton visualises the kind of death she would like to die:

"But when it comes to my death let it be slow,
let it be pantomime, this last peep show,
so that I may squat at the edge trying on
my necessary black trousseau." (DN, 6)

This is very close in spirit to the concluding lines of Plath's "A Birthday Present" in which she imagines her own death:

"Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger.
Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty
By the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it.

----------
If it were death
I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
----------
There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife not carve but enter
Pure and clean as the cry of a baby.
And the universe slide from my side."
Like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton plays with death, toying with the idea of dying, and seems to get a narcissistic thrill imagining herself dead or dying.

In Anne Sexton's work, it is obvious that she is struggling hard, trying to ward off not only madness but also death which tempts her constantly. Hence her poems express a conflict between life and death. *Live or Die* (1966), which tries to resolve this conflict, concludes in favour of 'Live'. The last poem of this volume is a strong affirmation of life. The sun (strangely endowed with female attributes, probably symbolic of the speaker and her optimism) shines brightly and its life force enthuses hope into the poet's heart:

"Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer."

And the answer is

".....Live, Live, because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift." (*Live*)

The conflict is resolved, for the moment at least, in favour of life. This conflict between life and death is also found in the work of Sylvia Plath but nowhere do we find such an affirmation of life. It is death that Plath looks forward to, anticipating an afterlife.
Life, to Anne Sexton, means life as a WOMAN. She, like her friend, Sylvia Plath, writes as a housewife and mother, not only as a poet. Hence woman is the pivotal figure of her poems. Susan Juhasz feels that poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath define themselves in terms of their relationships with others - as wife, mother or daughter. There are times when Sexton sings "In celebration of the woman I am" (LP), glorying in her womanhood. However, most of the time, this euphoric tone is missing, especially when she speaks regretfully of unsatisfactory relationships between mother and daughter, as in "The Double Image". Here she explores the relationship between her mother and herself and also between her daughter and herself. In both relationships there is something missing: her attempted suicide alienates her from her mother who is unable to forgive her, and her madness is a barrier that keeps her apart from her daughter. The pain of separation from her daughter and the wistful yearning for closeness with her mother is poignantly brought out. On the other hand, Sylvia Plath's woman is more assertive, especially when portrayed as Electra, the "hound-bitch, daughter, friend" in "Electra on Azalea Plath", as the demonic woman who drives a stake into the fat black heart of the evil spirit that haunts her in "Daddy", as the terrible Lady Lazarus who rises phoenix-like to destroy all men, and as God's lioness...
who cannot be tamed by anyone. No doubt, she does feel the pangs of guilt now and again, but instead of despairing, she becomes aggressive.

But, to be a woman means to play a role - or several roles, for that matter - all the time. Robert Boyers feels that Anne Sexton is dissatisfied with her performance as mother and wife; there is a sense of self-disgust in her. As for the intimacy of married life, it seems "ludicrous, with strangers inhabiting a common situation, powerless to affect the essential loneliness of the individual psyche." In "The Farmer's Wife" (BPWB, 27) Anne Sexton describes the dreary life of a couple on a farm in Illinois. The wife wonders if there is anything "more to living / than this brief bright bridge" (of sex). She remains mentally isolated from her husband, "apart from him, living / her own self in her own words / and hating the sweat of her house."

Marriage is an institution that can become stale; conjugal love may be replaced by habit or - even worse - indifference; man and wife can become strangers to each other. This thought seems to have strong hold over the confessional poets. Robert Lowell in "Man and Wife" and Sylvia Plath in "Event" speak of the waning of love after marriage. Anne Sexton has written "Man and Wife" - the title is the same as that of Lowell's poem - in which again she speaks of a marriage that has become stale.
"We are not lovers. 
We do not know each other. 
We look alike 
but have nothing to say." (LD, 27)

The relationship is merely one between "strangers in a 
two-seater outhouse, / eating and squatting together."

Similarly, Sylvia Plath in "Event" depicts a 
marriage devoid of love. The relationship between the 
husband and the wife is "A groove of old faults, deep and 
bitter. // Love cannot come here." As they are "dismembered", 
Plath likens them to cripples: they "touch like cripples". 
Plath also speaks of the kind of life a woman leads after 
marrriage: she has to "bring teacups and roll away headaches", 
cook, sew and talk as the occasion demands ("The Applicant"), 
keep "Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus" ("A 
Birthday Present").

Anne Sexton's poems are the outcome of her bid to 
rehabilitate herself after her nervous breakdown. Searching 
for her own identity, she explores and defines the nature of 
womanhood itself and comes to the conclusion that the picture 
is not at all rosy. Hence she is forced to turn elsewhere 
for faith that would sustain her. This time she turns towards 
God. "Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods," she 
says on the first page of The Death Notebooks. Whereas 
in the works of the other confessional poets God is referred
to only casually, with Anne Sexton the search for God becomes a very serious matter. Sylvia Plath, in her work, often thinks of God but there is no conscious effort on her part to make it a religious issue. Her concept of God is not static: initially she feels that God is cruel and indifferent to the fate of man (as in "The Hanging Man"), then she contemplates the possible meaning of a union with God - "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" ("Mystic") - and finally she longs to be one with the supreme being. However, her wish for a union with God is not the outcome of a religious belief but of a desire to attain salvation from the seemingly endless cycle of death and rebirth that she believes in. This is not so in the case of Anne Sexton. With Sexton, the search for God becomes a religious issue, almost an obsession. Hunting frantically for something on which to pin her faith, she hopes fervently that belief in God will fill the vacuum in her life. In her work there is a desperate need to believe in God. However, it remains to be seen whether or not her search is successful.

When speaking of God, Anne Sexton seems to be a little confused. It is clear that she wants to believe in God, hoping that it would keep her from mental disintegration. However, wanting to believe in God is not the same as believing itself and when she turns to God in her poems,
she does not strike a very sure note. She herself admitted that her ideas about God were not very clear: "I found when I was bringing up my children, that I could answer questions about sex easily. But I had a very hard time with the questions about god and death. It isn't resolved in my mind to this day." In an effort to clarify the idea of God to herself, Anne Sexton diverts her attention from death and madness to praise of the lord.

In *The Death Notebooks* she ponders upon the relationship between man and God and puts forth the view that there is perfect communion between the two. Human beings are a manifestation of God, no matter what their role in daily life:

"When they fuck they are God.
When they break away they are God.
When they snore they are God.
In the morning they butter the toast.
They don't say much.
They are still God." (*DN*, 37-38)

The *Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), drops all extraneous themes and speaks only of seeking God, trying to unite with Him. "God was there like an island I had not rowed to," says the poet as she sets out on her quest. In the poems of this volume she is, as she herself puts it, "typing out the God / (her) typewriter believes in" (*ARTG*, 76). Going deeper into the volume, we see her trying to give
the impression that she is nearing her destination. Towards the end of the book she says,

"I cannot walk an inch without trying to walk to God. I cannot move a finger without trying to touch God." (ARTG, 83)

God is her aim, thoughts of God her path and the need for faith her driving force. The concluding poem of the volume, "The Rowing Endeth", speaks of her union with God. The poet has reached her goal and she and God laugh a hearty laugh of triumph, making the whole world echo with "that untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha-ha."

On the surface it may appear that Anne Sexton has found what she was looking for but, somehow, she fails to convince. Ben Howard very appropriately says, "The pathetic figure of 'Mrs. Sexton' reminds one less of St. Teresa than of Charlie Brown."26 Truly, in "Gods" (DN, 1-2) Anne Sexton is a ludicrous figure when she hunts all over the world for the gods. Finally, she finds them – all the gods of the world – shut in the lavatory of her house:

"At last! / she cried out, / and locked the door." Since she shows herself as a ridiculous figure in this poem, and since she finds her gods in a place that is anything but sacred, it is difficult to realise the seriousness of her search.
J.D. McClatchy, too, is not convinced by Sexton's God. Referring to the poems of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, he says, "though this may be a God a typewriter can believe in, it seems questionable that Sexton does. At the very least, He is an abstracted presence — perhaps merely an obvious displacement of the father with whom she is attempting to effect reconciliation." And, relating God with the father figure, one is brought back to the father fixation that is found in the work of Plath, Lowell, Roethke and Berryman.

Influenced by psychoanalysis, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath tend to speak of the father-daughter relationship in Freudian terms. Plath's heroine has an Electra-like attachment to her father; it is her love that kills him; it is to his memory that she devotes an entire life-time; and it is his surrogate that she seeks in her husband. Similarly, Anne Sexton also speaks of a kind of sexual relationship between the father and the daughter. For example, in "The Sleeping Beauty" (*Transformations*), she speaks of

"...my father, drunkenly bent over my bed circling abyss-like dark my father thick upon me like some sleeping jelly-fish."

In sado-masochistic terms Anne Sexton speaks of her father as cruel but adored. In "Baby", she says:
"You have seen my father whip me. You have seen me stroke my father's whip." (IN, 16)

Just as Plath's heroine delights in the black boot that kicks her in the face, Sexton's speaker adores the whip that beats her.

However, in the work of Anne Sexton, the father figure is not as dominating as in Plath's. Even though Sexton refers to her father often, she is not completely dominated by him. This is because he is just one of the persons she turns to while searching for faith; like the mother and the lover (she speaks of a lover returning to his wife in "For My Lover Returning to His Wife" - the return symbolic of a betrayal) the father, too, does not prove a pillar to lean on. Hence she "rows" towards God in a desperate bid to have something to believe in. The importance that is given to the Colossus by Plath is given by Sexton to the God she seeks.

JOHN BERRYMAN:

Of all the confessional poets, probably the one whom Sylvia Plath resembles the least is John Berryman who, at first glance, strikes the reader as being a very "difficult" poet. In his "Dream Songs", published in two volumes as
The Dream Songs and His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, the logic is inner and arbitrary and there is the "crumpling (of) a syntax at a sudden need" so that it is not always easy to understand what the poet tries to say through the assumed persona of Henry House.

Berryman's themes are intensely personal. His personal misfortunes—the failures of his first and second marriages because of his excessive drinking and the mental tension he often suffered—contributed to the kind of themes that figure in his poems. Like Plath, Berryman was the victim of recurring mental depression and suicidal tendencies. More often than not, these two poets are grouped together because of their obsessive concern with death, disease and despair, and also because both of them voluntarily—and sensationaly—ended their own lives.

The Dream Songs of Berryman are the musings of a person called Henry whom the poet introduces as "a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr. Bones and variants thereof." Even though the poems are about the disorderly, meaningless world of Henry's dreams, they are remarkably organized in their composition, with a few exceptions each comprising
eighteen lines divided into three stanzas that are mostly rhymed. However, the rhyming effects are not superimposed on the dream songs and the thought flows freely—so freely, in fact, that it is only with an effort that the reader can keep pace with Henry and his leaps of imagination. In spite of the fact that John Berryman tries to shrug off all kinship with Henry by insisting that he speaks of an "imaginary character (not the poet, not me)", it is not possible to overlook the similarities between the two. There are autobiographical references that throw light on the fact that Henry is none other than the poet, John Berryman himself. In the guise of Henry he mourns the deaths of his father and some close friends, confesses his own inadequacy and sense of failure, and speaks of his attempts to drown his sorrows in wine and women. Grappling with his problems, Henry searches for a meaning in a world that he finds as chaotic and dark as a nightmare.

Henry House bears a resemblance to Sylvia Plath's Lady Lazarus who keeps undergoing metamorphosis time and again—she is a Jew, a "walking miracle", a "smiling woman", a strip tease artist, a sea shell, a failed suicide, a "pure gold baby", a phoenix-like creature, a vengeful fury, and so on. In the same manner, the identity of Henry keeps on changing so that it cannot be defined easily.
Berryman himself is ambiguous when he describes Henry as a "white American .... sometimes in blackface". He is "free, black & forty-one" (DS 40), sometimes depicted as an ailing person, a womaniser, a drunken sot, a Rabbi, a world-weary person pondering on Keirkegaardian concepts, a disillusioned cynic, a merry old soul like King Cole, a teacher, a writer, a forsaken son, and even a loving father full of tenderness for his daughter. To add to the confusion there is another question - who is Mr. Bones? Berryman says that he is none other than Henry himself but on reading some of the poems we often get the impression that Mr. Bones is not Henry but another person who engages Henry in a dialogue. This confusion arises because Henry invariably refers to himself in the third person and so does his friend. Therefore it is not always easy to pinpoint where Henry stops speaking and his companion continues. For example:

"Henry couldn't care less.
- Mr Bones cares for all men!" (DS 217)

Here it seems that a comparison is being made between two men - Mr Bones and Henry.

"Nothing very bad happen to me lately.
How you explain that? - I explain that, Mr. Bones, terms of your baffling sobriety." (DS 76)

"Am I a bad man? Am I a good man?
Hard to say, Brother Bones. Maybe you both, like most of we." (DS 239)
In these two examples Henry appears to be engaged in a conversation with someone who acts as his alter-ego, explaining to him the complexities of his own self that eludes his grasp.

"A rainy Sunday morning, on vacation as well as Fellowship, he could not rest: bitterly he shook his head. - Mr Bones, the Lord will bring us to a nation where everybody only rest. - I confess that notion bores me dead ...." (DS 256)

If we follow the guidelines given by Berryman, the observation separated by hyphens is made by another man to Henry (Mr Bones, as he is called). But it could easily be mistaken to be a remark made by Henry ("he" of the second line) to another man called Mr Bones.

"Filling her compact & delicious body with chicken paprika, she glanced at me twice.

I advanced upon (despairing) my spumoni. - Sir Bones: is stuffed, de world, wif feeding girls.

There ought to be a law against Henry. - Mr. Bones: there is." (DS 4)

Here it appears as though there is a conversation going on between two persons - the 'I' of the poem and Mr. Bones - and Henry is a third person they refer to. The colon after "Sir Bones" and "Mr. Bones" gives the impression that Mr. Bones is another person, not Henry. Such a confusion does not arise in the work of Sylvia Plath but her characters,
too, are multi-dimensional. Probably both, Plath and Berryman, aimed at creating universal characters in this manner.

As in the case of Sylvia Plath, the person who had the greatest influence on Berryman's poetry was his father. When he was just a boy, he had the misfortune of witnessing his father shoot himself because of marital problems. This incident had a traumatic effect on the poet and to a great extent determined the kind of verse he wrote later as a mature adult. There are several dream songs in which he, as Henry, speaks of his dead father. In fact, the father's presence in Berryman's poems is comparable to that of the colossus in Plath's work - the colossus that is modelled on the poet's dead father whose death is viewed as an act of desertion and never forgiven - hovering over her work with his feet planted firmly in the poet's bygone childhood. Berryman speaks of his father's suicide in DS 76, "Henry's Confession" in which he gives the details of the death very clearly:

"In a modesty of death I join my father
who dared so long ago leave me.
A bullet on a concrete stoop
close by a southern sea
spreadeagled on an island, by my knee."

Berryman's father, before putting an end to his life, used to threaten his wife that he would drown himself
along with his sons but, as DS 143 tells us, he changed his mind and "decided on lead". In DS 145 we are again told that he "did not swim out with me or my brother / as he threatened ...... as company in the defeat sublime". He just

".... very early in the morning, rose with his gun and went outdoors by my window and did what was needed."

The poem ends on a note of poignant simplicity with Berryman telling us that his father "left Henry to live on" - almost as if Henry were being condemned to live an insufferable life as a survivor. Berryman's feelings towards his father are ambivalent. At times he rages helplessly against his father when he finds himself alone in the world. DS 384 brings out this rage very vividly. The anger against the father seems to consume Henry. At the same time it does not require much observation to note that the feelings underlying these furious ravings are those of one who has been deeply hurt - a hurt that can be inflicted only on one who loves and cares from the core of his heart. This dream song (no. 384) deserves to be quoted in its entirety as no amount of explanation would do justice to the fierce emotions it portrays effectively:

"The marker slants, flowerless, day's almost done, I stand above my father's grave with rage, often, often before I've made this awful pilgrimage to one who cannot visit me, who tore his page out: I come back for more,
I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave
who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn
O ho alas alas
When will indifference come, I moan & rave
I'd like to scrabble till I got right down
away down under the grass

and ax the casket open ha to see
just how he's taking it, which he sought so hard
we'll tear apart
the mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry
will heft the ax once more, his final card,
and fell it on the start."

Such passionate feelings are also expressed by Sylvia Plath
in her poems when in the grip of a violent rage she does not
hesitate before driving a stake in her father's "fat
black heart" ("Daddy") in her attempt to be "through" with
him. As Electra she is faced with a dual responsibility -
on the one hand she is responsible for the death of her
father, and on the other she is bound to his memory and
must spend the rest of her life in his shadow. Plath's
Electra and Berryman's Henry are both doomed - doomed to
a life of guilt and despair - and both feel that redemption
will come to them only through death.

Berryman finds death to be a fascinating subject
and his dream songs never really steer clear of its shadow.

"Henry was most clear on this subject, dying
as all we all are dying,"

he says of himself in DS 144. Most of the 308 songs of
His Toy, His Dream, His Rest are dirges that mourn the
deaths of close friends or just ponder on death. Berryman and Plath, both consider themselves to be connoisseurs of death. If Sylvia Plath as Lady Lazarus says, "Dying / Is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well," Berryman's Henry says, "It all centered in the end on the suicide / in which I am an expert, deep & wide" (DS 136). Besides the songs about the suicide of his father, there are several about Delmore Schwartz, his friend whose death seems to have had a profound effect on his psyche. There are also songs about the deaths of Robert Frost, Randall Jarrell, Sylvia Plath, R.P. Blackmur, Ivor Winters, William Carlos Williams and Theodore Roethke. Thinking of them John Berryman, as Henry, "pauses to wonder why he / alone breasts the wronging tide" (DS 172). He would like to join them:

"Their deaths were theirs. I wait on for my own,  
I dare say it won't be long.  
I have tried to be with them, god knows I have tried..."  
(DS 146)

But even though he longs for death, a part of him recoils from the thought of dying and views death with horror as a "terrible end out of which what grows / but an unshaven, disheveled corpse?" (DS 156). This thought is comparable to that of Sylvia Plath in "Berck-Plage", "this is what it is to be complete. It is horrible," when with distaste she views a dead body and death appears stripped of all enigma...
or romance. But whatever it may be, an object of horror or fascination, death is something that brings about a painful parting, separating one from those who are near and dear to the heart.

Berryman views death as the will of a god whose actions remain a mystery to man. Even though he returned to Catholicism just before his suicide in January 1972 and concluded his *Love and Fame* (1970) with "Eleven Addresses to the Lord", in *Dream Songs* he cannot suppress his resentment against God for having snatched his friends away from him. In DS 153 he says very clearly:

"I'm cross with god who has wrecked this generation. First he seized Ted, then Richard, Randall, and now Delmore.

In between he gorged on Sylvia Plath."

Theodore Roethke, R.P. Blackmur, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz and Sylvia Plath were poets with whom Berryman felt a spiritual affinity and he finds it difficult to be respectful to a god who has snatched them away from him. The note of irreverence against God is sounded in DS 113 where "the most high GOD" (said ironically) is responsible for Henry's troubles, having "clapped" a handicap on him, making him lame. The God depicted in this poem is inexorable, relentlessly pursuing Henry in order to punish him and bind him inextricably in a web of suffering. He
is comparable to Plath's God in "The Hanging Man" who punishes his victims mercilessly. Both these poets regard heaven itself to be indifferent to the problems of mankind. In DS 9 we are told that Henry would like to "flee / but only Heaven hangs over him foul." At times he muses: "Perhaps God is a slob, / playful, vast, rough-hewn." (DS 238)

The Dream Songs contain a number of poems about sickness and hospitals that are akin in mood to those of Sylvia Plath. Just as Lowell speaks of a cut cornea and an extracted tooth, Sylvia Plath of a splinter in the eye and a cut thumb, John Berryman 'sings' of an infected ear "dim & bloody" (DS 128) and of being hospitalised (DS 52, 54, 67, 92, 94, 95, 96, 198, etc.). DS 92, in particular, is remarkably close to Plath's "Tulips". In "Tulips" the person feels that the tulips in her room are "too excitable", "too red", "like dangerous animals", upsetting her "with their sudden tongues and their colour". In the dream song the tulips have the same disquieting effect: "Tulips from Tates teazed Henry." Like Plath's patient who tries to "efface" herself, Henry too would like "to be a tulip and desire no more / but water, but light, but air" and in a similar mood looks on at what takes place around him. Just as the nurses of "Tulips" tend the body of the patient "as water / Tends to pebbles it must run over", Berryman's Henry is also acted upon by the doctors and the nurses of
the hospital (DS 94) who "swarm / day after achieveless
day" around Henry (DS 198). Often it is mental affliction
that Henry suffers from. Like Plath and Lowell, Berryman
dwells on psychic regeneration. DS 52 speaks of Henry
"doing time down hospital / and growing wise" - not well,
but wise, recovering from what we infer must have been a
nervous breakdown. Later, we are told that "with genuine
difficulty he fought madness" (DS 201). The quirky,
disjointed, whimsical nature of the dream songs in itself
is symbolic of a mind gone awry under the pressures it has
to put up with.

Henry, as a man who is ailing physically and
mentally, feels that he is on a different plane from the
rest of mankind and tends to think of himself as more
of a machine than an individual. He 'performs' rather than
lives. Instead of seeing a man, he sees an eye, a slit
(DS 12); his own body is a "slab (that) lifts up its
arms" (DS 97). He cannot help being fascinated by the
body and its various organs and functions. There are images
of unfolding that dismantle the various parts of the body:

"....they will take off your hands,
both hands; as well as both your feet, & likewise
both eyes" (DS 81)
which call to mind Sylvia Plath's images that divide the
body into separate parts - the legs and arms of "Getting
There"; the thighs and hair, "Dead hands, dead stringencies"
of "Ariel"; the hands, knees, skin and bone of "Lady
Lazarus". However, Berryman goes a step further. He seems
fascinated by the functions of the body and this interest
testers on vulgarity when he says, for example:

"poor Henry,
with all this gas & shit blowing through it
four times in 2 hours, his tail ached." (DS 134)

This is something that Sylvia Plath carefully avoided.

John Berryman, unlike Sylvia Plath, indulges in
what W.J. Martz calls "sheer erotic exultation", especially
in his Sonnets. Even in The Dream Songs there are indelic-
cacies of language and crude portrayal of physical love and
lust. He says:

"....Henry became interested in women's bodies,
his loins were & were the scene of stupendous
achievement." (DS 26)

Or, trying (somewhat unsuccessfully) to say it discreetly:
"The berries & the rods left him alone less" (DS 44). He
speaks of a Secretary of State for War who "screwed a
redhaired whore" (DS 66); of Henry who "got hot, got laid"
(DS 66); of "the memory of a lovely fuck" (DS 46) and shows
crude humour when he narrates the incident of a bride
biting off the penises of all the men whom she married and all her husbands "dying mutilated" until the last one thinks of an ingenious strategy to save himself (DS 124). When compared to Berryman's lack of all inhibitions, Sylvia Plath could be called prudish considering the fact that she kept sexual matters right out of the domain of her poetry. There is nothing in her poems that produces the kind of shock effect that Berryman's blatant talk of the physical urge to mate does. Probably the only startling line she ever wrote was in "Daddy", "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through". But the unconventional tone of this line falls mildly when compared with the work of Berryman where there are no restraints whatsoever. Robert Phillips, speaking of the "literary offences" of Berryman, says that *Love and Fame* reveals much of what is wrong with bad confessional verse when the poet as a "sexual athlete" writes of lust instead of love.

While comparing the works of Sylvia Plath and John Berryman it would be worthwhile to conclude with the differences in their technique. Whereas Plath's poems are in sentences that are more or less conventionally constructed, Berryman's work is remarkable for its syntactical innovations. The very nature of his poems (dream songs) calls for a style that should relate to the unpredictability
of the dream world. Hence he writes sentences that seem
to be disjointed and impart to his work a kind of delirious
quality. For example, he says:

"Toddlers are taking over. O
ver! Sabbath belling. Snoods converge
on a weary-daring man." (DS 12)

Here we have two examples of his unique style: first of
all he breaks up a single word, "over", into two, letting
the latter part run into a new stanza, thus showing at
once the fluid continuity as well as the disjointedness of
dream logic; next, he coins an antithetical phrase, "weary-
daring man", that brings out effectively what he tries to
convey - the picture of a man who, instead of losing heart,
bravely persists in his efforts though he knows they may
be doomed to failure. Another new device that Berryman
employs is the location of the pause in the middle of the
line. This pause is different from the usual kind of
enjambment with the help of a period, a comma or a colon;
there is no punctuation mark used, just an extra space
between the words, for example:

"Huffy Henry hid the day,"
"The senior population waits,"
"I feel my application failing,"
"Neither the menstruating stars (nor man) was moved.."
"his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievement."
These pauses are significantly placed and heighten the impact of the words that follow. In these experiments Berryman stands apart from the other confessional poets and deserves the credit that is given to him.

To conclude, it may be said that though there is a lot of similarity in the themes of the confessional poets, each has an individuality that cannot be confused with the characteristics of another's work. Sylvia Plath, influenced by the older poets, tried for a while to write in their style, but later discovered her own style. As Gary Lane says, the echoes of other poets "are not central to Plath's search for a voice...." They are merely "nods of acquaintance, hats tried and returned to the shelf: they do not become her." Even though this may be considered a rather bold statement — the influence may be regarded as something more than mere "nods of acquaintance" — yet there is an element of truth in it: the influences on Plath might have become a part of her unconscious being but they are projected differently in her poetry, not as mere imitations. They become expressive of her own individuality that makes her stand apart from other poets: she rises above all influences to find her own voice.
NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE:


3. These quotations are from "Those Before Us" and "Middle Age" (For the Union Dead).


6. All quotations from *For the Union Dead* are from the New York edition, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967.

Abbreviations used:
FUD = For the Union Dead.


13. All references to Roethke's poems are from *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), hereafter cited as CP.


15. Ibid., p. 23.


17. Abbreviations used:


   **DN**: The Death Notebooks (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).


   **LD**: Live or Die (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).


28. References to the dream songs are from *77 Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965) and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). The abbreviation DS is used for "Dream Song". The number indicated is not of the page but of the dream song.
29. Introductory note to *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, p. ix.