Chapter - I

SYLVIA PLATH, MAKING OF THE POET

Confessional term was used to describe the kind of poetry that Lowell wrote in Life Studies. “Confessionalism” is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States in 1950s. It is a kind of poetry that focus on extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche, and personal trauma often set in relation to broader social themes. It is classified as postmodernism. M.L. Rosenthal in 1959 first used the term “confessional” in a review of Robert Lowell’s “Life Studies” entitled “Poetry as Confession”. Rosenthal said that in earlier works there was a mask that hides poets “actual face” and Lowell removes the mask. Life Studies was the first book in confessional mode, the poems in the last section were confessional, in which Lowell alludes to his struggle with mental illness and his experience in mental hospital and same method is used by Sylvia Plath. She too discusses her hospital experience in her poems. And this is influence of Robert Lowell’s confessional poems. A. Alveraz says that some poems in Life Studies are concerned with the process of psychoanalysis than with those of poetry.

Some texts of the American confessional school of poetry include Sylvia Plath’s “Ariel”, Berryman’s “The Dream Songs” and Sexton’s “To Bedlam Part Way Back”. Andriene Rich was also a confessional poet. In the 1970s and 1980s some writers rebelled against confessionalism in American poetry, arguing that it was too self-indulgent.

Sylvia Plath is one of the best-known confessional women poets of the twentieth century. Her fame has eclipsed even that of great, world famous female poets, such as the Russian Anna Akhmatova, or Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean writer who won the Nobel Prize for
Literature in 1945. Yet unlike those poets, whose international reputations were established during their lifetime, Plath’s fame came more slowly, growing gradually after her death in 1963 to the point where, at the end of the century, she had acquired an almost mythical status, inspiring dozens of biographies, critical studies, memoirs, performances and even, by 2003, a Hollywood film about her life, with Gwyneth Paltrow ‘Playing Sylvia’. Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts. Plath was first child of Aurelia and Otto Plath. Otto Plath was a professor in Boston University. Otto Plath had migrated from Germany to New York. Plath’s father was a German descendant but Aurelia Schober was not a German descendant. This aspect of parentage could be easily recognized in Plath’s poem like ‘Daddy’. Otto Plath was so good at learning that he is said to have learned English “…by sitting in the back of elementary classrooms and promoting himself. As a result he spoke English with a clear American pronunciation.”1 Aurelia Plath was a good school teacher. She helped her husband in revising his dissertation into a book entitled “Bumblebees and Their Ways” which was published in 1934. Aurelia helped her husband in collecting books and quoting references for his research papers. Thus, the environment of Sylvia Plath’s home was enveloped with good atmosphere. The atmosphere had a great influence on Plath and her brother Warren, who was two and half years younger than her. Both had keen interest in studies and were exposed to the works of great writers like Charles Lamb, Rudyard Kipling etc. Sylvia Plath started writing the poems during the school days. “By age of five she wrote poems, short but crafted”. Of her early attempts, the first one that she recopied in final form, dated and saved was ‘Thoughts’ an unrhymed couplet celebrating Christmas, written in 1937.”2. Sylvia Plath was the Centre of attention for her parents and grandparents as she was the first child of the family. After two and half
years her brother Warren was born. When Plath learnt about her brother she was excited she thought that he could be her playmate. On the other hand she felt insecure as she thought that she would lose the affection and love of her parents and grandparents.

“My mother was in hospital. She had been gone three weeks. I would do nothing. Her desertion punched a smoldering hole in my sky. How could she so loving hummed and thumped out her bread dough with suppressed excitement. Viennese, Victorian, she pursed her lips, she would tell me nothing. Finally she melted a little. I would have a surprise when mother came back. It would be something nice. It would be a baby I hated babies. I who had been the Centre of a tender universe felt. This axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth. Babies!”

Otto Plath’s health had started to detiorate after the birth of his son Warren. Most of Aurelia’s time was spent in tending Warren and in care of Otto Plath who was sick. Plath felt alone and abandoned. Otto was not able to spend time with his children. He died suddenly after his operation from embolism. Aurelia Plath did not allowed her children to attend the funeral of their father. She wanted to shield her children. Sylvia and Warren used to recite poems to their father when he was healthy. After death of her husband Aurelia Plath took up a teaching post at Boston University and decided to change house and moved inland along with her children at the Schobers to 23 Elmwood Road in Wellesley. So, Sylvia Plath got departed from the landscape the birthplace especially the sea of which Sylvia Plath was very fond of “When my father died we moved inland. Whereupon those
first nine years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth”. Plath felt insecure; she thought that her mother would marry again. She was not relieved till she made her mother promise never to marry again. Aurelia recalls the pitiable state of her daughter as:

After school, she came to me, red—eyed, and handed me a piece of paper, which told me there had been troubling comments from her classmates regarding the possibility of stepfather. On the paper in shaky printing, stood these words: I promise never to marry again. signed … I signed at once, hugged her and gave her glass of milk with some cookies, She pushed a kitchen chair against the one I was sitting on, sighed as if relieved and, leaning against my arm, ate and drank with relish.

Otto Plath’s death was a major shock for Sylvia Plath. She had a great attachment with her father. The death of her father left an imprint on the mind which could be seen in her poems. Sylvia was a brilliant student, she always excelled in studies both in school as well as in college, propelled by the academic environment at home as well as her sense of loneliness and insecurity. She wrote poems from the early age. While studying at Alice L. Phillips Junior High School she wrote for the Philippians, the school literary magazine. Sylvia Plath was enrolled in Gamaliel Bradford Senior High school in Wellesley where she co-edited The Bradford. In 1950 she managed to enter one of the premier women’s college in America, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts as an English major, with the help of scholarship. Olive Higgins Prouty was her Sponsor, he helped him in the ups and downs.
of her life. Aurelia Plath was not in a condition to support Sylvia Plath in higher education so Plath sometimes did side jobs to earn money. In 1950 she even worked as a field hand on a truck farm in Nattick “Reward of a New England Summer”.

When Sylvia Plath was studying in Smith College she suffered from bouts of depression for which she finally received bipolar electroconvulsive shock treatment:

“Metal probes were placed on Sylvia’s temple that powerful dosages of electricity shocks could be shot through her body. Following the session, the staff returned Sylvia to Aurelia, and the two of them returned the hospital. On that first day and on three additional days, Thornton oversaw the session. At some point in August, he went on vocation and left a Dr. Tilotson to oversee several more sessions. In later years, standard medical procedure would demand doctors administer electroshock therapy only after the patient was given a muscle relaxant and a general anesthetic. Also, a doctor or a nurse would stay with the patient during the recovery period, to provide support and counselling. In case of Sylvia Plath nothing this happened. Because she had taken no muscle relaxant her body was rigid with fear as she had received no anesthesia, she was in effect nearly electrocuted. Because no doctor or nurse accompanied her in recovery she experienced a painful numbing loneliness as she lay on the table by herself. As a side effect of shock therapy, Sylvia’s sleeplessness turned into acute insomnia. In August, night after night passed during which she did not sleep at all. It seemed she had become immune to the sleeping pills she now took.”
When Plath recovered after six months she continued her studies. In 1954 she returned to Smith College and did an outstanding research on the thesis “The Magic Mirror”: A Study of the Double in two of Dostoevsky’s Novel’s” for her graduation degree. For this purpose she read a number of books.

After one year interval she started writing again. “Doom of Exiles was the first sonnet written after her breakdown. In 1955, she graduated from Smith College and was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to Cambridge University. There she met Ted Hughes. She was totally swept out of her wits when she met Ted. She found all the traits that she desired. Her life was filled with laughter. She found herself totally different and started to write poetry in a different spirit. In a letter to her brother Warren on 23 April, 1956’ she wrote:

“I am writing poetry as I have never before; and it is the best because I am strong in myself and in love with the only man in the world who is my match”.  

They become close to each other and started to read each other’s poems. They became critics of each other’s works. In a letter to her mother she wrote:

“ Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine; they are strong full and rich- not quailing and whining like Teasdale or simple lyrics like Millay; they are working sweating, heaving poems born out of the way words should be said”.


Sylvia Plath was very excited as she thought that she was in love with a perfect man. Their mutual closeness and attachment could be seen in the letters that Plath wrote to her mother and brother during that time. After her father’s death she was looking for the man who could give her protection and could support her she found all this in Ted. She married him, in spite of Olive Higgin Prouty’s advice to the contrary:

“I can see you are going through the thrilling early stages of being again “in love”, Prouty wrote. “Too bad the early stages are limited duration. She then launched into a stinging attack on Ted. “You anticipated that I would feel skeptical. Fearful more closely describe it. Ted sounds too much like Dylan Thomas for me to think he would make a satisfactory husband and father. Thomas’s attitude towards women was much like you describe. Thomas’s wife was marvelous. Are you ready to do this for this second Thomas?” Prouty expressed deep concern about Ted’s violent behavior.”

Sylvia thought Ted was the best suited man for her. She wrote to her mother when she was on honeymoon in Spain she claimed that “…she had never been so happy: she was proud of Ted; she was reveling in the sea, the hill. She wrote that she and her husband are perfectly matched; both of us need same amount of food and sleep and time for writing; both are inner directed, almost antisocial” Sylvia writes about the anger of her mother as she was not happy with Plath’s marriage with Ted. She writes about her mother’s anger:
“The hurt going in, clean as a razor, the dark blood Welling…sitting in night gown and sweater in the dining room staring into the full moon, talking to the moon with wrongness growing and filling the house like a man eating plant. The need to go out. It is very quiet. Perhaps he is asleep. Or dead. How to know how long there is before death”. 11

She supported her husband in writing and in March 1957 Ted’s first book of poems ‘The Hawk in The Rain’ was published in America by Harpers. During this time she wrote a number of stories and poems. In the mean time she started to write her novel ‘Bell Jar’. A month before sailing off to United States, Hughes poetry book ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ was accepted by Faber and Faber for publication in England.

Sylvia and Ted went to America in 1957 where Sylvia taught English in Smith College for a year and Ted also taught at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. But Sylvia felt unhappy at Smith. She had no time for writing. On the other hand Ted was gaining popularity as a poet. Sylvia felt jealous. She decided to give up teaching and decided to devote all her time to writing. On the last day of teaching Sylvia invited Ted to celebrate but he didn’t come she felt very upset. Finally she found him with a girl student, she accused him but he stood his ground protesting innocence but Sylvia was furious. She deserved different treatment, better treatment, she wrote. She had given him all trust and love, not to mention money. Perhaps the last item was very difficult for her. As she wrote angrily in her journal:
“I have served a purpose, spent money, mothers money which hurts most to buy him clothes, to buy him a half year, eight months of writing.” Ted’s protestation of innocence only added to her fury. Then, after a fight complete with physical injury to each, everything was all right once more was developing a good deal of resentment toward Ted”.  

Later on Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal that though Ted knew how much she loved him yet he was not there when she needed him. “… isn’t this an image of what I feel of my father did to me?  

Plath attended classes of Robert’s course in poetry at Boston University there she met with Anne Sexton whose work had become an inspiration to her. At that time Plath was facing mental depression, three years after her marriage she was deprived of the blissful experience of motherhood. She thought that she would never be able to become a mother. She longed for a baby. She wrote in her journal of August, 1958, “I have a queer growing hunger for a baby, I feel an immaturity there, where a teen-age mother is farther advanced in womanhood than I” and next month she found that she was pregnant and Hughes wish was to have baby in Britain. Plath followed her husband’s decision; they spent two months at Yaddo, a writer’s colony where Plath and Hughes wrote and produced many poems. In Sylvia Plath’s collection, ‘The Colossus’ many poems are written when she was at Yaddo. In 1960 Sylvia and Hughes departed for England and in the same year they signed a contract with William Heinemann for the publication of her first volume of poetry and ‘The
Colossus’ which was published in England in October. In 1960 Plath’s first child Frieda Rebecca was born. In the same year Plath and Ted bought a manor house at Court Green in North Tawton, Devon. Controversies developed between Ted and Plath and by October 1962 Hughes left Sylvia Plath and his two children and went to live in London. Ted Hughe’s main cause for leaving the family was Assia Wevill wife of David Wevill, the Canadian poet. They had come on a visit for few days in 1962 but Wevill came close to Ted with the passage of time:

“…an odd chemistry formed between Ted and Assia: their interaction began to take on obvious sexual overtones. This should not have been surprising. Ted had been the object of women’s flirtation in the past, and Assia- a beautiful if thick wasted woman who disguised her figure by wearing long, flowing coats- had the reputation of having affair especially with poets. Her marriage to Wevill had evolved out of an affair the two had started while Assia was married to another man.\(^{15}\)

At that time Sylvia was working on Ariel and her novel ‘Bell Jar’. In January 1963 her novel ‘The Bell Jar’ was published under the pseudonym ‘Victoria Lucas’. The novel got a good public response and also became a point of attention for the critics. This was the joyful moment for Sylvia but she and her children were facing the hard time of their life. She was down with flu and her children were also ill. A. Alvarez observed:
“Her recurrent trouble, her sinuses were bad; the pipes in her newly converted froze solid; there was still no telephone and no word from the psychotherapist the weather continued monstrous. Illness, loneliness, depression and cold, combined with the demands of two small children, were too much for her.”

After Ted’s betrayal Sylvia decided to shift to London, since it was full of best opportunities for Sylvia as well as for her children. She shifted to the house were W. B. Yeasts stayed, in London with great expectations in the middle of December 1962. Sylvia boldly faced the dark side of life and gave a good parental care to her children and continued her writing carrier despite of all the difficulties. London faced the worst snowfall in 150 years. Sylvia and her children continued to get severe colds. Nature casted a negative effect on Sylvia and her two children, and with the passage of time she became both physically and psychologically weak, in that feeble condition Sylvia went to Professor Thomas, who lived down stairs weeping badly:

“He asked her in and, alternating between grief and resentment she gave free rein to her anger against her husband and the other woman, her frustration at being chained to the house and the children when she wanted to be free and become famous. Asking for a Sunday paper, she pointed to a poem in The Observer and said it by her husband. Then turning to a review of The Bell Jar by Victoria Lucas she disclosed that she, Sylvia Plath, was Victoria Lucas, and said that she did not want to die. Thomas tried to console her. He said why she had not thought of
getting divorce. She told him that she had reluctantly signed the divorce papers the last week she thanked Professor Thomas and said that he reminded of her father.”

Finally she couldn’t bore the burden of life and on the morning of 11 February, 1963 she committed suicide. Ted Hughes betrayal became the main cause of her suicide. Ted Hughes himself told that he was responsible for Plath’s suicide .In a letter that Hughes wrote to Aurelia Plath he revealed:

“…how he felt about Plath’s suicide. Mrs. Plath deposited the letter in the Lilly Library at Indiana University and sealed it until Hughes death; it was recently made available to the public. In the letter Hughes confesses that his “madness” played a major part in Plath’s depression, which ended in her suicide. He also says he was making for a reconciliation with Plath in the form of a holiday vocation, but she died before he could arrange it. From the letters tone and subject matter it is clear that Hughes felt more than slightly responsible for the Plath’s death. His guilt is palpable in the letter. If there is an eternity, Hughes hands his letter to Mrs. Plath; he would be “dammed in it”.

Different critics have given different views about Sylvia Plath’s suicide. Susan Bassnett gives a clear definition of Plath’s suicide:
“Within barely three years she had left her native United States to live in a country that intrigued her but whose climate eroded her health and sense of wellbeing, she had given birth to two children and miscarried a third, her adored husband was involved with someone else and she was writing with an exhaustive pace juggling the domestic parts of her life around the flow of creativity that she needed to fulfill. Small wonder that there was times when she felt unable to cope. The simple fact of organizing her domestic life, always difficult but made doubly so by the need to become the bread winner once the marriage had failed, was an enormous burden to take on.”

Assia Gutman who remained Hughes mistress for six years also committed suicide along with her four year old daughter Shura. “The poet Ted Hughes, the lynchpin of 20th century most tragic literary triangle, was such a domestic tyrant that he issued his mistress with two pages of typed instructions on how to manage his house and children and dictated what time she should get up.”

This side of Hughes life was reported by Daily Telegraph on the basis of biographical work done on Assia Wevill by Yehuda Koren and Eliat Negev the A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill. This work is based on secret diaries of Assia Gutman:
“The domestic instructions, described as “Draft Constitution” were probably written in 1967, when Wevill and Hughes were living in Devon with Frieda and Nicholas. In them, Hughes wrote that she was forbidden from staying in bed after 8a.m. from wearing her dressing gown around the house and from taking a nap. She had to play with children for half an hour a day, teach them German and introduce each week at least one meal with “a recipe we have never had before”. Hughes was exempt from cooking except in emergencies”. 21

From such indications it is clear that Ted was a domestic tyrant. Ted also humiliated Sylvia Plath by scolding her publically in the presence of Marica and Mike Plummer Ted:

“…accused her of refusing to sew buttons on his shirt and of tearing his worn-out socks. Later, in private, when Sylvia demanded to know why he had degraded her in front of her friends, Ted told her that by scolding her he hoped her to force her not to perform these minor tasks in the future.” 22

Sylvia Plath would have become a famous poet her life was extraordinary one she used material from it and presents in a magnificent way in front of the reader. Plath is categorized confessional poet. M.L. Rosenthal called Robert Lowell a confessional poet and Sylvia Plath was also confessional poet like Lowell. She used autobiographical material in her poetry in an artistic manner. Ted Hughes challenges that Plath was better than Lowell. Marjorie Perl off says Plath’s poetry is devoid of the realistic details of Robert
Lowell’s poems. No doubt there is disagreement that Sylvia Plath is a confessional poet or not but it is certain that she used her autobiographical material in her poetry. In an interview Plath her self-declared:

“…. I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experience I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or knife, or whatever it is. I think that one should be able control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience and one should be able to manipulate experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important but certainly it should not be a kind of shut box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on.” 23

From this it is certain that Plath used material from her life and used it with intelligent and informed mind. It is certain from the images of her father, mother, husband and brother that she used in her poetry. The happenings of Plath’s life are reflected in her poetry. The suicide attempts the father- daughter relationship and the failure of marriage with Ted could be seen in various poems of Plath. In ‘Daddy ‘which belongs to a group of poems exploring the Electra complex, clearly shows Plath’s affection with her father and her longing for him after his death. She constantly searches for him. “The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was a God. Her case is
complicated her father is a Nazi and her mother is a Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyses each other she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it”.

Plath creates the image of father as Nazi and her mother’s image as Jewish. The creation of such elements is fabulous. The black shoe is an obvert symbol. It indicates Plath’s fade memory for her father and all her attempts to recover him to have become fruitless:

You died before I had time-

Marble heavy, ab bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one grey toe

Big as Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic

Where it pours been green over blue

In the waters off beautiful Nauset.

I used to pray to recover you.

Ach, du

(Ariel: ‘Daddy’, p.49)
The same elements could also be seen in ‘The Colossus’ where Plath says that her father’s fragmented self could not be recovered again but in ‘Daddy’ she shows her longing to recover him.

Plath gives references of her father and husband in her poems. Her husband tortured her for seven years, she faced a lot and faced it for seven years. She depicts that her father and husband were both oppressors. One of them oppressed him by dying when she was a child and she needed him badly. He betrayed her in that way and the second one that is her husband betrayed her in her real life and also appears as a victimizer, oppressor, vampire and blood sucker. She needed their security in her real life but she lacked it. She succeed in killing them both if she kills both of them:

If I have killed one man, I have killed two-

The Vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a year,

Seven years if you want to know

Daddy you can lie back now

(Ariel: ‘Daddy’, p.50)
Plath is not looked as a person or a poets but as a “classical heroine” for daring to write the kind of poetry that appeared in Ariel. It is filled with high-voltage stuff which was seen by Robert Lowell as a playing Russian roulette with a bullet in each cylinder. Suicide seemed to be the natural outcome in Ariel poems. According to George Steiner Sylvia Plath’s last poems are representative of the emotional life of the time. Most of the books that were written on Plath during the seventies and early part of eighties are delimiting, specific approaches to her life, fitting into rigid schemes. Plath’s Collected poems and The Journals, show Plath’s growth as both as a person and as a poet. Sylvia Plath’s poetry is an act of self-revelation. by studying her work in conjunction with the letters that Plath wrote to her mother and the entries that she made in her journals does not give the clear picture of the person and the poet. In her personal diary which she kept since childhood and which records her inner struggle, Sylvia Plath observes: “my happiness streams from having drenched a piece out of my life, a piece of hurt and beauty, and transformed it to type written words on paper.”  

In her letters Home and in The Journals there is a record of similar expressions made during her childhood and all through her ill-starred life.

For Sylvia Plath writing was a way of life, an expression of being alive it is also an expression of her personality and a preservation of sanity. Plath has mentioned in her diary, “I have powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative or they turn to destruction and waste…”

Creativity is thus directly related to Plath’s inner life and is looked upon as a factor nourishing her emotional and intellectual wellbeing. A close study of Plath’s works shows that the pressures of writing creates a direct effect on her life style. Her writing is an attempt
to synthesis life and art. She has made her choice early in the life to devote herself to writing. It is evident from her poem:

You ask why I spend my life writing.

Do I find entertainment?

Is it worthwhile?

Above all does it pay?

If not, then, is there a reason?

I write only because

There is a voice within me

That will not be still.

(Letters Home, pp. 33-34)

The poem clearly shows Plath’s desire of writing. There was a conflict between writing and social acceptability, between creativity and academic success and between leading a feminine life and literary recognition and achievement. It was possible for Plath to control and master art but the real life problem couldn’t be controlled in such a way. The personal could be seen in her autobiographical novel The Bell Jar, and in Letters Home and The Journals. In her poetry the destructive forces of life are countered by the creative forces of art. Writing made her capable to struggle with the odd situations of life. As she wrote to
her mother after facing a bad accident of life: “To make myself feel better I wrote two
villanelles today and yesterday … they took mind Off my helpless misery and made me feel a good deal better …oh hell. Life is so difficult and tedious I could cry. But I won’t; I’ll just keep writing villanelles.”27 This feature lead her to write her collections Ariel and Winter Trees. Her tormented life could be clearly seen in her writings. After separation from Ted Hughes she wrote to her mother: “It is hurtful to be ditched …but thank God I have my own work. If I did not have that I do not know what I would do.”28 this is not to suggest that she wrote to escape from the pressures of her life. But through it she highlights the cry of heart. She used her personal material in writing. In Plath’s early phase of her life writing and living took up equal time attention and she has to sort out her priorities.

The progress of Plath as a poet could be observed in four stages marked by a definite development in her authentic voice. The first stage is marked the pre-1956 poems “constructed around reading”, in which her inner voice experience is artificially handled. The second phase is marked by the poems that Plath submitted in 1957 to her “twelve black gowned examiners”. The third stage is represented by her publication “The Colossus”, which contains lyrical and thundering poems, poems that deal with her real life accidents. And the last phase is represented by her collection “Crossing the Water”, a volume in which Plath frees her work of inhibitions. Plath’s art is seen undergoing a change from first to last; there is a fusion of strength and elegance, and phrasing is literary. Literary devices have given a way to voice which dramatic, colloquial, unsubtle, sarcastic and ironical. Plath’s development as a poet is complete. The poetry of Plath must be seen in terms of draft and content simultaneously. The majority of her poems are autobiographical in nature,
but they can also be read as poems in their own right without any reference to her life. The close study of her poems help us to understand the artist and her art.

Plath was influenced by Theodore Roethke’s poetry. She herself confesses when she wrote ‘Poem for a Birthday’ by referring to it in her journal as “a few new things … Roethke’s, yet mine” 29. She uses Roethke’s imagery of stones, trees, shadow and the moon and dapper people:

“The tree caught by the moon in Roethke’s ‘All the Earth’, ‘All the Air’ reappears in Plath’s in ‘The Moon and The Yew and Tree’ and ‘Elm’; ‘The Breathing Red Flowers’ in ‘The lost Son’ recur in ‘Tulips’ and ‘Poppies in July’”.30

In Plath’s poetry Robrt Lowell’s influence is more than Roetheke. According to Ted Hughes ‘Point Shirley’ is “…a deliberate exercise in Robert Lowell’s early style.”31 Plath was much influenced by Lowell’s style. Her use of autobiographical material is also be attributed to Lowell’s influence. The poem ‘Daddy’ is also written after reading Lowell’s ‘Life Studies’, but with an alteration and modification:

“ The attempt to communicate the ‘real Robert Lowell’ emerges in ‘Life Studies’ as a painfully accurate analysis of one man’s dilemmas which gains universal significance through the depth and detail of its treatment. Sylvia Plath’s method is especially different rather than delineating the individual in a recognizable
context she uses the private to gain aces to the universal by ruthlessly mythologizing her own experience and in doing this moves a long way from autobiography".32

Plath’s poems are confessional, she gained experience from the poets belonging to the same category like Lowell. She gives a detail of the relationship she had with her father, mother, brother and husband. She pictures the real incidents of her hard life in front of the reader. Plath intends it to be this way as she herself said.

Critics like Steven Lowell commented that in Sylvia Plath’s sea poems “Plath adopted Lowell’s clotted syntax his tone of aggrieved aggression, and his vocabulary of comber’s’, spindrift, squalls, and sluttish, rutted sea”34. This indicates that Robert Lowell had a profound and lasting influence on Plath. Emily Dickinson had also influence on Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath in ‘Mussels Hunter at Rock Harbor’ talks about the shellfish in the same manner as Dickenson contemplates a bird in the poem ‘A Bird came down the Walk’. Riddle poems show the same nature. Plath like Dickenson liked to speak obliquely. Both Dickenson and Plath criticize their respective fathers. Plath calls her father vampire on the other hand Dickenson calls her father a burglar because of whom she is poor. Plath and Dickenson were interested in being raised from oblivion, they sought survival through art. Both were fond of death as moth is fond of light, same lust was seen in Dickenson and Plath for death. Dickenson was tempted by death as a way “to obviate” the frustrations of experience” and was repelled by it as a source of defeating silence, even more than the final termination, she dreaded the daily deaths of consciousness as the following quatrain suggests:
The dying is a trifle past,

But living, this include

The dying multifold-without

The respite to be dead.

(Poem1013)\(^{35}\)

Virginia Woolf was also a model for Sylvia Plath. On comparing Sylvia Plath’s novel Bell Jar and Virginia Woolf Mrs. Dalloway there one can find a number of similarities. Woman has the central place in both the narratives, in spite of being marginalized in a predominantly marginalized culture. Both show their sufferings through the novel and both give the solution for the suffering that is suicide. “Woolf’s writing haunts Plath’s. Indeed, there is a strong presence of Woolf’s texts in Plath’s own.”\(^{36}\)

‘A Room of One’s Own’ is actually an unrepressed presence in Plath’s work. Woolf writes: “Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father. The Fascist Poem…will be a horrid little abortion such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of a county town.”\(^{37}\) The Bell Jar examines the problems of the poet who can find no serious female role models, of the young woman writer who finds the shift from silent muse to speaking subject difficult.

It is clear that Plath used the material from her own life rather than using the events.
Plath only published one collection during her life time, ‘The Colossus and Other Poems’, in 1960 in UK, and she published her novel ‘Bell Jar’ in 1963, under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. The public response for the two works was positive many critics praised the technical skill of the two works. E. Lucas Myers, in his review emphasized “the impersonal nature of Plath’s poems even though they appeared to be about personal subjects”. He also praised their technical skill.

Another critic Susan Bassnett said that all the collections by Plath are equally worthwhile. All have the same valve she doesn’t compared that early poems with the later ones as most of the critics had done.

Plath’s Bell Jar was published under a pseudonym Victoria Lucas, it was favorably reviewed. Lawrence Lerner, in his review of the novel, called it “a brilliant and moving book”. In Jeremy Hawthorn’s view, the novel concerns itself not only with the heroines “Split personality forced on to women by men in a historical way”, it is a precise and historical and social context. The novel is a depiction of the complexities of human relationship.

After the suicide of Sylvia Plath, the tenor of the criticism also changed, for both, the early and later poems as well as the novel. Critics tried to understand the works of Plath through her biography and they also tried to understand her hardships through her art. Sylvia Plath’s second collection of poems was published posthumously in 1971 by Ted Hughes and the next year her third collection Winter Trees was published. Robin Skelton praises the poems in’ Crossing the Water’ for their verbal brilliance and imagery.
Sylvia Plath’s letters to her family were published as Letters Home, in 1975. These were edited by Aurelia Plath. In 1977, her collection of short stories, prose and journal excerpts, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writing was also published. She won Pulitzer Prize posthumously.

There is no doubt that Plath was one of the most dynamic and admired poets of twentieth century and her work attracted the attention of limitless readers, who saw in her work an attempt to catalogue despair, obsession with death and violent emotion. In the New York Times Book Review, Joyce Carol Oates describes Plath’s personality as “one of the most celebrated and controversial of postwar poets writing in English”. Her poems are autobiographical and they show her mental anguish, her failure of marriage with Ted Hughes, her unresolved conflicts with her parents and her own vision of herself.

In the New York Times Book Review, former American Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky said “thrashing, hyperactive, perpetually accelerated, the poems of Sylvia Plath catch the feeling of a profligate, hurt imagination, throwing of images and phrases with the energy of a runway horse or a machine with its throttle stuck wide open. All the violence in her work returns to that violence of imagination, a frenzied brilliance and conviction”.

Kuo (1996) conducted a study entitled Trauma and Paternal Loss in Sylvia Plath’s poetry. The study explored her relationship with her father and how her father’s death influenced in her career and development. The study showed that her father’s death made a big gap in her life which was never filled in her life time. The poems of Sylvia Plath reflect her pain and agony of life. The poems are traces of Sylvia’s scars. Being alive she was wounded to death. The loss of her father and husband betrayal forced her to commit suicide.
Runco (1998) conducted his study entitled Suicide and Creativity: The Case Study of Sylvia Plath. The study explored the area that although much could be learned by viewing Sylvia Plath’s poetry as an expression of her thinking. Plath’s writing is outcome of her depression and huge contribution of Plath’s writing is due to this contribution. Her depression is the main cause of Plath’s death.

Khalief (1999) conducted a study entitled A “Normal” Split Personality: A Feminist Study of Sylvia Plath. The study revealed that that the speaking subject in Sylvia Plath’s works is a contradictory, split and divided subject. She has chosen different choices to express different ideologies and attitudes, whether conscious or unconscious.

Kimura (2001) conducted his study on Sylvia Plath under title Sylvia Plath’s mourning and creativity. The aim of the study was to know the connection between mourning and creativity in Sylvia Plath’s work. It was obvious from the study that Plath’s work is an example of Melanie Klein’s idea that artist’s creative products represents the process of mourning. For Sylvia Plath writing was a compensation for loss, especially the loss of her father. Plath must have continued her writing to get peace and to forget the loss that she had to face from the early stage of her life.

Sharif (2006) conducted a study entitled Ambivalence: The Divided Self in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry. The study showed that ambivalence, feelings about a particular entity, became a ruling passion in Sylvia Plath’s poetry. These states of breakdown and ambivalence are prevalent in her poetry. Confessional poets usually choose their personal subject in their poetry and Plath too had followed the same technique. Plath is famous among her celebrities for her ambivalence: schizophrenic, schizoid and paranoid. Plath’s works
contain self-hatred, deep attachment and simultaneously deep hatred towards her near and dear ones.

Ghasemi (2007) conducted a study entitled Reflection of Self and other in Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” Imagery. The aim of the study was to the reflection of Plath’s self in her poetry. Plath has used a lot of images like “mirror”, “candles” and “moon” which indicate the connotative significance which she employed for self-reflection. The study made a focus on Plath’s use of reflective images which imply her process of arriving at a liberative and realistic definition of the female self.

The writer A. Alvarez, wrote in The Savage God, that the poems of Plath’s collection Ariel which were published by Hughes have the main characteristic that these poems make life and death inseparable. The one could not exist without another.

Charles Newman in his book The Art of Sylvia Plath wrote that “death is preeminent but strangely unoppressive. Perhaps it is because there is no longer dialogue, no sense of otherness she is speaking from a viewpoint which is total, complete. Love and death all rivals are resolved as one within their irreversibility of experience. To reverse Blake, the heart knows as much as the eye sees.”
Objectives of my study are:

1. How confessional poetry emerged in the United States?

2. How can “Womanhood” be a declaration of freedom and power for a women poet?

3. How does Sylvia Plath’s poetry exhibit the internal conflict that assails a woman poet?

4. In what ways did Sylvia Plath radicalize the issues of parenthood and marriage?

5. How personal sufferings are expressed through embryological images and metaphors?

6. How domestic issues have been high lightened by Sylvia Plath through various devices?
REFERENCES


4. Alexander, Paul. op. cit., p. 68


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23. Ibid., pp. 305-306.
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