CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: DEVELOPMENT OF CONFESSIONAL POETRY

The act of "Confession" is the acknowledgement of sinfulness in public or private, regarded as necessary to obtain divine forgiveness. Etymologically, 'Confessional' means a 'box cabinet' or 'stall' in Roman Catholic Church where the priest sits to hear the confessions of the penitents. This Christian practice has always been recognized for its therapeutic effect. Bible stresses the need of confession. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament discuss the importance of confession and penitence. The Bible advises: "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:16). In modern times, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that penance is a sacrament instituted by Christ, in which a confession of all serious sins committed after Baptism is necessary. The admittance of sins is the admittance of insatiable desires, cravings and complexes which lead to sins. Bible interprets confession as an acknowledgement of one's dark side. In some ways one do not fully understand, self-disclosure helps to see things, feel things, imagine things, and hope for things that had never seemed possible. The invitation to transparency, then, is really an invitation to authenticity. In fact, when one reveals oneself to another person, the knowledge of how to increase contact with the 'real self' becomes possible and destinies can be directed on the basis of this knowledge. The literary version of 'Confession' is based on these theological roots.
Confessional poetry converges with the aspects of psychology and philosophy because it has its roots in the ceaseless efforts to reach a level of perception of oneself. Its material is derived from one's immediate life, one's past, as well as one's own imaginative plunges into the unconscious. Since most of this is psychological, confessional poetry responds to studies making use of psychoanalytical methods. Again, since most of this is related to the existential vision of life, confessional poetry becomes understandable in terms of existential vocabulary. Therefore, a psychoanalytical and existential approach is necessary to understand and interpret the confessional poets better. Before the discussion of confessional poets and the trends of confessional poetry, a discussion of psychoanalytic aspects of confessional poetry is necessary and existentialist approach shall be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

In recent decades the convergence of literature and psychoanalysis is commonly seen to permeate each other. With the interlocution of all 'texts' in a postmodern discourse of today, the boundaries between these two fields have blurred and they have so much in common. Adopting interpretive latitude to understand the coalescence of both literature and psychoanalysis, it becomes apparent that the interpretation of literature in terms of psychoanalysis is plausible because the perversions of personality are made compatible with their psychical accessibilities. Psychoanalysis helps to talk about texts as the embodiment of writer's psychological insights. Besides discovering the conscious intentions, it enables to perceive literary texts as the embodiment of writer's unconscious motivations. The conscious,
preconscious and unconscious mental processes, which are the components of mind, constitute a writer’s text with their interplay.

Every literary expression is the result of a complex interaction between the author’s conscious and unconscious mental processes and can thus be illuminated by psychoanalytic means. To understand the confessional poetry in terms of psychoanalytic theories, it is necessary to have a crystal clear image of the fundamentals of Freudian psychoanalysis. The polymorphous ways in which Freudian ideas endeavour to explicate the underlying intents of texts justify the undertaken attempt. In conjunction of the psychoanalytic process with the development of confessional poetry, an effort is made to entwine a number of theoretical reflections in this study.

Psychoanalytical criticism interprets the whole range of literary expressions, including poems and fairy tales. This reality-based interpretation focuses on the relationship between the text and its author, or between the texts and its readers, or both. It elucidates these texts by interpreting them as artistic transformations of the author’s mental disposition, or by explaining their enduring appeal on the basis of the psychological fascination they hold for the reader. Everything people do depend on their mental states – on conscious deliberations, conflicts and decisions as well as unconscious mental processes. The domination of unconscious element in the creative process is the basis of the psychoanalyst’s particular interest in it. Like dreaming, the creative process provides a value to the pressure of the unconscious. Literature allows the
writer to work his repressed desires out of his system by expressing them in a cloaked socially acceptable form.

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton consciously and unconsciously define and structure their ideas of themselves as a woman, which makes the theoretical approach plausible. At the root of their relationship with the discourses of psychoanalysis and myth, there is a subjective–objective conflict which is manifested in their treatment of culture and literature. But before the application of these theories on their confessional poetry, a discussion of the origin and development of confessional poetry and various confessional poets is imperative. The theological roots of confession have already been discussed. In literature also confession is considered to be admittance. Therefore, the autobiographical form is taken as confession for it is an expression of the personal experiences, beliefs, feelings, ideas and states of mind, body and soul. But, while in autobiography those events and experiences are expressed which give the work a structural pattern, the confession is related to the worthwhile contents and the notions of religion, politics and art.

Just as the interpretation of dreams provides insights into the mind of the dreamer, so the interpretation of literary texts provides insights into the mind of the author which gives important clues to the meaning of the text. Every text is also the product of conscious motivations and as such a carefully organized, highly interlinked unified creation. In other words, every work of art is overdetermined. Hence, instead of uncovering the meaning of literary texts, psychoanalytic literary criticism uncovers only a specific layer
of meaning. As Freud puts it, "All genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation."¹

In a way, creative writing is like dreaming. When people dream, their unconscious wishes are transformed through such mechanisms as condensation, displacement, representation, and symbolization; into the dream content. Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams provides a hermeneutic for the unmasking of the dream's disguise, or dream-work, as Freud calls it. Like literature, the manifest content of the dream which is remembered and reported, must be understood as veiling a latent meaning. Because the dreams intermingle the residues of immediate daily experiences with the deepest, often most infantile wishes, they defy logical entailment and narrative coherence. Yet they can be ultimately decoded by attending to four basic activities of the dream work, which are at the same time applicable to the poetry by reversing their mystifying effect.

Condensation, the first of these activities, operates through the fusion of several different elements into one. As such, it exemplifies one of the key operations of psychic life, which Freud called over-determination. No direct correspondence between a simple manifest content and its multidimensional later counterpart can be assumed. The second activity of the dream work, displacement, refers to the decentering of dream thoughts so that the most urgent wish is often obliquely or marginally represented on the manifest level. Displacement also means the associative substitution of one signifier in the dream or poetry for the other. The third activity Freud called
representation, by which he meant the transformation of thoughts into images. Thus, to decode a dream or a poem means to translate such representations back into intersubjectively available language through free association. The final function of the dream work is secondary revision, which provides some order and intelligibility to the dream by supplementing its content with narrative coherence. The process of dream interpretation thus reverses the direction of the dream work, moving from the level of the conscious recounting of the dream through the preconscious, back beyond censorship into the unconscious itself.

The invention of confessional literature is attributed to Saint Augustine and Rousseau. The Confessions of Saint Augustine has guided the successive generation of critics. As a psychological document, this book probes into the problems generated by the life's hardships and provides practical solutions which 'affect the metaphysics' of the reader. Opening the layers after layers of successive mental crises, it helps the reader in his miseries and in his constant search of faith.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's Confessions which was written two hundred years ago, is one of the frankest self-revelations ever offered to public. Comprising an Augustinian awareness of human nature and a sense of eternal torture, this book serves as a torch-bearer to be followed by the numerous "confessions" of nineteenth century Romantics, De Quincey, Musset, Chateaubrind and certainly William Wordsworth of The Prelude. The first tracing of confessional poetry has been found in the solipsistic poetry of these Romantics. Some poets who refused to accept the Eliotic mantle of
reticence and other modern techniques of Dylan Thomas and John Crowe Ransom; which had produced a dehumanized objective art, devoid of emotions, took a subjective turn. Exposing their private anguish, they sang of emotions and feelings they were intimate with. Depicting their genuine emotions, they expressed their self-incurred deep personal conviction. These poets became a potent force in the modern literary history and were christened as "Confessional Poets." Writing lyric poems, very true to their heart, these poets won numerous Pulitzer Prizes and National Awards. Gaining recognition as a distinguished literary genre with the publication of Robert Lowell’s Life Studies, confessional poetry brought back the subjective element which was extirpated rudely since the Augustan age. All the top practitioners of this genre since 1959 like Robert Lowell, Stanley Kunitz, Randall Jarell, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, W. D. Snodgrass and John Berryman have won several prizes worth their abilities for the vast range of the volumes they have produced to enrich the world literature with the subjectivity par excellence. Regarding the origin of confessional poetry, the views of Robert Phillips are of great value, Sappho, Catullus, Augustine, Rousseau, Rilke, Baudelaire, Whitman, countless others through the ages have written with the self as primary subject, the self treated with the utmost frankness and lack of restraint... confessional poetry can be traced as far back as Sir Thomas Wyatt, which is pretty far; and that Pope’s famous Epistle to Arbuthnot is a worthy example of the genre as is Wordsworth’s Prelude and Byron’s Don Juan.
The confessional mode then has always been with us. It merely has not until recently been officially "named." It is that writing which is highly subjective, which is in direct opposition to that other school; of which Auden and Eliot are modern members-writers who consciously strove all but to obliterate their own concrete personalities in their poems. It is poetry written in opposition to, or reaction from, the Eliotic aesthetic which influenced several generations of poets.²

America's Walt Whitman, who is said to be the first confessional modern poet, taught courage to many moderns to write frankly about themselves and their experiences. As Robert Phillips has studied, Whitman had written blankly, "I am the man. I suffered, I was there," while T.S. Eliot had taken the help of the persona, the Tiresias, when he stated, "I, Tiresias, have suffered all..." In the long succession of confessional poets, of which Robert Lowell is considered as the father, Walt Whitman is the great grandfather. Allen Ginsberg called him the lonely old courage teacher in his "A Supermarket in California" and John Berryman, in his The Dream Songs makes several allusions to "the great Walt." Theodore Roethke invokes his poetic deity in these words: "Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues: for the world invades me again."⁵

Confessional poetry dispensed with the stance of the aesthetic distance maintained by the 'high poetry.' Instead of depending on 'objective correlatives' which T.S. Eliot described in his essay on Hamlet as, "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that
particular emotion; such that when external facts... are given the emotion is immediately evoked...." Confessional poetry makes use of the subjective correlatives because this poetry is not an escape from personality but an expression of it. While earlier modern poets prided themselves in a dignified and elevated style away from uniquely human poetry, the new school of confessional poets achieved unison of emotions with horrors of modern man’s existential predicament.

The brilliant Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung advised his patients to become acquainted with what he called the "shadow side" of themselves, or the "inferior" part of the personality. It means that perhaps there is a secret portion in every mind which comprises of memories from the past which terrify all and of which everyone is ashamed; the mean, selfish and base nature which erupts occasionally and which is explained away in a thousand different ways. The natural assumption is that if someone let others see this dark side, they too will hate him. But generally others are more lenient with a person then one is to oneself and a curious kind of chemistry begins to work. Because one has shared one’s deeper secrets, a better understanding of oneself is created; and sharing the secrets gives way to confessional poetry.

To achieve unison of passions with the panic, the emotions with the angst of modern life, confessional poets dissolved the 'self' into the 'subject' as Robert Lowell mentioned, "The confessional poets chiefly employ the self as sole poetic symbol. They are artists whose total mythology is the lost self."7 This statement is substantiated by the statement of E.V. Ramakrishnan, "The confessional poets of twentieth century embody the
American experience of rejecting the original situation for an alternative and prefer to live as lost men while the hunt for alternative continues." The confessional poems of Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman strengthen this comment. All of them suffered with the complexes and the psychic problems created by the non-adjustment with their family situations. Roethke's long confessional sequence is titled as *The Lost Son*, while Plath's love-hate relationship with her father becomes a destructive passion making her a lost daughter. Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* is an account of the failure of his father, the domination of his mother, the subsequent alienation of Lowell with his own self and the recurring mental breakdowns. The death of his loved ones made him so lonely that he lost the sense of his own entity resulting in his failures to cope with the environment. Similarly, Anne Sexton's mental illness and loneliness is expressed in her third book *Live or Die* where she declares, "*Everyone has left me I except my muse \ that good nurse*"(her italics). The poems of personal failure are related closely to the poems of alienation, frustration and detachment. Lowell has given the details of his father's financial bust, Kunitz confesses his father's suicide, Anne Sexton and Roethke their fathers' drinking habits and Ginsberg writes about his mother's madness; which confirms the fact that childhood experiences have an impact on the psyche.

Confessional poetry is a mixture of love and loathing, humour and horror, self-deception and despair and all the same it has an impact of a purely personal release. Such expressions are evoked through phrasing that reconstructs actual speech and potentially explosive repression. The
dramatic flexibility and structural dynamics of confessional art are a result of
the portrayal of the true feelings of the confessional poets and "Whatever the
cost in public exposure or private anguish their subjects are most often
themselves and always the things they intimately know." The more naked
and directly emotional nature of confessional poems heightens the integrity
and force of their witness to the inner lives of both poets and readers. The
poet inevitably catches up the way we live now: especially the personal life,
since our marriages are more difficult than our wars, our private nightmares
more terrifying than our public horror. The final privatism of poetry itself
affords the confessional poets a certain confidence in using the details of
intimate experience in ways that earlier would have been considered either
arrogant or obscure. Once a poem is published, it turns into a more inclusive
focus from a strictly private need.

In his The Compulsion to Confess, Theodor Reik opens up a few
theoretical approaches towards an understanding of the "compulsion" and
its results. Broadly, Reik defines a confession as "a statement about impulses
or drives which are felt or recognized as forbidden." When these impulses
are expressed, both the repressed tendency and the repressing forces are
involved. When the primitive urge for expression is transformed into the
compulsion to confess, it gives rise to a confessional situation. Moreover, the
social and psychic restraints and the reactive reinforcement cause it.
Therefore, a repetition of action or of certain behaviour, which is substituted
by displacement and with different emotional material, as words must
substitute for action, is confession. In Reik's view, "The disintegrating of the
personality is at least temporarily halted by the confession. The communication between the ego and that part of the ego from which it was estranged, is restored.\textsuperscript{12}

If we take account of Reik’s definition of confession, then confessional poetry becomes psychotherapy because like psychotherapy it involves a process in which the patient recounts his most intimate experiences, both conscious and unconscious, memories and fantasies. Through the restoration of the psychic integration, confessional art, whether poetry or not, becomes “a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences, that must be hunted down, concerned and exposed in order to be destroyed.”\textsuperscript{13}

The common theme, cause and underlying strain of confessional poetry of 1950s and 1960s were the neurosis. Almost all the confessional poets of that time suffered one or more mental breakdowns. To eschew the existential dilemma off their soul, the confessional poets probed into their self and relinquished the romantic equation of the cosmos. Their poetry has exposures of their suicidal impulse. Committing themselves to the confession and nonetheless being obsessed by it, they wrote the poetry of suicidal romance as well as that of psychic perturbances. It was not all by chance that almost all confessional poets had suffered these psychic vacillations and some of them fed up of their sybilical existence; took their lives in which Sylvia Plath, Randall Jarrell, Anne Sexton and John Berryman are most conspicuous. The suffering of confessional poetry is generally unbearable because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia. How so ever,
it is not enough to relegate the matter to the province of the mentally disturbed. A heightened sensitivity to the human predicament in general, has led to a sharper sense of the pain of existence under even "normal" conditions. Sentimentality, self-dramatization, and the assumption that universal feelings are the private property of the poet himself as a uniquely seismographic instrument, are among the manifest dangers of this situation.

Instead of being a literal recitation of losses or facts, confessional poetry springs from the need to confess and the problem of the confessional poet is to break down the distinction and to "approach the muse as frankly as one talks with once friends. It is the ability to commit to writing, to write the same way that you... are!" The aesthetic procedure of the poetry transmutes the visionary approach of the poet towards a psychological preview which brings an order into the neurotic life of the poet. The self-motivation for this poetry seems to be an ardent desire to express the inner consciousness. Therefore, each poem is in some way a declaration of independence, or of guilt, anguish or suffering. Confessional poet focuses exclusively upon the pain, anguish and ugliness of life at the expense of its pleasure, delight and beauty.

Confessional poetry consists of balanced narrative poems with unbalanced or afflicted protagonists. These poems ask rather than answer questions. To attain artistic detachment, the confessional poets employ irony and understatement as in Lowell's line, "My mind's not right." from "Skunk Hour." Whatever may be the form of poem; blank verse, free or rhymed, conversational language is used to give a heightened effect of reality.
Through the idiomatic, work-a-day language, the confessional poet gets closer to the realities of life. Though confessional poets share common subjects, a common vision, frequently a common tone and a common disclaimer to veracity, they do not use similar forms. Since they write individually to express their own vision, they freely use work-a-day language, and freely experiment in matter of forms to feel closer to the realities of life. While Robert Lowell delights himself in free verse, Anne Sexton deals with strict forms. The strict measures, symbol clusters, and dense phrases of Empson, early Lowell, and early Kunitz were replaced by the conversational diction of the later confessional poets. Most poems by Anne Sexton, Roethke and Lowell have a definite rhyme scheme. Anne Sexton and John Berryman are among some disciplined poets but Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath (in her last poems) has written the freest verse of all.

Confessional poem is not only anti-structural and anti-elegant in mode; it is also anti-establishment in content. It has widened the range of the subject matter for the poetry. Confessional poets have written poems on almost every experience of life, from menstruation to masturbation, from psychic disturbances to physical problems, from a cut to the wound, from sexual relations to pregnancy, abortions and a myriad of subjects. "Meditation In Hypotheraphy" and "Lines upon Leaving a Sanitarium" by Roethke; "Face Lift", "Thalidomide" "Contusion" by Plath; "Menstruation at Forty", "In Celebration of My Uterus" and "Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" by Sexton and "The Operation" by Snodgrass are the examples of the vastness of the themes offered by Confessional poetry. For the openness of
emotion, the technique of the openness of language is appended. The language of the ordinary speech allows the free outlet of the emotions.

Whether the conversational or elegant language, confessional poems are mostly emotional outpourings, though not controlled. After a long term repressing of emotions, when American poetry regained the emotional language, it seemed like a drizzling after the scorching heat of monsoon, when Sylvia Plath shouts, “Daddy, Daddy, you bastard I’m through,” or Lowell cries out, “Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!” or Anne pleads, “my drunkard, my navigator, \ my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.” They expose their soul and hence categorize themselves among the great poets, as Anne had expressed in an interview, “It is very embarrassing for someone to expose their body to you. You don’t learn anything from it. But if they expose their soul you learn something. That’s true of great writers. They expose their souls and then suddenly I am moved and I understand my life better.”

Generations of poets had censored their emotions and had given only a filtered outlet to them but “The Confessional poets” as Robert Phillips has mentioned, "at the risk of all else, return that which is uniquely human to poetry. Rather than fearing emotion they make it their stock-in-trade.”

Though the confessional poetry is emotional outpouring, it doesn’t mean that the confessional poet must necessarily speak the truth. In fact, a “holding-back” process goes on in poet’s mind. As Anne Sexton had said, “I’m hunting for the truth. It might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one, because everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life.” This statement reaches us to the technique of
confessional art. The truth for which the confessional poet strives is a poetic truth, and not a fact. In it, a lie is formed to replace the truth.

Confessional poem is a fancy of poet to mythologize his own life. It does not portray a fact to substantiate a fact, rather it depicts a fancy to materialize it. The "holding-back" process helps poets to intentionally keep some facts in check to eliminate as well as embellish the truth. Robert Phillips also approved that "nearly every poet, writing in the confessional genre has taken the pains to disavow the literal truth of his poems." Therefore, in almost all poems there are imaginary names of the places, fictitious brothers, sisters, daughters and dream lovers because poetry begins where matter of fact or science ceases to be merely such, and to exhibit a further truth and the connection it has with the world of emotion, is its power to produce imaginative pleasure. What Jacques Lacan had once said in his television presentation is applicable on all confessional poets: "I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible; words fail. Yet it is through this very impossibility that the truth holds on to the real."

D.H. Lawrence has said "one sheds one's sickness in books- repeats and presents again one's emotions , to be master of them." What a person hides from himself, is revealed in the poetry as Anne Sexton's doctors had told her. She affirms,

Sometimes my doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven't integrated into my life. In fact, I may be concealing it from myself; while I was revealing it to the readers.
The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious. The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of.

All the poets who are central to confessionalism have undergone extensive psychotherapy. It would be careless to ignore its influence, especially given the strong similarities between the process of therapy they have needed as individuals, and the process of poetry by which they have then sought to express the lives they have come to explore or understand. Psychotherapy and psychoanalysis involve a process during which the patient recounts his or her most intimate experiences, both conscious and unconscious, memories and fantasies. In her work, Anne Sexton is sharply aware of the difference between factual truth and the poetic truth of the need to "edit" out, while trying not to distort, redundant or inessential "facts" in the service of cleaner, sharper poems. Therefore, confessional art is a means of realizing the poet.

Because confessional poetry is an expression of the subdued emotions; angst, anguish and suffering, each confessional poem is an ego centered though not an egocentric act; its goal is self-therapy and a certain purgation and when Anne Sexton cries out that she has been left alone by everyone except her poetry, her good nurse, she indicates towards the therapeutic effect of the poetry and the use of Franz Kafka's words as an epigraph for her second volume All My Pretty Ones, validate it even more:
The books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that makes us suffer the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation— a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.23

The book which approves of the statement above is bound to be a self-revelation. The acceptance of neurosis becomes a means of survival for the confessional poets and so the confessional poets are driven back to their losses;

to that alienation- from self and others, from sanity and love which is the thematic center of their vision and work. The betrayals in childhood, the family romance, the divorces and madnesses, the suicide attempts, the self-defeat and longing—the poets pursue them in their most intimate and painful detail.24

Now some of the prominent confessional poets will be studied in the light of the above mentioned points. Robert Lowell whose Life Studies (1959) carved a niche for the confessional poets, is known as the father of the confessional poetry of the 1950's America. Though his first book The Mills of the Kavanaughs (1951) was regarded as a failure, in 1959 he found that personal touch which he had to express. The poems of Life Studies are an attempt to reconstitute his family history and personal experience. The book considered as Lowell's "bildungsroman", 
Unflinchingly faces up to and addresses the poet's contempt for his inadequate father and the compensatory affection he lavished on his grandfather, domineering mother, and young Uncle Devereux; the failures of his Aunt Sarah, his own imprisonment as a conscientious objector during World War II his uneven marriage, his treatment in and return from an expensive "house for the mentally ill" and a final statement of acceptance and some little triumph even in a world in which the poet acknowledges, "I myself am hell."

Divided into four sections, each of which is a vision of the breakdown of the poet, Lowell's *Life Studies* is the poetry of self discovery and fact. Every statement in it is factually autobiographical. Part one consists of four poems which are considered public and serve to place the remaining three sections in historical and emotional prospective. They are all comments on private and public madnesses. The second section of the *Life Studies* is an autobiographical prose fragment. It portrays the psychic condition of an only child born of an unhappy marriage. The four poems of part three are again concerned with the madness and the breakdown not alone of individuals, but of the whole of society. Each poem is about, or is addressed to a writer for whom Lowell felt an especial affinity, and all of who were purged, exiled or hounded to death. Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz and Hart Crane all honour and deepen *Life Studies* with their presence.

Part four of *Life Studies* is the most important because it contains the poems of Lowell's mental breakdown and confessional breakthrough. In it,
the poems become intensely personal. This section is subdivided into two parts. The nine poems of the first part deal with the writer's childhood impressions of relatives, especially grandparents. These poems deal with Lowell's relationship with his grandparents and parents. The second part contains four poems of which two speak of marriage, one of his opposition to Second World War, and one of his current mental states. Together these fifteen poems of part four are a testament to Lowell's past and present. The last poem of the book, "Skunk Hour" is one of the most famous poems of the confessional movement. In each of the four parts, an element predominates; earth in the first, water in the second, air in the third and smoke in place of fire in the fourth. Lowell once observed "a confessional poem is possible only when one has something to confess." This constitutes the whole matrix of his confessional poetry. Lowell's poems move from a nostalgic recreation of the grandparents and their world, to a recalling of his father and mother. One abuses one's past, and when one finally realizes what has been done, it is too late. When the poet cries, "Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!" Tears smut my fingers," it becomes the extent.

Lowell depended on his resources and had the material of Life Studies already in him, shaped by violent experiences. The loss of his parents in early fifties and his mental illness in 1949, threat of its recurrent attacks, barrenness of his poetic ability in this period, all weighed heavily on his mind and forced him to attempt the prose fragment, 91 Revere Street. Many of the poems of Life Studies were first written in prose, and all the poems of the book refer back to this prose autobiographical fragment. Aiming at the
human richness of Tolstoyan novel or a Chekhovan story along with a
descriptive language in his poetry, Lowell exuberantly expresses the trauma
he underwent. In an attempt to clarify, Lowell explores the entangled relations
of his family. Lowell’s manner in 91 Revere Street comes close to the mode of
psychoanalysis. He focuses on the mind of the people he describes. Behind
the psychological drama of unconscious drives and unfulfilled ambitions,
Lowell sees an existential predicament but he is unable to find the ‘why’ of his
existence. His 91 Revere Street depicts a rootless and meaningless world
where Lowell searches for his roots. In this endeavour, he piles up absurd
details which reinforce the central sense of displacement.

Lowell advocates a unified sensibility that can make sense out of the
waste of accumulated experience. His use of the metaphor of journey in Life
Studies, as a whole permits the poet to move between youth and middle age,
past and present, history and religion. Though confessing the disgrace of his
family’s lives, Lowell reconnects his past and present selves and seeks an
identity that can withstand the disintegrating violence of his family history.

Lowell, through his poems, strikes a sympathetic chord with the lively
objective reality that carries the conviction of a strong identity. Throughout
Life Studies sequence Lowell has been searching for an acceptable and
authentic relationship and a meaningful identity within an existential frame of
reference. The search for the essence lies at the back of the Life Studies
because the existence merely supplies the setting for such a search. From
the failures of his family and New England culture, Lowell had learnt that one
is truly responsible for what one makes of life.
Lowell's interest in the abnormal minds of perverts is suggestive of his own mind that cannot resist its instinctual impulses. His genius lies in translating his own private horrors and traumas into public images which catch the imagination of the contemporary society. His mind, as E. V. Ramakrishnan puts it,
is disastrously divided between these diametrically opposite psychological experiences. He is caught between the instinctual and the intellectual mental states. While a part of his self remains in the underworld of exiled man in prisons and hospitals, his creative self craves to recover the identification with the healthy and the loving.27

The neurosis in Life Studies had its source in family history and the New England tradition that the family could not free itself from. The mental breakdown provided the matrix for an existential exploration into the roots of his personality.

Through his inimitable and indelible confessional mode of poetry, Lowell dramatizes all the personal and universal concerns. He objectifies the subjectivities in his own style to give them a flavour of universality of anguish. The poems of For the Union Dead sequence portray his self trapped in guilt complex, horror and lack of resources. In this volume, he tries to transcend mundane life in order to transform it into art. In his Paris Review interview Robert Lowell spoke of the stylistic strategies of confessional poems. He admitted that he did not represent all the necessary factual details in his confessional poetry:
They are not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complex flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. Yet there's the thing: if a poem is autobiographical- and this is true of any kind of autobiographical and historical writing- you want the reader to say, this is true.... there was always that kind of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry- the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell. 28

Written in a mood of depression, as he himself once stated, For the Union Dead depicts his anxiety to invest his life with meaning and the limitations of the art to achieve it. The disgrace of his father's failure haunts him. His alienation from his age is a version of his father's inability to cope up with the circumstances of life. His poem "Middle Age" defines how he suffers from the guilt of his adolescent assault on his father. Along with this legacy of guilt, this poem defines his despair and vulnerability. In the context of a guilt-ridden psyche, Lowell searches for an identity. His attempt to create art out of his inner violence is an attempt to transcend his mental world, which is divided and discoloured by guilt.

As a confessional poet, Lowell has expressed his own guilt, anxieties and despondency towards the aimlessness of life. He confesses his suicidal impulse that gets the better of him in moments of pain, "always inside me is the child who died, / always inside me is his will to die." In his body, this urn
"the animal night sweats of the spirit burn." Besides the representation of his suicidal mania and neurosis, Lowell remains involved with nostalgic burdens. As Marjori G. Perloff had expressed, "For Lowell there is no future and no eternity- only a present which contains the pressure of a recollected past." Thus, trying to find the appropriate channels of communication between the inner and outer world, he finds himself enclosed in disfigured images and his own isolated and painful consciousness. Lowell's guilt which is rooted in his rebellious mind has always made his choices difficult. Even when Lowell found outward expression for his violence, his suffering could not invest it with a deep significance. It is his ambivalence towards his own acts and his separation from his own experience which imparts him the strength of confession, and establishes him in the vanguard of the great confessional poets. Now W.D. Snodgrass and his confessional works will be discussed.

W.D. Snodgrass, whose *Heart's Needle* [1959], was a source of inspiration for the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton, drove towards writing confessional poetry after the forced separation from his daughter. He reminds the reader that his only daughter is the needle of his heart. Even though being the father of three children, his separation from his daughter pricked his vitals and hurt him into writing. Another poetry sequence titled *Remains* got published much later. While in the *Heart's Needle* sequence he writes about his wife and daughter, *Remains* poems describe about his father, mother and the memory of a sister dead at twenty-five. Snodgrass always wrote with the depth of sincerity which specifies the best of his work
for he believes that the only reality which a man can ever surely know is that self he cannot help being, through its interactions with the world around it. It is the sincerity expressed in poems which make Snodgrass's confessions more sympathetic than Lowell's. As Jerome Mazzaro puts it: "Lowell has to stand outside himself to become part of the age; Snodgrass does not. There is, as a result, less irrelevant poetry by Snodgrass and less strain in writing, for his own urgency touched the urgency of his readers." Snodgrass' "Flash Flood" and "The Platform Man" express his views on the futility of American materialism. Experiencing alienation in the no man's land of mid-century America, Snodgrass wrote the poetry of withdrawals and returns. The first poem of Heart's Needle; "Ten Days Leave" strikes the chord of alienation which echoes throughout the book. This theme continues in "Returned to Frisco, 1946." A minor development of the alienation theme is seen in "At the Park Dance."

Snodgrass' "Papageno" which is dedicated to his second wife reveals his quest for love after the break off of his first union. The psychic atmosphere of the next poem "The Marsh" establishes the profundity and gloom of his quest. While Snodgrass's "September in the Park" indicates his emergence from the dark, "The Operation" marks the partial fulfillment of his quest. This poetic piece is about human recovery and resilience. In almost all of his poems, the poet's quest for a meaning in life continues. The Heart's Needle cycle brought a shift in Snodgrass's life just as the entrance of a feminine muse to inspire and save him in "The Operation" had brought. This poetry-sequence is inspired by the enforced separation from his young
daughter Cynthia. It shows the experience of a father poet grooping for meaning and survival when the world he has created and grown into, fall about him. Snodgrass, through his poetry, attempts to make the most of this bad situation, our life, in which we have few choices and those we have may prove destructive to those we love, but as Heyen clearly expressed, destruction is perhaps "the inevitable outcome of any attempt to live the individual life." 32

The three prevailing motifs of Heart's Needle are animals, wars and institutions. Robert Phillips considers institution as Snodgrass's "microcosm of the larger world where creatures are pitted against creatures in constant rage." 33 Though Heart's Needle doesn't answer the questions, it nonetheless remains the poetry of "total awareness," 34 as poet-critic Heyen puts it. In his second book, After Experience (1968), Snodgrass manifests his agony of loss, the loss of the relationship between himself and his daughter. "Partial Eclipse," "September," "Reconstructions" all recall the very nature of their strained relationship. They manifest how the loved ones of the poet always go away from him. Snodgrass walks through the universe, communicating his personal loss but even then he avoids sentimentality without losing sentiment. "The First Leaf" seems to bid farewell to the subject of poet's loss. Though Snodgrass keeps an aesthetic distance between his matter and himself by creating "objective correlatives" and keeps a check on emotional overflow, his poems nevertheless touch the deep corners of the heart.

Snodgrass's Remains opens with the portraits of Snodgrass's mother and father. The poems also portray his sister, their upbringing and poet's
experiences after his sister's death. The poems are the revisualization of the past events. Though all poems focus on the death and then survival, Snodgrass contemplates that there is much for the living to learn from another's death. He thinks that love is a mistress without whom we will die, but the irony is that with love we kill each other. Whatever may be the aim of his writing, Snodgrass could never disguise any of his poems. In all the books he has given a voice to the suffering, the guilt complex and his own marginality in his relations. The suffering, the search for an authentic self, the guilt complex that Lowell and Snodgrass suffer from is also shared by Theodore Roethke through his poetry.

Theodore Roethke's poems reveal that in wanting to lay himself bare, he is in search of his authentic self. His first collection of poems, Open House which was published in 1941, identifies this quest. It contained forty-seven poems in five groups. His greenhouse poems of The Lost Son and Other Poems explore his personal past in order to come to terms with the overwhelming influence of the ancestors. Another group of poems in Open House goes into the relation between the various selves of the poet. In his desire for the essential he disinherits the world of the physical self. Feeling physically soiled and humiliated by life, he tries tirelessly to transcend the world of the body.

Roethke had a compulsive need to be a “perpetual beginner” which is to be one's own naked self once again. Besides being a stylistic strategy to cope up with various themes he used in his poems, his confessional mode is also a quest for meaning in personal terms. This confessional mode
altogether converge the diverse and diverging pulls of his contradictory themes such as resolving one's quarrels with one's own ancestors, transcending the physical self and exploring the close encounters between the self and the other.

Defining the parameters of his experience in existential terms, Roethke in *Open House* interprets the split between the inner and the outer, the self and the other, mind and nature and the temporal present perceived by oneself and the past of the ancestors, as a fundamental opposition between being and non-being. Roethke understood that the fight and resolution of the warring opposites lied in his own psyche:

> The excitement of life lay within himself, not outside, nor in anyone's past, but his own. What struck him through his senses he transformed at once into signs of his own states of being, well or ill. It was himself he had to sing not the circumambient world.³⁵

In all the poems of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* he sings of himself. The greatest achievement of this collection is the making of the intensely personal experience an adequate vehicle for poetry and thus transcending the traditional limitations of the lyric mode. Moving from the greenhouse of the poet's childhood, and putting Roethke's life "barely and sincerely" the lyric mode of the poem treat his own psychic progression. Roethke's strategy is to transplant the experience into a psychic landscape where different levels of meanings co-exist. Through his greenhouse poems, he analogizes the external world of nature with a psychotic state. He evokes the essential
meanness of subconscious life and disengages himself from the bewildering aimlessness of its crude multiplicity. To preserve his self in this existential world becomes a formidable task for a poet trapped in a materialistic culture. The greenhouse poems metaphorically explore the possibilities and problem of existence in a hostile environment. Roethke's greenhouse poems have released those suppressed feelings which seem to terminate in the experience of the poet's mental disintegration. As Rosemary Sullivan points out,

Roethke found the greenhouse symbol an objective correlative for his own disgust and hatred for life and feeling of defilement by organic processes, emotions inextricably woven with desperate insecurities which were the legacies of childhood.

Roethke has also admitted the murderous desire for his father. Even at the zenith of his poetic career, he suffered inwardly because of disobeying his businessman father's wish to see him as a lawyer. The particular relation Roethke had with his father shaped his personality and the kind of work he produced. This is discernible in his poems and it makes them more diversified is his shifting of moods. When the poet attempts to heighten his self as a part of nature, the poem takes on a narrative quality with long and uncontrolled lines. To show the state of completeness, he uses different rhythms showing both control and clarity. Short and erratic lines having the alternative pattern of a paradigmatic nonsense verse are used to project disharmony or frightful mood. Beginning with The Lost Son, a series of poems attempt to come to grip with the traumatic experience of mental illness and
the violence it unleashed in the self. His four long pieces, "The Lost Son," "The Long Alley," "A Field of Light," and "The Shape of the Fire" are considered by him as "four experiences, each in a sense stages in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress, if you will; part of an effort to be born."

Roethke's explorations into the greenhouse world of his childhood led him to portray the subliminal world of isolation and silence. His poems depict the invocation of the greenhouse world as a means of escape from the claustrophobic world of the self. The lack of space to grow and to be free made him yearn for "the whole air" in "The Shape of the Fire," the last poem of The Lost Son sequence: "To have the whole air! / The light, the full sun / Coming down on the flower heads." The greenhouse was a condition of the poet's self which he continuously tried to get over in his poetry. Each of The Lost Son poems enacts the movement of the self from an imprisoned state to a state of liberty, from isolation to a sense of relation. The greenhouse world of Roethke analogizes the world of ontological security. The narrow line that divides the self and the other, being and non-being is the fascination of Roethke. In his poetry, he takes his quest to a state of extremity where the poet's survival as an integrated whole is at stake and he encounters the experience of absolute nothingness.

Roethke, after a lot of struggle, accepted mental illness as a part of his personal destiny. His earlier sequences, particularly The Lost Son conveyed the degradation of mental illness. Through the depiction of such a degraded existence, Roethke met the challenge of measuring up to his experience and
not succumbing to it. Roethke has not accepted his sickness in the manner of Berryman or Sexton. His capacity to transcend his experience of sickness into a spiritual crisis differentiates him from these poets. As Thurley had viewed, “Roethke’s is a poetry of aloneness, terminal aloneness, one would think, of a neurotic intensity and completeness.”

His greenhouse experience imparts him with the vision of transcendence that he painfully preserves throughout his quest for selfhood. His journeys to the interiors, made him to come to terms with a state beyond the reality. He accepted that the absence of any abiding reality is a permanent fact of life. The symbols that he creates are symptomatic of a hallucinatory reality the perception of which ends in a vision of total dissolution of the self. He exclaims, “A lively understandable spirit / Once entertained you. / It will come again. / Be still. / Wait.”

Hence, we see that in his poetry, Roethke attempts to search a psychic integration and preservation of the self in the struggle of being and non-being. In his search for pure space to escape from time, he creates a stasis where all matter is dissolved. Roethke tries to forge an identity in the face of the forces of negation, and this evokes an existential angst which verges on agony. By using the past for the present to evolve into future, Roethke energizes the power of the self and share a search for authenticity with the other confessional poets. Before discussing the two confessional poets, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, whose poetry is the focus of this study, another confessional poet is to be discussed who welcomed and embraced death.
with them and who exclaims: "My desire for death was strong / But never
strong enough. / I thought: This is my chance / I can bear it." 41

John Berryman even when accepting that his desire to die was not
strong when he cuddled death; contemplated and committed suicide. He
established himself among the confessional poets with his 77 Dream Songs
(1964) and His Toy His Dream, His,Rest (1968) which consists of 308
additional Dream Songs. Though the second and the thicker volume is
superior of the two, all the 385 dream songs are a revelation of his poetic self
and his hope for immortality and as Robert Phillips avers, "Daydreaming and
nightmaring on the printed page, Berryman broke from his earlier,
academic,Audenesque verse into,confessions of overdrinking, oversmoking,
oversexing, pillpopping .... 942 His poems are barely confessional. They are a
sort of hallucination instead of dreams. They differentiate with each other
according to the changes in poet's age and psyche. Filled with the poems
focusing on deaths and suicides of friends, events which took their toll on
Berryman's psyche, these two volumes lay bare the anguish of his soul. From
the dream song one to the very end, death stalks the poet. His desire for the
grave became gradually stronger and his desire to accept the chance and
bear up to life was overcome with his tragic end on January 7, 1972, when he
jumped from a bridge onto the ice of the Mississippi River. His effort to be
indifferent towards his father's suicide culminated in his own act of suicide.
He himself followed the instance of his suicidal father, whom he claimed
alternately to hate and love, and whom he could never forget therefore he
sings: "in a modesty of death I join my father / who dared so long agone leave me." 43

Though both collections are confessional, the second is far more personal, bearing greater witness to Berryman's attempt to confront his past. Berryman creates the persona of Henry to depict his own temperament, its tenderness and absurdity, its love and its angst, its mysteries and its revelations. Whereas Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's best works are their most personal, the reverse is true of Berryman. His two books which came after The Dream Songs, which are, Love & Fame and Delusions, Etc. had the same imagination and the same life but the note of self-aggrandizement and lack of confessions made Berryman's late confessions a series of false notes. He equated love with lust, and fame with money; and instead of confessing for therapeutic effect, he did so to gratify his formidable feelings. While his The Dream Songs is motivated by the ego; Love & Fame is sheer vanity. In Love & Fame he is trying to write his relative successes in the game of love and in the game of fame. Though he wrote a lot about love, he knows sadly little about it. But about lust he wrote so much that this "catalog of sexual performances, without passion or personal commitment to other values than satisfying the itch is indicative of the poet's total lack of commitment to other higher values as well." 44

In his last poems, Berryman follows the Yeatsian process of synthesis by viewing the poet as one who is reborn as an idea, something complete. Jerome Mazzaro has compared Berryman's Love & Fame with Augustine's Confessions. Though they have parallels, Robert Phillips considers that "the
formidable ego which wrote the poems of the first three sections has never been sufficiently doubtful or suffered the mental disquietude which would trigger such a full-scale embracing of Christianity". Despite the bathetic beauty of the confessions of this volume, they may not be considered as poet's repentance. While Love & Fame is considered his loudest work, Delusions, Etc. is surely his quietest. In this work, the extroverted poet assumes a new tone of humility.

The book opens with a group of eight meditations in which the poet returns to the Catholicism just to reach to the origins of his boyhood and youth. He is sick in life and haunted by death. But his new found humility enabled him to forgive others, even his suicidal father. The second section consists of poems about historical figures and personal friends like George Washington, Beethoven, Emily Dickinson and Dylan Thomas who somehow touched the poet's life. The third section is a mixed bag of thirteen poems on various personal, theological and historical topics. The fourth section reintroduces the figure of Henry of The Dream Songs. Its poems depict Berryman's insomnia, night sweats and shakes and also his conviction that one day he will take his own life. The fifth and final section is a true climax to the book and to Berryman's life. It has meditations and reflections. When Berryman views that art survives after the death of the maker, he sees a probable parallel in his own life and work. Delusions, Etc., though not being Berryman's best book, redeems his reputation, which was tarnished so badly by Love & Fame.
Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton share almost all the episodes of anguish and anxiety with these confessional poets. All those elements which are responsible for ravaging the lives of all Confessional Poets are profoundly present in the lives of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The search of existence, the angst of being and non-being, the psychic disturbances that created havoc in the lives of these two poets and their other obsessions will be discussed in the forthcoming chapters. Now a discussion of the lives of these two poets will be made.

Sylvia Plath was the daughter of Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober Plath. She was born on 21st November 1932 at Boston Memorial Hospital in Boston. Otto Plath was an expert in Entomology. His book *Bumblebees and Their Ways* was published two years after Sylvia’s birth. Owning an undisputed position in her family, she was threatened by her brother Warren whose birth in 1935 evoked a sibling rivalry in her mind. Since his birth, she felt herself neglected. At school she was an over achiever, but contrary to it a failure in her personal relations. All this led her to be a neurotic at a young age and her neurosis is reflected in her poetry which tends to be confessional. Owing to a toe infection, her father Otto Plath was confined to bed and Sylvia was left ignored. Being a masochist, Otto Plath refused all medical help and finally died in 1940. Sylvia was filled with hatred for her mother because she did not let them attend the funeral. She felt emotionally alienated in her own home. After this tragic incident, many things happened which led her to be a schizophrenic, schizoid and a paranoid personality who suffered ambivalence. Though she achieved a lot, she suffered depression when she
was rejected admission to the Creative Writing Class of Frank O’Connor. She tried to commit suicide by swallowing sleeping pills and then hiding herself under the porch of her house where from she was found in a precarious condition and taken to the hospital. She spent five months at MacLean’s, an expensive private mental hospital in Belmont.

Winning poetry contests and scholarships, her next years were marked by continued academic success. Sylvia Plath married Ted Hughes, the British poet who had won the New York Poetry Center award for his book *The Hawk in the Rain*. Both Sylvia and Ted left their teaching career for creative writing. They thought that the creative writing would be hindered by teaching so they took up unacademic jobs to maintain themselves. Sylvia Plath’s job was to write case histories in the psychiatric wing of Boston Memorial Hospital. By reading case histories of the mental patients, she could better understand her own mind. Quite similarly, her poems became the confessions or her case history to understand her life.

A perceptive reading of Sylvia’s work reveals self-pits, self-hatred, self-criticism that led her to suicide. Ted Hughes’ adulterous relationship with Asia Wevill and the worst snow storm that hit London in 1963 caused her the depression that was the path shower towards her suicidal march, not more than one month later the publication of her only extant novel, *The Bell Jar*. The morning of February 11, 1963 was the day when she succeeded in her third attempt of suicide by locking all the doors and leaving the gas oven on.

Sylvia was extra-ordinary in her talents and achievements at school. She had over expectations from those around her. Her failure degraded
herself in her own eyes so much that she felt frustrated. She was a highly emotional person. Her violent reactions, impulsive thoughts, and hasty actions are both the cause and effects of her nervous breakdown. Like other confessional poets, she was not a conformist in her thoughts and actions. She accepted, contradicted and cancelled her own actions. She loved and hated in extremes. Her mental disorders, her writings, her life all showed that she was never understood properly because the persons she came into contact with did not possess necessary insight. Psychoanalysis and modern psychiatry throw light and help in interpreting and comparing her work with Anne Sexton whose life is quite similar to Plath's life.

Anne Sexton, who thought that until twenty-eight she had buried herself and all she wanted was "a little piece of life, to be married, to have children." She had been at the time of her suicide in 1974, recognized as one of the prominent and influential poets of her generation. Anne (Gray Harvey) was born on November 9, 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts to Mary Gray Staples Harvey and Ralph Churchill Harvey. She started writing poetry at the age of 19 just one year before her elopement and marriage to Alfred Muller (Kayo). Anne had the privilege of a rich childhood in large suburban Boston houses staffed with servants. Though she had two sisters, she felt herself lonely as a child. Her great aunt Anna Lad Dingley was her dearest friend and the mental disorder and placement of 'Nana' (her aunt) in nursing home was a moving episode of her life.

Not much after the birth of her second child, Anne suffered with episodes of mental disorder and severe anxiety. She began to receive
regular psychiatric treatment. In the very year 1956, on her birthday, she attempted suicide. Then her second psychiatrist, Dr. Martin, suggested her to take up writing as a form of therapy. Beginning at the age of twenty-eight, Anne had a well-received book in print, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* by the age of thirty-two. Then she went on publishing seven more books of poetry. Two of them were nominated for the prestigious National Book Award. Her third book, *Live or Die* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1967. She had begun working on a never-completed novel in the year 1966, the year in which she attempted suicide for the second time. On this thirty-eighth birthday, she broke her hip.

When Anne Sexton read five poems by W. D. Snodgrass in the *Heart's Needle* sequence, it was the spur that she got to more serious concentration, of the conscious conversion of a means for survival into a necessary art. The impact of his poems came as an affirmation of Sexton's own effort to write personally. She was so encouraged with his example that she left to study with him at the 1958 Antioch Writers' Conference. There she showed him her poem "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" written in direct response to *Heart's Needle* and dealing with the loss of a child. Snodgrass sensed that her poem was a disguise and advised her simply to tell the real story. The result, written over many months and in obvious imitation of the strategies of *Heart's Needle* became one of her best-known poems, "The Double Image."

Anne Sexton's only play *Mercy Street* had a successful run off Broadway in New York at the American Palace Theatre in 1969. Though having only a high school diploma as her formal education along with a college extension course or two, she had become a Professor of Creative
Writing at Boston University and had received three honorary doctorates for her poetry by 1973. Before that she had made her third suicide attempt in 1970. Despite the great professional success, Sexton remained prey to morbid sadness and dread. Her judgment power eroded owing to her addiction to alcohol and sleeping pills. In 1973, she was hospitalized twice. She asked her husband for a divorce and they separated. Frustrated with the life, and the fear that she was losing her creativity, she committed suicide by Carbon Monoxide poisoning a month before her forty-sixth birthday in 1974.

Like most of the poets who are labelled as confessional, Anne did not like the reductive implications of the term. She considered herself a storyteller. In fact, she was an artist, whose purpose was to make awesome experiences lively, immediate and real. Most of Anne Sexton's poems are about family life, usually her own. As a poet, she felt as free as any writer not only to invent characters and situations but to retouch the family portraits she drew from life. She had once reminisced of her work:

I began to think that if one life, somehow made into art, were recorded- not all of it, but like the testimony on an old tombstone- wouldn't that be worth something? Just one life- a poor middle-class life, nothing extra ordinary (except may be madness, but that's common now a days)-that seems worth putting down. It's the thing I have to do. The thing I want to do- I'm not sure why.47.

And she went on to describe a reader's response to this 'testimony': "I think, I hope, a reader's response is: My God: this has happened. And in some real sense it has happened to me too. This has been my reaction to other poems,
and my readers have responded to my poems in just this way." Sexton's poetry is continuously about a narrative character named "Anne." Anne is portrayed as a privileged child, who is cursed from infancy with fears that mature into a desire to die. She appears as a girl, young wife, emerging and mature artist and as a broken woman whose rage is directed against her. Anne Sexton's books, as she herself says, "read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy." As Robert Phillips has analyzed, her nakedly autobiographical poems enable others to reconstruct a hellishly unhappy life from them. She took birth into the well-to-do Harvey family in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1928. Her mother's materialism and father's alcoholism troubled her a lot. In an accident at the age of six, she nearly lost an arm in a clothes wringer. The arrival of her great aunt "Nana" to live with them, her subsequent deafness and madness, her own marriage to a man who was unimaginative and insensitive, her suffering on account of the suicides of her two dear friends; John Holmes and Sylvia Plath, the experience of the birth of her two daughters; Linda and Joy, death of her both parents at a gap of only three months in 1959, all problems she was afflicted with, are clear from her poems. Moreover,"her confinements in mental institutions, the temporary loss of a daughter; her search for release through religion, drugs, lovers, art" are evident in her works. Because Sexton spoke so urgently about her experience, the general public was intensely fascinated with her career. Her nervous breakdowns, her flamboyant risks and simple needs, her virtuosic craft and searing honesty all of these combined to make Anne Sexton's
poetry a vital document of a woman’s life and of a poet’s art. The intimacy of her revelations makes them forceful and striking.

J. D. McClatchy has considered her a representative poet of two decades who adopted the methods of confessionalism ranging to surrealism. She explored efficiency more than any other woman poet of her generation. The effect her revelations have caused is purposeful for they create shocks of recognition in her reader. They sensitize the reader to the suffering because of their genuineness. We may say that,

Confessional poets are driven back to their losses, to that alienation from self and others, from sanity and love- which is the thematic center of their vision and work. The betrayals in childhood, the family romance, the divorces and madness, the suicide attempts, the self-defeat and longing- the poets pursue them in their most intimate and painful detail.  

Anne Sexton had pointed that the exposure of soul is the trait of great writers, so is true of both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath who committed themselves to confessional mode for their poetic expression and in this act they came to understand their life better. Their poetry is poetry of wounded heart, which suffers from the existential predicament of “being” and “non-being,” and creates such psychological images of love, death and other obsessions which make their search for an authentic self, plausible and unparallel.
REFERENCES


3- Ibid. 4.

4-Ibid. 4.

5-Ibid. 4.


Further references to this book are incorporated into the text of the thesis under the abbreviation SP.


Subsequently cited as Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics.

12- Ibid.248.


18-Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics. 34.


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22-Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics .5.

23- Ibid.265.

24-Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics.248.


27-E. V. Ramakrishnan, Crisis and Confession.135.


44- Ibid. 99.
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