 Plath as a confessional poet

What is confessional poetry?

Confessional poetry is a style of poetry where a poet writes of the personal, personal encounters and / or experiences or uses ‘I’. The term was first coined by M.L Rosenthal, 1959, in a review of Life Studies, the collection of Robert Lowell’s poetry where he discusses, through his writing, his struggles of events in his personal life such as his troubled marriage and with mental illness. (1) Lowell who wrote of very personal and emotional experiences which had not been addressed before such as his experiences in a mental hospital. Anne Sexton, a student of Lowell, wrote in her poetry of her mother who experienced a nervous breakdown. Sylvia Plath was also a student of Lowell, and attributes her writing style to both Sexton and Lowell in an interview with to Peter Orr in 1962, Plath says of Sexton’s poem about her mother that she is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting. (2)

Much of the subject matter of confessional poetry deals with those taboo subjects that hadn’t been openly and freely addressed in American poetry such as feelings of death, depression, trauma and relationship issues. Plath’s poems are very much autobiographical and ‘explore her own mental anguish, her troubled marriage to fellow poet [Ted Hughes](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/ted-hughes), her unresolved conflicts with her parents, and her own vision of herself.’ (3)

Whilst the subject matter may have been shocking to the public, the poets maintained a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to, and use of, [prosody](https://www.britannica.com/art/prosody). (4)

One of Plath's most well-known confessional poems is Daddy, where she addresses her dead father. Plath says of her poem ‘Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other - she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.’ (5)

Confessional poets of the 1950s and 60s paved the way and introduced a style of writing that ‘forever changed the landscape of poetry. The tradition of confessional poetry has been a major influence on generations of writers and continues to this day’ (6)

Useful sites to visit for Plath’s style of poetry:

[Glossary of poetic terms](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/confessional-poetry) (1)

[A 1962 Sylvia Plath interview with Peter Orr](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm) (2)

Biography of Sylvia Plath (3)

[Prosody](https://www.britannica.com/art/prosody) (4)

[Analysis of Poem Daddy](https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-Poem-Daddy-by-Sylvia-Plath) (5)

[Brief guide of confessional poetry](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-confessional-poetry) (6)

[Glossary terms of confessional poetry](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/confessional-poetry)

The literary style of Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes, a British poet, spent much of the early of his life living in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire where he would visit the moors with his older brother, Gerald, who was often known to carry a hunting gun over his shoulder. Much of the inspiration for his poems came from his experiences in nature. ‘To read Hughes’s poetry is to enter a world dominated by nature, especially by animals’ (7) and as such this was one of the reasons for turning to poetry to express his thoughts. In his poetry, he ‘not only give[s] a realistic description of animals, but also builds up myths about those animals to enlarge and impart certain status to them. In this regard, he is a myth-maker too.’ (8)

His was influenced by the likes of Dylan Thomas, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and he had a tendency put words together in unusual combinations and use ‘tough vocabulary’ (8). The result of this is that readers of his poetry had to work to get the meaning of the word combinations. He does, however, also have poems that are written using simple vocabulary and word combinations.

Hughes believed that for a poem to come alive, the poet must employ the appropriate images, rhythms and words, a poet must ‘make sure that all those parts over which you have control, the words and rhythms and images are alive.’ (9)

Birthday Letters

‘For most of his career Hughes had adhered to a principle of impersonality in poetry. He despised the direct use of autobiographical material, and believed that to make poetry of any value experience needed to be imaginatively transformed’ (9). His collection of poems, Birthday Letters, are then, a departure from his ‘usual style’. Here the poems, which have been written over a 25 year period, are of a more personal nature and look at the work, life and death of his first wife Sylvia Plath. Whilst not really a confessional poet, he does address personal experiences and thoughts in response to his life with Plath and of her Ariel poems. He came to believe that having not addressed this part of his life before, damaged ‘his creative development, and even his mental and physical health.’ (10)

There was much uproar from many groups when Birthday Letters was published in 1998, as they saw it as a confessional text, discussing much of what Hughes had failed to say after Plath’s suicide in 1963. However he said ‘I just don't want the agitation and over-reaction, he wrote to one of his closest friends.’ He goes on to say ‘I published it purely to get it off my chest and I'm indifferent to its fate.’ (11)

Useful sites to visit for Hughes’ style of poetry:

[Biography of Ted Hughes](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes) (7)

[Stylistic qualities of Hughes' poetry](https://www.bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanpoetry/stylistic-qualities-of-hughes-poetry.html#.W3tqiYhubIU) (8)

[Hughes' language and style](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/32970/9/09_chapter%205.pdf) (9)

[An introduction to birthday letters](https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-birthday-letters) (10)

[Hughes in hiding over birthday letters](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/apr/14/education.books) (11)

Hughes' regrets