

Essay on Confessional Poetry

Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal or “I.” This style of writing emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is associated with poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass. Lowell’s book *Life Studies* was a highly personal account of his life and familial ties, and had a significant impact on American poetry. Plath and Sexton were both students of Lowell and noted that his work influenced their own writing.

The content of confessional poems is autobiographical and marked by its exploration of subject matter that was considered taboo at the time. This subject matter included topics like mental illness, sexuality, and suicide. The school of poetry that became known as “Confessional Poetry” was associated with several poets who redefined American poetry in the generation following World War II, including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, and W. D. Snodgrass. Some key texts of the American “confessional” school of poetry include Lowell’s *Life Studies*, Plath’s *Ariel*, Berryman’s *The Dream Songs*, Snodgrass’ *Heart’s Needle*, and Sexton’s *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. One of the most prominent, consciously “confessional” poets to emerge in the 1980s was Sharon Olds whose focus on taboo sexual subject matter built off of the work of Ginsberg.

The confessional poetry of the mid-twentieth century dealt with subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in American poetry. Private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were addressed in this type of poetry, often in an autobiographical manner. Sexton in particular was interested in the psychological aspect of poetry, having started writing at the suggestion of her therapist. The confessional poets were not merely recording their emotions on paper; craft and construction were extremely important to their work. While their treatment of the poetic self may have been groundbreaking and shocking to some readers, these poets maintained a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to and use of prosody.

One of the most well-known poems by a confessional poet is “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath. Addressed to her father, the poem contains references to the Holocaust but uses a sing-song rhythm that echoes the nursery rhymes of childhood.

Another confessional poet of this generation was John Berryman. His major work was *The Dream Songs*, which consists of 385 poems about a character named Henry and his friend Mr. Bones. Many of the poems contain elements of Berryman’s own life and traumas, such as his father’s suicide. The confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s pioneered a type of writing that forever changed the landscape of American poetry. The tradition of confessional poetry has been a major influence on generations of writers and continues to this day; Marie Howe and Sharon Olds are two contemporary poets whose writing largely draws upon their personal experience.

The post-confessional poetry of the seventies and eighties continued to extrapolate on the themes that the confessional movement pioneered. Examples of post confessional poems include Robert Pinsky’s collection *History of My Heart* (1984), Bill Knott’s poem “The Closet” (1983), and Donald Hall’s *Kicking the Leaves* (1978).

The content that the Confessional Poets explored laid the groundwork for much of the poetry that is being created in M.F.A. programs all over the country. The poets of this movement wrote unflinchingly about difficult topics. In contemporary poetry many poets are adopting the same mindset. These poets include Marie Howe, Sharon Olds, Judith Harris, and Jon Pineda. Popular confessional writing of today includes *Post Secret*, a project that asks individuals to submit an anonymous confessional postcard. The image below is posted on their website as one of their Sunday Secrets.

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The influence of confessional poetry has had a spillover effect. Now it has become popular to write memoirs about overcoming traumatic experiences and mental illnesses. Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life* (1989), Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994) and Dave Peltzer's *A Child Called It* (1995) are examples of contemporary confessional prose. However, while works like this are "celebrated for their extraordinary candour," others, such as Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) and Russell Brand's *My Booky Wook* (2009), are also "criticized for their perceived exhibitionist egotism," and critic Bran Nicol compares this genre to reality tv.