

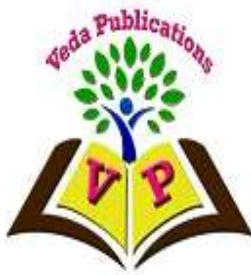


## THE BEATS AND THE CONFESSIONAL POETS AS INFLUENTIAL HARBINGERS OF THE TRUTHS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT



The phase of war has etched itself as an unforgettable era in history. The devastation that was caused spreads to the realms of the physical, material, intellectual and even the spiritual. The dry and truth-seeking hearts poured out their anguish in literature. The latter has, henceforth, become a true and credible refuge for such souls and for those who experience internal wars in the contemporary world. This paper aims to bring out the cries of the poets who lived after massacres and freed their souls either by not confining themselves to the society, committing suicide or by a change in their view point. Contemporary literature focuses on deep, intriguing and resourceful topics that are being widely studied even today. "The Beats" and "Confessional Poets" are very different yet similar in many ways. Their experiences are strikingly contrasting to each other but the source of their pain revolves around many common grounds. Poets like Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath awaken our senses by their soul-stirring expressions of woe and explicit manifestation of things that bothered their inward beings. These two movements have brought contemporary literature a long way and its influence is still seen, felt and acknowledged as we apply its aspects to our daily lives.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary, Anguish, Personal, Poets, Theories.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The contemporary world oftentimes seems to be running after things that are temporal and the void felt is unmistakably real. The events of wars changed the course of many an individual into something monotonous and broken. Literature has addressed this disturbing phase of man in both concrete and abstract terms. Contemporary literature originated after the evolution of World War II. Literature that came from this period are generally grouped under themes like dejection, skepticism, despair, trauma and much more. This literary period has become very popular due to its greatly accurate, definitive and precise accounts of events that affected them. Poetry is undoubtedly the most influential genre in this regard because of the unequivocal results that it produces.

The breakage of rigid patterns, behaviours and values has distorted the ways of mankind. Faith in religion was twisted and things that held people together fell apart. The emotions that burned deep in the hearts of men is seen to be evident in the works of artists. Contemporary literature has become a true mode of undefiled expressions and nothing less.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

Man has become self-sufficient and this concept of individualism has been taken to a dangerous extent. Theories such as Modernism, Post-Modernism and Post-Structuralism have one similar characteristic feature. The idea that there is no such thing as absolute truth is exalted. Hence, there is no place for set what values and laws. People decide for themselves as to what is right and wrong.

Confessional Poetry is a popular movement of the contemporary era where people use literature as a platform to express their suppressed, unexplainable dreams and ambitions. Writing is a powerful tool that they use to openly criticize the society that has denied them of rights. The Beats have been unconventional in their mode of writing and have been considered as confessional poets by many. A few scholars deny this by stating the primary features that belong to both these groups.

Beat poetry is at its core anti-conformist and counter-culture. The beat poets protested the conservatism of post-war society and stood for social change. The

confessional school produced personal poetry, describing the psychological plight of the poet (Steinberg-Zwirek).

It is undeniable that the beat poets were personal but they did not solely delve on their problems, like the confessional poets. They discussed their personal pangs in the light of the society that denies them the right to be themselves and do what they desire. The follies of The American dream, ill-effects of materialism, condemnation of the nation because it rejects homosexuality and drugs are some of the common themes of The Beats.

**INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION**

Allen Ginsberg is undoubtedly famous for his controversial poem "Howl" because it resounds the cry of his agony and of the other fellow beats as well. The title itself is a cry, just like the wolf that howls at night. It has been interpreted as a cry of despair and a cry of protest against the American dream. The opening lines are often quoted to note the despair that come to us without any pretensions.

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night (Ginsberg)

The "best minds" are the ones expelled from their respective universities for their misconduct and also included those who suffered in life due to addiction. Ginsberg always had hostile feelings against those who shunned his dreams and desires. His poem is an open declaration of hatred towards everything that has been so long said to constitute a healthy society. The beats go against the norms against the use of drugs and explicitly state the "elevated" level it takes one to.

The beats fought against the institution of marriage and Ginsberg saw it as an intrusion. He believed that wives and children take a man's focus away from artistic excellence. He also mourned that he could not spend much time with them.

In part two, he addressed the evil effects of capitalism and materialism using the word "Moloch". The concept of Moloch also elaborates on the poverty the society imposes on the people. This



state, according to the poet is in our minds and cannot be removed out easily.

Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius!

Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!

Moloch whose name is the Mind!" (Ginsberg).

Part three talks of the cruel treatment one undergoes in mental institutions. The concept of American Dream is treated sarcastically but the enlightenment it brings home is immense. Ginsberg's friend Carl Solomon was in one such institutions that mistreated its patients. His suffering reminded the poet of his own mother. He associates himself with his friend by starting every line using the phrase "I'm with you in Rockland" (Ginsberg).

The cruelty of the nation and their love for the same is elaborated in "I'm with you in Rockland where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets/ the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep" (Ginsberg).

The absurdity of the American Dream is also presented in Arthur Miller's works including *Death of a Salesman*. The American Dream proposes that every American would enjoy material prosperity but the impossibility of the Dream drove the protagonist of Miller's masterpiece to suicide. The same idea is reiterated in his *All My Sons*.

Contemporary literature is packed with unexpected twists and turns, a new perspective in form and ideas. Truths that are startling and revealing are found plenty in this literature. Applications of theories in literature have won popularity in the contemporary era because they enable us to view things in many angles. Post-Structuralism has always focused on the need to shift one's concentration on the existing patterns and to throw more light on new perspectives. Thus comes the evolution of different approaches to a single work of art. Importance is given to the work rather than to the author/poet. Derrida and other Post-Structuralists called it as "decentering" or "destabilizing" of the author.

However, there are exceptions to the theory of "decentering". Such an example is confessional poetry. These poems have been studied

with respect to the experiences of the writer because the work is poignant with meaning and the depth of the emotions can be fully grasped only on understanding them. Contemporary literature thus functions by agreeing and disagreeing with each other thereby creating platforms for innovation.

Confessional poetry is the poetry written in the first person "I". It grew in fame in the latter part of the twentieth century. Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* marked the beginning of confessional poetry. It reflects the aspects of the contemporary society.

Confessional Poetry began as one of many artistic movements in post-war twentieth-century America. Its most fundamental aspect is blatant autobiographical content, which often manifests as self-deprecation. It frequently deals with taboo topics such as sex, addiction, mental health and familial relationships ("Confessional").

In an era where it was commonly believed that poetry is not about the poet, confessional group of poets came into the scene to change the idea of this genre. The prominent characteristic features of confessional poetry are as follows:

1. First-person narration
  2. Intimate and personal subject
  3. Lyrical workmanship
- ("Confessional Poetry: Characteristics and Examples").

First-person narration enables the reader to create a close connection with the poet and an understanding of the subject matter discussed in the poem is comprehended better this way. Plath's "Daddy" creates a mystical bond between the readers and the poet.

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew ("Confessional Poetry: Characteristics and Examples").

It is amazing to see the speed in which the "I" catches the attention of the reader. An invisible bond is created and the poet triggers the imagination of the reader by enabling him/her explore more in this respect.

The second characteristic feature details on the intimate tone that is derived from confessional



poetry. In her poem "Lady Lazarus", Plath elaborates on how she tried to commit suicide for the third time but failed drastically. Her rebirth after the attempt is stated artistically in this poem.

Her comparison of dying to an art is a unique portrayal of her deep suffering. She confronted the men who always seemed to come between her ways of freedom. Bold, stern and poetic in style, this poem still stupefies people.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air ("Confessional Poetry: Characteristics and Examples").

The final characteristic feature of confessional poetry is lyrical workmanship. The overflow of emotions written in the form of poetry does not stop the poets from properly framing rhyme, meter, allusions, and metaphors etc. Literary devices are used in varying number in this type of poetry.

One of the interesting features of confessional poetry is that it paves a way for the readers to relate their personal sorrows with the devastated state of the nation/society. This can be seen in "Skunk Hour" by Robert Lowell.

One dark night, my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull, I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down, they lay together, hull to hull, where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . . My mind's not right ("Confessional Poetry: Characteristics and Examples").

The choice of the title is very artistically crafted. "Skunk" refers to the dirty, small animal that produces a bad smell. Since this comes before the word "hour", it may refer to an extremely bad time period in the poet's life. The pessimistic stanzas are followed by a sudden shift in perspective as an encounter with a happy skunk made the poet realize that the fault was his. He did not have the free spirit that the skunk possessed.

The point that can be taken from these poems is to be studied in the light of the contemporary era.

Modern life's corrupting influences have led men to express frustration and despair: "I myself am hell". Solitude, trivialization, psychic problem, drug, and moral corruption

are the causes. Only the resolution (decision) to use the individual's own potential will help, as in this poem (Shrestha).

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary era is a blend of the new with the old. Our perspectives determine whether the end result of every action is good or otherwise. The strong foundation of religion and values were shaken and in their place dwelt secularism and free-play. Literature enlightens us on the startling transition and the reasons behind the chaos that followed. "The Beats" and the Confessional poets bring to us the true and unmasked portrayal of the world we live in. All that is chaotic and formless are handled by individuals differently. The contemporary era believes in the concept that one can make or mare their lives. The pertinent question that arises is, what decision will one take?

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