

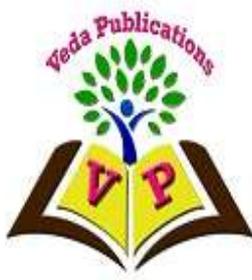


## “IF I STOP WRITING, I STOP BREATHING”:PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN ROBERT LOWELL’S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT



Confessional poetry started in the late 1950s and early 1960s in America, with notable poets as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and W.D. Snodgrass. It was personal poetry, a confession made of one’s personal and closed details of one’s life, his relations, his family etc. The focus was on personal experiences of illness, deaths, broken relations etc, the topics that remained untouched before. Robert Lowell was an important confessional poet, and his most noted collection of poems, *Life Studies* left a deep impact on other confessional poets. This paper focuses on the individual experiences of the poet and its link with his poetry. His personal struggles became themes of his poems. His battle with mental illness, his failed marriage becomes basis for his poetry. The paper aims to study his *Life Studies*, and highlight his personal experiences and emotions in his collection of poems. The study would highlight the private sphere of Robert Lowell in his poems, and study Lowell as one of the greatest confessional poets. The ideas of Robert Lowell as expressed in his poetry, gives details about his personal life. Not only his life but also the reflection of the modern man and society, his ancestry, and how the poet opposes Eliot’s concept of impersonality.

*Keywords: Personal poetry, Confessional poetry, Impersonality.*

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The concerns of the early, middle and later phases of Lowell's poetic career beginning from his early religious and seemingly impersonal poetry, through the grand success of his confessional mode to the later cathartic volumes, underscore the significance of personal experience in the creation of meaningful poetry with universal significance. In drawing upon his most intimate guilt, matters of family, failure of the puritan tradition, politics and contemporary world, Lowell has painted powerfully, the chaos of the modern man and society. By drawing upon the painful facts of his life, Lowell has given us an art, which transcends not only the local but national as well to arrive at an authentic representation of the human condition itself.

Individual experience has always been a basic theme of American writings and major preoccupation of the literary mind. One of the most important groups to have emerged on the poetic scene of America after the World War II, the confessional poets, was the main continuators. This tradition attempts to make beauty out of terror of the modern conditions through a retreat into self and alienation of the artist from society. These poets aimed at making explicit what was once implied, through stripping off the persona or mask and making the speaker unequivocally him/her self. The self that is engaged in crucial introspection and analysis tries to peel off the layers of pretense and attempts to reconstruct the self that has fallen apart, so that the personal life which is under stress of psychological crisis becomes a major theme.

Robert Lowell's confessional volume, which appeared in 1959, became the poetry event of the year and immediately evoked both, critical controversies and acclaim. The contribution of this volume was inspired by his battle with mental illness, marital problems and the Vietnam war, which was acknowledged even by his contemporaries, as Sylvia Plath expressed in a British Council interview, "I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, the intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal experience which I feel has been partly taboo." (Peter Orr 167-68). As mentioned earlier, the private life of the poet himself becomes a major theme in confessional writings,

critics argued that *Life Studies*, performed a cathartic function for Lowell after which he was ready to move on to a more mature poetry. More than any other school, confessional poetry directly opposed the "impersonality" argued for by T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Lowell saw the relationship of art to human experience as too elemental for an "impersonal theory of poetry". He felt that art had "become a craft and there must be some breakthrough back into life" (Seidel, Paris Review, 25). Art and experience came to have a complex interrelationship in Lowell's thought, for he believed that it was his life that had made his writing possible, just as the ability to write could save his life and give it meaning. *Life Studies*, is understood as an odyssey of self-understanding, in which Lowell comes to grips with his "oppressive past" and "madness-ridden present" (Lawrence Kanner 80) and the awareness affirms his troubled conscience. The anguish of Lowell's mind however, is not only personal to him but is also bound with the anguish of his times.

In 1944, his first volume *Land of Unlikeness*, appeared which was marked by themes of rebellion, depiction of chaos and corruption in the modern world and a quest for spiritual values in his new found faith. When Lowell talks about this chaos ridden world that is eaten up by corruption, he also talks of persecutors, his ancestors, who came to New England and perceives in them a denial of the same Christ that they had professed to worship and all this had made his own world, a land of unlikeness. Those who fled from persecution, came here to persecute (the red Indians), those who hated war made war on nature and neighbors (as described in 'The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket', 'Lord Weary's Castle') for unspiritual profits. The guilt of the blood of these Indians at the hands of his Puritan ancestors, thus finds mention in poem after poem only to culminate in the understated horror of 'Skunk Hour', the last poem of his confessional volume, where he can actually visualize how, "a red fox stain covers Blue Hill" (*Life Studies* 61). Considering himself guilty of the crime that was committed by puritans against the Indians, Lowell in his poem 'Children of Light' juxtaposes a present in which this crime is magnified into the holocaust of World War II:



Our fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones

And fenced their gardens with Redman's bones;

.  
. .

They planted here the serpent's seed of light;  
And here the pivoting searchlights probe to shock

The riotous glass houses build on rock'

And candles gutter be an empty alter,

And light is where the landless blood of Cain

Is burning, burning the unburied grain.

An important element in his poetry is the feeling he has for his puritan ancestry and their materialistic tendencies, this aspect finds support in Herbert Leibowitz's contention that, "Lowell's ambivalent attitude to the Puritans is central to an understanding of poetry. Although he repudiates them intellectually, he is at home with their buffetings and morbidity. From them he takes or rather corroborates the habit of self-examination." (27). 'At the Indian Killer's Grave', Lowell recalls the slaughter of Indians during King Philip's war, bloodiest of all, between the newcomers and native Americans which marked: "the colonists eventual victory over the forces of King Philip in 1676, making the end of the Indians as a national entity in New England, serves Lowell as a symbol of American violence, idealism, and ambition" (Axelrod 69). The last poem of the volume however, in fidelity to Lowell's method, ends in hope,

Stand and live,

The dove has brought an olive branch to eat.

*Life Studies*, not only confirmed his place at the head of his poetic generation, it made him one of the most influential poets and one of the most influential writers of the 20th century in America. It came after a lull of eight years during which Lowell experienced traumatic personal incidents. Both of his parents died during this decade. The poet was troubled by a series of mental breakdowns, which at times required hospitalization and therapy, including an exercise in which he conducted a review of his life through the writing of a prose narrative exploring his

childhood and submerged feelings about family members, published as '91 Revere Street'. In addition, his marriage to second wife Elizabeth Hardwick, whom he had married in 1949, had undergone difficulties. In the poems of this volume, Lowell repeatedly talks of his trips to Mclean's Asylum and ventured to speak openly about his madness, imprisonment, his marriage, his relatives, himself. In the poems of *Life Studies*, Lowell was not only concerned with the violence of the world but also with the psychological aspect of it. In this confessional volume, Lowell repeatedly speaks of his trips to McLean's Asylum, as Christopher Ricks puts it that different kinds of violence can be seen in the works of Lowell: natural, domestic and psychic, which is caused by war, infidelity, murder and madness. Poems that he was writing now were unlike anything he, or any American poet, had produced before. In poems, 'Home after three months away', 'Waking in the Blue', and 'Memories of West Street and Lepke', facts have been put across as metaphors. In the first poem, the subject is his return from the asylum and the scene is set with biographical details. It begins with a reference to an inimical nurse who tied gobbets of pork-rind on the magnolia tree for the birds. There is an analogy of the self after the breakdown to the war-torn world and in both the cases there is no chance of normalcy. All the poems in the first section of *Life Studies*, articulate Lowell's burden of a familial history of social tension, guilt and repression. There are several glimpses of the gradual decline of a glorious Lowell past into the present ruin. Lowell feels like a whale pursued by its killers, and this becomes his central symbol for all that is wrong with his personal as well as his national past, as he exclaims in 'Waking in the Blue':

My heart grows tense

As though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.

The last poem of the volume 'Skunk Hour' is about hopelessness and promise and is a fine example of confessional poetry, for it puts the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such a way that his psychological problems and shame become an embodiment of his civilization. The poem is set in the Maine seacoast village of Castine, the nearby Nautilus Island and Blue Hill, locales where Lowell had spent the summer of 1957. Starting with



promise of a land with heritage it reaches its decay. The "eccentric heiress" prefers, "Queen Victoria's century" to the present, but fails to arrest the social disintegration she sees around her. In the next two stanzas the poem abruptly shifts from the description of a "disintegrating town to the "dark night" of personal ordeal" (Breslin 3). Lowell observes ominously that "the season's ill". Although this refers only to seasonal change here, it later implicates a diseased civilization. As Axelrod puts it: "this season of human habitation on earth is ill-decadent and debased" and Lowell's "ill-spirit" personifies that disease. (126). He drives to this local lover's lane, trying to discover some sense of closeness to another human being, but exclaims instead: "my mind's not right". The poet persona seems to lose sanity at the depressive prospect that greets him in his search of love. Here his car takes over and carries him up "the hill's skull" to where the love cars take over the cemetery and later turn into grounded ships lying "together hull to hull" as in the graveyard that overlooks the town and the harbor. The lovers in the parked cars too, are not able to escape the chill of the surroundings. The poet draws comfort from death on the "hill's skull" near the graveyard so that the "hill's skull" becomes his own skull. From here on the journey's into the interiors of his own unconscious. Overtaken completely by thoughts of his own death, in a bleak prospect, he can only cry silently to himself,

"I myself am hell,  
Nobody's here—"

Rudman explains this as the key line, when Lowell says "I myself am hell". "I myself"—not the "hermit/heiress", not "our summer millionaire", not "the fairy decorator", to backtrack through the book, Robbie Stanley, Abramowitz, or Lepke; not even his Uncle or his Aunt or his father or his mother; "I myself"—and it is precisely this insight that makes 'Skunk Hour' a great poem and *Life Studies* a great book rather than a collection of poems. (90) Loneliness is the vision of hell. The appearance of skunks, looking for something to eat at a deadly hour, is the only sign of life and therefore survival.

"Only skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:

white Stripes, moonstruck eye's red fire,"

Axelrod, while commenting on skunks, states that: "in the modern land, devoid of even the hope of rain, all is abnormality, self-assertion, ugliness, violence, madness, monstrosity....the skunks are an image of the new world Lowell has entered. He breathes the "rich air", accommodating himself to this present, this future" (131). The last line looks forward to a future so that "the movement in the poem has been from still to will; from regression and stasis, towards hope. The skunks break into the garbage and hurl Lowell out of the pat into the anxious present". (Rudman 92)

This power of self-revelation then becomes that hallmark of *Life Studies*, its most distinguishing feature. An enduring quality of this volume is that everything in this book is linked to something before or after and this gives the volume a unity and integrity of concern.

Confessional poetry was thus to be seen as a reflection of man's alienation from the world he inhabited and a retreat into privatism, an effort to make significance and beauty out of the terror of our modern condition. Lowell believes that experience was the basis of all existence and could not be detached from the self, just as the suffering self could not be separated from the mind that created. Thus all poetry is, in a way, confession. The man who suffers does affect the mind which creates, unlike T.S. Eliot's view that the feelings, emotions, or vision resulting from the poem were to be different from the feelings, emotions, or vision of the poet himself. Lowell based his poetic premises on the Emerson's concept of poetry, which was founded on the doctrine of experience. Lowell's poetry thus became his means of articulating a deep, personal and ancestral guilt. The relationship between art and experience was too elemental for an impersonal theory of poetry. As he stated in his interview with Frederick Seidel: "poetry has become a craft, purely a craft and there must be some breakthrough back into life" (25). This much-desired breakthrough came with the publication of *Life Studies*, which proved to be a watershed in the history of American poetry. Lowell had however confessed, that the poems were indeed difficult to write and were not true factually true all the times. A lot of changes have to be made with the



facts, some are invented and some are moulded and that is the balance required in making a poem.

In a poetic career spanning thirty-six years Robert Lowell has successfully appeared as rhetorician, storyteller, translator, verse-novelist, autobiographer and memoirist too. Yet for all his dynamism, his poetic oeuvre is unified. Lowell's is the ubiquitous presence that resides at the very center of all his work. Although the style of writing has changed radically over the years, the central character remains the same, for the thread that strings it together, is my own autobiography" (Seidel 352) says the poet. Lowell viewed his art as a form of therapy, confessing later that poetry was the breath of life for him.

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