

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU - NATAL

FABRICATED HONESTY: AN ORIGINAL COLLECTION OF POEMS, INCLUDING A  
CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF TWENTIETH CENTURY  
CONFESSIONAL POETRY ON MY WRITING.

By

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in the Graduate Program in Arts,

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Kimentha Govender, declare that

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Kimentha Govender

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of two sections: a creative section and a theoretical section. The first section of this paper will be the creative section which consists of a collection of 40 original poems that can be generally described as confessional poems. These poems explore and deal with personal relationships, memory and self- reflection. The second section of this paper will be the theoretical section and will consist of three chapters.

Chapter One explores confessional poetry. It will look at the history of confessional poetry around the 1960s as well as how it arose as a genre. I will briefly look at the work of Boston poet Robert Lowell in his most famous work *Life Studies* and explore how he had become a catalyst for confessional poetry. Chapter Two will explore select poems by Sylvia Plath and what made her work so influential at a time when confessional poetry started to be recognised as a genre. I will also compare some of my poems to those of Plath to see how my work fits into this genre. Plath and my work share similarities in style, tone and topics such as loss, and interpersonal family relationships. Chapter three explores South African contemporary poetry and the work of South African contemporary poet Joan Metelerkamp and why she is considered to be a confessional poet. I will also analyse some of her poetry and compare her work to that of my own to find any common ground.

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## SECTION A

## 1. Virginia Woolf

One night she turned to me and said,

“I want to die.

I want to know what Virginia Woolf felt as she drowned  
with stones in her dress.

I wonder what voices filled her ears as water filled her lungs.

I wonder

when words are not enough and life is not enough

what is it then that will save me?”

I suppose

I too would choose death

over feeling that I am living it.

## 2. Dinner Party

Death sits and watches  
from the end of the dinner table  
asking you  
“What is life?”  
while you cut your chicken  
and he drinks your wine.

### 3. Her Darkness

She has never liked me. The way I look and dress. The way my words seem to fall out of her mouth when she thinks I am not listening. She hates knowing I am just behind her shoulder like a nightmare emerging from under the bed. A game we secretly play together. A game of power which she always wins leaving me battered but breathing. She lunges at me and rips out my tongue, peeling my skin, dragging my limbs through the hallways, laughing bitterly. Stitching me back together and hanging me up like an old dress. Sometimes she takes me out, dressing me like a doll for dinner parties. I watch her from the corner moving across the room spilling drinks and laughing, looking for me. At dinner I sit opposite her and smirk, her eyes full of hatred. I will pull at her wounds, burning into her skin, turning her words to ash. I will watch her from afar knowing she anticipates my arrival. And when she thinks I have left, I will claw my way into her brain and make a bed for myself there. I will listen to her breathe, watch her dream and hold her in this empty room. She will try to pull out pieces of me so she can live alone. But doesn't she know? She and I were born together.



## 5. This Town

This town is too small for us  
splitting at the seams,  
but holding on like  
a child too afraid to be left alone  
while our voices scream through  
open windows and over fences  
landing like ash from  
the man smoking outside the local bar.

We can never say our dreams  
are bigger than the billboard of the  
rich guy with the family in the background  
or that happiness can never ever solely exist  
on the doorstep of the girl with  
the deer eyes who  
we have had a crush on since we were twelve.

We never say this town doesn't understand  
when our wings are cut  
and our hands are burnt from fires of expectation,  
that this town is home  
but not where we want to stay.

We never say and they never ask.

## 6. Home

Home to me

was an invisible rope

formed by their words

and wrapped around my wrist.

I lugged it around like a suitcase

that I desperately wanted to empty.

## 7. Goodbye

You left that morning  
with no note,  
only a bunch of yellow roses  
in a vase on the kitchen table.

I stare at your picture now  
and see your face when I look in the mirror,  
your laughter stuck in my throat.

I have lost all of my words  
as the days drag on without you.

Tired, I crawl to your side of the bed  
marked with your shape –  
motherly.

## 8. Red Moon

There is a red moon in the sky.

“The world is ending,” they say.

It’s why you came to visit.

But I keep thinking how red you are

like the stain on the Band-aid around my finger.

I watch you from an open window

and wonder who gave birth to you on this cold night

in a town with women and men who speak in curses,

superstition running like hot lava from door to door

as children throw stones.

And you hang in the sky

like a loose tooth I want to pull

and keep under my pillow.

## 9. Survival

They never tell you  
how to survive at 2am  
when thoughts open you up  
like a surgeon.

Something is moving  
gnawing at your ear,  
your brain,  
your ankles.

It makes you feel like salvaging what is left  
of your sanity,  
your intestines,  
your shoes.

When they say  
only the weak cry,  
you spend days  
filling a jar with  
pieces of paper instead of tears.

You watch the jar  
like a left lung breathing too well.

## 10. Dear ...

I want to write you a letter  
like I did when I was seven  
explaining why my faith is like a man  
on a respirator machine.

I put my hands together when  
my mother demands I pray but  
no words fall from my lips.

I suppose it is easier for her.  
She has conversed more  
with you than me in twenty-six years.

You've handed me over –  
a bastard child cursed by those who  
bow to you asking for a good life.

They tell me who to be, what to do –  
abiding by laws that reek  
of men's cologne  
and women's spirituality.

Should I stand and strip  
every word they have dressed me in  
as an offering instead of fruit and milk?

Or is the hook they've  
dug into my side

enough of a blood sacrifice?

## 11. Words

I unpack your words and  
string them out like beads in my palm,  
pressing them together,  
kneading them with my knuckles,  
I roll them out  
carefully peeling the layers  
searching for something to hold onto.

## 12. Hands

I am thinking of my grandmother  
washing the dishes.

Her gold bangles move up and down  
like the tide rising and falling

and I wonder  
if you can tell someone's life by their hands

the way they hold a glass,  
tie shoelaces,

hold a child?  
Can you tell

the years they have lived  
by their weathered skin,

turning soil in the sun,  
washing floors and clothing

raising children,  
with blistered fingers and cracked nails?

Hoping for their children's lives  
to be more delicate.

I wonder what her hands did

to build the world my father lives in.

Those gold bangles  
move back and forth

over dirty floor tiles  
and kitchen sinks

stirring pots and  
rocking crying babies.

Everything that has led to the world in which I exist.

### 13. Sisters

We look the same they say,  
as if we are one –  
Jekyll and Hyde.  
But your face is friendlier,  
mine more rough,  
an acquired taste.

You are sweet and bright  
like jalebi –  
happiness placed on the tip of one's tongue.  
I am vile.  
My words run wild  
like paraffin on fire.

They say that people  
do not like girls like me.  
I tell them  
that I do not like people.

Sometimes you watch me  
with this look of distaste  
and I know their voices  
play in your head,

that they have placed you on a pedestal.

When I fall  
it isn't too far from where I stand.

But when you fall. . .

## 14. Hiding

I try to remember  
the first time it happened.

When I began hiding  
behind your eyes.

You wouldn't listen when I said  
the nightmares had grown too big,

that the walls spoke too loud  
for my little voice.

When you said  
you were ashamed of me.

## 15. Memories

In the dead of night  
I pull memories from my fingertips,  
autumn leaves, too brittle to hold onto.

I listen to your breathing  
light as washi paper,  
your hands too hot  
like the winter sun burning my cheeks.

You mumble something  
but all I can focus on is the silence –  
Your barren dreams tucked  
into my shoulder as  
I assemble and disassemble you.

Until the only comfort I have  
is the darkness  
that had me reaching out to you in the beginning.

## 16. Wings

You held me,  
2.8kgs of skin and hair,  
my wings cushioned  
by the warmth of your hands.

Did you promise  
that my wings wouldn't bruise  
when life became a string of storms,  
that broken bones  
did not mean I was fragile?

Even when words become grenades  
walls built were never  
across the doorway that lead home,  
and when these wings  
have grown too big for your hands  
release me,  
even if you cannot see the world as I do.

Can you believe that I can ever be more  
than the ash that settles after a fire?

## 17. The Nice Boy

My friends told me there was a nice boy  
who lived two streets away  
and I should go  
on a blind date with him.

I sit and think about the word nice  
N – I – C – E.  
The sound sits too comfortably  
on the tip of my tongue to venture out –  
because nice does not go very far.  
It is obliged to stay  
within its parameters,  
bound by its feet to a  
definition that is as dull  
as the boy I am supposed to meet.

## 18. Little Girl

Little girl  
you are too cruel  
when you remove all your clothes  
to pull at the flesh  
of the wound still raw –  
A bloodied dress,  
look you've ruined it!  
What have you done  
to yourself in the dark?

## 19. Angel on a Bicycle

In the dead of night  
an angel steals a bicycle  
in a town filled with  
sleeping bodies, wondering if God  
is watching him through the  
window of a dreamless house.

The angel rides through the  
streets listening to the snores  
of men and dogs in  
houses that whisper and shudder quietly.

He passes a grave where a  
shovel stands against a tree  
thinking what are words to  
a family whose baby never  
held onto its first breath.

He hears the baby's cries  
beneath the earth while other  
children sleep soundly in tiny  
beds that creak with each turn.

The sky gets heavy as the  
angel waits for a woman  
to finish her words on  
paper so he can understand  
why he has no wish

to use his wings to  
go back home.

## 20. Shoes

It was the type of love I thought I deserved,  
the type that is tattered  
like shoes walked in too long.

## 21. Gentle

I am sorry I was not more gentle with you,  
that I took their insults  
pressing them into your bones until they broke.  
And when the scratches and bruises healed  
I began to tear away again like an animal  
until your body became too heavy to carry.

I watch you staring at yourself in the mirror  
eyes tracing the inconspicuous scars.  
I am sorry I did not know how to hold you,  
they never showed me how.

## 22. Grudge

You've always been with me,  
my little friend  
keeping me company in the dark  
like a lost dog clutching onto my sleeve.

I close my eyes and you ask me  
if I have forgotten what it feels like,  
your lips pressed against mine,  
the taste of blood heavy with hostility.

How can I? You have placed  
yourself where I cannot reach you.  
Only the smell of rotting meat remains  
as you claw your way, scratching and bruising,  
lacerations on my wrist draining me like a hookworm.

## 23. Alive

I did not die.

I heard them later ask: “What  
do we do with her?”

as if I were pus

oozing from a wound

because I wore my defiance like a virtue.

I was not born to sit pretty batting my eyelashes.

I was born to cause hurricanes.

## 24. Strength

They say it takes a woman to  
raise a strong daughter but  
it was you, Dad  
who taught me how to raise my voice  
shattering traditional obligations  
where men want to leave an imprint  
on girls like a tattoo.

You allowed me to trim  
the edges of my wings razor sharp,  
to fight wolves in a world where  
others were told to wear  
red capes and carry baskets of food.

## 25. That Man

I cannot stay,  
there's another man who told me once  
I was beautiful.  
His words were so enticing  
they made me want to rip out his tongue and  
put it through a grinder.  
But the memory remains -  
his smile as he handed me an ice cream at noon  
eyeing me like a new toy.  
His voice playfully devious as he whispered,  
"You will never belong to anyone else",  
and ran his tongue over the bruises he'd already made.

That man,  
whose words still run cold in my veins,  
stares at me through your eyes.

## 26. The life I should want

You say it is wrong that

I do not want what you say I should.

A wedding in the same hall as you and father,  
red sari with gold beading, heavy with commitment,  
hands stained with mendhi holding a brass lamp.

I am now the light of a household with a name  
that did not raise me to give you grandchildren who  
will carry my genes like a birthmark.

You say I should be like other girls and play well  
with my words, that when I curse  
it's pure evil running out my mouth like a sewing machine.  
While others stand exuding praise from their family's eyes,  
I stand like a deranged woman who shouts the names of the dead.

I do not know how to carve my life into a portrait for you  
to hang in the living room, or how to  
place my words like a bouquet of flowers.

I only know how to sit and craft my sins meticulously.

## 27. You are not

You are not your mother's  
coffee brown eyes or her lips painted red,  
the colour that only married women wear.  
You are not her hands that last held you at seven  
nor the skin she bore you in, elastic –  
to be stretched and molded as you find  
a way to hide yourself. You are not  
your mother's words dyed white for crowds to admire  
nor her cruelty that she serves like a cup of tea  
watching you drink with a smile on her lips slightly parted,  
as she turns to admire herself. You are not  
your mother's figure, the embodiment of woman in her hips  
as she moves, laughter piercing the air.  
You are not this stranger you've watched  
whose eyes, nose and lips you wear so uncomfortably.

## 28. Lie

It is easier if I lie to them and say I am well.

It's less words packed into a sandwich ready

to be devoured, my fingers numb

as the smog around me begins to taste like honey.

How many pills have I taken this time?

Daddy dearest

sing for me like you used to

my body is ice and your voice

hot steel searing into my skin.

My thoughts twist like vines when

you ask me how I am.

I don't know how to explain last night's dinner

on the floor or why sarcasm falls from my mouth

like loose change.

## 29. Your Name

Boys who say your name is pretty  
think they can fill the crevices and grooves  
with their roaming fingers  
twisting your face and bruising  
your lips while trying to convince you  
that you are unlike others.

Those boys will never know the power  
in your thighs,  
on your fingertips, on your tongue  
when you pronounce every syllable of your name,  
a weight their fingers can never grasp.

### 30. Poem

If you do not know what it means  
to construct a line and give birth on a page,  
do not hold a gun to my head and ask  
me to be good when my mind  
possesses me to do otherwise.

If you do not understand,  
hand me a pen and watch me bleed.

### 31. Memories of you

Thinking of you is like  
holding loose buttons in my left dress pocket.  
I keep fiddling but can't seem to  
pull them out and sew them  
onto a bouquet of roses  
and say goodbye.

## 32. Beautiful things

You once said searching for beauty was like  
attempting to find a silver coin  
on the ground among cigarette butts.

I found it strange that your eyes were always  
as clear as the water that dead flowers rested in,  
like the memories of the girl you once loved  
though perhaps you still think  
of her lips when you kiss me.

I sometimes wonder  
if you said the words "I love you"  
would they cling to me like wet clothes or  
become bricks around my feet?

You once asked me what beauty and self-destruction meant.  
I couldn't answer then but I think the meaning lies  
somewhere between beginning a sentence  
with an I and ending it in a poem.

### **33. Loneliness**

is when you've reached the end of the novel at 3.22 am,  
repeatedly reading the last line  
unable to move forward.

## 34. The Book

Mum. Dad.

Want to know how it ends?

Turn to page 50 where it is written:

“How to know she is dying”,

and understand it isn't the big battles that throw her off,

it's the little ones that hammer through her supple skin down to the bone.

The page reads something like:

“Breathe in...

count to three.

Breathe out...

count to three.”

But each breath I take feels stuck like a cassette tape

with wrinkles in it that I keep winding and unwinding,

but it keeps skipping over the words

“Breathe out.”

### 35. Child

You bore this wailing baby,

bald as a rock with rat fingers and protruding eyes that  
weighed you down like a house.

Her screams drowned out by a record spinning on the turntable  
while you watched her little mouth open and close like a  
fish pulled out of a tank and left on its side,  
carelessly balanced like a butcher's knife in your hands.

### 36. Girls don't cry

They told me not to cry,

weakness always starts with the eyes.

So I learnt to swallow tears like tea and I asked myself,

what is strength?

I always believed it was steel wings and bulletproof skin.

What is the use of broken bones, pretty lips and beautiful words

when you must carve yourself into a woman as strong as a battle tank.

And they say girls don't cry - but girls

don't raise hell either,

so I started stapling notes to my body to

remind myself to know my place.

Watch me bleed, mother, as I rip off these iron bars.

Am I not enough with stitches and a bloodied mouth

to say I am beautiful and strong?

### 37. Puzzle Piece

I could tell something had changed.

I noticed you staring at me as though I were the extra piece  
in a 1000 piece puzzle.

I started to think about when it happened,  
that something began to feel stolen as though  
it slipped through my fingers, the same way  
my mother let go of my hand that rainy Tuesday afternoon.  
And then I wondered why these memories always surprise me  
like the sound of popcorn bursting in a pan,  
I wanted to know why I suddenly felt empty like a well  
that had dried up over summer so  
I decided to call God, pressing the speed dial  
only to hear an automated voice message.  
I guess he was busy.

I try to think of a way to explain to you  
how it feels, this stirring  
like taking a spoon of honey and mixing it  
into lemon tea.

The taste half pleasing,

half bitter,

the same way life balances out.

### 38. Conversations

There is a hole inside me like a bag that I keep filling,  
unspoken daily conversations are thrown in, the way you stuff  
a closet with unnecessary items purchased at a sale.

I know it should be closed the same way affairs are kept hidden  
under housewives' petticoats, in between  
the mattress, past the lips and under the tongue.

I tried to stitch it the same way you would a tear or  
a wound on the forehead, though  
part of me wants to pry it open to show you all I have been holding in.

Words,  
like bruised petals that turn to ash every time  
I close my eyes and whisper your name.

### 39. Goodbye

I liked to think we were happy  
when you put your hand on mine and smiled  
until you opened that chainsaw mouth of yours and  
gave me splinters that I spent days pulling out and placing in a bottle.

And that morning I left, my dresses placed at the foot of the bed  
wondering if there would be any traces of me like  
a blue string tied to your finger,  
the scent of lavender on the pillows or  
a note with my name inside your pocket.

Then I found the silence of a box made from splinters.

## 40. Tears

Have you ever listened to the sound of your tears?

Is it similar to the creaking of the yellow gate you pushed open the day you left home  
and never returned.

## SECTION B

## Introduction

This thesis looks at confessional poetry and my own work in relation to confessional poetry. The thesis is divided into two sections, a creative section and a theoretical section.

The creative part (Section A) consists of 40 original poems that can be generally described as confessional poems. The poems range from themes dealing with inter-familial relationships, death, loss, memory and self-reflection. Following the creative part is the theoretical aspect of my thesis (Section B).

The theoretical section consists of three chapters and deals with the history of Confessional poetry in the mid-twentieth century with works of two American poets and a South African poet. Chapter one briefly examine early twentieth century American poetry up to about the 1960; a period during which the New Critical theorists dominated the literary scene. However, many poets at that particular time felt the need for change, from a less formalistic way of writing to a more colloquial way in order for readers to feel connected to what they were reading. In this chapter, I explore the work of Robert Lowell, a poet whose work is seen as the catalyst for the confessional mode. The second chapter will explore Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet. The chapter explore how Plath's work should be acknowledge as not simply being autobiographical but as pieces that fall under the confessional genre. I will be analysing a few of Plath's poem before analysing my poems and making comparisons. My own poems fit into the confessional genre, I look at how my poems fit into the criteria of the confessional mode as well the comparison between my work and Plath's. The third Chapter explore the work of Joan Metelerkamp. In this chapter I assess Metelerkamp's work to confirm why she is indeed a confessional poet. I then analyse a few of her poems and compare my own work in relation to hers.

## CHAPTER ONE

### CONFESSIONAL POETRY

In this chapter, I will look briefly at the history of twentieth century poetry in America before the 1960s. I will then examine how confessional poetry developed as a genre by looking at the work of Robert Lowell. Following this, I will discuss the characteristics of confessional poetry. I will briefly examine the term “Confessional”, and why the term is used for such defined poetry.

#### (i) American Poetry before the 1960s

Before the 1960s, when confessional poetry arose as a distinct category, the movement known as New Criticism dominated the literary scene with their views on the academic study of poetry. Their ideologies concerning literature continued to be learnt and practiced from the 1930s until the 1960s, when confessional poetry began to change these views. Before understanding how confessional poetry arose, it is essential to understand how the New Critics came to dominate the ways in which poetry was studied and written.

It was in the 1930s that the New Critics started to spread their ideologies to universities. Terry Eagleton explains the reasons for this:

New Criticism evolved at a time when American Literature programs were struggling to become professionalized, and when the study of English Literature was attempting to compete with both the sciences and the social sciences as an academic discipline. (in Beach 2003:138)

The New Critical theorist had to think of a methodology that would attract students towards Literary studies. The ultimate reason and need for this was the vastly growing population of students which began to rise essentially after World War II. With the growth of the student population, the New Critics decided that they needed to change the way they analysed and interpreted literature to bring in students to study in Literature programs.

Though each of the different groupings that were under the banner of the New Critical Movement had slightly varied ideas on poetry, the fundamental concepts regarding the scrutiny of reading and assessment of a poem followed similar patterns. The general consensus was that the most successful works of literature had reached what was called an “organic unity” and the best way to understand this unity was by looking at their images, figures of speech, and symbolic language. As Eagleton argued: “The New Critics insisted on treating the poem as a self-sufficient verbal object (the ‘well-wrought urn’ or ‘verbal icon’), and in recognizing the words of Ransom, ‘the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake’” (2003:138).

They were strongly against practices that would essentially distract the reader from what they termed the “true” interpretation of the poem. This was described in several ways: one was the idea of the “intentional fallacy”, which was the idea that a work should be accessed according to the intention that the author had. Secondly, the New Critics also warned against the “affective fallacy” which is based on the idea that a work should be judged upon the emotional response of the reader or the effect that the work triggered in the reader. Finally, they argued that readers were not meant to interpret poems based on biography or psychological influence, nor should they rely on historical and social background in order to interpret a particular work.

The emphasis was placed instead on a poem’s verbal construction, especially on the use of ‘tension’, ‘irony’ and ‘paradox’, providing an equilibrium of these forces within a poem. John Crowe Ransom’s interpretation of this was that a poem was meant to essentially have two basic elements which were structure and texture. Structure was related to the argument and the logical discourse within the poem while the texture meant the use of imagery, rhythm, sound and diction. And these two elements were meant to create tension:

The primary methodology of the New Critics was the close reading or “explication” of the poem, which would reveal the complex interrelations of meanings and ambiguities within the text. The New Criticism was highly successful in training a generation of readers in the methods of close literary analysis. But in creating a new critical orthodoxy it also limited the range of possible responses to poetry, and as a result engendered an academic poetry establishment that was conservative in its literary tastes. (139)

Although the New Critics created a generation that consisted of both writers and readers, their literary formalism largely removed the idea of experimentation which had formed part of the early Modernist era. It also conveniently allowed New Criticism to avoid any discussion of the social and political issues during the Cold War. Thus, began the rebellion of the writer in the 1950s and 1960s against the conventions set by the New Critics.

By the late 1950s, American poetry was already undertaking changes in both the theory and practice of poetry, with James Breslin describing this as a “radical transformation”. The New Critics’ formalistic style began to feel “limited, excluding and impoverished,” and was rejected by poets who formed part of the anti-formalist movement. (148)

Robert Lowell stated that while this formalist style of writing had proved to be sufficient for writers of that time, it was no longer relevant to the new life being lived in the cities of America in the late 50s and early 60s: “The writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It’s become too much something specialized that can’t handle much experience. It’s become a craft, purely craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life” (149).

With Lowell keeping this in mind, his 1959 collection, *Life Studies*, made an enormous impact on American poetry. Lowell stated that he had wanted “to get away from the doctrine that poetry was first of all a craft” (in Perloff 1973:83). When a poem was seen solely as a craft, with little relation to society and the poet, he argued, then its hieratic form was supposed to make it easier to study and analyse. He went on describe such poems as a “stiff humourless and even impenetrable surface” (Ehrenpreis 1965:85). Lowell instead adjusted his work to be read as more colloquial, allowing the reader to feel that she/he was somehow connected to the writer, rather than feel that what they were reading was a façade. While this shift must be noted in the structure of Lowell’s poetry toward something more relaxed and colloquial, using a self-revelatory free verse, I must emphasise that his style was not unique amongst poets of his era. Aside from Robert Lowell, poets such as John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Adrienne Rich and James Wright also had similar trajectories in their work. Despite this, one cannot doubt the impact that Lowell had upon the new era of confessional poetry and on the style of American poetry in general – which would ultimately see a huge movement away from the mainstream form of writing poetry at that time.

(ii) Robert Lowell and Confessional Poetry

For the purposes of this thesis, the poetry of Robert Lowell and the impact of his work on confessional poetry will be briefly discussed. His work – particularly his most noted collection *Life Studies* – is the most renowned and had the greatest impact in comparison to other poets. “The structure of *Life Studies* embodies the process,” Macha Rosenthal wrote in *The Modern Poetic Sequence* (1983:397).

Lowell’s *Life Studies* is read in four parts. Part One, which consists of three poems, deals with aspects of power and privilege. It is written in a way that allows the reader to understand Lowell’s concerns about the corruption and misuse of power within the post-war society looking at politics, militarism and so on at that time. Part Two, which is autobiographical, looks at Lowell’s relationship with his family, especially his father, and the things which he felt had caused him psychological hurt that would haunt him later in his life. Part Two also gives the reader critical insight into wealthy American families and a vision of Lowell himself from a subjective standpoint “as a ruined being nurtured in the wreckage of a destroyed world” (397). Part Three, which consists of a series of four poems, “links the sensibility pervading the sequence to four outstanding modern writers out of phase with their age”, according to Rosenthal (397). Finally, Part Four goes back to the feelings that were reflected in Part Two of the book. Lowell looks at his childhood and the death of his parents as well as the personal struggles he had experienced as an adult.

“Lowell never again did a whole book as successful as *Life Studies*, his great demonstration of what the confessional mode can do – it’s power to cram the world’s riches into the tiny room of the poet’s vulnerable self,” Rosenthal concluded (402). The reason for this was the wide range of emotion and connotations compressed into the collection, which ultimately came from Lowell’s need to free himself and to find self-acceptance through exposing the vulnerable side of himself by writing about his childhood, his family, as well as his destructive and humiliating personal problems.

This is evident in the last poem of the book, “Skunk Hour”, which is regarded as the quintessential Confessional poem. With “Skunk Hour” Lowell had left behind his previous formalistic style of writing for a new form which “consists of eight six-line stanzas with variable

meter and rhyme scheme”, writes Christopher Beach (2003: 156). The first four stanzas of the poem speak of a town that is perishing and the last four stanzas deal with his personal difficulties which end in him feeling a sense of redemption and comfort when he sees a family of skunks at the end of the poem. The voice that he uses in the first half of the poem is one that jeers at the town and its occupants. Lowell represents the town as out of sync with its time, what he calls “the season’s illness”. Essentially in describing this town as lacking productive qualities or ideas, resulting in both social and physical decline, Lowell is constructing an analogy for his state of mind and the inadequacy he feels toward his work as a writer. In the second half of the poem there is a movement from the town’s illness to Lowell’s illness, described as moving from “illness of the season” to “my ill-spirit”.

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.  
A car bleats,  
‘Love, O careless Love . . .’ I hear  
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
as if my hand were at its throat. . .  
I myself am hell;  
nobody’s here. (Lowell 1959:104)

The lines in which Lowell describes the landscape in contrast to his own state of mind which seem to be the highlight of the poem. He has loaded this stanza with figurative speech; this is evident in the lines where he uses a metonymic replacement of cars to describe the lovers that are

inside them. This is followed by an implied metaphor that then looks at the comparison of cars and boats. The move from his description of the cars to the “ship’s hull” and the sea talks about the proximity of the cars to the sea and this can also be found in the earlier stanzas of the poem. This sort of ambiguity, followed by the image of the “graveyard”, creates a haunting feeling. The connection of the shelves could be interpreted as a link between the living and the dead and how they seem to fall into one another. The poem comes to the climax with the line, “I myself am hell”, where Lowell shifts from describing a song playing in the car to a quote from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. This line, of course, is an underlying reference to death. The reference to death, though, changes with the appearance of the skunks which come of nowhere in the concluding stanza. Somehow in seeing this family of skunk, he finds redemption and the will to live:

Lowell’s use of this highly untraditional metaphor for the poet’s survival suggests his new understanding of the ‘confessional’ poet. In a strategy that will be adopted by other confessional poets as well, the association of the speaker or the protagonist with the image of the debasement maps the poet’s damaged psyche onto the outside world. (Beach 2003: 159).

“Skunk Hour” looks at Lowell’s state of mind by first describing the town in which he lives as in complete decay, and then moving to that of his own mindset. He feels as if he, himself has disintegrated along with the town. With the appearance of the family of skunks, though, he somehow seems to find a sense of relief, an understanding that even in the world he experiences, he is somehow able to survive.

The reason why this poem plays an essential part in confessional poetry is the way in which Lowell moves from the idea of a physical, objective town to his own private feelings and his own thoughts. Through using metonymic substitution, and a less structured stanza format, he freely reveals his feelings to the reader. The idea of confessing his suicidal thoughts and his feelings that hope is essential fall under the rubric of the confessional. This allows the reader to experience intimately what Lowell is feeling and the despair that he endures. It also gives the reader insight into the author’s state of mind, and therefore engages the reader in a different and more private way to that practiced by the New Critics.

A second poem that I will discuss is titled “Home After Three Months Away”. Robert Shaw argues that Lowell’s poems in *Life Studies* “frequently rely upon complicated movements of the

Lowellian speaker into and out of the consciousness of various literary characters” (1973:18).  
“Home After Three Months Away” is seen as an example of this particular movement.

Gone now the baby's nurse,  
  
a lioness who ruled the roost  
  
and made the Mother cry.  
  
She used to tie  
  
gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze--  
  
three months they hung like soggy toast  
  
on our eight foot magnolia tree,  
  
and helped the English sparrows  
  
weather a Boston winter.  
  
Three months, three months!  
  
Is Richard now himself again?  
  
Dimpled with exaltation,  
  
my daughter holds her levee in the tub.  
  
Our noses rub,  
  
each of us pats a stringy lock of hair--  
  
they tell me nothing's gone.

Though I am forty-one,  
not forty now, the time I put away  
was child's play. After thirteen weeks  
my child still dabs her cheeks  
to start me shaving. When  
we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,  
she changes to a boy,  
and floats my shaving brush  
and washcloth in the flush. . . .

Dearest I cannot loiter here  
in lather like a polar bear.

Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil.

Three stories down below,  
a choreman tends our coffin's length of soil,  
and seven horizontal tulips blow.

Just twelve months ago,  
these flowers were pedigreed

imported Dutchmen; now no one need

distinguish them from weed.

Bushed by the late spring snow,

they cannot meet

another year's snowballing enervation.

I keep no rank nor station.

Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small (Lowell 1959:97,98).

This poem engages Lowell's thoughts about time and how he felt that it had been seized from him due to insanity. "Gobbets of porkrind" serves as a talisman from the nurse at the mental institution and remind him of his days before he entered the institution three months prior. To Lowell these talismans are seen as physical reminders of the time that he feels he cannot retrieve with the second stanza exclaiming "Three months, three months!". The question following this statement is "Is Richard now himself again?" which Shaw states is mocking and stems from "Collie Cibber's adaptation of *Richard III*" in which Lowell identifies himself in the image of Richard II "the poet-king who bears the marks of a man-poet continually, "beside himself", torn between the nothing and the all of his sense of himself" (1973:19).

In the poem Lowell has no substantial identity, he shifts from himself to Richard then to a polar bear and lastly imaging himself as tulips. Throughout the poem there is no progression of time except for that of which Lowell felt he had lost. However, Lowell creates an identifiable unity which dominates the piece and that is through complex references to Richard II. "The identification of himself with Richard provides a coherent focus for the absence or multiplicity of selves; it filters the apparently random sequence of images through the memory of Richard's cry "My thoughts are moments" (Shaw 1973:19). This can represent two disorders, one which

represents both Richard and Lowell (which can be noted as one order), and the other order being one that can only be saved from through conceding of time. (19)

Shaw stated that in all its brilliance, “Home After Three Months Away”, represents a sort of risk. The inherent recognition of the speaker in the poem to Richard and the contrast of images used, serve as a statement that order needs to be placed. Since the poem itself is placed rigidly in the present “it can only find unity in analogizing itself to images of other disorders. The radical shorthand of Lowell’s link between himself and Richard II stabilizes the poem, but without any sense of limit” (1973:20). Shaw goes on to state that the autobiographical poems found in *Life Studies*, and the images in said poems “seem constantly to find no rest within themselves and to point out giddily in all directions toward the external infinite” (1973:20).

(iii) The Characteristics of confessional poetry.

“The shift to confessional poetry from writing like this is a simple one: to attempt to present the poet’s own naked self and unrationalized, uncensored actual feelings and behavior.” (Rosenthal 1983:393).

It must be noted that the term “confessional” was first used by Macha Rosenthal in an article in which Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) was reviewed. Rosenthal used the term ‘confessional’ rather than autobiographical because “of the way Lowell brought private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of *Life Studies*. . . Sexual guilt, alcoholism, repeated confinement in a mental hospital – these are some of the explicit themes in a number of poems, usually developed in the first persona and intended without question to point to the author himself” (Horvath 2005:39).

Confessional poetry is one that allows the reader to believe that what they are reading about is the actual author’s life and their feelings. One of the ways in which to do this is with the use of the first person singular. The use of the “I” in these poems is vital as this is what was used to break away from previously written impersonal poems. While previous poets used the landscape and objects as descriptions to hint towards the author or to make a point in an

underlying sort of way, the use of the “I” refers clearly and unambiguously to the poet as both the speaker and subject.

However, it is important to stress that, as Marjorie Perloff, argues, “confessional poetry... is a literary convention like any other, the problem is to make it *sound* as if it were true. Whether the poet is presenting the actual facts of experience is not relevant, he must give the ‘illusion of a True Confession’” (1973:81). Even Robert Lowell had stated “that while he invented some of the autobiography, he nevertheless wants the reader to feel it is true, that he is getting the real Robert Lowell” (Uroff 1977:105). It is confession, but at the same time it is a strategy of writing. “One cannot read *Life Studies* straightforward as an account of Lowell’s life, and to do so would simply be overlooking the art that is contained within the poems that he created. (Simpson 1978 :148). As Rosenthal stated, “Robert Lowell’s poetry has been a long struggle to remove the mask, to make his speaker unequivocally himself” (in Simpson 1978:148).

Essentially the idea is that the poet is inviting the reader to engage in his own memories, experiences and grievances in a personal form. The “I” invites the reader to make him/her feel as if the speaker within the poem is speaking directly to them. However, poetry is fundamentally art and therefore a degree of craftsmanship is required in constructing the poem.

“The aim in writing is to convey a feeling –by creating an illusion, said Ford Madox Ford, “the sort of odd vibration that scenes in real life really have,” giving the reader the impression that he is witnessing something real, that he is passing through an experience.<sup>1</sup> “You attempt to involve the reader amongst the personages of the story or in the atmosphere of the poem. You do this by presentation.”<sup>2</sup>” (Simpson 1978: xi)

Therefore, depending on the writer, they can expose how much information about their life at their own disposal. Some poems may contain one or two concrete biographical facts while the rest of the work could be entirely fictional. There could be instances where some so-called facts may be exaggerated to create a story. The idea basically centres around finding an imaginative way to create a realistic story to draw the reader in, as well as to make the story relatable to reader on a certain level. “[That is], “I” becomes something other through the medium that absorbs its associations; it becomes a magnetic cohesive center for all the emotional and subjective currents running through the work” (Rosenthal 1983:394).

(iv) The Art of Confessing.

“In the pre-Reformation period, the Christian Church in Western Europe was Roman. Of vital importance in this period was to shape confession as a religious practice and thereby a source in this period and later of the legal authority – the fourth Lateran Council (1215)” (Gill 2006: 5).

During this time the church prescribed an “annual confession and penance for the faithful making it a condition for admission to Easter communion” (Gill 2006:5). What followed this was more regular confessions that were seen as vital in the fifteenth century and thereby taken over by the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century in which it was stated that the act of confession was necessary for “one’s spiritual salvation” (Gill 2006:5).

The idea of confession centered around the idea of revealing all. Weyer describes the essential idea of confession from the point of view of both the Church and state as follows:

Confession can [thus] be read as technique for the production of an individual, autonomous self which is brought into being through a dialogue with an (implied) unequivocal other. By extension, confession is not only emphasized as good for the self (or the soul or the psyche); it is also good for the self-in-society, and for society itself. Confession is not only about bringing one into a right relationship with God, or law-enforcement, or one’s own psyche, but, through this, to bring about the societal rehabilitation of the self and of the society. (2013:38)

The idea that confession refers to the idea of confessing one’s sins to the church or to the law no longer exists within those strict definitions. Confession can be used under different contexts; for example, the idea of unburdening or revealing one’s feelings in order to deal with social pressure, stress, one’s grievances and so forth.

Foucault describes the necessity for confession in society, “in justice, medicine, education family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites’ and of course, in literature” (in Gill 2006:4).

Foucault goes on:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or the virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to punish, forgive, console and reconcile. (1981:61–2)

While more importantly, for the purpose of this essay, the definition of confessional poetry is as follows:

It may be argued that much poetry, especially lyric poetry, is, *ipso facto* 'confessional' in so far as it records a poet's states of mind and feelings and his vision of life. However, some poems are more overtly self-revelatory, more detailed in their analytical exposition of pain, grief, tension and joy. (Cuddon 1977: 175)

Confessional poetry is different in that while some of the work may be interpreted as autobiographical, it is important that not all of it is expected to be so. The idea stems from the need to write something that a reader can relate to or to forge a connection between the speaker and the reader. The writer attempts to make the speaker in his or her poem sound as if it were them (the writer) talking directly to the reader in such a way as to make a connection. In doing this it seems as if the writer is confessing to the reader (who then becomes Foucault's 'interlocutor') about their feelings, thoughts, pain and so forth.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SYLVIA PLATH – THE CONFESSIONAL POET

The purpose of this chapter will be to analyse why Sylvia Plath is considered a confessional poet. Following this, I will be examining a few of Plath's poems and assessing how her work is confessional. Furthermore, I will conclude this chapter by assessing some of my own poems in relation to Plath's work.

#### (i) The Confessional Poet

“This is the Sylvia Plath everyone knows, with a ‘long, escalating drive toward suicide’” (Simpson 1978:120).

It is quite common and easy to interpret Sylvia Plath's poems as a way of her purging herself before ultimately committing suicide. However, emphasis should be placed on the misconception of analysing her poems in this manner. “Plath writes about her life, but her poems are works of art, the images going down to a level of feeling that is shared by others” (Simpson 1978:121). While one cannot deny connections made in the poems to Plath herself as well as people who were in her life, we must acknowledge first and foremost her craftsmanship as a poet and writer. Plath herself states:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind (in Uroff 1977: 105).

Therefore, while Plath had indeed been writing of her own experience, what she found to be traumatising or to have caused her psychological hurt, she nevertheless turned it into a work of art through narrative within her poems.

Before analysing Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet, I should point out the difference between Robert Lowell's confessional writing and Sylvia Plath's confessional writing. Lowell had stated that parts of his autobiographical work had been fictional, regardless of this fact he wished for the reader to believe it to be true. That is, the reader was meant to get a sense of the real Robert Lowell, "The literal self in Lowell's poetry is to be sure a literary self, but fairly consistently developed as a self-deprecating, modest, comic figure with identifiable parents, summer homes, experiences at particular addresses" (Uroff 1977:105). Through the disclosure of his intimate feelings and humiliating experiences, Lowell allows the reader to actively participate in the idea that "the person in the poem [is] making an act of confession" (in Uroff 1977:105). However, with Plath's poetry we see a difference in the style of confession. Uroff argues that the "person in her poem calls certain people father or mother but her characters lack the particularity of Commander and Mrs. Lowell. They are generalized figures not real life people, types that Plath manipulates dramatically in order to reveal their limitations" (in Uroff 1977: 105). The information divulged by Plath through her poetry about the people she has written about can be interpreted with certain prejudice. This in turn allows reader to misconstrue the information presented and react with certain hostility to the references to controversial topics and imagery that Plath presents. Her speakers do not confess typically by calmly unfolding what it is that traumatises them but rather through explicit expression of emotion bring tension and anguish through the stanzas that the readers cannot ignore. In contrast, Lowell display his characters so that they laid out for the reader to critique their emotions often resulting in harsh criticism for said characters. Therefore, the term "confessional poet" is to be used distinctively according to the individuality of the poets and their work. As stated by Simpson:

The term (confessional), applied to poets as different as these, can mean very little –in fact, is misleading, for it does not take into account Lowell's deliberate self-portraiture, Ginsberg's "hallucinatory-mystical" experiments...It misses the most important thing about Sylvia Plath, her conversion of life into art (1978 :120).

(ii) Plath's Confessional Poems

While Plath had important works out such as *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and *The Bell Jar* (1963), it was her book *Ariel* (1965) published after her death that made a significant

mark in which “she transcends her personal history” (in Simpson 1978:123). As described by Richard Gray:

Her later poetry is a poetry of the edge, certainly, that takes greater risks, moves further towards the precipice than most confessional verse: but it is also poetry that depends for its success on the mastery of her craftmanship, her ability to fabricate larger, historical meanings and imaginative myth out of personal horror (1990:261).

Her poems “takes greater risks” through the description and details of the emotions of the speaker. When Plath speaks about death, the loss of her father or her personal struggles, she allows the reader to also participate by indulging in the emotions displayed in the lines of the poem. Thus, through her powerful way of describing emotions of the speaker in the poem so vividly and severely she compels the reader to feel the despair in the poem and react to it. Whether the poem is factual or not, it’s ability to draw the reader in through the narrative and displays of personal struggle and psychological issues pulls the reader to engage in said poems.

I have selected a few poems to illustrate why Plath’s works are so profoundly regarded as part of confessional poetry. The first analysis will be the poem ‘Tulips’ which is found in her collection *Ariel* as well as two other poems, namely ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Daddy’.

‘Tulips’ is a poem that is written in stanzas consisting of seven lines compared to many other poems that Plath had written which consisted of either three or five lined stanzas. The poem is about a speaker that is in hospital talking about her state of mind to which she feels numbed by her surroundings. “The tone of the poem [...] is informed by a more reflective melancholy as the persona broods on the state of mind induced by her situation as a patient in hospital” (Aird 1973: 71,72).

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses

And my history to the anesthetist and my body to the surgeons.

They have propped my head between a pillow and the sheet-cuff

Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.  
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.  
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,  
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,  
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as the another,  
So it is impossible to tell how many there are. (Plath 1965:12).

What stands out in this poem is the lack of identity and individuality that is displayed in the first few stanzas of the poem: “She has moved beyond normal activity and relishes the opportunity to relinquish all responsibility to become a ‘body’ with no personal history” (in Aird 1973: 72). There a sense of surrendering to her circumstances and environment with the description of her renouncing her name as well as her clothes presumably to wear hospital attire thus becoming a part of her monotonous surroundings. The description of the nurses is that they wear the same outfit, so that she/the speaker cannot distinguish them from one another, adding further to the dull background. She describes them as gulls with white caps completing the same tasks ritualistically. In a way one could say that this description is of that of someone who feels like a prop, in which she feels that she does not belong to herself but rather to those who are taking care of her, the lack of her individuality results in the lack of individuality around her. This moves on to another description of herself as a pebble in the third stanza:

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water  
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.  
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.  
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage –  
My patent leather overnight case like a black pill box (Plath 1965:12).

This stanza again enforces the idea of ritualistic movement within the hospital. She describes the movement of the people who are taking care of her as water or rather waves that are meant to smooth the pebble or make her better. However, this does not seem to be the case, instead she feels as though she has become an object laying on the bed with no will to move. Adding to this is the use of the medication or what they are injecting into her which enhances the numbness that she is already feeling resulting in her wanting to rid herself of this heaviness. The idea that she is sick of baggage and reference to her overnight case as a pill box entertains the idea that the items in said case is meant to make her feel better or revive her of this numbness but in no way, are doing so, so she rather rid herself of said baggage. This idea of the speaker portraying herself as an object seems to be a recurrent theme in Plath's poems as Aird states:

The apprehension of self as a concrete, inanimate object, a thing, is one which occurs frequently in *Ariel*; in 'Morning Song' the object being a statue, in 'Getting There' a letter in the slot, in 'The Bee Meeting' 'milkweed silk' (1973: 72).

There is a recurring theme running through the poems in *Ariel*, that is the idea of renouncing oneself as an individual for escapism. Thus, this continues in 'Tulips' in the stanzas that follow as she feels that they have been taken away from her in this hospital bed. It then allows her to find a sense of freedom in relinquishing them in order to start anew.

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat  
Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.  
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.  
Scared and bare on the green plastic pillowed trolley  
I watch my tea set, bureaus of linen, my books  
Sink out of sight and the water went over my head.  
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure. (Plath 1965:12,13).

When the line begins 'I have to let things slip' and 'stubbornly hanging onto my name and addresses' illustrates her need to want to give things up. The symbolism of the cargo boat and name and address means that one will always return home regardless of wherever one is (at sea

metaphorically speaking). There is identity attached to a name and address however the speaker in the poem finds this burdensome, so instead of holding on to things associated to home and oneself, she rather allows them to be taken from her. This then allows the speaker (now detached and free) to start anew. This is directly linked to religion, the idea of letting go of all of one's personal and material belongings to begin as a new person (i.e. such as a nun). She allows all her possessions to sink to the bottom and herself to be immersed into the sea as part of a cleansing ritual or being baptised to achieve a state of purity. Death or a sense of rebirth is seen as a constant theme in *Ariel*: "Death is usually pure in Ariel because it brings escape from conflict; it symbolises a rebirth, and all the pain and torture of living..." (in Aird 1973:72).

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.

Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe

Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.

The redness talks to my wound, it corresponds. (Plath 1965: 13).

This stanza introduces the red tulips which, when placed against the whiteness and numbness of her environment (both represented through winter and the hospital), somehow bring her back to her senses. They awaken her with their colour, but the red could also be a representation of blood and the living which is breaking her away from her state of mind. The idea of living as a functioning human being rather than an inanimate object: "The tulips hurt because they require an emotional response which will rouse her from her numbness of complete mental and physical inactivity;" (Aird 1973: 73).

"And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes

It's bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.

The water I taste is warm and salt like the sea,

And comes from a country far away from health" (Plath 1965:14).

The end of her poem has her returning from her numb state to acknowledge both herself and her surroundings.

In the poem “Lady Lazarus”, Mark Ford states that inspiration for this particular piece may have come from T.S Elliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ and refers also to the New Testament story of the resurrection of Lazarus from death. Ford goes on to write that ” Lady Lazarus” can undeniably refer to Plath’s own biological history in which she attempted suicide in 1953. She attempted to kill herself through an overdose of sleeping pills only to be discovered by her brother and mother and taken to hospital. “It is to this suicide attempt, as well as to a swimming accident that nearly cut short her life when she was ten, that refers midway in the poem” (2016) (internet source):

The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident.

The second time I meant

To last it out and not come back at all.

I rocked shut

As a seashell.

They had to call and call

And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (Plath 1965:9)

Even at the end of this poem, we see another reference to death. This time however it is as though she is a phoenix rising from the ash and renewed.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air (Plath 1965:11)

The theme of death is evident in most of Plath’s poems in which death is seen as a redemption. Shaw states that “Lady Lazarus” seeks purification in death but that in this poem it can be regarded as theatrical. The poem is theatrical in the statements that are made starting with the opening lines stating:

I have done it again.

One year in every ten.

I manage it –

A sort of walking miracle, my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade (Plath 1965:8).

The proclamation of “I have done it again” already begins boastful and as though she were making a statement to the public with bold exaggeration describing her skin as a Nazi lampshade. She continues later in the poem stating “Gentleman, ladies/These are my hands” as though she were on a platform or stage addressing people revealing parts of her body and then her pain for them to awe at which eventually ends in a death and rebirth for everyone to witness. “Its sense of performance lets it lapse into mere rhetoric at times; her pain and its necessity” (1973:166). For her, perhaps it was something that she felt necessary to do publicly to feel a sense of freedom and relief. A shedding of her skin and her pain makes allowance for a new phase for her in her life. Though even the idea of dying to her was not experienced the same as everyone else. It wasn’t a simple death to her it was an art form that she displayed immense pride in.

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I’ve a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.

It's easy enough to do it and stay put.

It's the theatrical (Plath 1965:9).

This further illustrates the theatrics of the poem even in the statement of her death to her “...dying is her vocation, the subject of her art, the image of her poetics in terms of change and renewal” (Lim 1997:64).

As we have already noticed this with the previous poem ‘Tulips’ in which she had accepted ridding herself of all possessions to have a feeling of rebirth and starting anew. It also feels as though death to Plath is second nature just like her writing, she does it as though it were a skill that she has somehow acquired.

As I have mentioned before, Plath’s imagery and bold statements often leave the reader to experience the emotional tension displayed in the narrative of the poem. Her use of this technique is to derive emotional response to her audience in her narrative and to her readers whether it be jarring or mocking. Ford states “In her late work Plath often appropriates imagery from a startling and, at times, troubling range of sources to heighten the emotional intensity and expressionist violence of her poetry” (2016). Such images produced are in the lines “my skin/Bright as a Nazi lampshade” and reference to her face as “fine/Jew linen”. She uses her own psychological traumas to compare those condemned in actual Nazi concentration camp. In this sense, to reveal shocking statement such as this can make the reader either feel uncomfortable or angry to the comparison that is presented to them. Either way, Plath’s imagery provides an intense emotional source for the readers to be either astonished by or criticise.

As I have illustrated above, the poem is very theatrical in the way the imagery is used to explain the speaker’s point, in a sort of performance in which the speaker exposes herself to a “peanut-crunching crowd” that “shoves to see”. Ironically the reader can also be aware that they are also a part of this “peanut-crunching crowd” through the wounds and scars that are displayed through the progression of the poem. Again, she creates an uncomfortable statement that the

reader too delights in seeing her pain and watching her expose herself and her personal struggles. The idea that they too are like the audience described in her poem.

Ford goes on to state that Plath wrote as a radical feminist before her time and questioned patriarchal notions that dominated Western society post-war. It can be seen through this poem that she wrote “Lady Lazarus into a ruthless heroine rather than a wronged and grieving wife” (2016). Ford suggests this as Plath had been separated from her husband Ted Hughes when most of these poems could have been written. Through the rage in the poem, ‘Lady Lazarus’ is able to emerge renewed with defiance from “Herr Enemy” with vengeance threatening “Beware/Beware” ending the poem in the curse or spell that she chants. These chants or curse along with her death and her rising from the ashes as renewal that she comes back with fierceness and perhaps power to live better?

Lastly, the poem ‘Daddy’ looks at Plath’s relationship with her father. Plath’s father had died when she was very young. Perhaps this traumatic event is something in which Plath had carried with her for many years often thinking about it. The poem is a way of dealing with her father as a figure in her life or lack thereof because of his passing. The poem has a “formulaic quality appropriate to the murderous ritual which the poem enacts: Daddy I have killed you/You died before I had time. But what is extraordinary about the poem is the amount and complexity of experience which it can convincingly include. [...] The poem veers between love and hate, Eros and Thanatos. Imaging herself as a Jew and her father as a Nazi, or her husband as a vampire and herself as a maiden” (Shaw 1973:163).

In light of his death, the poem allows her to free herself of her father’s memories or perhaps how she saw him after his death. Her father was German born and throughout the poem she refers to him as a Nazi and herself as a Jew.

I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen (Plath 1965:49).

In a sense she links the situation of her father's death with her feelings of abandonment and compares them to that of the Nazi concentration camps. This reference is also used in the poem 'Lady Lazarus' as mentioned previously. The reference to death in this poem however is not as a sense of renewal but one of longing to be with her father once again. It also reminds us of her suicide attempted mentioned previously in 'Lady Lazarus'. Her survival makes her want to purge herself of her father: "So daddy, I'm finally through". Through the statements that Plath makes in the poem, "'Daddy' astonishes a reader by the subtle fury of its hurts" (in Shaw 1973:163). Some of these statements relieved as short burst of angered and accusation such as "Daddy I have killed you", in a way she sees this as a cleansing more than a statement. Plath's father, Otto Plath died at 55, after being diagnosed with an advance case of diabetes, having his leg cut off as a result of gangrene to die soon after. "There's a stake in your fat black heart/and the villagers never liked you", she describes her father as being a horrible person whom other people did not like as well. Another line that perhaps seems to describe her anger or hatred is: "Not God but a swastika", where most children idolise their father it is understandable that she would have referred to him in such a way like a child but she states that now as she is older she views him as a Nazi or representation of the Nazi and I suppose in doing so condemns her to haunting memories of him:

I was ten when they buried you.

At twenty I tried to die

And get back, back, back to you.

I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,

And they stuck me together with glue.

And then I knew what to do.

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look (Plath 1965: 49,50).

...her tendency to recreate aspects of that relationship in later, adult relationships, her attempts at suicide, and her desperate need to come to terms with all these things. The secret of the poem lies in its tension (Gray 1990:264).

Gray further states that the tension lies in the narrator's attitude in reference to both her father and men in general. The tension is also caused by emotions of fear and desire, resentment and tenderness in which the victim both detests and admires the victimiser in the poem. What allows this tension is also the tone of the poem. The tone of the poem moves from childlike where she makes rhymes/ words such as: "You do not do, you do not do/Anymore black shoe" "Achoo" "gobbledygoo" within the poem. The poem also moves to sense of admiration, longing and sadness with lines displaying "I used to pray to recover you", "I never could talk to you", "bit my pretty red in two/I was ten when they buried you", "At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you". The tone of the poem moved between her sadness and longing for the presence of her father in her life to that of hatred and anger of his death resulting in the fierce axing of him from her memories of him. "The manic gaiety of tone, at odds with the bleak content has a curiously hypnotic effect on the reader, who feels almost caught by a contagion, compelled to surrender to the irresistible litany of love and hate" (Gray 1990:264). The poem ultimately ends with "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" in which Plath states that she is done with her father.

### (iii) My work in relation to Sylvia Plath's

Firstly, I would like to state why I have chosen to compare my work to the work of Sylvia Plath instead of Robert Lowell. The reason for choosing Plath is based on the popularity of her work within this genre. I also found her poetry similar to mine in terms of style and topic, themes such as loss, death and inter-familial relationships can be noted in both her poems and mine. Finally, both of us have added fiction to our poems. Like Plath, I have taken experiences of people that I have met and my personal experiences and created a narrative for my poems.

My poetry falls into the genre of confessional poetry in that my poems are written in the first person. As discussed in chapter one, “I” is an essential characteristic in the genre of confessional poetry. The second characteristic is the dealing of intimate subject matter such as themes ranging from personal relationships to what experiences I may encountered traumatising or otherwise that I may be able to write about. My poetry deals with themes such as memory, loss, death, and relation to family. Another characteristic is that of the poem being autobiographical by design, that is part of the ideas put in the poem is based on actual experience of the poet him/herself. My poems are based on personal experience whether they are of my own or someone else’s. The similarities that exist between my poems and Plath’s are that I write my poems based on either my own experiences or that of someone else’s and create a narrative around it. There are also similar themes that exist in both Plath’s and my own poems which shall be discussed.

The first similarity will be that of the father figure. In Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’, discussed above, the poet dealt with her unresolved feeling towards her father and his death when she was much younger. The poem goes through a pull and repel motion that reveals both love and hate towards her father, ending with ridding herself of him. However, in my poem, the speaker appears to have a relationship of admiration and being grateful to her father. This is seen in the poem ‘Strength’:

They say it takes a woman to  
raise a strong daughter but  
it was you, Dad  
who taught me how to raise my voice  
shattering traditional obligations  
where men want to leave an imprint  
on girls like a tattoo.

You allowed me to trim  
the edges of my wings razor sharp,  
to fight wolves in a world where  
others were told to wear  
red capes and carry baskets of food.

The father figure in this particular poem is someone who has allowed for the growth of the speaker, so much so that she is confident in facing whatever challenges are ahead of her. Rather than conform, she has been taught to be strong by said father figure. However, in Plath's poem, the poet describes the relationship between herself and her father as that between a Nazi and a Jew.

A second poem of mine that looks at the father figure is entitled "Lie":

It is easier if I lie to them and say I am well.  
It's fewer words packed into a sandwich ready  
to be devoured, my fingers numb  
as the smog around me begins to taste like honey.  
How many pills have I taken this time?

Daddy dearest  
sing for me like you used to  
my body is ice and your voice  
hot steel searing into my skin.  
My thoughts twist like vines when

you ask me how I am.  
I don't know how to explain last night's dinner  
on the floor or why sarcasm falls from my mouth  
like loose change.

The first four lines of the second stanza are in reference to a childhood memory of the father singing to the speaker. This can be seen in the next two lines, "my body is ice and your voice/hot steel searing into my skin". This also refers to childhood memories being a source of comfort to the speaker. However, when we look at Plath, her earliest memories included the death of her father. The poem 'Daddy' makes reference to this, "You died before I had time –".

Another theme that is common to both my poem and Plath's is the reference to death. While in 'Lady Lazarus', Plath refers to dying as a form of art in which she does exceptionally well. She also writes about death as a renewal, speaking about the time she almost died and then rose from death. In my poems, however I address the subject of death largely as a way of trying to understand it, as seen in the poem 'Virginia Woolf':

One night she turned to me and said,  
"I want to die.

I want to know what Virginia Woolf felt as she drowned  
with stones in her dress.  
I wonder what voices filled her ears as water filled her lungs.

I wonder  
when words are not enough and life is not enough  
what is it then that will save me?"

I suppose  
I too would choose death

over feeling that I am living it.

In this particular piece, the speaker attempts to understand what drove Virginia Woolf to kill herself and understand what she would have felt in her dying moments. In a sense the speaker is trying to rationalise the idea of killing oneself.

The second poem that deals with death seems more ironic, It is entitled 'Dinner Party'. The speaker is sitting with figure of death at a dinner while it asks questions about life.

Death sits and watches  
from the end of the dinner table  
asking you  
'what is life?'  
while you cut your chicken  
and he drinks your wine.

Lastly the similarity exists in the poem 'Lady Lazarus' and my poem 'Alive'. In Plath's poem, 'Lady Lazarus' the speaker states that she will rise out of ash with her out of the "red hair/and eat men like air". My poem 'Alive' also ends with defiance in the two lines stating, "I was not born to sit pretty batting my eyelashes/I was born to cause hurricanes".

I did not die.  
I heard them later ask: "What  
do we do with her?"  
as if I were pus  
oozing from a wound  
because I wore my defiance like a virtue.

I was not born to sit pretty batting my eyelashes.

I was born to cause hurricanes.

Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' is similar to my own work in that both poems the speaker seems to be making a statement to the reader. Plath writes about a woman who is putting herself on display exposing her emotions and her trauma to both the reader and a crowd within the poem. both poems address people who see them in a certain manner or way and they are making a defining statement about themselves. In my poem, the speaker addresses those who have criticised her for being who she is (character wise) someone who is defiant. In Plath's poem, the speaker is someone for who the crowd and the reader is waiting for her to expose herself and her trauma, the way she speaks about her suicide and her body to her enemies ending with her speech that she now rises better. The ending of our poems are similar in that the speaker in both poems are defiant and want to overcome the judgement of those around them. The idea of eating men like air and also the idea of being born to cause hurricanes makes a defiant statement that these women in the poems are more than what it appears and that they are strong in their state to carry onward with vengeance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CONFESSIONAL POET – JOAN METELERKAMP

This chapter will explore the work of Joan Metelerkamp as a confessional poet and then examine my work in relation to hers.

#### (i) Joan Metelerkamp Confessional Poet

Due to the history of South Africa, it can be said that there is a confessional movement that has occurred post-apartheid. “Postel contends in ‘The Post – Apartheid Confessional’, that South Africa has become a “confessing society” and that confession has become one of the icons of post-apartheid” (Weyer 2013:61).

The reason for this stems in part from the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which paved the way for the confessional mode as a catalyst for the healing of individuals and communities. This union (of healing and of reconciliation) was formed through the exposure of past traumas and grief, which in turn allowed writers to write about their own past grievances and memories as a way of bringing about a sense of common healing. I will argue that confessional poetry in South Africa played a similar role in breaking down the barrier between the public and the private sphere as it did during the 1950s and 1960s in America. One of the writers that I will be focusing on in developing my argument is Joan Metelerkamp.

Joan Metelerkamp was born in Pretoria in 1956 and grew up in KwaZulu-Natal. Her published works are *Towing the Line* (1992), *Stone No More* (1995), *Into the Day Breaking* (2000), *Floating Islands* (2001) and *Requiem* (2003), *Carrying the Fire* (2005), *Burnt Offering* (2008) and *Now the World Takes These Breaths* (2014).

I argue that Joan Metelerkamp can be considered a confessional poet since she meets many of the criteria outlined earlier in Chapter one. The first is the use of the “I” in her poetry.

As I have discussed with my reference to the work of Lowell and Plath, the first-person singular is often used to represent the speaker and the poet as interchangeably one. And from many of Metelerkamp poems we can see this to be the case. In her poem titled 'What is it', found in her book *Carrying the Fire* she writes, "what is it – I can't hear- /what is it I hear calling -" (2005:11). In her book *Into the Day Breaking* she writes "How could I know/thirty was so young-" (2000: 68), in the poem 'Photographs: the hold'. Another example is of the use of first person is taken from her book *Stone No More*, "What can I learn about stories from you, Walcott," (1995:62) which is from the poem entitled 'Stone Game'.

The second way of establishing whether her poems are confessional is the use of autobiographical information or things that refer back to the poet. In Metelerkamp's book *Stone No More*, she writes a poem entitled "Joan" in which the reader automatically assumes that she is writing about herself. Even in the first poem, of the same collection, she writes "bright Rosalind, brave Joan" (1995:2) which is dedicated to her grandmother, Joan Rose Innes Findlay, after whom she was named. As Christine Louise Weyer argued:

According to Lejeune, this pact can be made either through the use of 'titles leaving no doubt about the fact that the person refers to the name of the author' or through the inclusion of an initial section of the text where the narrator enters into a contract vis-à-vis the reader by acting as if she were the author in such a way that the reader has no doubt that the 'I' refers to the name shown on the cover, even though the name is not repeated in the text(2007:9).

The use of her name alone allows familiarity with the speaker and draws them in to read the poem and decipher its relation to the poet. Even if Metelerkamp is not writing about herself, the fact that the name is associated with the writer allows the reader to feel at ease seeing it and also at the same time intrigued to find out what the writer/speaker will expose about themselves personally. In a way, it breaks down the barrier between the reader and the writer creating the illusion of a personal trusted relationship between them. Since the use of a personal name enforces the idea of confession and familiarity, the reader is led into believing that the writer will tell or admit something to them (the reader) as they engage in the poem.

The third criteria to fit the confessional genre is the themes that are found in the poems. These themes include the writer speaking about death, suicide, psychological trauma, personal

relationship, inter-familial relationships. Weyer noted how some of these themes occurred in Meleterkamp's works over the years: "(*requiem*, focusing on her mother's suicide; *carrying the fire*, focusing on an extra-marital affair in the wake of – or possibly as an attempt to wake from – her mother's suicide and the practical and symbolic repercussions of this affair), it is no less evident in her earlier, more traditional volumes consisting of discrete poems (*Towing the Line and Stone No More*)" (2013: 56). Her poems resemble similar themes of suicide and personal traumas are seen often in confessional poetry. This is perhaps a form of purging of past memories or an attempt to deal with such traumas as noted in Plath's work. There is a theme of death that runs through both of these poet's works.

Another category to add as why Joan Metelerkamp can be seen as confessional is the type of language she writes in her poetry. The language that she uses in her poems enables an intimate connection between the reader and the speaker. One of the ways of determining confessional poetry is the use of colloquial language. The stanzas within the poem are not structured, and the language is written as though a conversation is taking place between the reader and the speaker. This is evident in the poem "A new language" from her collection *Into the Day Breaking*:

I remember this from my childhood –

if you closed your eyes,

sat still,

you could see it –

as if it were present

always,

as if it would never change –

the way the grass blows,

the way the wind blows,

the cricket,

the fly, (Metelerkamp 2000:20).

Some stanzas are three lines while others may be seven. The poem moves from descriptions to detailing memories, in the same way that one would recall memories. As mentioned earlier, the poem is not structured since the lines vary in length per a stanza. From the above quotation, it can be noted that the colloquial language used, allows for the readers to participate in the reminiscing of her childhood memories. The language is simplistic, and the descriptions create a narrative similar to how one would tell a story in recollection of their childhood to another.

I would like to further illustrate Metelerkamp as a confessional poet by analysing a few of her poems. The first poem is taken from the book *Stone No More* and is titled 'Sitting at home':

Sitting at home wanting to write like Auden

God help me

with a man in the roof over my head

fixing the rusty pipes

I'm here in the outside room wanting to write

God help me

like Auden: another man in my house

sanding, sealing the floors

he's laying the groundwork for easy cleansing

God help us

keep passages aseptic asthmatic

air-pipes clear: wanting to

write: a romantic modernist metaphor

for God's sake

for work writing tell me what should I do

since what I want to do

is write about writing and about wanting

God knows why

to write. This is the same day I want to

remind myself firmly

gently enough is enough you have to manage

God knows how

enough, having seen children to school food

in their tummies clean clothes

on their backs anxious airways unclogged enough

thank God – breathe-

despite the outside room the broken pipes

despite the tacky floors

today is the day I tell myself we can't

for God's sake

all write like Auden under circum-

stances under the roof

with the man in it today is the day I

o my God

receive the manuscript returned today

is the day I could die

at the table banging my head on the wood

God help me

I want the mellifluous density

of Auden the thickness

of thought in true song dour like dough sour

like age flesh

on the bones of the verses risen life

in the soul of words (1995: 69-71)

'Sitting at home' is a poem in which each stanza consists of four lines. Metelkamp writes about her inability to write a poem while being surrounded by men who are able to perform their own jobs efficiently. "Sitting at home is a good example of her reworking of her subjectivity through her identification of herself as female" (in Frost 1998: 80). In the poem, the speaker compares her difficulty in writing to men who are in her house sealing floors and fixing pipes. The

comparison that is made in the poem is perhaps the idea of her work constantly being compared to that of men. That the idea of a female writer is more difficult because male writers have the groundwork for writing already paved for them by previous generations. As a female writer, she will be compared to previous male writers and therefore in order to succeed she feels she must write like Auden. Frost continues that perhaps the line, “romantic modernist metaphor”, is a sort of authority that makes reference to literary history and the weight it holds. And this I believe could perhaps be traced back to the New Critics and their ideologies of creating well- made poems as a craft. They believed in crafting a poem through a specific standard in order for said poem to be recognised and be studied. The fact that she makes references, to want to, write like Auden, and also compares her work to that of the labour that is occurring within her house indicates her feelings of inadequacy resulting in her frustration. This stems from the authority that men have laid rules for writers to follow and she feels the burden to follow suit and write like Auden.

Ironically this is the last poem in this collection. Metelerkamp has already created and written a whole book of poems and in doing so, did not need to write like Auden. Though the last poem makes reference to the poet’s inability to write like Auden or rather a comparison to writing like Auden. I feel the poem underlines the difficulty a female writer has in comparison to those of male writers who have it easier in finding the subject and material to write about.

Her poem is written with colloquial references with regard to calling upon God such as “o my God” and “For God’s sake”. These phrases the reader is able to relate to, because these are common phrases used by people. “[...] I find Metelerkamp to be bold and conceptually adventurous in her willingness to break away from coherent sense units and to deny the reader comfort of a poetic premised rhyme and patterns of figurative play. Her expression frequently impels the reader ahead in a poem in the effort of sensible reading, but more often that not this rush also requires also the *return* to previous lines” (Frost 1998 :83). What Frost is referring to is the lines in the poem that runs through, leaving the reader continuously rereading certain lines in order to decipher the meaning. An example of this is:

gently enough is enough you have managed

God knows how

enough, having seen children to school food  
in the tummies clean clothes (1995:70)

Enough is used often in this stanza, “gently enough is enough you have managed” you have to break down and reread as “gently enough” on its own followed by “is enough you have managed”. The line needs to be broken down and assessed by the reader before moving on the next line often resulting in the reader going back to the same line continuously. From the previous stanza to this one, the first line is a reaffirmation by the speaker that what she has done is sufficient. This is a way of the speaker saying to herself that she is working hard in the things she is doing beside writing, such as feeding her children and sending them to school and cleaning their clothes. Even if her writing fails her, she has done enough in other aspects of her life. As Frost stated it allows the reader to slow down and reread in order to understand the meaning behind the poem and each line read.

Another poem that also describes her inability to write is from Metelerkamp’s collection *Into the Day Breaking*. The poem is entitled ‘Leaves to a tree’ in which Metelerkamp writes about her inability to write yet this time she writes about the body in relation to the mind:

I have been thinking about words,  
how they work  
if they come at all  
like *make*,  
*do*, in the place of  
*epiphany* – (2000: 15).

Instead of waiting for an epiphany or an idea to come to mind, the speaker believes that you have to make something or do something in order to achieve a result. Another instance of this is shown later in the poem where she uses the idea of action to produce a result (the result being writing a poem).

Weighing what words

might best balance *God*  
like *work, wrought* through the silence

what rhythms and lines  
might bare for me  
what they might bear (2000:17).

The words ‘God’, ‘work’ and ‘wrought’ are italicised. At the beginning of the poem the words, ‘make’, ‘do’ and ‘epiphany’ are italicised. What the both sets of words have in common is the idea of working in order to produce a result. The words ‘make’ and ‘do’ are actions same as ‘work’ and ‘wrought’ whereas ‘epiphany’ and ‘God’ are ones that are usually created or seen as a product of thought and imagining. However, in this stanza the writer wants to determine what words would balance God and in doing through her writing she will be able to see what those words will bare (reveal to her) and what weight they may carry (bear). Weyer states “By using the homophones bare/bear, Metelerkamp insists that the rhyme and lines of poetry both reveal(bare) meaning for the poet (and reader), but also they carry meaning within themselves (‘bear’). Words are certainly not merely substitutes” (2007:52).

Metelerkamp links the body to the mind in this poem. In order to produce a poem, the mind and body work as one, as argued by Weyer: “This idea that knowledge comes not from the mind alone, but from a mind unified with its body” (2007: 23). Metelerkamp continues:

I have been thinking about the men and women, working,  
the rhythms, the lines,  
the weight they carry;  
I have been walking, forgetting  
how this cool cloud  
turns muggy with the body’s working;

I say to chattering consciousness:

walk; take your body

through pines on pale clay

leave me

to look up at the mountains,

the bush, the blue –

I say to the willing mind

move over, move,

let me be –

I am waiting for something

like some Word,

some words, to take me – (2000:16,17).

The writer then focuses on herself, that in her herself, that in trying to weigh these words and lines while working her mind has become foggy - “cool cloud/turns muggy with the body’s working”. Therefore, she has to take the body (in a sense of freeing her mind) for a walk to a new environment in order to allow her to create. If the speaker is constantly sitting at the desk, it only allows the mind to think of the work and the writing it has to do. But if the speaker takes a walk, it allows her mind to be distracted or freed from the idea of work alone and in turn the speaker is able to create something:

This poem does not speak of the typical conception of artistic creation: the solitary, isolated genius, sitting quietly at his (or her?), desk in front of a blank page creating poetry from the

thoughts in his (or her?) ‘teeming brain [...]’. Instead, body and mind combine in the effort to create: ‘chattering consciousness’ needs to be taken for a ‘walk’. It is through the body’s motion that the mind is ‘free’ to create” (Weyer 2007: 23,24). (quoted as is).

(ii) My work in relation to Metelerkamp

The reasons for choosing Metelerkamp, as a poet, to compare my work to, is because she is a South African confessional poet and her poems resemble the similar themes as my own. In this section of the chapter I will be analysing my work in relation to hers. The first comparison I would like make between our work is the concept of God. Here is a piece that I have written entitled ‘Puzzle piece’:

I could tell something had changed.

I noticed you staring at me as though I were the extra piece  
in a 1000 piece puzzle.

I started to think about when it happened,  
that something began to feel stolen as though  
it slipped through my fingers, the same way  
my mother let go of my hand that rainy Tuesday afternoon.

And then I wondered why these memories always surprise me  
like the sound of popcorn bursting in a pan,  
I wanted to know why I suddenly felt empty like a well

that had dried up over summer so  
I decided to call God, pressing the speed dial  
only to hear an automated voice message.  
I guess he was busy.

I try to think of a way to explain to you  
how it feels, this stirring  
like taking a spoon of honey and mixing it  
into lemon tea.  
The taste half pleasing,  
half bitter,  
the same way life balances out.

According to the speaker in the poem, she views God as an ironic figure. The speaker talks about a piece that she feels is missing, or rather feels that something is inexplicably wrong, unable to decipher what it is. "I wanted to know why I suddenly felt empty like a well". She then decides to ask God, by calling God only to receive an automated voice recording. The line "I guess he was busy" gives the impression that either the speaker does not believe in God or that the speaker sees God as a non-existent figure. For Metelerkamp in the poem 'Sitting at home', the calling of God is due to her inability to write or understand why she cannot write. And, similarly in this poem, the calling of God is due to being unable to solve his/her memory and feelings.

My second poem with regard to the theme of God is entitled 'Dear...':

I want to write you a letter  
like I did when I was seven

explaining why my faith is like a man  
on a respirator machine.

I put my hands together when  
my mother demands I pray but  
no words fall from my lips.

I suppose it is easier for her.  
She has conversed more  
with you than me in twenty-six years.

You've handed me over –  
a bastard child cursed by those who  
bow to you asking for a good life.

They tell me who to be, what to do –  
abiding by laws that reek  
of men's cologne  
and women's spirituality.

Should I stand and strip  
every word they have dressed me in  
as an offering instead of fruit and milk?

Or is the hook they've  
dug into my side  
enough of a blood sacrifice?

In this poem, God represents someone the writer cannot connect with through her lack of faith. Through the first stanza she describes her faith as “a man on a respirator machine”. In a sense, the speaker holds God accountable, “you handed me over – / a bastard child”. The speaker feels

as though she has been abandoned by God to be surrounded by religious people who curse at her for not complying to traditions. However, she is unable to comply since she sees the roles both men and women play in which men rule (bide by laws that reek/ of men's cologne) and the women follow (women's spirituality). Since women are meant to be spiritual and know their place while being dominated by men, the speaker is unable to find faith to pray.

The concept of God is a similarity found in both in Metelerkamp's work and that of my own. The concept of God found in our pieces are very complex. In my pieces, the concept of God to the speaker is one who lacks faith. Though she often wants to call God in various ways such as, through a phone call or a letter, she ends up finding her attempts to be futile. Whereas in Metelerkamp's poems (from what I have discussed) in 'Sitting at home', the speaker calls on God to aid in her writing since she is finding it difficult to write. She gives vent to God about not being able to write like Auden and also proclaiming that God knows how much she has done, with regard to caring for her children.

The second poem I discussed entitled 'Leaves to a tree' also looks at the concept of God. The first three stanzas written:

I have been reading about the voice of God,

how it arises

when you give up

everything:

all will,

all willingly;

I have been thinking about a glimpse of God,

how it might break through; (2000:15).

The concept of God to the speaker in this poem is spiritual, the idea of giving up everything in order to hear the voice of God. The idea of giving up things willing is a similar theme found in Plath's work, which I have discussed. In the poem 'Tulips', the speaker wants to release all her

baggage in order to feel a sense of renewal, and this comes from religion. Similarly, the idea of letting go of everything is associated with religion. In order to achieve or feel a sense of higher purpose one has to let go of things that are weight down on you. Finally, I will examine the poem 'Eve calls' from the book *Into the Day Breaking*:

calling to God

knows whom who had

banished me

answering back I shall do it

fuck death fuck death come birth come death

see – I have let loose

my faith, Child,

at last night the sluice

of a dammed desire – (2000: 73,74).

Perhaps the idea of God in this particular piece is linked to the idea of death and abandonment. She calls to God in the poem, because only God knows who banished her. The line “fuck death fuck death come birth come death” could be seen in correlation with the suicides of both Metelerkamp’s grandmother and mother. And the link with God and death in the poem results in letting “loose” of the speaker’s faith. And thus, the concept of God in both my work and Metelerkamp’s pieces is that which is a very complex figure.

The next comparison I would like to make is a theme that is commonly found in the confessional genre, the concept of death. I have already discussed in Chapter two, my work in relation to this theme. I will briefly summarise my previous discussion. Plath wrote about death as a sense of renewal, that for her, it meant a new beginning. In many of her poems, she writes about her suicidal attempts and the idea that death to her was not the end, but rather that it paved

way for a sense for her to start a new way of looking at the world. Many of my own poems speak about death and suicide, the idea revolves around the speaker's curiosity to the subject as well as trying to understand the idea of death and what surrounds it. In Metelerkamp's poem, the concept of death is recurrent, this being in light of the suicides of both her grandmother and mother.

In the poem 'Joan' from her collection *Stone No More*, she writes:

In memory of Joan  
Rose-Innes Findlay, rest,  
in peace, spirit, leaving (1995:24)

This reference is made to Metelerkamp's grandmother who had shot herself. She uses the name in the title as she was named after her grandmother. In the poem Metelerkamp emphasises the weight that such death carries to the next generation:

Mothers carried the can. When she died  
when she shot herself the message to  
my mother was: your turn now – carry  
the can, not I not any longer.

Heavily heavily heavily  
we bear it: the shelter, the liquid  
spirit for the child's roots, their green shoots;  
caritas, caritas lacrimae (1995:26)

The idea of death is carried heavily with the responsibility of life handed to the next generation as "your turn now- carry/the can, not I any longer". Metelerkamp often writes about how effect of death has an immense traumatic impact on those who are living, as described in the poem by Metelerkamp "People destroying their life-blood./ Suicide" (1995:27).

However, one can argue it goes beyond the trauma of the loss of a loved one to Metelerkamp. The idea that death is seen as a constant in Metelerkamp's life. In the poem 'So, there is nothing left but poetry' in the collection *carrying the fire* it is written:

sometimes I think I was in love with a dead woman  
first, the woman who took my mother  
with her, eventually, who didn't come back –

who knows how it comes back  
in the middle of the afternoon  
the voice of the first love

dragging the weight of suicide women  
dragging them up to the light (2005:58).

The speaker writes about her first love being a dead woman who then took her mother and never return. In reading these lines, one can say it Metelerkamp speaking about her grandmother's death and then her mother's death that followed. The lines "the woman who took my mother/with her, eventually" implies that it was only a matter of time before the dead came hauntingly to take her mother. The idea of a voice that comes in the middle of the afternoon could refer to Metelerkamp thinking about both her mother and grandmother at times, the weight of their heaviness always with her.

The poem 'This young woman before me' emphasises the same idea of death :

I was born, I told you, with a bit missing :  
a child of love, but a bit missing –  
before I was born  
(before my mother was married)  
my grandmother shot a hole through her head  
right through my mother and her unborn children –

love forever blowing itself to scattered bits forever all over the place  
like bits of a body, dismembered all over a house –

*how small the bit missing*  
*how small a hole it leaves*  
*when my mother shot herself –*  
*how small a hole needs –*

*she lay on her back on her bed to let what was*  
*coming*  
*in*  
*silence*  
*letting*  
*all her life all her love all night*  
*out like blood – (2005: 31,32).*

The hole that is described in this piece represents a scar or a reminder of death that never leaves. Or perhaps one could even say it as though death is inherited, that hole represents a piece carried down through generations. An incessant haunting thought that they might also commit suicide as those who have already done so in their family.

The poem ‘And then the angel spoke’ talks about the pain of loss and the idea that the speaker buries it like an old scar that when mention again causes her to cuss and in order to show how those deaths still affect her:

then; you should have cried more  
opened and drained insisting insisted  
  
it can't come again  
  
the angel said : dead

as your grandmother or mother dead

as a suicide. I wasn't sure

what I heard. I knew

the angel had spoken. I said

“what the fuck do you mean”

“what is the matter with you do you think it helps

to curse where it hurts most” – (2005:75,76).

## CONCLUSION

My thesis has looked at the history of twentieth century American poetry prior to the 1960s where the New Critical theorists had dominated the literary scene with their views on how poetry should be read and created. This changed, with many poets believing that this way of writing and analysing poetry was too formal. The confessional mode arose with writers creating pieces written in a more spontaneous and open form, rather than in a rigid and structured one. Robert Lowell was one of the catalysts for this new mode as evident in the two poems of his I examined in depth, 'Skunk Hour' and 'Home after three months away'. I have also looked at the Sylvia Plath whose works are highly popular examples of this new type of writing. I noted that when reading her poems, one must be aware that while some part of the poem holds factual detail, she is still a writer and therefore the narrative in the poems hold fictional aspects to it as well. I kept this in mind when analysing her poems 'Tulips', 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy'. I then proceed to state why my own work is seen as confessional before I made comparisons in terms of style and themes to that of Plath. Lastly, I looked at the South African poet Joan Metelerkamp and why her work is deemed to be confessional, listing the criteria for her work to be considered confessional before assessing some of her poetry. I then looked at my own work in comparison to Metelerkamp's to find that while some of the themes may be similar, the context in which they are written differs.

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