Confessional Poetry

Definition

Confessional poetry is marked by its intimate autobiographical subject matter that is sometimes referred to as grotesque. Masturbation, depression, suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, drug abuse are all openly discussed. This type of poetry is commonly associated with work from the movement of the 1950's and 60's.

Background

In the late 1950's and 1960's four poets published works that were startling to the academics of the time: Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959), Snodgrass' Heart's Needle (1960), Anne Sexton's To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960) as well as All My Pretty Ones (1962), and finally Sylvia Plath's Ariel (1966). These collections of poetry became emblematic of what we know as confessional poetry today (Parini 631).

The Academy of American Poets defines Confessional Poetry as “Poetry of the personal or ‘I’ " . Poetry that discussed the “personal” was hardly new in the 1950’s and 60’s. In the fourteenth century Petrarch penned sonnets that frequently used the first person and discussed the poet’s feelings and musings on humanity. Similarly Shakespeare’s sonnets, written in the sixteenth century, expose facets of the poet to the reader. Yet what distinguishes the Confessional poets from other personal poetry is their rejection of the standards for appropriate content that saturated Academia during the middle of the twentieth century. During the 1950’s New Criticism’s sterile, and objective view of literature pervaded. The confessional poets’ disregard for this approach in favor of an intimate and autobiographical one was shocking.

Elizabeth Bishop wrote that she disliked the poetic trend of, “more and more anguish and less and less poetry”(Kirsch X). M.L. Rosenthal wrote in a review, “ It is hard not to think of Life Studies as a series of confidences, rather shameful….” (Parini 636). It was the confessional poets’ willingness to discuss these “shameful” matters with a frankness that can be unnerving that sets them apart from their contemporaries. Robert Lowell and his students W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, “…forced a mutation of critical standards…”(Parini 633).

Defining The Movement

M.L. Rosenthal used the word “confessional” in a dismissive review of Lowell’s Life Studies. It is generally accepted that the publication of this book of poetry in 1959 marks the beginning of the confessional school of poetry, though Lowell's work was influenced by his student Snodgrass's Heart's Needle, which was published only slightly earlier. The confessional poetry movement is defined by the content that its poets chose to write about, notably family life, infidelity, mental disorders, gender roles, suicide, and sexuality. The speaker is almost always referring to real events. The choice to focus on “the shameful” however, does not overshadow the technical merits of these poems. Each poet utilizes rhyme, rhythm, meter, and/or other elements of prosody. For the poets of this movement their work was not about the catharsis of confession, Plath is quoted as saying that poetry was not , “ Some kind of public purge or excretion”(Kirsch X).

The movement known as confessional poetry was defined by the quartet of closely related poets. In addition to Snodgrass, Lowell taught Sexton, and Plath. Snodgrass' mentorship of Sexton influenced her to write "The
Double Image”, which is strongly inspired by "Heart's Needle". Sylvia Plath cited Life Studies as an influence when she discussed her most confessional work, Ariel.

The creation of the term “confessional” has since helped to broaden the scope of this movement. John Berryman published The Dream Songs in 1969, and many now include his work in the canon of confessional poetry. Additionally many consider Theodore Roethke, who died in the middle of the movement, to be a confessional poet.

**Confessional Poetry's Influence**

The post-confessional poetry of the seventies and eighties continued to extrapolate on the themes that the confessional movement pioneered. Examples of post confessional poems include Robert Pinsky's collection History of My Heart (1984), Bill Knott's poem "The Closet" (1983), and Donald Hall's Kicking the Leaves (1978) (Parini 643).

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

worth.jpg

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

**Works Cited**


<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/roethke/bio.htm>.


<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This_Boy's_Life>.

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/sexton_life.htm>.  