THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORM IN CONFESSIONAL POETRY

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ABSTRACT
The present article aims to explore the significance of form in a number of well-known Confessional poems. The defining element of Confessional Poetry is its highly personal content and unprecedented frankness; having said that, the present paper aims to see if Confessional poems were as form-based as they were theme-based and if they deliberately manipulated carefully selected figures of speech to maintain an artistic balance between form and content. The central question to be tackled here, therefore, is: do typical Confessional poems simultaneously and concurrently manifest careful attention to form as they do to content? To answer the question, a number of the best representative Confessional poems including Robert Lowell’s “Home after Three Months Away,” W. D. Snodgrass’s “A Locked House,” John Berryman’s “The Ball Poem,” Anne Sexton’s “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn,” and Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” are given a formalistic treatment in an attempt to discover the craftsmanship of the poets and their use of formal features and figurative devices such as rhyme, metre, rhythm, imagery, personification, metaphor, symbol, and similar tropes and the role they play in the thematic development of the poems. The present formalist study reveals that while Confession lists' treatment of the poetic self was groundbreaking and shocking to some readers, they maintained a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to and the use of formal features and figurative devices such as rhyme, metre, rhythm, imagery, personification, metaphor, symbol, and similar tropes. Typical Confessional poems exhibit careful word choices and superb manipulation of poetic techniques, all of which contribute to the richness and compactness of their thematic load.

Key Words: Confessional Poetry, literary devices, form, and content.

INTRODUCTION
Like The Beat Generation, Confessional Poetry is an American literary movement which emerged in the late 1950s and was carried into the 1960s. It emphasises the intimate and sometimes unflattering details about the poet's personal life; in other words, it is marked by its intimate autobiographical subject matter which openly discusses unspeakable desires, traumatic childhoods, depression, mental disorder, guilt,
personal complexes, suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, and drug abuse. As Price has argued, one of the important features of such Confessional Poetry is “The necessary performative aspect of the writing self, caused by the author’s creation of a fictive persona through which to communicate with his or her readership and by the author’s implicit awareness of a voyeuristic audience” (2010, 3). Major representatives include Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and William de Witt Snodgrass. The best examples of Confessional of Poetry are Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) and *For the Union Dead* (1964), both of which dealt with his divorce and mental breakdowns, Snodgrass' *Heart's Needle* (1960) that includes poems on his divorce, Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), which contain poems on abortion and life in mental hospitals, Plath's *Ariel* (1966), which reveals her suicidal contemplations and family problems, and Berryman's *The Dream Songs* (1969) that betrays the poet's alcoholism and psychosis. Confessional Poets' impressive poems, combined with the pity evoked by their high suicide rate (Berryman, Sexton, and Plath all killed themselves), encouraged in their readers a romantic confusion between poetic excellence and inner torment.

It is generally accepted that the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959 marks the beginning of Confessional Poetry, though Lowell's work was influenced by his student Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, which was published only slightly earlier. The term Confessional Poetry itself was first used by M. L. Rosenthal in 1959 in a dismissive review of Lowell's *Life Studies* entitled "Poetry as Confession." Nevertheless, there were clear moves towards the Confessional mode before the publication of *Life Studies*. Delmore Schwartz's *Genesis* had been published in 1943 and John Berryman had written his *Sonnets to Chris* in 1947.
therefore, the Confessional Poets’ sense of realism, slangy and derogatory language, and their willingness to unreservedly discuss indecorous and highly intimate issues that set them apart from other ‘confessing’ poets. Another tendency that is specific to Confessional Poetry is self-realisation through writing a poem; it implies that not only Confessional Poets bluntly express themselves, but they also regard the process of writing as an opportunity to know themselves and to tap into their psyche. Sexton in particular was interested in the psychological aspect of poetry, having started writing at the suggestion of her therapist. In her Confessional poems, like a large number of other such poems, Oedipus tensions and confessions to suppressed and sinful desires are easily noticeable. Such an attitude, which is based on self-treatment, self-discovery, and self-expression through artistic creation, is what links Confessional Poets to the early 20th century Surrealists. Another tendency in Confessional Poetry is stated by Korzeniewska who has contended that “The Confessionals used their biographies, but changed any facts they wished in order to achieve a particular artistic aim … In the Confessionals, such a procedure strengthens and broadens the perception of the poem” (2013, 1).

Although Confessional Poetry began to fade away in the 1960s, many subsequent poets employed defining features of such poetry in their own works. The so-called Post-Confessional Poetry of the 1970s and the 1980s continued to extrapolate on the themes that Confessionals pioneered. Examples of Post-Confessional poems include Robert Pinsky’s collection History of My Heart (1984), Bill Knott’s poem ”The Closet“ (1983), and Donald Hall’s Kicking the Leaves (1978). The spirit of Confessional Poetry also lived on in prose: Tobias Wolff’s This Boy’s Life (1989), Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation (1994), and Dave Peltzer’s A Child Called It (1995) are among the better-known examples of contemporary Confessional prose. The major concern of the present article is the exploration of the significance of form in a number of well-known Confessional poems. As said, the defining element of Confessional Poetry is its highly personal content and unprecedented frankness; nevertheless, the present paper aims to see if Confessional Poets were as form-conscious as they were theme-conscious and if they deliberately manipulated carefully selected figures of speech to maintain an artistic balance between form and content. The central question to be tackled here, therefore, is: do typical Confessional poems simultaneously and concurrently manifest careful attention to form as they do to content? To answer the question, a number of the best representative Confessional poems are given a formalistic treatment in an attempt to discover the craftsmanship of the poets and their use of formal features and figurative devices such as rhyme, metre, rhythm, imagery, personification, metaphor, symbol, and similar tropes and the role they play in the thematic development of the poems.

DISCUSSION

Let us begin with Robert Lowell’s “Home after Three Months Away”:

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,
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. (1959, 38)

As Hamilton has explained, the occasion of the poem is the poet’s return from McLean mental hospital at weekends and his relationship with his daughter, Harriet. The poem also marks the poet’s struggle with his mental breakdown (2002, 255). Confessional streaks of the poem are, therefore, self-explanatory: family estrangement, autobiography, alienation, mental breakdown, and the overt expression of private feelings. But how does the poet put these traumatising feelings into words and what are the formal merits of the poem?

The opening lines contain examples of ellipsis (shortened syntax) and metaphor (the nurse has been compared to a lioness). The following lines contain an impressive simile (“bowknots of gauze—/three months they hung like soggy toast”) as well as an enduring image (“soggy toast”). The repetition of the phrase “Three months” in line 10 with a final exclamation mark speak of the poet’s feeling of nostalgia, helplessness, and regret. Lines 12 through 24 include examples of visual and kinetic imagery (“Dimpled with exaltation . . .”) as they are rich with movement, colour, and description. The following lines (beginning with “Dearest”) contain such figures of speech as apostrophe and simile (“like a polar bear”). Another effective imagery is to be found in the withering of Dutch tulip into “weed.” This can also be taken metaphorically, in that the poet is comparing himself to a dried up “weed,” after being a pedigree Dutch flower. That is why it can be claimed that the poet has employed the trope of understatement. In the extended metaphor of the final lines, the poet seems to be complaining that with the next touch of frost nothing will remain of the once-fresh flowers, which even after recovery will be “stale and small.” In addition to alliteration (in the sound s), another conspicuous literary device in the last lines is another understatement. The metrical pattern of the poem is predominantly iambic, with variations in the length of the lines. Rhymes are unpredictable and sporadic. The inconsistency of the metrical and rhyme pattern can be said to refer to the inconsistency and tabulation of the poet’s mental status. He seems out of focus and crippled by his mental trauma, nostalgia, and family duties. To sum up, the poet has deliberately used certain formal and structural qualities that can best reflect his intended feelings in his confessions regarding home, family, and mental breakdown which he does not seem to be able to fend off.

The next Confessional poem for a brief analysis is
“A Locked House” by W. D. Snodgrass:
As we drove back, crossing the hill,
    The house still
Hidden in the trees, I always thought—
A fool’s fear—that it might have caught
Fire, someone could have broken in.
    As if things must have been
Too good here. Still, we always found
It locked tight, safe and sound.

I mentioned that, once, as a joke;
    No doubt we spoke
Of the absurdity
To fear some dour god’s jealousy
Of our good fortune. From the farm
Next door, our neighbors saw no harm
Came to the things we cared for here.
    What did we have to fear?
Maybe I should have thought: all
    Such things rot, fall—
Barns, houses, furniture.
We two are stronger than we were
    Apart; we’ve grown
Together. Everything we own
Can burn; we know what counts—some such
    Idea. We said as much.
We’d watched friends driven to betray;
    Felt that love drained away
Some self they need.
We’d said love, like a growth, can feed
    On hate we turn in and disguise;
We warned ourselves. That you might despise
Me—hate all we both loved best—
    None of us ever guessed.
The house still stands, locked, as it stood
    Untouched a good
Two years after you went.
Some things passed in the settlement;
Some things slipped away. Enough’s left
That I come back sometimes. The theft
And vandalism were our own.
    Maybe we should have known. (1987, 325)

Like the previous poem, the lines and stanzas are replete with carefully selected structural and conceptual elements and motifs that are intended to reinforce the overall meaning of the text. The theme of the poem is rather easily detectable: the poet is expressing his despondency over a failed and troubled relationship. The house (a Freudian/Jungian symbol for the anima or the feminine) is locked — in other words, the speaker’s relation with the woman has come to an end. Let us see how the poet has manipulated literary devices to express the theme of the poem. In his commentary on the poem, Sam Heupel has written that Snodgrass uses many devices of poetry to enhance the message of the poem about a locked house. Snodgrass has the metaphorical use of a locked house that he uses to compare with the true meaning of his words, he uses the devices of voice and tone to enhance his writing, and he uses unique language and structure in his poem. (2014, 1)

The opening stanza gives us a glimpse of the house as it was in the past; the imagery (“trees,” “too good here,” or “safe and sound”) as well as the tone imply that once for the poet the house symbolised security, peace, and harmony. The pronoun “we” with which the first sentence starts, also indicates the sense of unity and friendship he used to feel round the house. In addition, the speaker’s fret over the house being “broken in” shows what it actually means to him. The speaker’s upbeat mood is manifest in the second stanza, too; such phrases as “our good fortune” and “What did we have to fear?” reveal his sense of optimism. The diction and tone, however, dramatically change in the third stanza, which begins with a deep doubt (“May be I should have thought”). Now, the reassuring words of the first two stanzas grow increasingly ominous and sinister: “rot,” “fall,” “apart,” and “burn.” The
fourth stanza opens with a past perfect verb (“We’d watched”), which carries with it a sense of remoteness and nostalgia. The repetition of the word “love” (no less than three times) denotes the poet’s regret over a joy he fears he has lost forever. Ironically, the word “hate” and its synonym “despise” also recur three times, implying that there is as much hatred now as there used to be affection. The last stanza includes an alliteration of ‘s’ sound in “still,” “stands,” and “stood,” which intensifies the silence in the house. The sound is repeated in following lines, too (“some – twice – “settlement,” and “sometimes). Also, the stanza contains an example understatement: the house is now reduced to “the settlement.”

All of the five stanzas incorporate accentuated pauses, punctuation marks, and dashes which serve to heighten the speaker’s disrupted and scrambled memories. Furthermore, all of the five stanzas are perfectly rhymed (the rhyme pattern being aabbcedd); nevertheless, the structural cohesion of the poem is in sharp contrast with the fragmentation of the poet’s thoughts and feelings. The dominant metrical pattern is iambic, but due to variations in the length of the lines and rhythm, the scheme is quite inconsistent and at times erratic. The discrepancy between rhyme and metrical patterns can be said to be indicative of the speaker’s mental distress.

John Berryman’s “The Ball Poem,” too, demonstrates superb control over metrical, lexical, and syntactical elements in its construction of a rhetorical balance between form and meaning:

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball.
What, what is he to do? I saw it go
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then
Merrily over—there it is in the water!
No use to say ’O there are other balls’:
An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down
All his young days into the harbour where

His ball went. I would not intrude on him,
A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now
He senses first responsibility
In a world of possessions. People will take balls,
Balls will be lost always, little boy,
And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.
He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,
The epistemology of loss, how to stand up
Knowing what every man must one day know
And most know many days, how to stand up
And gradually light returns to the street,
A whistle blows, the ball is out of sight.
Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark
Floor of the harbour. I am everywhere,
I suffer and move, my mind and my heart move
With all that move me, under the water
Or whistling, I am not a little boy. (2010, 225)

The theme of the poem is almost self-explanatory: the loss of something which meant a lot to the speaker and which seems to have changed, and even paralysed, him forever. The speaker is recalling the loss of a ball, which to him is simply irreplaceable; symbolically speaking, the ball can stand for anything that is gone forever and its loss can connote the beginning of a new phase in his life and a new insight about the world, which is tainted with a sense of gloom and bleakness. On the meaning of the poem, Nicole Lang has written that

In “The Ball Poem” by John Berryman a little boy loses his ball that means so much to him and it is a symbol of his childhood… He is stricken with grief and senses responsibility because he cannot get the same ball back… Berryman’s father shot himself outside of the little boy’s bedroom window when Berryman was only eleven. Berryman suffered with depression and alcohol abuse for much of his life because he was greatly affected by his father’s suicide… This… brings a whole new meaning to this poem. There is immense symbolism: the ball is
his father. The boy in the poem is Berryman as a child. The loss is the worst kind of loss: death. (2014, 2)

The first lines of the poem are narrated by a detached and indifferent God-like omniscient narrator/observer who is ironically unwilling to “intrude.” The speaker’s callousness adds to the poignancy and bitterness of his/her account. Most of the lines are run-on, either grammatically or semantically; the continuation of the lines signals the continuation of the effect of the incident well into the present time. The poem is unrhymed and the language is quite unsophisticated and conversation-like; moreover, the punctuation at the end of the first line is wrong (a full stop instead of a question mark). These are all indicative of the simplicity of the child’s mind and his outlook regarding the world before the incident around which the narrative-like poem revolves. Such naiveté is further accentuated by the repetition of the world “Merrily” in lines three and four. The poem opens with two questions which progressively become more cynical as the plot unfolds. Lines seven and eight contain a brilliant extended metaphor in which the ball is compared to “All his young days” that have tumbled into the “harbour.” The words “grief,” “rigid,” “trembling,” and “staring down” in the lines all refer to his helplessness, shock, and paralysis. The word “Now” at the end of the tenth line signifies the end of an old phase in the child’s life and the beginning of a new one, shaped and defined by his “first responsibility / In a world of possessions.” Line thirteen contains an apostrophe in which the speaker directly addresses the child and advises him on the cruelty of the world and reminds him of the losses he will have to go through and put up with in the future. In the following lines, in an implicit and extended apostrophe, he talks to the reader and proclaims that such losses are simply inevitable and inescapable in a man’s life. In the last five lines of the poem, in a brilliant shift of voice, the omniscient point of view turns into the first person singular and finally into the voice of the child who announces his entrance into the world of adulthood “I am not a little boy.” In an ironic twist, the indifference of the speaker changes into a compassionate self-identification or empathy. The alliteration in line twenty-one (“dark and deep”) connotes the desperation in the useless exploration for a permanently lost happiness in the vast “harbour.” Other examples of alliteration in the closing lines of the poem include: “move” (three times), “my” (two times), “mind,” “me,” “With,” “water,” and “whistling.” Again, the intention is to amplify the effect of the crippling incident the mentally and emotionally scarred child can never put behind. That is why the merry and childish tone of the first lines of the poem gives way to a melancholic, sober, and dejected tenor in the closing sentences.

Anne Sexton’s “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn” exhibits similar craftsmanship and excellence in form:

The summer sun ray
shifts through a suspicious tree.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow
It sucks the air
and looks around for me.
The grass speaks.
I hear green chanting all day.
I will fear no evil, fear no evil
The blades extend
and reach my way.
The sky breaks.
It sags and breathes upon my face.
In the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies
The world is full of enemies.
There is no safe place. (2000, 548)

In her poetry, Anne Sexton, who like her mentor W. D. Snodgrass committed suicide, never
hesitated to explicitly express her long life-long battle against melancholy and psychosis, suicidal propensities, and numerous private details about life, such as her estranged relation with her husband and her children. Her therapist, Doctor Orne diagnosed her with “alternate personality” and “hysteria” (in Middlebrook, 2001, 21). This justifies why her poetry is characterised by the unrestrained expression of the obscene and the vulgar. Her close friend and confidante, Maxime Kumin, has asserted that Sexton “wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry” (in Colburn, 2014, 438). Elaborating on Sexton’s career as a poet, Ostriker has observed that Sexton’s “work started out as being about herself, however as her career progressed she made periodic attempts to reach outside the realm of her own life for poetic themes” (2003, 273). In the same vein, Rothenberg and Joris have written that “Starting as a relatively conventional writer, she learned to roughen up her line … to use as an instrument against the ‘politesse’ of language, politics, religion, sex” (2005, 330). Sexton’s “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn,” like other typical Confessional poems, embodies such themes and motifs as autobiography, depression, suicide, insanity, and obscenity.

As elsewhere, the major question here is how the formal qualities and features of the poem reflect and underline such concerns. The word “Asylum” in the title sheds light on the setting of the poem and the place of residence of the poet at the time of the composition of the poem. The poem is comprised of three five-line stanzas, which vary in length and rhythm; in addition, rhyming is sparse and inconsistent. In the first two stanza, the rhyming lines are the second and the last and in the last stanza, the rhyming lines are the second and the last and the third and the fourth, leaving only the first line unrhymed. All this stanzaic and rhythmic irregularity connotes the chaotic state of the poet’s mind. The first two lines of the poem contain an alliteration in ‘s’ sound in the words “summer,” “sun,” and “suspicious.” The sound ‘s,’ which is quite emphatic in the title word “Asylum,” seems to highlight the stillness and loneliness the poet feels in the asylum. The phrase “suspicious tree” embodies personification, as do the ominous “sun ray shifts” and “sucks the air / and looks around for me.” The phrase “though I walk through the valley of shadow” is an allusion to Psalm 23 (“though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”). The similarity is ironic in that there is a manifest difference between the calm and confident tone of the speaker of “The Lord is My Shepherd” and the dejected and agitated register of the poet, who evades the rays of the sun and prefers to stay in the shadow (a metaphor for loneliness and gloom). The first two lines of the second stanza include personification in “grass speaks” and “green chanting.” Here, in addition to alliteration, we observe another allusion to Psalm 23: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” In the context, however, the colour green signifies gloom and solitude rather than liveliness and vivacity. Echoes of Psalm 23 also recur in the third line of the stanza: “I will fear no evil, fear no evil.” The phrasal repetition is actually symptomatic of skepticism and distrust rather than assurance, which is quite evident in the Biblical text: “I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” The following two lines (which incorporate personification and in which “grass” changes into blocking “blades”) create a menacing ambience in sharp contrast with the comforting and reassuring Biblical passage.

The first three lines of the third stanza can be taken as the climax of the poem: “The sky breaks / It sags
and breathes upon my / face.” The poet implicitly confesses that she has given up to her persistent depression and abiding anguish. That is why the world “enemies” is repeated three times in the following three lines: “In the presence of mine / enemies, mine enemies / the world is full of enemies.” Once again, the original text is Psalm 23: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies,” and once again, the contrast is unmistakable. Sexton finishes her poem off with a distorted allusion to the same Biblical passage: “There is no safe place” which is an ironic reference to “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” Needless to say, Sexton’s ‘unsafe’ abode, which is devoid of “goodness and mercy” and which is surrounded by “enemies” and “blades” that “extend / and reach” her “way,” is totally and utterly different from the heavenly residence promised to the men of virtue and righteousness. As observed, through the use of alliteration, allusion, irony, personification, phrasal and lexical repetition, and rhyme and rhythmic fluctuations, Sexton creates a context that reveals her mental breakdown, suicidal impulses, and deep depression.

The last Confessional poem to be reviewed in the present article is “Mirror” by Sylvia Plath; the poem was written roughly two years before she committed suicide in 1963:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful,

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so

Long

I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

(2002, 233)

In his analysis of the poem, Spacey has explained that at the time of the composition of the poem, “Plath was living in England with her fellow poet and husband, Ted Hughes, and she had already given birth to their first child, Frieda. This was a stressful time for Sylvia Plath. As a first-time mother she was on the way toward fulfilling her love for her partner but deep inside she dreaded the idea of ever growing old and settling down” (2017, 1). In her article “Reflections of Self and Other in Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” Imagery,” Ghasemi has contended that

“Mirror” was composed in 1961, just before Plath’s twenty-ninth birthday. The cleverly calm tone of the poem conceals the violence inherent in the images and theme of the poem. The poem reveals the tension of the violent confrontation of a number of forces. At the centre of this confrontation lies the persona’s conflict with the mirror’s control over her identity. The mirror claims objectivity and rationality by confirming that it reflects exactly
what it sees. However, its reflection is concomitant to the patriarchal view of the woman’s existence. Therefore, the persona is forced to see her reflection as an ugly, useless object. The reflection denies the woman even her humanity and displays her as “a terrible fish.” The women is shattered as, uncertain about her identity, she seeks approval from the mirror which stands for the patriarchy. (2007, 59-60). In the same vein, Freedman has declared that “Plath uses mirror as a symbol of female passivity, subjection, and Plath’s own conflicted self-identity caused by social pressures to reconcile the competing obligations of artistic and domestic life” (1993,152). It is worth mentioning that the mirror keeps recurring in Plath’s poems with various implications and suggestions. As Aird has asserted, “The only general conclusion which can be drawn from the varied uses of the mirror as a symbol is that … it usually represents an absolute state from which or in which the poet strives to find a meaning. This is the value which it conveys in the late poem “Mirror”” (2003, 174). Theme-wise, to sum up, the sustained motifs of the poem are: aging and its physical, psychological, and mental consequences, self-discovery, quest for identity, deception and truthfulness, alienation and loneliness, and domestic strife.

Form-wise, the poem is admirably cohesive, well-organised, and well-balanced; there are also quite a few appropriately deployed figures of speech. It consists of two unrhymed and nine-line stanzas. In the first one, the speaker is a personified mirror and the point of view is the first person singular. We get to know what the silver-rimmed mirror sees and feels as it frankly and unreservedly describes itself and its environment. The sound ‘s’ repeats three times in the first two lines: “silver,” “see,” and “swallow.” The intention is to present a poetic description of the self-expressing mirror. In the fifth line, through a ‘metaphor,’ the mirror compares itself to “The eye of a little god.” The seventh and eighth lines contain the figure of speech of ‘empathy’; the mirror identifies itself, and shows deep sympathy, with the opposite wall: “I have looked at it so long / I think it is part of my heart.” Line nine contains ‘synecdoche’ in that “Faces” stands for people. In the second stanza, the speaker becomes “a lake,” over which a woman bends over every morning. The first line includes an allusion to narcissus (in Greek mythology, the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope, who was cursed by Nemesis to fall in love with its own image reflected on the water). There is an implied comparison between the mirror in the first stanza and the lake in the second: they are both confessedly “cruel” in their truthfulness. The words “face” and “darkness” (in the last line of the first stanza) recur at the end of the seventh line of the second stanza; furthermore, the empathy is repeated in the sympathy the lake shows towards the woman. All this accentuates the similarity between the mirror and the lake. In the ninth line, the poet uses the word “drowned” metaphorically in the sense that what the woman sees in the lake is no longer “a young girl.” The poem ends with a simile in which the “old woman” is compared to “a terrible fish.” All these tropes and literary devices echo and uphold the afore-mentioned motifs and themes of the poem, namely, loneliness, aging, search for identity, and isolation.

CONCLUSION

This research has been a formalist reading of such renowned Confessional poems as Robert Lowell’s “Home after Three Months Away,” W. D. Snodgrass’s “A Locked House,” John Berryman’s “The Ball Poem,” Anne Sexton’s “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn,” and Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” in
an attempt to answer the question posed at the outset of the article: Do typical Confessional poems simultaneously and concurrently manifest careful attention to form as they do to content? The present study reveals that while Confessionalists' treatment of the poetic self was groundbreaking and shocking to some readers, they maintained a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to stanzaic division, rhyme, metre, rhythm and the use of formal features and figurative devices such as imagery, personification, allusion, simile and metaphor, alliteration, understatement, symbol, and synecdoche. The selected Confessional poems demonstrate careful word choices and superb manipulation of poetic techniques, all of which contribute to the richness and compactness of their thematic load and all of which reinforce the intended meanings of the poems. In other words, it can be claimed that these Confessional poems are as content-based as they are form-based.

WORKS CITED