

## Autobiographical Poetry in the Twentieth Century

Dr. Anwar Abd El Kareem Elsayed

ملخص البحث باللغة العربية

الشعر الذاتي في القرن العشرين

الدكتور أنور عبدالكريم السيد

يقدم هذا البحث مسحاً شاملاً للشعر الذاتي في القرن العشرين، موضحاً التشابهات والاختلافات بين الشعراء فيما يتعلق باستخدام ملامح من السيرة الذاتية في أشعارهم. ويقتصر البحث على الشعر البريطاني والأمريكي، ويقدم تعليقا نقدياً على الأعمال الرئيسية الممثلة لهؤلاء الشعراء إما كأفراد أو كمجموعات ينتمون لمدارس شعرية معينة. وينتهج البحث الترتيب الزمني حيث يتبع في معظم الحالات تواريخ ميلاد الشعراء، ومن ثمّ فالبحث يتجول بين الشعر البريطاني والأمريكي بناءً على هذا الترتيب. وأخيراً يركز البحث على إيجاد الفروق الحاسمة بين الشعر الذاتي والشعر الغنائي من جانب، والشعر الذاتي و"الاعترافي" من جانب آخر.

This paper presents a survey of autobiographical poetry in the twentieth century, showing affinities and differences among poets in relation to the use of autobiography and voice in their poems. The study is restricted to British, Irish and American poetry, offering a critical commentary on the works of representative individual poets or groups of poets in a chronological order (following in most cases the poets' birth dates). Hence, the survey shifts back and forth from British to American or Irish poetry according to that order. Also, the main argument of this article is centered upon establishing a solid distinction between autobiographical and lyrical poetry on one hand, and autobiographical and "confessional" poetry on the other hand.

Autobiographical poetry can be defined as one in which the poet gives an account of his/her life, as well as self-revelation, self-exploration and "thoughtful and analytical excursions into the self" ([Penguin](#) 63-64). The speaker in autobiographical poetry is not a persona but the poet himself. Very occasionally, an autobiographical poem is rather long, covering long periods in the poet's real life; however, it sometimes presents some fictional details. Distinct from "confessional" poetry, which gives frank and minute details related to the poet's private life, grief, pain, and tension, autobiographical poetry may exclude "disagreeable facts" or distort truth "for the sake of convenience or harmony" (63). William Wordsworth's (1750-1830) poem, The Prelude, best exemplifies autobiographical poetry. In this fourteen-book autobiography, he traces his life from infancy through school and college at Cambridge, his experience in France during the French Revolution and other later experiences. In the course of the poem, his literal journeys become metaphoric ones for the exploration of his interior psyche, memory,



private relation to nature and poetic development. The speaker in this poem is Wordsworth who addresses himself to his friend Coleridge and his English people at large.

On the other hand, lyrical poetry is defined as a subjective verse, often brief, that expresses the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker (who may or may not represent the poet. The main difference between autobiographical and lyrical poetry, beside differences in form, musicality and voice, is that “whereas an autobiographical poem is set in the past, telling what happened, a lyric is set in the present, catching a speaker in a moment of expression. But a lyric can [also] glance backward or forward” (Sylvan Barnet 640-41). Roughly speaking, lyrical poetry is divided into two categories: the “personal”, wherein the speaker is the poet, or at least has many affinities with him; and the “impersonal”, wherein the speaking voice is that of a persona that is completely detached from the poet. In this latter category, the poet stands outside of and detached from what he is writing about, for he writes about other people rather than about himself. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” “The Daffodils” and Christina Rossetti’s (1830-1894) “No, Thank You, John” are good examples of the “personal” lyric, while Keats’s (1795-1821) “Ode on a Grecian Urn” exemplifies the “impersonal” lyric.

This article assumes that personal lyrics are also autobiographical, since they contain a great deal of autobiographical elements. In many of the poems chosen below for critical commentary, the speakers appear as the poets themselves. Known for their brevity and emotional intensity, personal lyrics become convenient vehicles to convey the poets’ personal feelings and thoughts.

In fact, autobiographical poetry is not a new phenomenon in twentieth century literature, but it goes back to earlier stages. For example, the British romantics were immersed in personal expression of the self and reflection of their private relation to nature - unlike the Augustans who were engaged in abstract expression of universal truth. Their autobiographical poems and personal lyrics formed great influences on twentieth century poetry. On the other shore of the Atlantic Ocean, the American transcendentalists - Emerson (1803-1882) and Thoreau (1817-1862) - wrote about their personal feelings, beliefs and experiences rather than about philosophies and logical abstractions. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) were two of the most influential sources on modern poets. Like the British romantics, they believed in the great value of personal experiences. Hence, their poetry celebrated their egotistical “self,” social, political and even sexual experiences.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is the first British poet who launches us into twentieth century poetry. He discusses his agnostic philosophies of nature, fate, time and God in many dramatic poems, but he writes about personal events, episodes, memories and feelings in personal lyrics. His first wife Emma appears as a central figure in his 1912-1913 poems. After more than thirty-five years of unhappy marriage, she died in 1912. Ironically enough, her death elicits from him the greatest of his personal lyrics, in which he experiences remorse for his part in their decades of hostility. Michael Schmidt



comments: “they are poems of guilt as much as love” (16). In fact, they record very intense and charged emotions, mixed sometimes by a flaring desire for her.

In his posthumously published volume, Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres, Hardy offers a large proportion of personal lyrics, portrays real women and shows a change of attitude towards life. He moves “towards recovery - from sorrow to acceptance” (Linda Austin 1). In some other love lyrics, Hardy replaced the dim portrayals of nature - associated in his sub-consciousness with his first wife - by neutral ones. The alchemy of remembering itself was diminished by stoical joys; the intense perturbed memories of the past yielded themselves to the calm actualities of the present. Hardy’s personal lyrics reflect many autobiographical facts in his life. Nevertheless, he does not reveal himself directly, but he speaks through personae or masks. The various lovers, seers, pessimists and optimists he presents in his lyric “So Various” are projections of his own self; in other words, “they are aspects of himself” (T. D. Armstrong 391).

The First World War poets produced a good number of fine personal lyrics recording their real war experiences. Despite their individual and poetic differences, they had many things in common. First, before the beginning of war, most of them shared the same primary feeling of patriotism, which prompted them to quit schools or colleges and enlist. Second, while on the front, they tried to justify and rationalize their patriotism. Third, disillusioned by the atrocities of war, they protested against its inevitable continuity and hostility; they also attacked the army leaders and politicians for perpetuating the misery of people, especially young men who had to fight. Although their poetry documents personal experiences in trenches and training camps, it also records the agonies of a whole generation.

The post-war period witnessed experimentation with English language and poetics, bringing into existence what is known as Modernism. Despite the concentration of this modern school of poetry on objective expression, some poets continued to write autobiographical and lyrical poems; Robert Frost (1874-1963) was one of them. In his personal lyrics, “Wood-Pile,” “Mending Wall” and “After Apple-Picking” - which make use of the first person pronoun - Frost portrays himself engaged in real daily activities such as chopping woods, cleaning springs, building fences or picking apples: typical activities of rural New England life. In 1895, Frost married Elinor Miriam White, who became a major inspiration to his poetry until her death in 1938. In his personal lyric, “The Subverted Flower,” for example, he introduces a very personal episode during his early courtship of her. The poem shows an intense, youthful and passionate love for the lady, who will later become his wife.

The modern school of poetry owes much to the efforts of two great American expatriates on British territories: Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). It was Pound more than anyone else who made poets write modern verse; his motto was “Make it new.” In fact, he is generally considered the poet most responsible for defining and promoting a modernist aesthetic in poetry. Moreover, he stressed the suppression of subjectivity in favor of objectivity. Although Pound has been widely discussed as a



progenitor of Imagism, he is treated here as a poet who wrote autobiographical poems and personal lyrics. This appears as a sharp paradox in Pound's work. He tries to suppress the expression of the self, yet many poems reflect an expression of it. **Herbert Schneidau** ascribes this paradox to the heavy influence of Browning's (1812-1889) dramatic monologues, which had dominated "the poetic landscape" of Pound's youth (164). He adds, "the speaker in a Pound poem, no matter what mask he wears, is always Pound himself" (166).

Pound's autobiographical poem, The Cantos, which he started in 1917 and continued over a period of fifty years, deals with personal events in his life. For example, some of his later cantos handle his arrest and confinement in 1945 by the American army, as he was accused of broadcasting Fascist propaganda by radio to the U.S.A. during the Second World War.

**Stephen Coote** proposes that Hulme's anti-romantic expression of personality influenced Eliot (like Pound), and it developed in him a dislike for the poetic exploitation of the author's own personality. He adds, "it follows that we must learn to see his work not as the outpourings of an overcharged soul, a revelation of the private experience he was careful to protect, but as series of artifacts, well-made verses that communicate matured experience" (17). On the other hand, **Martin Scofield** confirms that Eliot's "poetry can still be seen in a significant sense as 'personal', the expression of personal feeling" (4). I think that despite Eliot's insistence on the necessity of escaping self-expression in his famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," some of his poems, which cannot be classified as either autobiographical or personal lyrics, contain some autobiographical elements. Though he tries to escape direct expression of the self, many poems reveal a hidden Eliot behind his texts

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) began his literary career in the early 1890s in the tradition of the self-conscious romantics, mainly affected by Blake's (1757-1827) and Shelley's (1792-1822) personal lyrics. His themes and imagery of this period were basically derived from his personal experiences and his knowledge of country places and folklore. In the following years, Irish nationalist movements and their leading figures intrigued him. This interest is reflected in poems such as "September 1913" and "Easter 1916."

Like Hardy's, D. H. Lawrence's (1885-1930) poetic achievement is almost overshadowed by his reputation as a novelist. However, he is one of the twentieth century poets who write fine personal lyrics in which he records personal incidents and relationships that disturb him. "Discord in Childhood" portrays the emotional tension that characterized the relationship between his parents. Many personal lyrics in his first volume, Love Poems and Others (1913), explore his relationship with his demanding mother and his frustrated love affairs with different women. They concentrate on the ambiguous nature of his relationship with his possessive mother who seems to have been the direct cause of his thwarted love affairs as well as other emotional problems. Commenting on such poems, Schmidt says, "they were



written guiltily, 'as if it were a secret sin', because they were autobiographical" (97). Nevertheless, her death in 1910 elicits from him some elegies such as "Sorrow," "Brooding Grief" and "Piano".

The Oxford Group, including W. H. Auden (1907-1973), Stephen Spender (1909-1995), Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) and Cecil Day Lewis (1904-1972), introduced a new kind of autobiographical poetry in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Known for their left-wing sympathies and affiliations, they reflected their leftist attitudes in their poetry, proposing Marxist solutions for modern social and economic problems especially after the Stock Market Crash in 1929. During the Spanish Civil War (1936), Auden, MacNeice and Spender went to Spain to support the left-wing elected Republican government against Fascism, represented by the right-wing Spanish Army that was led by General Franco. With the defeat of the Republicans in 1938, these poets went back to England, disappointed and frustrated because they thought that that war was supposed to determine not only the democratic future of Spain but also that of Europe. Their portrayals of that war and their aborted expectations of it - as in Auden's "Spain 1937" - were derived from their first-hand experiences and personal observations.

In America, the Harlem Renaissance poets introduced a very unique kind of personal lyrics, one tinged with racial elements. Many of these young poets lived in Harlem in the early 1920s, and they derived their subject matters, characters, settings and language from the city's daily life, as well as from their personal experiences as African-Americans suffering from many racial problems. Those poets - like Claude McKay (1890-1948), Jean Toomer (1894-1967), Sterling Brown (1901-1989), Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Countee Cullen (1903-1946) - shared the spirit of a psychological transformation and a positive attitude towards their African-American selfhood. They, in different ways, expressed their "break with past racial attitudes of subservience, humility, and self-apology. [They also] attempted to give artistic expression to the more positive attitudes of self-acceptance and self-respect" (Leon Coleman 107-8).

Theodore Roethke's (1908-1963) personal lyrics derive their subject matter and imagery from his real past experiences. As a young man, he had lived in close proximity to nature, and he had keenly meditated the nursery world of flowers and plants in a greenhouse owned by his grandfather. Sometimes, nature becomes the projection of his psychic landscape and moods; at other times, it is completely separate from him. Neal Bowers notes that in Open House, Roethke tries "to get outside himself by breaking down the walls of flesh to free his spirit. But in The Lost Son, he ... turned within himself for a route to the outside" (77).

William Meredith, in anatomizing the sources of Roethke's imagery, says: "In recounting a spiritual autobiography he tells us what he feels about cats and dogs, hot and cold, father and mother, trees, weeds, birds, stones, and fish, and about his special imagery, the wind" (44). In his personal lyric, "My Papa's Waltz," Roethke remembers his parents and includes minute details.





Dylan Thomas (1914-1953), attempting to explore his dark interior, reflects many of his personal experiences in his poems. He projects his personality upon the universe and shapes its landscapes according to his subjective vision. He thinks that he cannot depend on any source other than himself: the only authentic source of knowledge. That is why his poetry lacks overt references to social, economic or political problems. His concepts of love, sexuality, procreation, unity of all forms of life, integration of life and death and the continuous link among generations are drawn from autobiographical sources.

Philip Larkin (1922-1985), like his idols Hardy, Yeats and Thomas, expresses himself in a different way from the “impersonal” Eliot. Much of his poetry is autobiographical, rotating round personal reminiscences of his childhood and meditations on his loneliness, age and death. In “I Remember, I Remember,” “High Windows” or “Sad Steps,” he appears as an old man regretting the passage of his childhood; however, he sees a compensation for the loss of the pleasures of that period: the redeeming thought of a paradise in the life to come.

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) makes use of autobiographical elements in his poetry, as he derives some of his themes and imagery from his personal experiences. For example, his condemnation of war is mainly based on the tales his father (who fought in the First World War) told him about its atrocities. Moreover, his interest in England’s natural beauty is rooted in his personal experiences as an outdoor person, someone who has absorbed that beauty and lamented the environmental devastation at the hands of industrialization. His fascination with the theme of fishing and hunting derives much from his fishing trips with his elder brother Gerald who was a professional fisherman and a gamekeeper. Also, his poems dealing with cattle and sheep are based on the fact that in 1972 he bought a cattle farm, an experience that provided him with vivid imagery of farm life.

The Beat poets - Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), Gregory Corso (1930-2001) and others - erupted into the American literary scene in San Francisco in the late 1950s and early 1960s, rebelling against society and rejecting its values. As individuals, they were obsessed with sex, drugs, crimes, bohemian styles of life and literature. In their poetry, they tried not only to celebrate their personal emotions, but also to idealize themselves as models to be followed. Hence, their poetry is autobiographical in nature, reflecting their egocentrism, self-exploration and social protest. In fact, the poetry of Allen Ginsberg can be taken as a representative of that movement. His autobiographical poem, “Howl,” traces his bizarre life as a student at Columbia University and the ten subsequent years. It also explores his homosexual inclinations (which will develop later into intimate relationships), his feeling of personal defeat owing to the end of a relationship with a male friend, his angry social protest against his society, his hallucinations and his personal views of poetry. “Kaddish” rotates round his mother’s insanity and death. Despite Ginsberg’s personal loathing of his mother, [Roberta Berke](#) insists that he “transforms a squalid family embarrassment into an epic which embraces every beloved parent who has disintegrated into a death without dignity” (51).

The American “confessional” poetry - produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Robert Lowell (1917-1977), Anne Sexton (1928-1974), W. D. Snodgrass (1926-) and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) - is defined as “an autobiographical mode of verse that reveals the poet’s personal problems with unusual frankness” (Oxford 48). Moreover, it is uniquely distinguished by its “candid examination of what were at the time of writing virtually unmentionable kinds of private distress” (49). In fact, these poets’ confession is a gesture of redeeming their unbearable emotional crises and venting repressed anger inside them, since they refuse to seek counseling for their psychic pains. In this context, Emily Dickinson, whom they take as a model, has a deep influence on them. Dickinson once wrote to her publisher Higginson: “I had a terror - since September - I could tell to no one - and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground - because I am afraid” (Jay Leyda 34). Thus, like her, they resort to poetic creativity as a homemade therapy. Despite their individual differences, they deal with shared themes such as their mental breakdowns, suicidal impulses and deaths. They are concerned with giving the minutest details about their own private lives and suffering. Berke argues that they “deliberately used their own particular feelings as metaphors for wider meanings. At their strongest, [they] carved their own lives into grotesque but potent images which shaped intense individual suffering into concentrated images of universal tragedy” (69).

In his autobiographical volume, Life Studies, Lowell frankly discusses his mental turmoil more frankly than any of his contemporaries, bouts of depression, divorce and alcoholism, trying to convince his readers of the authenticity of his emotional distress. He neither wears a mask nor speaks through a persona, but he directly exposes himself to his readers, confessing his own inner feelings and speaking about his private marital life as well as his parents’ weaknesses and failures. In this volume, he also talks about the religious and political transformations which he had undergone through his long poetic career. The dominant feature prevailing over this volume is the sense of a strenuous clash of contraries and the tension arising from that clash. For example, he shows a divided attitude of awe and hatred towards his own father.

Anne Sexton’s poetry is deeply rooted in her experiences as a daughter, a woman, a housewife, a mother and a poet. She deliberately sinks into the depth of her self to reveal her inner and contradictory feelings towards all these roles. Suzanne Juhaz comments that Sexton’s “poetry is highly personal. She is either the overt or the implicit subject of her poem, and she as subject is the person who anguishes, who struggles, who seems mired in the primary soil of living: the love/hate conflict with mother and father, the trauma of sex, the guilt of motherhood” (262). In fact, when we read Sexton’s poetry, we realize that it follows a psychoanalytical model and is concerned with her attempt to find an “exit” out of the persistent emotional stress under which she had lived. Devastated by many aspects of victimization and mutilating madness, engaged in a lifelong unresolved struggle to quell her anxieties, and failing to find equilibrium for her own salvation, she committed suicide in 1974.



Sylvia Plath, like Sexton, documents her personal feelings of agony, private relationships and intense desperate moods in her poetry. As one of the “confessional” poets, she reveals her inner emotional tensions, though at times she exposes dark sides of her mind especially when she talks about her parents or husband. Like Sexton also, Plath committed suicide. Generally, it is difficult to separate her life from her poetry, as her poems are in most cases frank self-revelations. Nevertheless, she is different from Sexton in that she uses personae in her poetry.

Plath’s sequence of bee poems, vibrating with tension, derives much of its imagery and a good portion of its subject matter from her father’s specialized studies on the behavior of bees, as well as from her first-hand experiences in this field. Although this series deals with bees, it also handles - through symbolic representations - her relationship with her father, her procreativity as a mother and her creativity as an artist. [Rose Kamel](#) argues that Plath “gives us a metaphor through which her personal life is woven into the fabric of poetry and this metaphor requires some familiarity with bee-keeping” (305). Moreover, these poems reflect unresolved contradictory feelings inside her: she celebrates her procreative role as a female, yet she despises her sexual role as a machine of procreation. Plath also wrote many autobiographical poems on motherhood, deriving their subject matter from her personal relationship with her mother, or from her personal experience as a mother of two young children. Moreover, Plath’s father haunted her life and poetry. Dead when she was eight, he continued to inspire her poems.

W. D. Snodgrass is often compared to Lowell, as both have maintained a strong will to resist suicidal thoughts. Nevertheless, Snodgrass is different from Lowell in that his poetry does not handle history or politics. Like the other “confessional” poets, he is engaged in self-discovery, and his poetry is steeped in very personal and private experiences. In fact, his poetry comes very close to Plath’s, as both intimately deal with family troubles, sufferings and anger. In his poem, “Heart’s Needle,” Snodgrass laments his inevitable separation from his only daughter after a broken marriage.

Diane Wakoski (1932-) has many affinities with the “confessional” poets, sharing their themes and, like them, depending on her personal experiences as reliable sources of her poetry. But more than them, she mythologizes such experiences. In “Thanking My Mother for Piano Lessons,” she records her filial gratitude to her mother who was caring about her aesthetic refinement and education. Like other “confessional” poets (as Plath), she shows hostility towards her father, but unlike their antagonistic attitudes towards their mothers, Wakoski presents her mother as caring, hard working and always ready to sacrifice for her daughter’s sake.

The American feminist poetry in the 1950s-1970s attempted to re-evaluate subjectivity and the category of female experience, focusing on the expression of women’s revolt against their victimization in a patriarchal social system. It also chronicled their attempts to achieve economic, political, social and artistic autonomy with the aim of not only rejecting stereotypical, traditional images cast upon them by





males but also confirming their equality. However, autobiographical facts of such poets were taken as starting points from which they launched their commentary on their identities and their society.

Adrienne Rich (1929-) is one of the pioneering spokeswomen for this new writing which explores the will to change: she started as a dutiful and submissive student but ended up as a revolutionary woman. Written to please her father who had dominated her life, her first volume, A Change of World, reflects admiration for his brilliance and gratitude to his encouragement in her poetic composition. It also documents her feelings of isolation, enclosure, self-division and victimization through the use of various symbols such as locked doors, broken windows and shattered glass.

In spite of her dissatisfaction with her position as an undistinguished woman, she married in 1953 and gave birth to three sons. This fact would make her later (in her second volume, The Diamond Cutters) feel temporarily guilty for accepting her role as a mother and postponing her aspirations for success as an artist. In this context, [Deborah Pope](#) comments on Rich's "Autumn Equinox" and "The Perennial Answer": "both poems concern the emotional desolation of women locked in regrettable marriages and roles" (127). Moreover, Rich experienced depression bursts of anger and entrapment because of her economic dependence on her husband: she wanted to attain her independence by earning her living through the profession of a free-lance writer. That was why she decided to "remake" her own life. In her following volume, Necessities of Life, Rich tries to recapitulate "her tenacious efforts to carve an identity for herself from the welter of personal, literary, childhood, and adolescent influences, and against the sometimes enslaving pull of others" ([Pope](#) 141). She started by assaulting patriarchal domination and asserting the rising energy within her. In Leaflets, associating male political domination with sexual oppression and rape, she revolts against both aspects as powers that tend to dehumanize women. [Rachel DuPlessis](#) argues that Rich, as well as other feminist poets, links the personal to the public, and that she relates the "personal awakening to political and social life" (280).

Despite their individual differences as poets, Sonia Sanchez (1935-) and Audre Lorde (1934-1992) have many things in common: shared themes, preoccupations and similar life styles. Both derive their subject matter from their personal experiences as African-American female poets, protesting against all aspects of racial and gender oppression. Like other feminists, they believe that "the personal is the political and the public". [Gloria T. Hull](#) argues that Sanchez "writes of relationships between black men and women, of the problems and possibilities that lie in black children, and, most poignantly, of personal/black female selfhood and pain" (177). On the other hand, Lorde writes in her prose autobiography, Zami, "I am not one piece of myself. I cannot be simply a Black person, and not be a woman, too, nor can I be a woman without being a lesbian ... I write for myself and my children and for as many people as possible who can read me. When I say myself, I mean not only the Audre who inhabits my body but all those Black women" (268). Hence, their poetry, like that of the Harlem Renaissance



poets, represents the collective racial self as uniquely African-American, but it also reflects their aesthetic preoccupations as female poets.

English poetry in the last thirty years of the twentieth century has been dominated by the writings of multicultural poets, like the British West Indies' poet Derek Walcott (1930-), the Irish Seamus Heaney (1939-) or the Black British women poets. Generally, they make use of autobiographical events and sometimes relate them to political situations around them, each according to his or her special case. In his poetry, Walcott usually portrays his Caribbean tropical landscape out of his memory, making use of painting techniques he inherited from his father, who was a talented amateur painter. In his recent years, Walcott even transforms paintings into poems. In his poem "A Far Cry from Africa," he discusses his divided loyalties between his love to his African roots and the "English tongue I love". He is unable to resolve the conflict that takes place inside him: each aspect of loyalty pulls him to a diametrically opposed direction, leaving him finally in a state of devastating indetermination.

Although his public personality sometimes seems to override his private self, Seamus Heaney presents himself in many autobiographical poems. In his first poem, "Digging," he remembers his father and grandfather working on their farm: his father digs a "gravelly ground" with his spade and seeds potatoes, while his grandfather cuts turf. It is apparent that the son, who observes them from his window while holding a pen in his hand, does not scorn the old ways of cultivating the land. On the contrary, he reveres them, promising to carry on family traditions in his own poems. Hence, in his early poetry, Heaney reflects "a fundamental rejection of politics and violence in favor of an art that provides readers with [autobiographical] poems that yield warmth [like his grandfather's turf for fires] and nourishment [like his father's potatoes]" (Adrian Frazier 7).

Lauri Ramey notes that "some of the most exciting poetry being written in England today is by Black women" (1). On January 27, 2000, six British Black poets read their poetry in an exhilarating atmosphere in the Royal Festival Hall in London and managed to engage a mesmerized audience by their performance. They were: Karen McCarthy (1947-), Raman Mundair, Malika B., Dorothea Smart, Bernardine Evaristo (1959-) and Patience Agbabi (1965-). Despite the variety and individuality of their works, both in themes and techniques, they have some affinities with African-American women poets. They discuss personal relationships with fathers, mothers and children; feminist issues like female adornments and hairstyles; male/female relationships; social and political issues and finally "last slavery poems". They also dramatize their personal feelings of alienation in a white society. Lauri Ramey comments on this event of poetry reading saying that it "made it clear that there is a great deal of hunger for the work of these fine multicultural writers in a country whose poetry has been mired in the bogs for at least one long generation. These young Black female poets are very much the future of British literature" (4).

The American poets, Donald Hall (1928-) and his wife Jane Kenyon (1947-1995) wrote many autobiographical poems, while Robert Pinsky (1940-) introduced some autobiographical elements in his poetry. Many of Hall's poems derive their subject matter and imagery from his personal experiences. He introduces reminiscences of his early childhood, engaging homely stories, personal experiences as a student and university professor, personal impressions about friends, neighbors and relatives. Furthermore, the later poems talk about his and his wife's journey with cancer, treatment, medications and surgical operations. A good bulk of such poems also deals with the poet's personal feelings of bitterness owing to the loss of his wife and the sense of loneliness dominating his life after her departure.

Jane Kenyon suffered from depression most of her life, though as [Becky Edgerton](#) suggests, "She was diagnosed as bipolar only relatively late, during the last twelve years of her life" (79). In the intervals of the disease, she wrote autobiographical poems handling her fight against it, attempting to tell people what it is like to be under the influence of depression. Also, her personal religious experience plays a central role in her poetry. Moving from doubt to spiritual awakening, Kenyon records her journey from darkness to light in many of her poems. Moreover, she records very personal events in life.

Robert Pinsky writes about his personal experiences as a Jew living in a wide diversity of American multiculturalism in the late twentieth century. In his book-length poem, An Explanation of America, addressed to his daughter, Pinsky proposes to explain America, or at least his idea of it. As an objective explainer, he extols its praise-worthy aspects and condemns its dark sides. The poem, Langdon Hammer writes, is "a sustained meditation on national character that an intelligent child could read and ... understand" (176). Intended as a historical text, the poem aims at instructing not only the poet's daughter but also the American people at large about the realities of America. In other words, the poem presents Pinsky's personal feelings towards America.

It seems to me that a good bulk of the twentieth century poetry, despite the modernist claim for objectivity, springs from autobiographical facts in the poets' lives and careers. Throughout this paper, it is clear that the British romantics, on one hand, and Whitman and Dickinson, on the other hand, have greatly influenced twentieth century poets. Many autobiographical poets express their individual selves directly, deriving their subject matter and imagery from their private experiences, feelings, visions and states of mind, while others hide themselves behind masks or personae. Others still express their collective selves as groups representing humanity in general, a racial identity or a feminist identity. The method of self-expression differs from a poet to another or among members of one group whose poetry can be approached as the product of one poet.

#### Works Cited.

- 1- Armstrong, T. D. "Supplementarity: Poetry as the After Thomas Hardy" Victorian Poetry 26 (1988): 381-93.



- 2- Austin, Linda. "Reading Depression in Hardy's Poems of 1912-13" Victorian Poetry 36.1 (Spring 1998): 1-14.
- 3- Barnet, Sylvan. An Introduction to Literature. New York: Harper Collins College Publisher, 1994.
- 4- Berke, Roberta. Bounds out of Bounds: A Compass for Recent American and British Poetry. New York: Oxford Univ. P, 1981.
- 5- Bowers, Neal. Theodore Roethke: The Journey from I to Otherwise. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri P, 1982.
- 6- Coleman, Leon. "Carl Van Vechten Presents the New Negro" The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined. (Ed.) Victor A. Kramer. New York: Ams Press, 1987, 107-27.
- 7- Coote, Stephen. The Waste Land. Bungay, Suffolk: Richard Clay Ltd., 1985.
- 8- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyer" Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets. (Ed.) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. P, 1979, 280-300.
- 9- Edgerton, Becky. "Attention as a Palliative for Depression: The Poems of Jane Kenyon. Bright Unequivocal Eye. (Ed.) Bert G. Hornbook. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2000, 87-97.
- 10- Frazier, Adrian. "Anger and Nostalgia: Seamus Heaney and the Ghost of the Father" Eir-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies (Fall-Winter 2001): 1-22.
- 11- Hammer, Langdon. "Poetry in Review" The Yale Review 84.3 (1996): 168-78. Hoffert, Barbara. "Without" Book Review 123.5 (March 15, 1998): 68.
- 12- Hull, Gloria T. "Afro-American Women Poets: A Bio-Critical Survey" Shakespeare's Sisters. Op.Cit. 165-82..
- 13- Juhaz, Suzanne. "Seeking the Exit or the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the Career of Anne Sexton" Shakespeare's Sisters. Op.Cit. 261-68.
- 14- Kamel, Rose. "'A Self to Recover': Sylvia Plath's Bee Cycle Poems" Modern Poetry Studies 4 (Winter 1973): 304-18.
- 15- Leyda, Jay. Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, vol.11 (New Haven: Yale Univ.P, 1960.
- 16- Lorde, Audre. Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. New York: 1982.
- 17- Meredith, William. "A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Theodore Roethke's Long Journey out of the Self" Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry. (Ed.) Arnold Stein. Seattle: Univ. of Washington P, 1965, 36-53. .
- 18- Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms. (Ed.) Chris Baldick. New York: Oxford Univ. P, 2001.
- 19- Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. (Ed.) J. A. Cuddon. London: Penguin Group, 1998.



- 20- Pope, Deborah. A Separate Vision. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. P, 1984. Pratt, Annis. "Dylan Thomas's Prose" Dylan Thomas Op.Cit. 117-29.
- 21- Ramey, Lauri. "Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry" Ishmael Reed's Konch Magazine (2000): 1-4.
- 22- Schmidt, Michael. An Introduction to Modern British Poets. Bungay, Suffolk: Richard Clay Ltd., 1979.
- 23- Schneidau, Herbert. Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real. Louisiana: Louisiana State Univ. P, 1969.
- 24- Scofield, Martin. T. S. Eliot: The Poems. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. P, 1998.