



# A Study of Domestic Aspects of the Confessional Poetry in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*

Rania Saber Ahmed Abdel Rahim <sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> PhD Research Scholar, JAMIA MILIA ISLAMIA UNIVERSITY, New Delhi, Faculty of Humanities/English Department ICCR Scholarship/African Scheme (Egypt).

Received: 10 December 2021

Accepted: 13 January 2022

Published: 03 March 2022

## Abstract

Robert Lowell, the iconic American Poet, moves with his Confessional poetry, notably the poetic volume *Life Studies* (1959) from the “raw” to the “cooked”. Confessional poetry is a literary genre of the expression of personality. It is where the art of poetry is similar to the art of confession and the inclination of poetry to move toward the too personal. The personal life of the poet under the dilemma of psychological crisis, sex, family life, humiliation and mental and psychological state of mind moves to the forefront of the poem. Personal pain, experiences, trauma, depression, psychological break-down and the private relationships articulated through a new kind of free verse and mode of expression. Humanistic Psychology as a therapeutic and a person-centered theory acts both as a means of self-analysis and as a literacy device. It enables consideration of the poet's self and how this self feels irritated for being only an actual self, try to move from the actual to the ideal self until it successfully reaches self-assertion and self-actualization in relation to his/her poetic language and the process of creativity. Hence, in order to study the confessional poetry, domestic aspects and the consequences of their psychoanalytic literary approach objectively play a significant role.

**Keywords:** Confessional poetry, Robert Lowell, Poetic Volume *Life Studies*, Humanistic Psychology, Existential Psychology, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, The Meaning of Anxiety, Domestic Aspects.

## How to cite the article:

R.S. Ahmed Abdel Rahim, A Study of Domestic Aspects of the Confessional Poetry in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, *J. Hum. Ins.* 2022; 6(1): 07-19. DOI: 10.22034/JHI.2021.313600.1040

©2021 The Authors. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

## 1. Introduction

Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV (March 1, 1917 – September 12, 1977) was born in Boston, Massachusetts descendant of a prominent family. His father, Robert Traill Spence Lowell, worked as an officer in the Navy, while his mother, Charlotte Winslow Lowell, was a member of an old New England family that of William Samuel John, a signer of the United States Constitution.

Since the end of the Second World War, Robert Lowell became an important American poet. He is one of the most influential poets of the 1950s and 60s. Lowell was educated at private schools in Boston where he decided upon a career as a poet.

He spent summers reading and studying the English literary tradition even imposing his reading lists on school friends.

At Harvard, Lowell met with Allen Tate, a poet of the Fugitive group. He travelled to Tate's Tennessee home during the summer of 1937; writing poetry and studying at the feet of the older poet. He transferred to Ohio to study with John Crowe Ransom who was Tate's mentor in Kenyon College. At Kenyon, he then befriended Randall Jarrell and Peter Taylor, both of whom went on to their successful careers as writers. Lowell then studied with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren at Louisiana State University.

In 1940, Lowell's conversion to Roman Catholicism

\* Corresponding Author: [rahimrahnia@gmail.com](mailto:rahimrahnia@gmail.com)

was a denial of his ancestors' New England Protestantism. He had volunteered for military service when the Second World War began in 1941. However, it was in 1943 when he received a conscription notice from the United States military, shocked and disappointed by the bombing of civilians in German cities, he declared himself at this time a conscientious objector. He served for several months in jail and finished his sentence performing community service in Connecticut. During these months, Lowell finished and published his first book, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and revised it in the next year. He published the new version as **Lord Weary's Castle** in 1946 which received a warm reception within critical circles in **The Nation** magazine, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1947. These works strengthened Lowell's reputation as a leading poet of the new generation. He published his next book, **The Mills of the Kavanaughs**, in 1951. The book was criticized as inferior to **Lord Weary's Castle**, and even Lowell recognized the firmness of the new book's dramatic monologues.

These years saw Lowell suffering from a number of manic-depressive experiences, foreshadowing the disease that plagued him when he was eventually hospitalized at McLean's, a mental hospital after his mother's death in 1954. The years of suffering, sickness and despair of the middle 1950s were characterized by a political atmosphere because of the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Meanwhile, Lowell's psychiatrists drove him to write about his childhood manifested in the prose memoir at the heart of Lowell's 1959 book, **Life Studies**, which is a free verse poetic piece that took consideration of Lowell's self, his psyche, and his surroundings. The publication of **Life Studies** in 1959 renewed Lowell's reputation; the book received the National Book Award in 1960. Many readers saw in the book nothing less than a change in the American poetic landscape while the new book actually inaugurated the poetry that was coined by M.L. Rosenthal as, "Confessional."

The early sixties found Lowell also publishing his collection of *Imitations 1961*, loose translations of poems (the book won the Bollingen Poetry Translation Prize in 1962). The historical interest evident in Lowell's poetry and plays alike are revealed where Lowell returned to a consideration of the individual's relation to history with the publication of *The Old Glory* (1964) and *For the Union Dead* (1964). Lowell publicly refused Lyndon Johnson's invitation when invited to a White House Arts Festival in 1965 as a stance against the American escalation of the war in Vietnam. In 1967, Lowell participated along with thousands of others in the March on the Pentagon. In 1967, Lowell published **Near the Ocean**, a collection which is the work Lowell was most deeply absorbed in during

the year when the verse journal **Notebook, 1967-68** was published.

In 1973, Lowell published his book **History and For Lizzie and Harriet**, which includes some of the poems about his wife and daughter from **Notebook 1967-68**, and many new poems which document the break-up of his marriage with Hardwick. Later, **The Dolphin** (1973) includes a number of poems about his marriage with Caroline Blackwood which won in 1974, the Pulitzer Prize. Lowell died in New York of a heart attack on 12 September 1977. His last book, **Day By Day**, was published a year after his death.

The literary merit of Robert Lowell's poetry has been in question for the past fifty years. Critics focused on Lowell in the context of Confessionalism. They offer readings of his poetry which emphasize the need for confessional detail in order to understand the context and the true meaning of his poems. The questions raised in this study depict the domestic and historical aspects that characterized the type of confessional poetry throughout the analysis of the poems of Robert Lowell's Volume *Life Studies*. The focus of the study will also draw attention to the stylistic development that accompanied these aspects.

Literary critical studies such as Psychological Studies will be discussed in context. The most important issue in this study is the approach which seeks to interpret the psychological freedom of mind, soul and body which Lowell attempted in his confessional verse. The study will cover significant features in Lowell's poetry by analysis and citation from his correspondences with Elizabeth Bishop, Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell and Elizabeth Hardwick. This paper discusses in detail confessional poetry as related to the analysis of the poems of Lowell's volume *Life Studies* in context with the psychological approach. Domestic Aspects will embody the majority of the poems which revolve around family life: the troubled marriage of his maternal grandparents and parents with a main focus on Lowell's mental outbreaks. In addition to the domestic aspects, history, the age and the socio-political circumstances are crucial aspects in Lowell's volume *Life Studies*.

Finally, this research paper is a concentration on the innovation of confessional poetry and the evolution of Robert Lowell's psyche and ideas with regard to confessional American free verse and themes and stylistic tools. It aims at proving the development of his vision and attempts to open up further possibilities for understanding and interpreting his poems.

## 2. Domestic Aspects

### 2.1. Mundane Events and Manic Episodes

*Life Studies* was the medium which caused an unexpected thriving of a new literary movement.

Robert Lowell's personal poetry in *Life Studies* or what Rosenthal branded as "confessional" (25) showed Lowell as a confessional poet who attended to the mundane details of life drawn directly from his personal life, as the title suggests; as if the poems were simply a diary or photograph shots. It is necessary to dwell on the confessional poetry of *Life Studies* as a literature of trauma and recovery. The level of torment and suffering is now about how the writers really feel about their traumas. In the confessional poem, even the most heartfelt deeply felt presentation remains lifeless if it is not brought to life with artistry. Lowell masters this craft in his confessional poems and turns the pain and risk of his own life into the cleansing of emotions and consolation of great poetry. It is necessary also to dwell on Robert Lowell's opinions and strategies, in this volume which were consistent with his views on humanity and his social views of the changes that occurred simultaneously in the American society at that time.

One key aspect of the confessional poetry is the domestic which is revealed in the poems of the final section of the same sequence. It is the part that is greatly related to confessional poems and appears to narrate Lowell's private life chronologically. Robert Lowell began it by using his indecisively alert five-year-old persona and ended it with current revelations about himself as a middle-aged man. Lowell included poems about his grandparents and their deaths and his suffering at losing them. After that, Lowell wrote about the deaths of each of his parents. With his parents gone, he shifted to his wife and children and described his role as a husband and as a father too.

In the poem entitled "Reading Myself," from his sequence entitled *History* (1973), Lowell ends it with describing this part as "his open coffin." (591) The basic mask of the poet which provided an insight into his private life has been removed for exposure by Robert Lowell. Members of his family were introduced through the titles of the poems of section four of his volume *Life Studies*; uncle, aunts, maternal grandparents, father and mother. Each life incident and what follows it, respectively of life events, mark an important part of life which was stamped out through dates, real places and a move in thought and poetic style to reach its final form of pure confessional poetry.

Section Four, "Life Studies" reaches the heart of the matter, with critical treatments of his parents as well as studies of his own personal troubled life. Lowell deliberately organized the book to draw attention to the daring venture of his new style in an attempt to understand his own madness as a first step toward overcoming his insanity and making his fractured self a whole, when he admits in "Skunk Hour," which is a confessional poem

written in (August and September 1957): "My mind's not right." (30) For a book about madness, *Life Studies* owes a great deal to a Freudian analysis of relationships in the type of family which is defined as dysfunctional.

However, Lowell seems to need more than Freud's psychoanalysis to identify and idealize himself as a disturbed individual, in a fractured American society from the outside and from the inside faced by anxiety, tension and mental disorder. He discovered the evil that surrounds him in family members and a violent society alongside their double standards and pretence at being good. Nevertheless, Lowell was in a deep conflict with himself. He kept searching for the inherent goodness within himself. Furthermore, he believed that freedom from fear is possible for everyone. Eventually, he decided to expose the reality out loud via his confessional poems and make his poetry—naked exposures.

Critics often mentioned confessional poetry with a predetermined Freudian, and Jungian perspective because the poet reveals directly or indirectly his/her own experiences, problems and psychological complexes in his/her poetry. It was such a difficult mission for the confessional poets to deal with the subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in American poetry. As Jeffrey Meyers says in *Manic Power* (1987) that Lowell truly felt that agony was the true path to art and insisted that all poets had to confront their deepest fears in order to survive and to write, though they were mentally ill. (13)

Confessional poetry, as Meyers believes is trapped into madness, for example, in: "the literary manifestation of the mental illness of Lowell." (21). Lowell's part in literary history is described as a "powerful personality," ... which has "impressive engagement with "brilliant wives" and one who plays opposite his negative side "eminent lineage of insanity," "high-mindedness," "profound guilt" (29) and reveals a complex and inconclusive man, one lost on stage where he becomes his own significant subject matter.

Several manic episodes in Lowell were recorded through his life as is mentioned in the correspondences between him and his friends. Philip Larkin even once Larkin thought him "barking mad". Other friends, such as Dorothea Richards and Ivor Richards, were sitting on the sofa when Dorothea recounts:

What a lovely party.  
Everybody's having such  
fun! Robert is just going  
round like the devil putting  
people against each other.  
It was the most

extraordinary party—an  
absolute triumph for Cal...  
The extraordinary thing  
was that nobody seemed to  
realize that he was mad."  
(Hamilton 14)

The last crisis for Robert Lowell happened after his mother's death in 1954. It was an experience of manic episodes when Lowell was hospitalized at McLean's, an American mental home which is recorded in detail. All these psychological breakdowns which Lowell suffered, served his artistic purpose and compelled him to assess his life and literary style during this period. This experience developed especially when Lowell was urged by his psychiatrists at McLean's Hospital to write about his childhood and was illustrated in some photographs. It was not the first time for Lowell to take his psychiatrist's advice to adopt a new path. In his life, back then, he followed family tradition by enrolling in Harvard, but after two years – and upon the advice of his psychiatrist-Merrill Moore- he transferred to Kenyon College.

It is clear then that tackling domestic studies cannot be done thoroughly without studying humanistic psychotherapy in context which includes several approaches to counseling and therapy; especially the approaches of Carl Rogers (1902–1987) and Rollo Reece May (1909-1994). Both of them are two major exponents of the Humanistic Psychology. Some of the earliest approaches also is the developmental theory of Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970) that emphasizes a hierarchy of needs and motivations; such as the existential psychology of Rollo May that acknowledges human choice and the tragic aspects of human existence; as well as the person-centered or client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers, which is centered on the client's capacity for self-direction and understanding of his or her own development. Humanistic Psychology can be defined as a psychological perspective which emerged in the mid-twentieth century in response to the limitations of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The Humanistic Psychology core perspective was first articulated in an article in 1964 by James Frederick Thomas Bugental (1915-2008) and adopted by Thomas Greening. It is the approach which holds that people are good and emphasizes the goodness in man and his drive towards self-actualization and creativity. Therefore, studying Lowell's confessional poetry without drawing attention to the humanistic psychology approach leaves many questions unanswered with regard to Lowell's aim in writing this kind of verse.

It pays special attention to uniquely human issues

as the self, self-actualization, creativity, free will, and human potential, health, hope, love, nature, being, becoming, individuality, and meaning—that is, a concrete understanding of human existence. Humanistic Psychology believes in viewing the individual self as a whole person and encourages self exploration rather than the study of behavior in other people. It is basically a self-centered perspective which has to focus more on the subjective persona and thus it is so adequate in studying the aspects of confessional poetry.

Early sources toward studying the humanistic perspective, was the work of Carl Rogers, who was one of the founders of humanistic psychology and was the dominant member of the first person-centered groups working to resolve conflicts. Carl Rogers and the rest believed in real development and spiritual aspiration as an integral part of the human psyche. It is linked to the emerging field of transpersonal psychology. In the twentieth century humanistic psychology was referred to as the "third force" in psychology in the post-industrial society and is linked up with Lowell's confessional poetry.

Rogers strongly ensured that the developmental processes led to healthier, if not more creative, personality functioning. Rogers eventually believed in the necessity to study self-actualization as one of the needs of humans, and introduced this positive, humanistic psychology in response to what they viewed as the distinctly generally speaking the pessimistic view of psychoanalysis towards others. As described by James Fadiman, James and Frager Robert in *Personality and Personal Growth* (2012) that it is "fundamental to all Roger's work is the assumption that people define themselves through observing and evaluating their own experience." (423) This kind of approach seems to fit in with Lowell's aim as a confessional poet.

Similarly, someone like Robert Lowell as a poet seems somehow to be adopting consciously or unconsciously the humanistic perspective. It can also be applicable to his life and work as a patient and a poet, Lowell's *Life Studies* ends up with the confessional poems of the section "Life Studies" which can be discussed easily in the light of this psychological trend. Lowell describes this in his correspondence to Elizabeth Bishop as follows:

Adrienne Rich used to  
come out twice a week to  
see me in the Boston  
hospital and a couple of  
hours would whirl by in  
what seemed like a few  
minutes of talk. I have a  
formidable new doctor,

Kurt Eissler, surrounding (I mean just his name) like a Nazi in a film, and of course out of Germany with forty volume sets of Goethe, Wieland, etc. and books of his own Goethe, Genius and Environment, Depression, etc. Maybe I'll get well. This doctor is the first I've had who is really much like an artist, thought it took several days for us to speak a language intelligible to the other. (Words in Air 602)

It took eighteen years for Lowell to return to the theme in his own compositions and consideration of himself, his psyche, and his surroundings. He goes on to say:

I am back from a month in the sanitarium. It was a quiet stay this time. I went in almost well and so had little of the jolting re-evaluation that usually comes. These attacks seem now almost like something woven in my nervous system and one of the ingredients of my blood stream and I blame them less on some fatal personal psychotic flaw. Who knows? They are nothing to be blithe about, but I feel rather composed about it all. Here I am back in the bosom of my family, and back in my study, and getting ready to finish the Oresteia. Life and work will go on. (Words in Air 570)

According to Roger's assumption people are the directing force of themselves through expressing and assessing their own experiences. His belief is based upon people's real life and personal and private affairs which are defined by the people themselves so that they can build their own personalities and construct their own images. Rogers stated that in the self, therein, lies the field of experience which is an unstable one and cannot be captured as a still photograph.

The self is "an organized, consistent gestalt, constantly in the process of forming and reforming as situation change." (224) therefore according to Rogers, this self is capable of growing, changing, and personally developing. This depends on the person's understanding of himself/herself according to past experience, present input, and future experience. (224) Helen Vendler applies this to Lowell stating that he feels the thread of self as a changing clue, while following the labyrinths of change, forcing works into shape, distressed by the control of words, wishing a real, not artificial. To him, life and hope conquer death, generally, always. (Vendler 133) In his sequence entitled *History* (590), he says: "Life by definition breeds on change," (8) There is also the quest of the ideal self wherein the person places the highest values for himself. It is similar to the self which is unstable and submits to change. If both are unlike, then the individual may be dissatisfied and undergoes neurotic difficulties. In order to see the inner self accurately and be satisfied, it is definitely a sign of mental health. A person always strives to become a whole and self-actualized person.

In another way, Lowell's thoughts in writing confessional verse, show how closely similar he is to Rogers's explanation wherein the self can strive towards mental health. Furthermore, the ideal self and the real self necessitate understanding. Lowell was well-aware of his madness when he wrote about his experience with his group therapy when he said that one morning in July 1954, he sat in his bedroom on the third floor of New York Hospital, trying as usual to get his picture of himself straight. He recalled a violent manic seizure. He heard the elevator shut and the last group of sixteen of his fellow patients going to Occupational Therapy. His mind literary and somewhat hazy, sought for the key to the right picture of itself. In his confusion, the walls of the hospital seemed to change to white clouds. He thought he saw a hard enameled wedding cake, and beside it, holding the blunt silver knife of the ritual, stood the tall white stone bride—his mother. He was as if building this hospital like a child, brick by brick or block by block. He wrote to Peter Taylor:

It's not much fun writing about these breakdowns after they themselves have broken and one stands stickily splattered with patches of the momentary bubble. Health; but not of a kind which encourages the backward look. (Hamilton 14)

Lowell's girl friend, Ann Adden, worked as a nurse at McLean hospital, when he first met her at the Boston Psychopathic Department. Lowell, wherein his poem "Home After Three Months Away", a confessional poem written in 1958, had displaced his real "mother," with Ann Adden in his mind and imagination. It was only in the very last versions of the poem that Lowell turned his daughter (Harriet)'s mother into a "Mother Figure". He seems to be assuming that he himself as a baby, as he says:

Gone now the baby's nurse,  
 A lioness who ruled the roost  
 And made the Mother cry.  
 She used to tie  
 Gobbets of portrind 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. (1-9)

According to the humanistic psychology, empathy and self-help are also parts of the healing process. This idea focuses on the therapist's ability to see the world through the eyes of the subject and Lowell's role as a poet, therefore, discusses painful memories and family embarrassment without a qualm and his conflict as reflected in his favorite themes in poetry. Lowell's approach in other words is saturated with the sense of subjective reality.

Confessional poetry changed everything regarding what could be said about mental illness, shocking the readers with a display of personal details, through using language and words that are not usually used in those respects to write about the shame, guilt and madness in free verse in order to provide insights into reality. It is the personal power of an individual to make decisions consciously and unconsciously. Each individual, thus, has this capacity to use his power correctly in order to reach self-understanding and altering his behaviour. Such power also pushes Lowell towards self-development which prevents him from falling under another's control.

As Lowell investigated more deeply into his own mental disturbance, he came to write about the pain that he suffered as a result of his incapability to precisely explain what he saw. Lowell did not follow traditional poetic form: "I think letters ought to be written the way you think poetry ought to be [...] breezy, brief, incomplete, but spontaneous and not dishonestly holding back." (*Harvard Review* 151) In reference to traumatic experience, Rogers and Maslow study the self-actualizing tendency and the needs of the human being and the importance

of acting positively. The theorist Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965) says self-actualizing is defined as the motive of the person to know his full potential. Expressing one's creativity, quest for spiritual enlightenment, pursuit of knowledge, and the desire to contribute to society are examples of self-actualization.

According to Carl Rogers (1959), "the creativity is the same tendency which we discover as the curative force in psychotherapy - *man's tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities* to express and activate all the capacities of the organism and the self." (35) Yet, before a person can achieve self-actualization there is the need to work towards being good. Research shows that when people live lives that are different from their true nature and capabilities, they are less likely to be happy than those whose goals and lives match. In the 1950s, Allen Ginsberg, and their contemporaries, Steven Hoffman and Steven Gould Axelrod believed that Lowell suffered constantly and experiences catharsis. Hoffman states that Lowell's confessional poetry includes more personal details and therefore risks more personal torment. Those critics see in Lowell a poet who embodies great torment, as if he has fallen like the well-known speaker of "Skunk Hour" who says "I myself am hell" (35). It was actually an act of self-actualization where Lowell resorts to confessional poetry in order to represent more than the recording of facts. Lowell forces us to consider how suffering and liberation can play vital roles in our attempts to define the role of the individual in literature. Lowell's conclusion to the poem "Eye and Tooth" is one of the many poems about depression in *For the Union Dead* (1964), describes this state most briefly:

Nothing! No oil  
 For the eye, nothing to pour  
 On those waters or flames.  
 I am tired. Everyone's tired of my  
 turmoil. (33-36)

Rogers defines the degree of accuracy between experience and awareness and the differences in two terms "congruence and incongruence." (427) The latter may be experienced as tension, anxiety and confusion: "I never seem to be able to stick to anything." (Fadiman 428) He suggests the inherent positive force in the individual is the move from some conflict to resolution.

According to Rogers, the nature of the human individual is not limited to being a human but it seeks to real functioning, expanding, developing, and maturing toward health and growth. This driving force towards health never sweeps aside

obstacles but it ultimately can face being distorted and repressed. Rogers, however, sees such motivating force in working freely and not being crippled by past events or current beliefs.

Self-actualizing and awareness can be a step towards identifying the problem and thus its development. Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art" from *the Complete Poems 1926-1979*, discusses how the pain of losing persons or things can be alleviated in our life if we practice how to get over the loss of little things in order to be ready to cope with the larger losses which may follow. The poet suggests that we get used to loss by practicing with little things so that when one gets to the time when significant losses occur, one will be ready to handle them, she says:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster. (1-19)

In spite of Elizabeth's advice of how to alleviate pain, strangely enough, she confesses in a "joking voice" that she is still sad about loss when she says really: "it wasn't a disaster". It is obvious that Lowell at times follows the same pattern of thinking as Elizabeth.

Therefore, Lowell mirrors the way to how the poet commits himself to and pursues a personal aesthetic. He examines himself as the subject of his poems (self-reflexive) and he ends with the same strategy, as reflected in his "Epilogue" (1976) "why not say what happened?" (11) This study explores what happened along the road with special emphasis on the contrast between Lowell's belief of the human condition. The one of "turmoil" where man can eventually liberate himself from pain. In his final poem in *Day by Day* (1977), "Epilogue" (127), the poet says:

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme--  
why are they no help to me now  
I want to make something imagined, not recalled?  
I hear the noise of my own voice:  
*The painter's vision is not a lens,  
it trembles to caress the light.*  
But sometimes everything I write  
with the threadbare art of my eye  
seems a snapshot,  
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,  
heightened from life,  
yet paralyzed by fact.  
All's misalliance.  
Yet why not say what happened?  
Pray for the grace of accuracy  
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination  
stealing like the tide across a map  
to his girl solid with yearning.  
We are poor passing facts,  
warned by that to give  
each figure in the photograph  
his living name. (1-23)

Axelrod ends his argument in an attempt to explain the ways that Lowell successfully worked towards something such as the reconstruction of identity through construction of self motivation. He says to describe Lowell as:

Lowell's experience of psychological abjection was the reasons which caused him to resist the mainstreams of social values. Perhaps it was away to combat the social conformity and other issues which influenced the people of his time and place. (10)

Robert Lowell's poetry as liberation argues that he can convey his own freedom to his readers. First, he attempts to remove his socially obstructive masks for personal liberation. His writings set examples of rising above cultural forms of social fear. Second, after his success in *Life Studies* Lowell adopts a strategy to create an ever-widening sphere of influence for the sake of individual freedom. The chronological view of Lowell's poetry demonstrates the fundamental workings of his personal style by showing how he arrives at being universal.

In setting goals, in order to solve social/human problems, there prevail critical terms and categories of the humanistic psychology and psychotherapy, such as: self-actualization and human potential. It is an approach tending towards wholeness, taking into account: human beings' free will, subjectivity, human experience, self/development, spirituality, creativity, positive thinking, client-centered and context-centered approach/intervention, empathy, personal growth and empowerment.

In order to understand how it is that with each attempt to confront suffering, as conveyed in Lowell's verse, helpful to know that there is growth, development and hope when it is grounded in true self-knowledge.

## 2.2. Specific Domestic Aspects

The following are some of the domestic and minute details of familial relationships which are exemplified in certain poems of *Life Studies*. It is the heart of the book where the sequence of poems gives the volume its title. The traditional issues of discrepancy, separation, disappointment, breakdown and death within the family were intensified by Lowell's mental breakdowns and disastrous marriages. This resulted in Lowell's writing confessional poems. The poet's own voice, his persona, is poignantly heard in these poems.

In most of the poems by Lowell, both his mother and his father were of a sort of restriction to him. He wanted to distance himself from the surrounding life which is a source of unease and anxiety. In his personal poems, Lowell sought out ways to liberate himself, he gave an example of himself as one who could remove what he believed to be social masks enforced upon all human beings. He, thus, wrote many poems to lessen basic fears about society and its norms. He thought of personal poetry as a solution to continually reconsidering how suffering and liberation can play vital roles as we move between our own private and public selves, increasing the scope of discourses that define the role of the individual in literature. The fifteen poems discussed reveal Lowell's suffering and then they are shown in relation to how Lowell seeks freedom from this suffering.

Throughout *Life Studies*, about half of the poems make reference to the speaker's ability to view himself or events precisely. Other poems draw attention to the moments of Lowell's precipitating mania that will emerge in his later work. Lowell begins with his significant "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," a confessional poem experienced at a very early age and written in the Spring of 1959, which is a family drama told by perhaps the middle-aged man looking back on and remembering his five-year-old self who witnesses death for the first time. As in the first line of the first poem, "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," he states:

"I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!"  
That's how I threw cold water  
on my Mother and Father's  
watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday  
dinner. (1-4)

It is a child's guileless cry, which would never have been paid attention to, but it is also a hint of the defiance to come. In this poem, the boy's desire to spend time with his grandparents instead of his less responsible parents comes about as a result. The poem narrates a five-year-old boy's life before and after his "last afternoon" with his uncle in a given specific time and place when he last sees his uncle in the year 1922 on the stone porch of his Grandfather's summer house.

Lowell's opening illustrates his theme of seeing and suffering: through his preference for his grandparents, he plays up a brotherly closeness with his young uncle, Devereux, and he questions his parents' authority. Yet he establishes his independence at a young age, relevant to his sense of suffering because it is so personal. When the boy first appears on the actual day in 1922 when he last sees his uncle, he stares through a dark display. The display shadows Lowell's profound thoughts on viewing life and the problems that result in his personal life: One afternoon in "1922: the stone porch of my Grandfather's summer house" (*Life Studies* 59) which Lowell uses as a subtitle in the poem, he says:

I sat on the stone porch, looking through  
screens as black-grained as drifting coal.  
Tockytoc, tockytoc  
clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo  
clock  
slung with strangled, wooden game.  
Our farmer was cementing a house  
under the hill

One of my hands was cool on a pile  
of black earth, the other warm  
on a pile of lime. (14-22)

The boy, staring through the display, mixing white and black with his hands, confronts death with his symbolic gesture of staring down and mixing earth and lime. Ordinary life goes on around him as the farmer continues his work. Lowell, as the young boy, tries again to understand the realities of life and death. This time, he finds himself staring into a water basin mirror, he says:

I was five and a half.  
My formal pearl gray shorts  
had been worn for three minutes.  
My perfection was the Olympian  
poise of my models in the imperishable  
autumn  
display windows  
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the  
State House  
in Boston. Distorting drops of water  
pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.  
I was a stuffed toucan  
with a bibulous, multicolored beak. (52-  
62)

It is then like the white and black piles he was mixing with his hands the new, dark thoughts of death suggest the roots of the boys suffering. In the final section, the young boy's ability to see things now makes up his identity, he says:

I covered in terror.  
I wasn't a child at all--  
unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina  
in the Golden House of Nero. . . . (120-  
123)

Lowell suggests that the boy somehow possesses a way of seeing situations in which he will fail to control, Lowell says: Uncle Devereux's death-haunted image looms over the young boy who: "sat on the tiles / and dug at the anchor on my sailor blouse." (128) Meanwhile "Uncle Devereux stood behind me" (129), and "his face was putty." (131). It is Lowell's first experience of mortality. He says what he sees when he thinks about death, partly transforming that which shapes his life:

He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's  
disease. . . .

My hands were warm, then cool, on the  
piles  
of earth and lime,  
a black pile and a white pile. . . .  
Come winter,  
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one  
color. (138-143)

This is exactly what happened to Lowell during his blackouts, he acts positively by having the courage to accept anxiety and move ahead dependent on his subjective realization.

The poem is a confessional poem of 152 lines divided into four parts which depends on the poet's memory about his young uncle who was about to die of Hodgkin's disease. In the poem, his age was five years old when he portrayed his wealthy family. The style of the poem is an important one where part one presents several photographs about the setting of the poem which is already given in the caption: "1922: the stone porch of my Grandfather's summer house." The poem is an elegy of a confessional mode about self-exploration and the speaker is the sincere Lowell. The style and technique are also confessional for it is written in free verse with no regular rhyme scheme. The characters in *Life Studies* and their distortions reflect the complicated state of personal suffering that Lowell chooses to emphasize with the many features of his "turmoil". As Lowell proceeds through *Life Studies*, he depicts his grandparents, his mother and father, himself, his wife and child, and even the worrying skunks that end the book as characters who struggle to see things clearly or to make sense of their disturbed conditions. None of them, of course, are successful. Yet, the success or failure to see things is not the issue since Lowell remains intensely aware all the time of everything that went around him. He says in the poem "Grandparents", which is a typical confessional poem written in 1958:

the Pierce Arrow clears its in a horse-  
stall  
Then the dry road dust rises to whiten  
the fatigued elm leaves-  
the nineteenth century, tired of children,  
is gone.  
They're all gone into a world of light; the  
farm's my own. (9-13)

In "Dunbarton", which is a typical confessional poem written in 1958, Lowell continues to pinpoint his problematic relationship with his parents by emphasizing how he, as a youth, felt closer to his grandfather: "He was my father. I was his son." (10) Lowell ends up of his way of seeing himself in the lines, "I saw myself as a young newt / neurasthenic,

scarlet / and wild in the coffee-colored water" (55-57) or in the lines "In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour / in my Grandfather's bed, / while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove." (58-60) The final picture of Lowell connotes mental disorder and strangely wild behavior.

"Dunbarton" is one of the poems from his *Life Studies* book. It's a short poem of only two pages but it has very deep meaning. The style is important wherein Robert Lowell makes use of free verse for his poems as he uses poetic language for there is no metered rhythm in the poem. Lowell always shows his preference for prose for he couldn't get his new confessional experience into tight metrical forms. Lowell has developed since his first implied acknowledgement of his father's spiritual detachment, he describes him as: "At each stage of his life, he was to be forlornly fatherless." (Nelson 62) In the poem "Commander Lowell", which is a confessional poem written in 1958-59, the father has his own sense of identity that was never mature nor stable. Lowell also mocks his father, as he does many times in *Life Studies*, as incompetent, shallow, and frustrating, but, here, especially his father's shortcomings are drawn (his physical appearance, his choice of homes and cars, his careers). He says in this poem:

Having a naval officer  
 .....  
 He wasn't at all "serious,"  
 when he showed upon on the golf course,  
 wearing a blue serge jacket and numbly cut  
 white ducks he'd bought  
 at a Pearl Harbor commissariat....  
 and took four shots with his putter to  
 sink his putt.  
 "Bob," they said, "golf's a game you really  
 ought to know how to play,  
 if you play at all."  
 .....  
 Poor Father, his training was  
 engineering!  
 Cheerful and cowed  
 among the seadogs at the Sunday yacht  
 club,  
 he was never one of the crowd. (18-34)

The implication is that such a son needed badly a reliable father whom he could respect, but that he had had no such luck. Given his medical history, the father moves to Beverly Farms so that he could have easier access to "the Boston doctors" to cure the dangerous growth of coronary heart-disease / prematurely senile decay ailment not necessarily in conjunction with that of a hero. In these final days, Lowell

permits the thought of his father's superior attitude to "the curator" but father's death was not like a hero. In "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms", a confessional poem written in 1958 and a memoir of the last days of his father's life, Lowell seems to be less critical of his father's failures to adapt to civilian life and ultimately sympathetic to his mortal condition. Still, Lowell's strategy is to catalogue significant details. For instance:

Father - bronzed, breezy, a shade too  
 ruddy,  
 as if on deck-duty (4-6)

Lowell reveals an aspect of his father's character that: "Father's death was abrupt and unprotesting. / His vision was still twenty-twenty." (42-43) He ends the poem with his father's life ends in a letdown but with a hopeless cry: "I feel awful". (46) The vast potential of his life has amounted in the end just to a common mundane phrase and his father has vanished to one color.

Lowell, in "Father's Bedroom" written in 1958-59, shows some understanding of the father, since the poem stresses his father's things, for example, a lamp and a book. Lowell's focus on his father's book is a statement of love from someone for whom he felt powerfully strong emotions for inwardly, and also about a father for whom he had hoped to derive an ideal image. But the poet's love persists through time and events, for he says as quoted in the poem:

"This book has had hard usage  
 on the Yangtze River, China.  
 It was left under an open  
 porthole in a storm." (20-23)

In "During Fever", a typical confessional poem written in 1958, Lowell feels bad that his mother's bedroom which pictures Lowell's mother in her bedroom familiar about what was going on "behind the screen." (36) Lowell surveys in *Life Studies* sequence this poem "During Fever" in order to emphasize the elements that hinder his attempts to interpret his life.

In "Waking in the Blue" written in 1958-59, is concerned with his stay at McLean's Hospital and his return home to his wife and child. With the other "mental cases" in McLean's, Lowell rises one morning to consume a large breakfast and walk about, he says:

After a hearty New England breakfast,  
 I weigh two hundred pounds

this morning. Cock of the walk,  
 I strut in my turtle-necked French  
 sailor's jersey  
 before the metal shaving mirrors,  
 and see the shaky future grow familiar  
 in the pinched, indigenous faces  
 of these thoroughbred mental cases,  
 twice my age and half my weight.  
 We are all old-timers,  
 each of us holds a locked razor. (40-50)

In the above last line of verse, Lowell indicates openly the suicidal inclination in most people suffering from mental disturbance. Yet, he is able to confront the dark world and deny the suicidal desire and the death urge.

In a scene in the poem "Home After Three Months Away" wherein he emphasizes his own shaky state, Lowell describes an emotional view between himself and his young daughter. The scene combines his love for his daughter, his distrust of himself, and a mediating aspect between the two, his attempt to remain mentally stable, he says:

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. (10-  
 28)

Lowell's daughter, jokingly making an innocent and imaginative game of her father's shaving, has no idea that he sees the razor and shaving mirror with the "shaking future growing familiar" (45) in the previous poem about McLean's. Lowell cannot stay with his daughter because he does not trust himself with the razor. As he shaves, he finds himself in the same situation that the young boy in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" experienced while staring into the basin. As was the case in the earlier poem and is the case persistently

throughout the speaker's life--his confused self-image, father and aging mental case in "Home After Three Months Away" and death-haunted child in "My Last Afternoon," wherein a plot is there to separate him from others, usually his family and through all this he manages to get some freedom. During the 1950s, Lowell definitely writes clearly about his own private life and his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick 1916-2007, as in such representative examples as Lowell's "Man and Wife" (1958). Lowell never gives us the impression of being the worn out man who shows his feeling under the burden of failure in marriage. He describes both the marriage system and woman in the light of a reproduction machine. He writes against the conventional practices of marriage of his time which are in practice even today in some sectors of American life. As an example of the lines of the poem:

Now twelve years later, you turn your  
 back.  
 Sleepless, you hold  
 your pillow to your hollows like a child;  
 your old-fashioned tirade-  
 loving, rapid, merciless-  
 breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my  
 head. (23-28)

Lowell makes clear his growing personal isolation in his *Life Studies* sequence. In "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" which is a confessional poem written in 1958, he presents a negative account of himself from his wife's point of view. Lowell uses a subtitle by Schopenhauer which summarizes the situation, it states: "*It is the future generation that presses into being by means of these exuberant feelings and supersensible soap bubbles of ours.*" (*Life Studies* 88) In the poem, the "hopped up husband drops his home pursuits / and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes, / free-lancing out on the razor's edge" (3-5). The razor motif sustains the idea of trying to see himself exactly and of being dangerous to himself. He piles up the present self devaluation through his wife's imagined monologue:

My only thought is how to keep him alive.  
 What makes him tick? Each night now I  
 tie  
 ten dollars and his car key to my thigh. . .  
 .  
 Gored by the climacteric of his want,  
 he stalls above me like an elephant. (10-  
 14)

The oppressive husband is an extreme image of himself different from the recovering father of "Home After Three Months Away" who is "frizzled, stale and small." (40) The problem he faces is that the fixed patriarchal structure is still controlling and imposing his life in one way or the other.

In another poem, Lowell places "Skunk Hour" at the end of the "Life Studies" section. The gloom about this poem centers on his sense of seeing and suffering. He distanced himself from the family concerns. The first half of the poem diagnoses an "ill season" by listing several images of deteriorating wealth and focusing on characters that have either left this "ill season" or remain to contribute to its misery. In the second part of the poem, the speaker emerges on "one dark night" to look down on the town people and to confess his failing mental state. At this point in the *Life Studies* sequence the physical and psychological torture reach its acme revealing the extent of Lowell's suffering. The speaker's blood pushes a weeping pain a million times over in his body which may be Satan to its followers. The difference is that Lowell's pain is internal, he says:

They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church. (39-42)

All of this shows that Lowell cannot chase them away, yet, as the stanza makes clear, they pose no real threat, for the speaker stands above them. But Lowell plays up the frightening sense that the skunks will somehow overwhelm him. These are no manic killer skunks and the speaker may simply return to his home, close his car- the Porch door, and be with his own family. The fact that they "will not scare" suggests that--at the end of the sequence--Lowell feels some hope about his own mental state and will continue to have hope to stay with them as nobody is left of his family only the skunks. All of this shows that Lowell, in the *Life Studies* sequence, uses images that reveal his personal identity.

The poem "Skunk Hour" is formally organized. It is the first poem which is written but the last laid out in the sequence of *Life Studies*. It is written in the confessional personal mode but it seems to be still affected by Lowell's formal style in his earlier poems. All stanzas are of the same length, six lines with some rhyme. The fourth stanza rhymes as abcbca, not in all stanzas; the rhyming varies throughout the poem. The rhyme scheme reflects the unstable minded state of the speaker. In addition, the tone seems to be revealing the

unstable, sad and lonely mentality of the speaker as well. He is driving the whole night and stopping with his Porch car to watch the skunks. Lowell then passes along the seaside in the dark night abandoned by all, even by the skunks.

In this poem, sounds are not unuttered from the poet's mouth. The first two lines are long and full of syllables while other lines are short and direct. This contrast, for example, in the poet's mind is shown in the fifth stanza where we have a line full of syllables such as in "my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull" (26), and "where the graveyard shelves on the town." (29) Whereas the last line is short "My mind is not right." (30) This change over from long lines to short ones reveals the poet's state of mind. The question which poses itself is why the poem is entitled "Skunk Hour." Lowell moves around the poem with lots of double meanings and puns. The title is itself a play with word another pun. It is a witching hour word that is finally used to appear to the reader as a "Skunk Hour", it is literally midnight when witches are brewing all their spells. It is the time when the town is empty except for skunks and where the speaker can feel ill and speak about it elsewhere at ease when he says: "I've been working like a skunk.", as an earlier mentioned statement in a letter in this thesis, he indicates his own personal vision about continuing to work very hard at his poetry despite all difficulties.

However, the study of the psychoanalytical approach helps the reader to understand the process of growth and development of a poet and a man in the society, and how the repressed unconscious desires affect his future life. He comes to terms with most of his earlier resentment against all established orders of society. The themes of his poetry are related to life in all its significant aspects. Lowell chose to reflect all that is hidden about the family in the 1950s when he discovered his own ancestors' disreputable history; he began to feel embarrassment, contempt and a deep moral burden. Lowell's poetry has struggled to break the boundaries of tradition while describing the conflict between the old and the new. In confessional poetry it is of significance that Lowell should make himself the subject of his poetry in such a diverse cultural milieu as that to which he belonged and his celebrated poetry stands witness to this.

## References

1. Axelrod, Steven Gould. *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Jan 1, 1999, 33.
2. ---. Helen Deese, ed. *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 80.
3. Bainbridge, Charles. "Seeing things". *The Guardian* (London). 11 February 2006.

4. Bate, Walter Jackson. *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1971, 3-5.
5. Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983.
6. Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Tennessee Williams*. New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1987, 116-126.
7. ---, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 162.
8. Borkowska, Ewa. *At the threshold of mystery: Poetic encounters with other(ness)*. The University of Michigan. New York: P. Lang, 2005. 94.
9. Ellison, Helen McCloy. Ellesa Clay High, Peter A. Stitt. "Richard Wilbur." *The Art of Poetry* No. 22.
10. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3509/the-art-of-poetry-no-22-richard-wilbur>.
11. Fadiman, James. Robert, Frager. *Personality and Personal Growth*. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994, 418-428.
12. Freud, Sigmund. *Collected papers*. Translated by Joan Riviere, Alix Strachey, James Strachey. Volume 5. London: Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1950, 74.
13. ---. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by A. A. Brill (1911). NY: Macmillan, 1900.
14. Hamilton, Ian. *Lowell. Robert Lowell: A Biography*. London: Faber & Faber, 2011.14-17.
15. Hamilton, Saskia, Travisano, Thomas, ED. *Words In Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. 317, 570-602.
16. Hart, Henry. *Robert Lowell and the Sublime*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995, xxiv.
17. *Harvard Review*, Issues 24-27 President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2003, 151.
18. Horváth, Rita. "Never Asking Why Build-Only Asking Which Tools". *Confessional Poetry and the Construction of the Self*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2005, 30-40.
19. Jarrell, Randall. Mary Jarrell. *Randall Jarrell's Letters: An Autobiographical and Literary Selection*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002, 139.
20. Karthikeyan, J. *Richard Eberhart's Apprenticeship And Process Of Becoming*. International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL) Vol.3, Issue 21-10. India, Vellore: TJPRC Pvt. Ltd, 2013, 6.
21. Kirsch, Adam. "Smashed". *The New Yorker*. 14 March 2005.
22. ---. "Lowell Studies". *New York Times*. August 15, 2007. <http://www.nysun.com/arts/lowell-studies/60509/>
23. Lowell, Robert. *Life Studies*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1959.
24. May, Rollo. *Love and Will*. New York: Delta, 1969.
25. ---. "The Problem of Evil: An open Letter to Carl Rogers." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1982, 22, 10-21.
26. ---. *The Meaning of Anxiety*. New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1950. 223.
27. Meyers, Jeffrey. *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988, 2-93.
28. Nelson, Deborah. *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, 62.
29. Ostriker, Alicia. "The Widening Spell." *A weblog of poetry's capacious connections*, August 16, 2012.
30. Phillips, S. Robert. *The Confessional Poets*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, 2.
31. Roberts, Neil. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003, 197.
32. Rogers, Carl Ransom. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Mariner Books. Introduction by Peter D. Kramer. U.S.A: Mariner Books, 1995, 35.
33. Simpson, Louis. *At the End of the Open Road: Poems*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1963, 55.
34. Tillinghast, Richard. "The achievement of Robert Lowell." 2004. <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-achievement-of-Robert-Lowell-1611>.
35. Travisano, Thomas. *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999, 253.
36. Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, 135-141.
37. Wallingford, Katharine. *Robert Lowell's Language of the Self*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. 64.