

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE CONFSSIONAL POETS:
REMOVING THE MASK OF IMPERSONALITY WITH ALL THE
SKILLS OF THE MODERNISTS

VANESSA SHALKEY
Spring 2012

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in English and International Politics
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

John Marsh
Assistant Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Sternlieb
English Honors Advisor
Honors Advisor

Christopher Castiglia
Liberal Arts Research Professor of English
CALs Senior Scholar in Residence
Second Reader

*Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

The pioneers of the frontier of new art forms have always made themselves vulnerable to the criticism of the previous generation; however, this criticism often overshadows and undermines the true success of these bold artists. The confessional poets were some of these trailblazers who took American poetry into areas untouched by previous generations and were criticized for breaking with the traditional methods of past poets--especially the modernists. Poets like Robert Lowell and John Berryman used their life events as subject matter for their poetry, which the New Critics thought was bad form. This controversial shift in style won these poets the name "confessional," a title that many of the poets to whom it refers found disparaging. The label "confessional" gives the impression that these poets did little more than use their poems as diary entries, when in fact they wrote magnificent poetry with the same talent and technical skills that the modernist poets displayed. This thesis is an examination of the confessional poets' use of effective poetic devices favored by the modernist poets to analyze whether or not the act of removing the mask of impersonality negatively impacted the ability of the confessional poets to develop complex themes and transmute feelings to the reader. I will examine T.S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which contains many of the arguments for the impersonality of the poet that the New Critics used to disapprove of the new confessional style. I will also compare two quintessential modernist poems by T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Wasteland," to the poems in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* and John Berryman's *Dream Songs* to analyze the connection that the confessional poets have to the traditions of the modernist style of poetry. The artistry and insight that the confessional poets put into their new style of poetry helped them to produce great masterpieces in English literature and inspired future generations of American poets to test the conventions of the past with boldness and creativity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
That Which We Call Confessional Poetry	1
Not Mere Confessions, But Art	3
They Owe It to the Modernists	5
Against the Rule of New Criticism	6
ROBERT LOWELL: LIFE STUDIES	10
Lowell's Life	11
What Lowell Learned from Eliot	13
“Inauguration Day: January 1953”	16
“Waking in the Blue”	20
“To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage”	27
“Skunk Hour”	30
JOHN BERRYMAN: DREAM SONGS	37
The Development of Berryman's Career	37
Eliot's Manifesto of Impersonality	42
Dream Song #1	45
Dream Song #4	48

Dream Song #14	51
Dream Song #36	53
Dream Song #76: Henry's Confession	55
Conclusion	59
Bibliography	61

INTRODUCTION

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone...
you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

--T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

That Which We Call Confessional Poetry

The poets discussed in this essay are a couple of the most criticized, yet two of the most brilliant poets of the twentieth century. In T.S. Eliot's famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he wrote "criticism is as inevitable as breathing" (1). When Robert Lowell and John Berryman started publishing poetry that was very different from that of the previous generation, critics had quite a lot to huff and puff about. Because of the more personal subject matter of their poetry, the literary world started to call Lowell, Berryman, and a few of their colleagues "confessional poets." From the 1940s through the 1970s, these poets wrote some of the most influential and controversial poetry in American literature. Collections such as Lowell's *Life Studies* (1957) and Berryman's *Dream Songs* (1969) challenged the New Critical theory of literature and left these poets vulnerable to harsh judgment by the literary community, which was still hooked on the great works of the modernist poets. M.L. Rosenthal was the first to use the term "confessional" in reference to these poets to describe the self-exposure evident in their poetry; however, he did not realize the damaging effect of this label until many years after he

coined the term in his paper, "Poetry as Confession." In 1967 he wrote a response to the controversy that this word created:

The term 'confessional poetry' came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, and perhaps it came to the minds of others just as naturally. Whoever invented it, it was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage. (Travisano 32)

In *The Wounded Surgeon*, Adam Kirsch writes, "the confessional style has been one of the most popular, and most easily ridiculed in American poetry" (Kirsch x), and to weaken the "confessional" poets' association with such a notorious style, Kirsch suggests the title of his book, which comes from T.S. Eliot's "East Coker," as an appropriate alternative:

In order to reclaim the true achievement of these six poets, a new metaphor is needed. This is what the title of *The Wounded Surgeon* hopes to supply: T.S. Eliot's image evokes the resolve, not to say heroism, that these poets displayed by submitting their most intimate and painful experiences to the objective discipline of art. (Kirsch xi)

Despite valiant efforts to distance these poems from the unsophisticated genre of confession, no other name has stuck--but that does not mean that this poetry is limited by its name. Putting these poems under the section titled "Confessional Poetry" in the anthology of American Literature has made it easier for readers who are unfamiliar with these works to overlook the merits of the poets who wrote them; nevertheless, this controversial label has led to many fruitful analyses of its unsuitability, which highlight the achievements of poets like Lowell and Berryman. Their poems

“made it possible for poets to put themselves at risk in their work in ways that would have been unthinkable a generation earlier” (Kirsch X) and opened the world of American poetry to a formerly forbidden subject matter that would be used to create some of the best (and, yes, some of the worst) poetry in American history. Before Lowell and Berryman were associated with the term “confessional,” true written confessions were looked down upon as low art, but the confessional poets have added a level of complexity to the art of speaking about oneself.

Not Mere Confessions, But Art

At first glance the poems written by Lowell and Berryman look like mere confessions, but if the reader does not take the time to look below the surface of these poems, he will miss the intricate construction of these works of art. In the essay “The Confessional Paradigm Revisited,” Thomas Travisano makes the argument that calling Lowell and Berryman’s poems confessional leads to ignoring the artistic aspect of these poems: “Critics following the confessional paradigm have either ignored or minimized the means by which...the characteristically devious tactics of art have made the process of life seem real” (38). In “My Grandfather’s Tackle Box,” Billy Collins exhibits the kind of behavior that Travisano describes when he offers this comment about the confessional poets:

If you have a memory, write a memoir, the austere advice goes; and if you have lived a freaky enough life, try an autopathography. To put it more practically: if what you want to say in poetry can be said as well or better by some other means, be it a memoir, a travel piece, a diary entry, a short story, a phone call, or an e-mail, by all means stop writing poems. The key risk in writing the memory-driven poem is a failure to take advantage of the imaginative liberty that poetry offers. A

poem suffering from such a disadvantage wanders around in the past and may amount to little more than a record, an entry in the log of the self's journey, a fond reminiscence, a photo in a family album, or worse, a carousel of color slides.

(Collins 281)

The correlation between the content of the poems of *Life Studies* and *Dream Songs* and the biographies of the poets who wrote them is obvious, and as a result, these poets are known mainly for their dramatic life events; however, reducing these poems to diary entries or little more than records of the poets' lives dismisses the artistic craftsmanship put into the poetry. Collins writes, "For a poet to write of his own life...would be not only self-indulgent but of no value to an audience interested in its own edification, not in the secrets of the poet's past" (297), unwilling to acknowledge that the primary goal of post-modernist poets like Lowell and Berryman was to express truths about universal emotions through the illusion of self-reflection. Collins argues, "In writing a poem, one is pursuing an aesthetic truth (which may be a total lie), not a journalistic or historic truth" (284), but his statement does not accurately apply to Lowell and Berryman who pursued "aesthetic truth" above all things in their poetry and were more than willing to change "historic truth" whenever necessary. Unlike Collins, Kirsch sees a distinction between confession and what Lowell, Berryman, and their contemporaries created:

The motive for confession is penitential or therapeutic--by speaking openly about his guilt and suffering, the poet hopes to make them easier to bear. Another possible motive is ethical: by refusing to join the conspiracy of polite silence around certain shameful subjects, he challenges us to shed light on our own dark places.

But the poets discussed in this book always approached their writing as artists,
and their primary motive was aesthetic. (Kirsch x)

How can art be limited to specific subject matter? A painting can be high art no matter if it depicts a classic image like the Pieta or a personal one, such as a portrait of the artist himself. As long as the piece is rendered with skill and an eye for aesthetics, it can be a work of art. Lowell and Berryman's artistic freedom is in no way limited by their use of personal subject matter.

They Owe It to the Modernists

The subject matter of confessional poetry differs from that of the previous generation, the modernists, but the confessional poets still showcase the skills developed by the modernist poets, such as using objective correlatives, allusions, and personas to evoke certain feelings in the reader. What makes these poets a cohesive group is not only that they share a similar confessional style, but that they were all forged in the same fire. Robert Lowell and John Berryman "came to maturity during the triumphant age of Modernist poetry" (Kirsch xii). Both respected the extraordinary achievements of the modernist poets, who raised American poetry to a level of unprecedented esteem in the canon of English literature. Lowell said that "never before or since have there been so many good poets in America; nor in England--unless we go back for than two hundred and fifty years" (Kirsch xii). The confessional poets began to study and write poetry during this age of ardent admiration for the modernists, and at first, they adhered to the principle styles and methods of great poets, such as T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. "With varying degrees of skill, they wrote poems that were ambiguous, allusive, symbolic, and impersonal--brilliantly so in the case of Lowell, lifelessly in the case of Berryman" (xiv), writes Kirsch;

however, these two poets eventually broke away from imitating the modernists and set out to write in their own original styles.

New Criticism, which became the dominant literary theory during the modernist era and continued to be popularly supported throughout the careers of the confessional poets, became something of a dogma for poetry. Robert Lowell studied with John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College and lived as a guest of Allen Tate--Ransom and Tate both being prominent figures in New Criticism. Berryman also was acquainted with Tate when he was introduced to him through his mentor at Columbia, Mark Van Doren. However much Lowell and Berryman were influenced by New Criticism, they all eventually rejected it in practice. New Criticism is so closely associated with the modernists that the confessional poets are sometimes accused of rebelling against the style of their predecessors, when they really were challenging the premises of New Criticism by using the foundations of modernism to explore the self, which was an unpopular practice during that movement in poetry.

Against the Rule of New Criticism

The confessional poets did not break with modernism as much as they did with New Criticism, which developed towards the end of the modernist movement and continued into the 1970's. Instead, they pushed modernism to its limits by exploring different subjects and styles. Nevertheless, this break with New Criticism was very controversial.

New Criticism is a multi-faceted theory, but its major application to poetry comes from the central idea in T.S. Eliot's criticism, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which he argues that poetry must be impersonal; however, Eliot himself moved further into the forbidden realm of "personal" poetry than the previous generations, especially in his poem "The Love Song of J.

Alfred Prufrock.” Yet even in this poem, Eliot’s ambiguity and use of Prufrock as a persona allows him to mask his personality from the judgement of the reader. Rosenthal says that “Lowell removes the mask” (“Poetry as Confession” 109), perhaps journeying much further on path of poetic transparency than Eliot would have dared.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot explains that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” (4). His main argument for keeping the poet’s personal life separate from the content of his poetry is that a personal experience is most likely not the best medium through which to transmute the desired emotion. “The emotion of art is impersonal” (Eliot 6).

In the general sense, the confessional poets break many of the rules in the second section of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” but the first part of Eliot’s essay makes many points that could be used to argue that the subject matter of confessional poetry is not its defining feature. “We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors...if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (Eliot 1). Most critics focused on the differences between confessional poetry and modernist poetry, but the similarities between the two are extremely important. “You cannot value [the poet] alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (Eliot 2). The relationship between the confessional poets and the modernists is more complex than just comparison and contrast. Eliot writes that “the past shall be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (2). Confessional poetry puts some of the tenets of modernist

poetry to use with subject matter that the modernists avoided, challenging Eliot's idea that personality cannot work in a poem.

Contemporary poets, Eliot writes, "must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past" (2); however, they will not be "judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics" (2). Eliot's essay was meant to be criticism, not an infallible standard for poetry. In fact, his essay even warns that, when he is dead, his standards cannot judge the value of new poets. Eliot argues that simply adhering to the standards of past generations cannot aid one in producing great poetry. "To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and therefore not be a work of art" (Eliot 2). At first, Lowell and Berryman wrote poetry in the modernist style, but it was nothing new and, therefore, not artistic. It was not until these poets ventured into a different mode of expression that they could create something new. Eliot writes "art never improves, but...the material of art is never quite the same" (2). Art is a movement, and is always changing but never getting better or worse. What the confessional poets changed about their poetry did not make it worse or even improve it. It simply made it new, thus giving it the possibility to be artistic. There is no highest art form, but there are different qualities of artists who can either skillfully or unskillfully aspire to greatness.

Despite breaking with Eliot's primary contribution to New Critical theory, the confessional poets embraced the discipline, seriousness, and technical sophistication showcased in some of Eliot's most highly esteemed poetry, such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land." Elements that Eliot used explicitly, such as the objective correlative, allusion, and persona, were also embraced by Lowell and Berryman. Using these techniques to

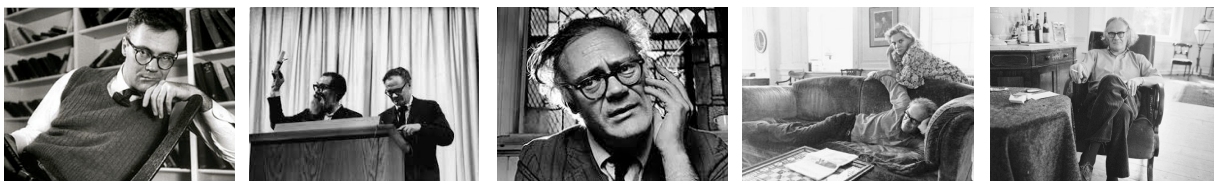
apply language in an artificial way made it possible for these confessional poets to share not merely the records of several individuals' turbulent lives, but an artful expression of the universal struggles of the twentieth century man.

This thesis intends to compare and contrast the confessional poets to their immediate predecessors, the modernist poets, in order to test the validity of Eliot's claim that "The progression of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 3). Through a close analysis of poems selected from Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, as well as T. S. Eliot's two most famous poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land," I will discuss how the structural and thematic similarities between confessional poems and modernist poems suggest that the personality of the poet can be employed to create successful and powerful poetry. Eliot uses objective correlatives, allusions, and personas to explore emotionally complex themes. Even though he maintains a level of impersonality in his poetry, Lowell and Berryman are able to use these same poetic devices to achieve similar emotional and thematic effects in their poetry. The confessional poets challenged the manifesto of the impersonality of the artist and weakened the belief that imperfect separation between the poet and the poem hinders the transmutation of emotions to the reader, which set the stage for future generations of American poets to continually reinterpret the art of poetry in the same innovative fashion.

ROBERT LOWELL: LIFE STUDIES

“The reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell.”

--Robert Lowell, in an interview for the *Paris Review* (1961)



A major concern that critics had about Robert Lowell's poetry was that he was sacrificing the aesthetics of his work by relying on the historical facts of his life as the content for his poems. Lowell resented this accusation, and addressed the misconception that *Life Studies* was merely an autobiographical piece during an interview with Frederick Seidel for the *Paris Review*:

They're not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in these poems...There was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry. (Bidart 1000)

One of T.S. Eliot's arguments for the impersonality of the poet was that the poet's personality can interfere in the transmission of emotions into verse: "the more perfect the artist, the more

completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” (Eliot 4). Lowell, however, seems separate enough from his subject matter that he feels free to invent facts and change things when it is aesthetically beneficial. Eliot claims that the poet’s personality, which suffers through everyday life, hinders his ability to effectively transmute passions, but I would argue that fictional poems have an inherent obstacle to overcome, since readers must suspend their disbelief that the fabricated situations in the poem applies to real life. By throwing off the appearance of fiction in his poetry, Lowell gains a powerful influence over the reader’s reaction by creating the illusion that his poems are historically accurate. In addition, he uses poetic devices that are very similar to Eliot’s preferred techniques, such as the objective correlative, the allusion, and the persona, to explore many of the same themes highlighted in Eliot’s poetry. I will compare the effectiveness of Eliot’s modernist style of impersonality to Lowell’s more self-involved style of poetry through and in-depth analysis of the techniques and themes in Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Waste Land” and selected poems from Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. If Lowell’s poems can effectively transform language into many of the same emotions found in Eliot’s poetry, that evidence would strengthen the argument that, in *Life Studies*, Lowell’s personality is not a debilitating crutch, but rather another useful poetic device that the poet employs to manipulate the reactions of the reader.

Lowell’s Life

Robert Lowell is known as the father of confessional poetry. His book *Life Studies* (1959) is incredibly personal, but Lowell insisted that every poem was a constructed reality rather than pure autobiography. Lowell was born into a well known and respected Boston family on March

1, 1917. His father was an officer in the navy. In *Life Studies*, Lowell exposed his strained relationship with his father and the marital and psychological issues in his own life, shattering the idea that his family was in any way perfect. Lowell attended St. Mark's School and continued on to Harvard College to study English literature, specifically poetry. After two years, because of psychological stress and a conflict with his family over planning to marry his first wife, novelist Jean Stafford, Lowell transferred to Kenyon College. There he studied under New Critic and poet John Crowe Ransom until he graduated in 1940. Lowell attended graduate school at Louisiana State University with two other New Critics, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, and became friends with Allen Tate. Lowell was greatly influenced by these men and New Criticism in general.

Adhering to the tenets of New Criticism, Lowell published two books, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and *Lord Weary's Castle* (which won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1947), which showcased poems that were "formal, and difficult" (120) and expertly handled meter and rhyme. Many of these poems were influenced by Lowell's conversion from Episcopalianism to Catholicism. After the bombing in Dresden, Lowell no longer believed that World War II was a just war, so he declared himself a conscientious objector and was imprisoned for six months.

After he was released, Lowell moved to Black Rock, Connecticut and wrote some of his best poetry. During this time, he suffered many episodes of manic depression and spent a significant amount of time in psychiatric hospitals. Partially influenced by these mental breakdowns, Lowell attempted to deconstruct the ambiguity and rigidity in his poems by writing about the most intimate aspects of his life in a freer meter and structure. This is when he wrote *Life Studies*, one of the most influential post-WWII poetry collections, one which would have a

monumental impact on the direction that contemporary poets took in their poetry for many decades after its publication. Lowell had a multitude of marital problems. His first marriage to Jean Stafford only lasted about eight years. He married Elizabeth Hardwick one year after his divorce. He divorced his second wife in 1970 and married the writer Caroline Blackwood two years later, but it was not long until Lowell was separated again. He died at the age of 60 in 1977 from a heart attack on his way to visit his second wife and his daughter.

(Biographical information from *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* 119-121)

What Lowell Learned from Eliot

Robert Lowell's writing style was greatly influenced by T.S. Eliot's techniques. Lowell's use of objective correlatives, allusions, and personas, are an indication that if he had not learned to write in the wake of the modernist tradition, his poetry would look very different. Despite being much more self-revealing in his poems, Lowell is able to use many of the techniques that Eliot emphasized to explore complex themes that are also evident in Eliot's poetry.

The concept of the objective correlative, for example, was formulated by T.S. Eliot when he used the term in an essay on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In "Hamlet and His Problems," published in the *Athenaeum* (September 26, 1919), Eliot makes the argument that the play was a failure because Shakespeare was only able to portray Hamlet's feelings through the character's speech, rather than using objects or events to elicit particular emotions in the audience. Eliot believed that to manipulate feeling into art, the artist should use forms that objectify the emotion's essence, rather than describe the emotion with words. An example of Eliot's using an objective correlative is the "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes" in "The Love Song

of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Eliot never says that this cat-like smoke is a metaphor for Prufrock, but we can see that the fog’s lazy attempt to get inside the house and quick resolution to sleep outside, “Curled once about the house,” parallels Prufrock’s attitude towards not “disturbing the universe.”

The genius of the objective correlative is that it allows the reader to come to his own conclusion about the poem. If a poet were to openly and directly state his feelings, the reader would first have to evaluate the truth of his words, then decide whether or not to believe them. The objective correlative does not need to convince the reader, since it has no bias and no opinion. It is an inanimate object. The reader will feel that his reaction to an objective correlative is spontaneous, but it is actually masterfully manipulated by the poet’s use and placement of the image.

In addition to objective correlatives, Eliot makes frequent use of allusions in his poetry. The epigraph at the beginning of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” comes from Dante’s *Inferno* and appears in the original Italian. The last two lines translate to “But since none has ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear is true, I answer you without fear of infamy.” This implies that Prufrock can only say exactly what he wants to say as long as only he and one other person are there to hear it. The reality is that, for someone living in a modern society, there is no place on earth that is private enough for a man to be completely honest about himself. The reader can see that Prufrock has trouble expressing himself because he says, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” Keeping the message of the epigraph in mind, Prufrock’s confession that “in short, I was afraid,” seems to mean that this man is wrestled into inaction by

the pressures and expectations of society. Prufrock will go on with his life, asking “Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?” and will never “have the strength to force the moment to its crisis.”

In the same way, the epigraph for “The Waste Land” makes the reader think of an issue that will be relevant to themes expressed in the poem. The epigraph comes from Petronius’s *Satyricon*. It translates to “For indeed I myself have seen with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae, hanging in a bottle, and when those boys would say to her: ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she would reply, ‘I want to die’” (*The Norton Anthology of World Literature* 2079) This epigraph makes the reader wonder if living a long life is what really matters. A long life with little excitement and adventure could seem like hell. Life needs to be vibrant and full of new experiences in order for it to be beautiful and purposeful. This allusion to Petronius’s *Satyricon* expresses that life that merely clings to existence and lingers in the same, old place is not aesthetically pleasing--a theme that is sustained throughout the poem.

The last poetic technique analyzed in this thesis is the use of persona. Eliot uses a single persona throughout “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and uses multiple personas in “The Waste Land.” These two, very different ways of using personas have different effects for the poems. In “Prufrock” the reader is slightly skeptical of Prufrock’s honesty, since he has just been warned by the epigraph that it is only safe to tell one’s secrets if they can never be repeated, yet the reader is also sympathetic to Prufrock’s heartfelt confession because it is so personal. In “The Waste Land,” Eliot uses so many personas that it is very difficult to focus on a character for the entire plot of the poem. This technique makes the reader feel as though he is trying to look for a familiar face in a chaotic crowd, enforcing the idea that life does not have the congruent narrative that is romanticized in classic literature. Eliot uses persona as a device to paint a picture

of the modern age in which nations are torn apart by world war and Christianity, the religion that united Europe, seems ineffectual. In “The Waste Land,” every individual is on his own, “each in his prison.”

These three poetic techniques used by Eliot are also extremely important in Lowell’s poetry. Through a close, line-by-line read of Lowell’s “Inauguration Day: January 1953,” “Waking in the Blue,” “To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage,” and “Skunk Hour,” I will examine this confessional poet’s success in exploring many of the same themes present in Eliot’s poems “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Waste Land.”

“Inauguration Day: January 1953”

“Inauguration Day: January 1953” is the third poem in Part One of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. The title alludes to the date on which Dwight D. Eisenhower was inaugurated president of the United States; however, the year 1953 by itself reminds the reader of the Korean War, the McCarthy era, and a shared fear of nuclear apocalypse. This poem is considered confessional because it expresses Lowell’s negative feelings towards the election of Eisenhower, who was associated with the bombings of Dresden, an event that convinced Lowell to conscientiously object to fighting in WWII. However closely the speaker’s feelings seem to align with poet’s, this poem does not contain any specific references to Lowell’s life, nor does it consist of a passionate monologue to persuade the reader to agree with the poet. Rather, “Inauguration Day: January 1953” displays Lowell’s use of the objective correlative to evoke feelings in the reader, who draws connections between the images in poem on his own.

The speaker's tone regarding the date in history mentioned in the title of Lowell's poem is immediately felt through the imagery, which is frigid. The fresh "snow" in line 1, the "ermine" in line 5, the reference to "Cold Harbor," and the fragment "Ice, ice" in line 10 all fit with the winter theme for January and express the speaker's feelings that the current condition of New York City, and even the entire country, is frozen and dead.

The first vignette of Eliot's "The Waste Land" uses the image of winter to elicit certain feelings from the reader. The character in the first stanza, Countess Marie Larich, says "Winter kept us warm, covering/Earth in forgetful snow..." which paints winter as a season of forgetfulness and security. She describes her childhood and how she remembers sledding in the mountains where "you feel free." Winter is a time for innocence. In Lowell's poem, this innocence seems to take a destructive route into ignorance.

Lowell, through the use of objective correlatives, shows that the city is unaware of its irrational celebration of the past. The Third Avenue Elevated line, referred to as "the El" in line 3, is an objective correlative for Manhattan's elevated nostalgia of old New York. The El's charge is a feeble "groan" compared to the war march of the "subways" set to the lively beat of a drum. The El is in danger of being replaced by the subways, but it still lingers. It is built on a "truss of adamant"--a truss being an elevated structure and adamant being an unbreakable and enduring substance. Even though the El is still standing, it "groaned" and "slummed on want" because it is falling into disuse. This message is similar to the one delivered through Eliot's allusion to Sybil, who is trapped in a bottle and cannot die. The image of the El shows that its enduring physical existence does not change its purposelessness. The El is draped in "ermine" (the snow), which is white fur from a weasel's winter coat that was often worn as a

sign of status. This image suggests that nostalgia results in fond memories that cover up the reality of a past that may not have been so much better than the present. Even though the subways are “buried” underground in a tomb-like vault instead of elevated above the street, the El exhibits the same warlike tendencies as the new subways marching underground.

Eliot’s “The Waste Land” explores the idea of the ritual burying of the dead to show that society’s celebration of the past is not only irrational, but it is also unproductive. For example, In the last stanza of part I, Burial of the Dead, the speaker asks someone he knows, “That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?/Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?” Eliot shows how futile it is to honor the dead, since the dead offer few answers. You cannot create life from the dead, and the dead cannot give you anything new. Trying to create something new out of the dead past is as silly as planting a corpse and expecting it to grow into something full of life.

Lowell also exposes the uselessness of celebrating the dead. January brings the snow and buries the statue of Stuyvesant as if it were a corpse being covered with earth. This statue, which is located in the courtyard of the Martin Luther King, Junior School in the village of Bergen, is a symbol for New York because Stuyvesant is associated with the founding of the city. The statue honors Stuyvesant’s contributions to New York, but it overlooks the fact that the city’s former Director-General was quite violent and intolerant. He ordered the public torture of Quakers and called the Jews “such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ,” ordering them to leave the city and “not be not allowed to further infect and trouble this new colony” (Jacobson 171).

In the second stanza, Lowell's language suggests that celebrating the dead can also be damaging to the future. The "Republic" has "the mausoleum in her heart" of dead war heroes, such as Ulysses S. Grant and "Cold Harbor's blue immortals," which refers to the union soldiers who wore blue uniforms. Mausoleums and statues are usually meant to honor the dead, but in this poem, observation of these memorials of the past bring pangs of despair for the future. Juxtaposing the beloved Union leader and U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant with what is probably his most disheartening battle (Cold Harbor) exposes a tragedy for which he was responsible--a tragedy that is often overlooked, since his patriot victories usually have the spotlight. Cold Harbor was the final battle of Grant's overland campaign during the Civil War. It is known for being one of America's bloodiest and most lopsided battles. The "blue immortals" are the hundreds of men that Grant "interred," or placed in their graves, by making a calculated battle decision to pit his strength in numbers against the Confederates' well fortified and tactically advantageous position. By referring to Grant as "God of our armies," Lowell is painting him as an image of the god of war, Mars. The title of this poem reminds us that Dwight D. Eisenhower, a military leader, has just been elected to lead the country. This is an indication that the "Republic" has not learned from the past and has chosen a president who will lead the country into battle, resulting in the wasteful deaths of many soldiers.

The themes of winter and death in Lowell's poem evoke both a feeling of stasis and rigidity. "Horseman, your sword is in the groove!" says the speaker, addressing Grant. His path is set and cannot be changed, just as the tracks of the subways and the El only allow the trains to move on a designated path. "Ice, ice" next to "Our wheels no longer move" shows the winter's power to stop progression. The following line, however, mentions the "fixed stars," which are

also stagnant, but their permanence allows travelers to use them as references for navigation. The “fixed stars” are from the star-spangled banner, and their image has morphed into “lack-land atoms, split apart.” This evolution signals that the America the Union fought so hard to keep intact is threatened by nuclear war, a fear that came with the splitting of the atom. In this poem, advancement only brings one closer to the suffocating grip of death’s cold hands. Scientific advancement does not bring us closer to safety, but instead brings the possibility of total annihilation. The inauguration of Ike (or Eisenhower) is a ritual to signify change, but the induction of this military-minded president promises more of the same war-filled past. The “Republic” has a “mausoleum in her heart,” exposing the country’s celebration and glorification of dead men who acted mechanically and lifelessly in war like the drumming subways and the charging El, as well as the cold statue of Stuyvesant.

Not once in this poem does the speaker state his feelings toward the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower, but through objective correlatives and several allusions to American history, the reader feels what the speaker feels about this event. The speaker does not explain how he feels, but rather provides images that evoke the desired feelings toward the subjects in this poem. In short, images of winter, death, and tombs can hardly make a reader feel happy about the results of this election, and thus accomplish the poet’s goal of exposing the gloomy forecast for America’s future after the inauguration of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

“Waking in the Blue”

“Waking in the Blue” is Lowell’s tenth poem in Part Four: Life Studies. The reference to the “night attendant, a B.U. sophomore,” places the setting near Boston, Massachusetts. This poem is often associated with a period during which Lowell was a patient at McLean’s (see line

25) psychiatric hospital for manic depression, which is located in a suburb of Boston, raising the suspicion that the poet's personal life greatly influence the content of this poem. Despite exposing much more about the poet's life events than do Eliot's poems, the thematic similarities among Lowell's "Waking in the Blue" and T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" show that Lowell's more personal style does not impair his ability to elicit powerful feelings in his poetry.

In "Prufrock" Eliot asks his reader to come with him through "half-deserted streets" and presents the objective correlative of a cat-like fog to give the reader the feeling that Prufrock is isolated from the other people in the poem. The speaker in "Waking in the Blue" is also isolated from the outside world since he is confined in a "house for the 'mentally ill.'" The images of corridors in lines 4 and windows in line 6 show that the patients are essentially imprisoned. The patients can only look at themselves through "metal shaving mirrors" because they might be able to break glass shaving mirrors to hurt themselves. They each hold a "locked razor," which shows that the patients are not trusted with these dangerous weapons. The "locked razor" represents the patients' confinement despite their desires to hurt themselves or even end their pitiful existences.

Both Eliot and Lowell's poems have a nautical theme, which represents the duality of life, which is both preferable to death, yet sometime too agonizing to enjoy. The waste land in Eliot's poem is so desolate because there is "no sound of water." Water is needed for nourishment, but the fortune teller, Madame Sosostris, shows the speaker that his card is "the drowned Phoenician Sailor." "Fear death by water," she warns him. In part IV, "Death by Water," Phlebas the Phoenician fulfills the tarot card reader's prophecy. He dies in the sea, and the sea

creatures “picked his bones.” However, around line 345, the speaker is obsessively concerned with the lack of water:

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only (345-353)

Too much water can kill you, but not enough water can also kill you. The speaker cannot calm his speech nor his thoughts until his vital needs are met, which occurs after there is “a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust/Bringing rain.”

Eliot’s “Prufrock” poem also uses the image of water to represent one substance that is both a source of life and a source of death. A “walk upon the beach” makes Prufrock think of “mermaids singing,” or the mythical sirens who lured sailors to their deaths with enchanting music. He has “seen them riding seaward on the waves” from afar, but he admits, “I do not think they will sing to me.” Although the sirens’ songs will ultimately bring death, Prufrock still wants to be sung to since it is a pleasurable experience. Prufrock expresses his longing for interaction with women through his fascination with the mermaids, but the allure for female attention is shattered when he hears the banal things that the women talk about and realizes that they have little interest in him: “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” For Prufrock, the sea is a source of life and sustenance, but it is also where he will die.

If you think of “the Blue” as the sea, the title “Waking in the Blue” seems to echo the last line from Eliot’s “Prufrock” poem: “human voices wake us, and we drown.” The ocean maintains its association with danger as the speaker equates his mood with a nautical weapon, a “harpoon [...] sparring for the kill.” The speaker uses “sunk” to describe Stanley’s damaged mental state, equating him with a boat that has been swallowed by the sea. The water in the “long tub” is a place for Stanley to play “redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale,/as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit.” The word “swashbuckles” makes an interesting connection between the water (swash is the sound water makes) and make-believe (a swashbuckler is an archetypal sword-wielding protagonist like one of the Three Musketeers). The water filled bathtub gives Stanley a place to escape from his depressing situation, but the water is foul and “urinous from the Victorian plumbing,” destroying Stanley’s romantic fantasy in the eyes of the reader, making him someone to be pitied. Placing the image of water in contradicting circumstances exposes the complex nature of our drive to struggle through life, despite the inevitable suffering.

Another destructive force in “Waking in the Blue” is the passage of time. Lowell compares the young night attendant and himself to the much older and mentally unstable patients in the ward. The “B.U. sophomore” is probably between the ages of 18 and 21, but he is caring for older patients. He is reading philosophical texts such as “The Meaning of Meaning,” which is a book written by Hilary Putnam. In it Putnam wrote about the “mind-body problem” and “semantic externalism.” This youth is not yet disillusioned by the existential aspect of life. He is still able to stay sane enough to keep from becoming a patient in the ward. We would think that the speaker would identify more so with the young attendant, but he seems to see himself in the “old timers.” He grins at “Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,” able to see how pathetic this man has

become, something to which Stanley is oblivious. The other patients are “victorious figures of bravado ossified young,” meaning that they are stoney, boney, pretentiously courageous versions of their younger selves. Stanley, however, is also compared to a child, “as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit/and horses at chairs,” which are very childish things to do. At the end of the poem, the speaker looks in the “metal shaving mirrors,” and in this distorted image, he sees his future: the faces of the other patients in the ward who are “twice [his] age and half [his] weight.” “We are all old-timers,” he concludes,” and identifies with them because they are all in the same situation: “each of us holds a locked razor.” The speaker’s future looks depressing, but it is impossible to avoid the damaging effects of time.

Prufrock is also worried about age and the passage of time. He is past his prime and is middle aged; he just has too much time ahead of him to make him feel a sense of urgency or to do anything differently and change his routine. There is so much time to do everything: “the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table.” But Prufrock does not suggest to his lover that they do anything spectacular. He suggests “restless nights in one-night cheap hotels/And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.” The fog cat, instead of trying to break into the window, or even make a ruckus so that someone would let him in, just decides to lie down and sleep and be content with that. “There will be time, there will be time,” Prufrock says over, and over again. “Time yet for a hundred indecisions/And for a hundred visions and revisions.” There is no final act that he will be judged by. There is always time to prepare a different impression for the people, time to “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.” He always has time to wonder if he dare “disturb the universe?” “In a minute there is time/For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.” He is already well into the middle of his

life, so life has become a routine. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." All of this procrastination and hesitation because he always thought he had more time has meant that he has "seen the moments of [his] greatness flicker" and float beyond reach. He was afraid. And when he looks back, he asks "would it have been worth it, after all?" Even if he came back like Lazarus from the dead to ask his lover the "overwhelming question" he never dared to ask, she would have rejected him and said "That is not what I meant at all,/That is not it, at all." No matter how bold he might have been, even bold enough to "disturb the universe," that would not change the fact that he is a pathetic and unattractive, balding, skinny, uneventful man.

Prufrock's disillusionment results from his observation that the present is a disappointment compared to the past. Eliot's juxtaposition of Shakespeare's tragic hero Hamlet to Prufrock, the Fool, exposes the decrease in the quality of the main characters of today's literature. The women talk of Michelangelo, an artist who painted many fantastical scenes and sculpted many magnificent statues. One of his most famous sculptures is that of David. The women want to talk about pieces such as this. Prufrock, a real man, not a sculpture, is a pathetic alternative to the perfect masculine beauty of David. Prufrock refers to Hesoid's "Works and Days," which romanticizes the life of the working man. Prufrock, in contrast, is decidedly not a working man. He has "a bald spot in the middle of [his] hair---" and he dresses in a "necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin." He has no muscles to show off under his conservative dress. He is boring and his life is mundane and without physical labor. He has "measured out [his] life with coffee spoons." His life is too long and mundane...without strife or drama or threats to his life to make him ask that "overwhelming question" or "disturb the universe." He

cannot be Prince Hamlet because he only plays a minor role in the plot, “To swell a progress, start a scene or two.”

“The Waste Land” also explores the theme of the decay of the past. In the last vignette, Eliot uses the image of a chapel in line 386. This chapel resembles the one that is supposed to house the mythical Holy Grail. The chapel is empty, “only the wind’s home.” The Holy Grail used to be a symbol that once held profound meaning, but no one searches for it nowadays, nor does anyone have a use for it. The modern world is made up of fragments of the past, but these fragments are so old and so removed from the present that they can only have slightly relevant meanings. Eliot’s voice seems to come through the poem when he says “I have shored the fragments against my ruin,” meaning that despite realizing that the past is dead and decayed, he will hang on to these fragments and make them into something that can sustain him.

Similar to Eliot’s poems, Lowell’s “Waking in the Blue” exposes the decay of the upper class and the “blue bloods.” Lowell belonged to this class, so it is no surprise that his character sees the irony of its degradation. Stanley was “once a Harvard all-American fullback,” but now, the speaker’s reaction is “if such were possible!” You can see that he used to be an athlete because he is “still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties.” Now he is fat and has “a muscle of a seal.” Saying that he has “a muscle” rather than muscles makes it seem like the man has turned into one big blob of fat. We can also see a sense of degradation in the “Victorian plumbing” that is discoloring the tub. This oldness is showing visible decay. The Victorian era was glorious in some aspects, but plumbing from that era is probably past its prime now. Comparing “Bobbie” to “a replica of Louis XVI” makes the reader think of the glorious lives of the royalty, but also of the ignorance that cost them their heads. This particular king ruled during

the French Revolution and, because everything was peaceful and prosperous within the walls of his own palace, he thought all was well within his kingdom. The reality was that there was a stark income gap between the rich and the poor, and the aristocracy was put to death for forgetting the world in its luxury. If this income gap would have been smaller, the aristocrats would have been more sympathetic to the revolutionists cause. In the same way, if the world had not assumed that these “blue bloods” would never become “thoroughbred mental cases,” it might have been able to remedy these patient’s mental issues in the early stages rather than let them spiral into complete madness. Despite Stanley’s respectable background, he maintains none of his dignity because he is mentally ill. In the distorted “metal shaving mirrors” the speaker sees his “shaky future grow familiar/in the pinched, indigenous faces of the thoroughbred mental cases.” Lowell knows he will end up like these men, and it is disheartening, yet almost comforting because it is expected. He belongs to this bunch of blue bloods and will share the same fate as them.

In “Waking in the Blue,” Lowell is able to examine many of the same themes found in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Waste Land.” Not only are these poems thematically similar, but they all maintain a similar level of complexity. Even though Lowell’s poem is based on a personal event in his life, he expresses an overarching observation of the duality of life and the inescapable fate of decay and death.

“To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage”

In this poem, Lowell uses a persona, as well as an allusion to Chaucer’s story of the “Wife of Bath” in *The Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer 105-116). The title is an excerpt from this tale

in which the Wife of Bath talks of her many marriages. She claims to be an authority on marriage since she has had five husbands and is very experienced. She can easily manipulate her husbands by making them feel guilty for things they have not done or by withholding sex. In Lowell's poem, the wife does manage to manipulate her husband in a way, but she does not seem to feel in control. Her tone is extremely fearful, unlike the jovial and proud confession of the Wife of Bath. The value in an allusion is that from one single excerpt we get the whole meaning of the original source, and when that meaning is held against the meaning expressed in the poem, it can show congruency or create a feeling of irony and skepticism.

There is an epigraph at the beginning of "To Speak of Woe," just like in Eliot's "Prufrock" and "The Waste Land." Lowell's epigraph comes from Schopenhauer, who was a German pessimist and philosopher who believed that the human condition is ultimately painful because we can never satisfy our desires. By saying, "It is the future generation that presses into being by means of these exuberant feelings and supersensible soap bubbles of ours," the epigraph seems to ask, what kind of world are we bringing our children into? This creates a context for the situation we see in the poem.

Lowell expresses that it is spring without ever naming the season. He says that it is a "hot night" and there are "magnolia blossoms," (which usually bloom in the spring) and "Life begins to happen." This might mean that the wife is pregnant, which would pair nicely with the epigraph, but it could also mean that the wife is longing to be pregnant so that the state of her body fits with the season. This cheery image is juxtaposed against the next line: "My hopped up husband drops his home disputes." In short, there is trouble on the home front.

In “The Waste Land,” Maria says that “April is the cruelest month.” It brings life, but this regeneration brings memories of the past and a time that did not have these things. Similarly, in “To Speak of Woe,” spring reminds the wife that she should be creating new life. She goes to great lengths in the interest of this goal and lures her violent and drunk husband to her bed by tying “ten dollars and his car key” to her thigh.

“To Speak of Woe” is full of language that make us think of violence even though it is not used to directly describe violence. The hot night “makes” them keep their windows open, implying that there is some kind of force or lack of consent on the part of the wife. The word “drops” in line 3, “hits” in line 4, “lancing” in “free-lancing” in line 5 as well as “razor’s edge” in that same line, all simply describe her drunken husband’s behavior as he cruises the streets for prostitutes, but it reveals the fear preoccupying her mind that “This screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge.” She is afraid, but his behavior is so sporadic that she does not know what to expect. “Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust,” she says, giving the sense that this happens all the time and he is driven by his desires. Her only thought is “how to keep alive,” but she also has another thought right after that statement: “What makes him tick?” She probably has some emotional connection to this man since she married him and constantly puts up with his antics. She wants to keep him from leaving her for prostitutes or getting drunk and possibly coming home to kill her. She lures him to bed with the “ten dollars and his car keys” tied to her thigh, so in a sense she still wants him sexually. Perhaps bribery is the only way to get him down there. She might also want to get pregnant, unless she already is pregnant. But she is “Gored by the climacteric of his want,” climacteric referring to reduced sexual desire in men. “He stalls above me like an elephant,” creates a violent and unappealing image rather than a sexual one. She is

gored by the elephant's tusks, and the elephant is on top of her, probably crushing her with its immense weight.

The whole poem is written inside quotations, reinforcing that Lowell is using a persona. He must imagine these feelings because, first of all, he cannot read his wife's mind, and second of all, these things never happened in his marriage. In an afterword for Lowell's *Collected Poems*, Frank Bidart writes that when he ask him about this poem, Lowell said that "his wife has never done that, that it was told him by the wife of Delmore Schwartz" (Afterword 1001). It is easy to believe that Lowell's wife would say the things in this poem since it was public knowledge that Lowell often had problems with drinking, as well as marital issues. The illusion of reality is what makes this poem successful. Believing that the husband in this poem is actually the poet, Robert Lowell, encourages the reader to feel sympathy for this woman. Just as Eliot uses the persona of Prufrock, as well as the multiple personas of Maria, Tiresias, Phlebas the Phoenician, and others in "The Waste Land" for specific purposes in his poems, Lowell's use of a persona that could be perceived as his real wife is well thought out and plays an important role in the delivery of this poem.

"Skunk Hour"

"Skunk Hour" is a poem about the lives of the residents of "Nautilus Island" off of Maine. It is one of Lowell's most praised poems and uses objective correlatives and allusions to comment on the pains of isolation and the hope that one can cope with this desolate situation. "Skunk Hour" is the last poem in the *Life Studies* series, and it gives an odd sense of closure to the themes from the poems that precede it.

Winter has just come to Nautilus Island. Similar to the way that Lowell's "Inauguration Day" uses the theme of winter to represent an ignorant and stagnant state of mind in New York City, in this poem winter means loneliness and painful memories of better days in the past. The "heiress" on the island is staying through the winter in her "Spartan cottage," which means that despite being from blue blood or old money she has a meager existence. "Her son's a bishop," and her husband is "first selectman in our village" meaning that he holds a seat in local government, so she has some things to be proud of. But she is in her "dotage" and past her prime. She hangs on to her family's former glory:

Thirsting for
the hierarchic privacy
of Queen Victoria's century
she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall

She yearns for the old world, the glory days. She does this by keeping others out of her view, so that she can go on imagining that she is royalty and socially superior to everyone. The third line of the second stanza references Queen Victoria's reign, which was a time of expansion. The heiress buys up all the other houses around her just as if she were conquering her own empire.

By contrast, most people who can afford it, and who also do not have a historical connection to the town, leave for the winter. "We've lost our summer millionaire," the speaker observes. The summer on the island must be nice, but now that it is winter "the season's ill--" The millionaire must not have liked the island because it seems that he is not coming back. "His nine-knot yawl/was auctioned off to lobstermen." There's "no money" in the "fairy decorator's"

work. He is a cobbler, which is a profession that seems to be dying out since people can buy their shoes more cheaply from companies that manufacture them overseas. These first four stanzas paint a picture of a town in decline. The residents are either pitiful and poor or rich and evacuating.

The decline of Nautilus island with its rich history is similar to the decay of the allure surrounding literature in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Prufrock’s body shows signs of aging and decay. He says he has “a bald spot in the middle of my hair--” and others will say “his arms and legs are thin.” He is not a vibrant image of male youth that is the focus of Michelangelo’s masterpieces. The women talk of Michelangelo, but they only have disgust for Prufrock’s ungraceful aging. Whereas Eliot’s poem ends on a depressing note, “human voices wake us, and we drown,” the speaker in Lowell’s poem seems to find a hopeful outlook despite the gloom of decay.

In “The Waste Land,” the speaker eventually realizes that the present is buried in the ruins of the past. The residents of this island have glorious histories, but they have crumbled. The only way to deal with this decay is to “shore these fragments” against one’s ruin or to find something new. “The Waste Land” ends with the words “Shantih shantih shantih,” which are the traditional ending to an *upanishad*, or a hindu fable. These words mean, “The peace which passeth understanding.” They are the ultimate expression of resignation. The fact that these words are coming from a culture continents away from the Western World give hope that the speaker has found peace in something new and different.

The first line of “Skunk Hour” makes a contrast between the social status of the people in the poem and their social situation to show the decay of the blue blood families of the past. For

example, the enjambment between lines one and two, “Nautilus Island’s hermit/heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage,” makes a visual and audible separation between “hermit” and “heiress.” The word “hermit” usually brings to mind the stock image of an old man with few possessions living in isolation, but the word “heiress” usually means a woman who will inherit her family’s immense wealth and large estate. The characters cling to a past that is fading away.

The second half of “Skunk Hour” is the “autobiographic” or “confessional” part of the poem. The last four stanza’s are the reader’s self-reflection in first person narrative. The fourth stanza starts, “One dark night,” and this shift from night into day gives the poem a scary and disturbing atmosphere. The topics shift from the lives of the older people on the island to the dead people in the “graveyard shelves” on the island, juxtaposed with the young lovers parked in the “love-cars” on the “hill’s skull.” Here, the poet is contrasting life with death. After this scene, the speaker proclaims, “My mind’s not right” alerting the reader that he is mentally ill. The desolate images of night and death that preoccupy the speaker’s mentally ill mind give the reader a sense that the speaker feels detached from the world of the waking and the living.

A feeling of isolation carries through out Lowell’s entire poem, a theme that is also important in Eliot’s “Prufrock” poem. For example, Prufrock is on “half-deserted streets” and the speaker in “Skunk Hour” is on “Nautilus Island.” Calling the “heiress” in the first stanza a “hermit” also continues the theme of isolationism. In the second stanza, the “heiress” is “Thirsting for/the hierarchic privacy.” “Nobody’s here--” says the speaker in the third to last stanza in “Skunk Hour.” He could be referring to his mind, which is “not right” or the town around him, where there are “only skunks.” The speaker can not make a connection with any other creature except the skunks. He does not seem human enough to relate to the humans. The

speaker seems to be without love and without family, and envies that even the skunks can live in a supportive family in which the mother skunk helps her children find “a bite to eat.” He is lonely, but he has also chosen to live on an island, so it seems that he creates his own loneliness.

Eliot’s epigraph in “Prufrock” that alludes to Dante’s *Inferno* explains Prufrock’s motivation for saying what he says in the poem. Similarly, the speaker in “Skunk Hour,” uses an allusion to *Paradise Lost* to shed light on a major conflict in the poem. The speaker says “I myself am hell,/nobody’s here--,” which is similar to what Satan says in Milton’s epic poem: “The mind is its own place, and of itself/Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” This allusion carries an added meaning to Lowell’s lines. The speaker’s statement, echoing Satan’s famous words from *Paradise Lost* suggest that the speaker’s happiness is under his control, and he needs to control his mind rather than let his depressing surroundings determine his mood.

The speaker in “Skunk Hour” searches for love in his “Tudor Ford.” The name of this car has an obtuse reference to a royal line of rulers in England that eventually ended because Queen Elizabeth never found a husband to give her an heir. The speaker watches for “love-cars” on the “hill’s skull” and gets a suicidal feeling (“I hear/my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,/as if my hand were at its throat...”) when he hears a car radio that bleats “Love, O careless Love...” This song brings the possibility of death, just like the singing of the mermaids in “Prufrock” will drown those who hear it. The title of Eliot’s poem also implies that it is about love, since it is called “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” even though the speaker seems to spend more time talking about himself than his lover. He intends to lead his lover “to an overwhelming question,” but his monologue reveals that he is hesitant to ask this question because he believes the response will be rejected with the words “That is not it at all,/That is not what I meant, at all.”

Prufrock cannot express his love because it is too dangerous. He describes what the gossiping voices say behind his back, such as “How his hair is growing thin!” and “But how his arms and legs are thin!”; however, the fact that these lines are set off by parentheses could mean that Prufrock is not meant to hear these things, and the fact that “They will say” is in the future tense implies that “they” have yet to say these things, and Prufrock is simply worried about people saying these things even though they haven’t said anything yet because he has not done anything yet. Prufrock has created an illusion of danger in his mind because he is over speculative. In contrast, the speaker in “Skunk Hour” realizes the truth that the self absorbed Prufrock does not see--the mind makes its own heaven and its own hell.

In “Skunk Hour,” the speaker finds solace in the determined spirits of the skunks rummaging in the trash. The unexpected aesthetic of the bottom feeders of the world is also explored in Eliot’s poetry. Prufrock says he would rather be a crab with “a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” In “The Waste Land,” the speaker observes that the only things that survive in the waste land are the rats. They eat the decayed refuse from higher ordered creatures, like humans, but they are able to sustain an existence off of what has been used before. Eliot finds this image interesting because, in the same way, he is using the fragments of poetry created by previous generations to sustain his poetic life.

The speaker in “Skunk Hour” admires the the skunks who “[swill] the garbage pail” for a “bite to eat.” The mother skunk maintains her dignity despite jabbing her “wedge-head in a cup/ of sour cream.” She is not as majestic as the “singing mermaids” in Eliot’s poem, but the fact that she “will not scare” garners some respect. The skunks boldly “march on their soles up Main Street” as if they owned the street, completely unaware of the implications that the “Trinitarian

Church” in their mists has on the human soul. The skunks seems to have demonic qualities that would surely bar them from salvation through Christianity: they “search/in the moonlight” with “moonstruck eyes’ red fire.” In the eyes of the Church, the skunks have no soul, and thus no higher purpose, but they do not let that purposelessness destroy their lives like the speaker does. Unlike the crab-like image in “Prufrock,” the skunks do not seem pathetic, even though they are not everyone’s most beloved animal. In Lowell’s poem, these skunks show bravery and dignity. The mother is nurturing and leads her “column of kittens” to food, which is refuse but nourishment nonetheless. Using “kittens,” even though it is the correct name for baby skunks, gives a more positive and favorable description of the skunks. The mother skunk seems to stand her ground “and will not scare,” which is dignified. Animals that are not majestic can maintain their dignity despite rummaging in the trash because they do not have a shining image that can be tarnished. Lowell, as well as the “heiress” in this poem, both have blue blood and high-class backgrounds. They are ashamed of their mediocre lives since everyone’s expectations for them are so high. What the speaker in “Skunk Hour” can learn from the skunks is that one can maintain a sense of self-worth in the most unflattering situations if he resolves to be unconcerned by the judgments of society.

JOHN BERRYMAN: DREAM SONGS

I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
operations of great delicacy
on my self.

--John Berryman, "Dream Song 67"



The Development of Berryman's Career

Robert Lowell called John Berryman "the boldest and most brilliant man for our common profession" (Kirsch 138). However, Berryman's poetry did not garner much attention until very late in his literary career. His first notable award in 1960 for "Promising Writers" was a bit of an insult to a poet who had been writing for more than twenty years and was now well into middle age. Berryman responded to this slightly disheartening award with the same sarcasm and searing honesty that is characteristic of his poetry: "it was far from agreeable to me to accept an award, in particular so publicly, as 'promising.' *Promising*. I did so with many misgivings and much gall and a bitter smile, because I had to have the money" (Kirsch 101). Nevertheless, this award turned out to be extremely fitting, since he would not write his most famous and

acclaimed work until several years later. His legacy was the two volumes of the *Dream Songs*, the first of which, the *77 Dream Songs* published in 1964, being his masterpiece. In 1965 it won him the Pulitzer Prize.

The story of Berryman's transformation from a student of the modernist style into a controversial confessional poet is a testament to the fact that the confessional movement in poetry broke the previous generation's conventions not for the sake of novelty, but in an effort to create something new and effective. Berryman, like Lowell, learned to write in the modernist tradition and under the guidance of the New Critics. He received an undergraduate degree from Columbia University in 1936 where he studied with Mark Van Doren and RP Blackmur. Berryman spent the first half of his career writing in conventional literariness. He greatly admired W.B. Yeats' poetry and aspired towards the same goals as Yeats did in his poetry. At first, Berryman imitated his idol at the expense of neglecting his own creative genius. His verse was beautifully written, but these early poems lacked the innovation necessary to bring him the fame and recognition he would receive after publishing the *Dream Songs*.

Like Lowell, Berryman eventually began to question the infallibility of certain elements of the strict modernist style that he learned from his mentors. Berryman took a great risk when he decided to publish the *77 Dream Songs*, but he knew that he had produced something with a genuine vitality that would outshine his previous works. His inspiration for the *Dream Songs* was the analysis of his dreams that seemed to be a way to access his uncensored consciousness before he subconsciously suppressed them. Berryman said, "Some of my simplest (in appearance) dreams have proved...more complex than any poem I ever read, a great deal to say; I have also a new idea of the mind's strength, cunning, & beauty." However, his poems are far from simple

accounts of his dreams. As the poet and the artist, he still chose which material to include in and which to leave out of his poems. The act of writing involves selection. It is not just indiscriminate transmission of the writer's thoughts. His dreams are a way to observe the real nature of his desires, not a template for his verse.

Lowell is known as the father of confessional poetry, but Berryman's poetry is personal in a much more intimate way than Lowell's. Lowell exposed that his prominent New England family background did not make his life immune to the tragedies of mental illness and familial strife, but Berryman exposed his fears, failures, and most embarrassing feelings, completely shattering his dignity--Lowell never seems to go this far. Berryman's self-abasement is in stark contrast to his Yeats era poetry. However personal his poems may be, it is important to remember that Berryman confessed these personal feelings from behind a protective mask. Berryman made a valiant effort to emphasize the fictitious nature of Henry when the *Dream Songs* was criticized as too autobiographical. He added an Author's Note to the beginning of his book:

The *Dream Songs* are "essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who address him as Mr Bones and variants thereof.

Even if this mask was rather transparent at times, it was a way for Berryman to say disgusting and astonishing things without having to admit that they were his thoughts, even though at some level they were invented by him. Henry in the *Dream Songs* is not necessarily who the real John Berryman is, but rather who John Berryman could be. Through the use of persona, Berryman

shows how ambiguous the relationship between the poet and the voice of the poem can be. If we all look at ourselves honestly, we are capable of coming up with many strange and sadistic fantasies in our heads, but we keep them to ourselves out of shame. What is our true personality? The thoughts we cultivate in the privacy of our minds, or the actions that we chose to show to the world. Even though he thinks up Henry's thoughts, Berryman is still separate from this persona because he has a life outside of the poem. Berryman said this about the separation between the poet and the persona:

We touch at certain points. But I am an actual human being; he is nothing but a series of conceptions--my conceptions....He only does what I make him do. If I have succeeded in making him believable, he performs all kinds of other actions besides those named in the poem, but the reader has to make them up. (Travisano 33)

Henry is Berryman's anti-self and his shame, but because of the poet's masterful rendering of the characters in his poems, the *Dream Songs* do not read like self-indulgent confessions. The key to the reader's trust that Henry's utterances are genuine is the input of his companion, who is never named, but is sometimes referred to Tambo by those who speak of him. Tambo is Henry in black-face and often calls Henry "Mr Bones." (Tambo and Bones are stock characters from minstrel shows.) Tambo is Henry's conscience, super ego, and supportive friend. His comments on Henry's thoughts and actions make it possible for the reader to sympathize with Henry's vulnerability when one's natural reaction would be disgust. Tambo makes commentary on Henry's thoughts, but his part is still written by Berryman. Tambo makes it possible for the

reader to observe Henry's embarrassing confessions without thinking that they are simply the confessions of the author with the same problems.

Despite denying that his poetry was completely confessional, Berryman did not try to conceal that there was something extremely personal about the *Dream Songs*. After he began to evolve out of his emulation of the modernist style, he wrote that the New Critics were "blinded, perhaps, by the notion of the 'impersonality' of the poet. This perverse and valuable doctrine, associated in our time with Eliot's name...is somewhat paradoxical, and may disfigure more than it enlightens...One thing critics not themselves writers of poetry occasionally forget is that poetry is composed by actual human beings, and tracts of it are very closely about them. When Shakespeare wrote 'Two loves I have,' reader, he was *not kidding*" (Kirsch 120). Berryman challenged the idea that "the notions of the 'impersonality' of the poet" should be considered doctrine and argued that impersonality was always desirable. Berryman uses the personal nature of his poetry to help express real human emotions.

Berryman was criticized for straying from the standards of the New Critics and the modernists, but he did not become a truly great poet until he challenged these standards and created something original in *Dream Songs*. He felt that some methods used by the modernist poets were ineffective in his own poetry. For example, in Eliot's "The Waste Land," the poet's use of fragments from old texts in many obscure languages creates a barrier to understanding between the reader and the poet--a barrier that was purposely set up to expose the inability for language to have an inherent meaning due to its constructed nature. Perhaps Eliot saw the personality of the artist as a flaw that degraded the aesthetics of a poem, but the personality of

the poet will inevitably have some effect on his poetry, and Berryman uses that flaw to his advantage rather than trying to suppress its nature, as the “notion of impersonality” suggests.

Aside from the subject matter of Berryman’s poems, his writing style was also controversial and successful. The poems seem hastily thrown together to the point of looking unfinished, and in a sense they are. Previously, Berryman had been a slave to perfection in his poetry, always choosing the perfect words. The *Dream Songs* break away from this extremely structured style, and his wording is often awkward. This awkwardness comes in the form of strange grammar, silly rhymes, sing-song refrains, foul language, contemporary slang, and outdated words.

One reason that Eliot advocated impersonality in poetry was to help the poet escape from personality. Berryman instead explored the dark places of his personality in an effort to create art out of the undiscovered, overlooked, and ugly aspects of the human existence. While he still uses many of the same techniques as Eliot, including the objective correlative, allusions, and personas, Berryman keeps the *Dream Songs* extremely personal, showing that impersonal poetry is not the gold standard.

(Biographical information from *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* Pp. 92-93.)

Eliot’s Manifesto of Impersonality

Berryman challenged the infallibility of New Criticism by calling it Eliot’s “amusing theory of impersonality of the artist,” and instead embraced Whitman’s idea of the poet “not as maker but as spiritual historian” (Kirsh xiv). Berryman disagrees with Eliot’s stance on the

importance of impersonality in art, but in many other ways, the *Dream Songs* fit Eliot's description of an effective and artistic poem.

In the second section of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot explains why it is better for poetry to be impersonal. "It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science" (Eliot 3). He describes the role of a catalyst in a chemical reaction. When platinum is introduced to oxygen and sulphur dioxide, the latter two become sulfurous acid, which contains no trace of platinum, leaving the catalyst (platinum) unaffected. The platinum is equivalent to the "mind of the poet," and the elements undergoing the reaction are like the feelings and emotions that the poet uses to create art. This analogy implies that the feelings of the poet should not be invested in the feelings that his poetry evokes. Eliot explains that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (Eliot 4). Why is it so important that the poet be detached emotionally from the content of the poem? Eliot seems to say that a poet who lets his personal emotions direct his poetry might be ignoring his artistic judgement, which should be governed by objective reason.

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. (Eliot 5)

Looking at this excerpt is a great way to examine the issues that the New Critics had with confessional poetry, especially Berryman's *Dream Songs*. First of all, personal events should not make a poet's poem interesting. The major theme that connects all of the *Dream Songs* together and gives them a cohesive narrative is the suicide of Berryman's father. By including this incredibly personal detail in his poems, Berryman breaks one of Eliot's rules, but he does manage to provoke emotions that are far from "simple, or crude, or flat."

Eliot's main argument for keeping the poet's personal life separate from the content of his poetry is that a personal experience is most likely not the best medium through which to transmute the desired emotion. Perhaps, if the personal event is a good medium, then it is appropriate for it to be used. Eliot writes "very few know when there is expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet," and from these assumptions he concludes that "The emotion of art is impersonal" (6). However, it was Berryman's insight that a poem can express both a significant emotion and be about an event that happened in a poet's life. Usually, the confessional poets use personal events for their poems very loosely--they can be easily altered to achieve the effect that the poet envisions. If the poet does this, then he is doing exactly what Eliot suggests: "to use the ordinary [emotions] and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (Eliot 5).

Berryman could not have pulled off the intricate metaphors, complex syntax, and revealing ironies in his poetry, nor could he have elicited such powerful emotional responses from the reader if he had not learned how to manipulate language from the modernists. Without his sophisticated and technical literary background, Berryman's attempt to write in a more impulsive

style would have surely failed. Berryman's *Dream Songs* seems so authentically honest that it is easy to think that his poetry is mere confession, but it is a sign of his artistry that Berryman was able to artificially create poetry that so believably mimics the characteristics of the surrendered subconscious, baring the inner truths of mankind's most shameful, yet universal, experiences. In this thesis, I will examine the skill with which Berryman used many of the techniques he learned from the modernists, such as the objective correlative, allusion, and persona, as well as the effect that Berryman's more personal style has on the delivery of the themes and emotions in his poetry.

Dream Song #1

Dream Song #1 displays Berryman's use of a persona. He breaks away from the elevated speech he imitated from Yeats in his earlier poetry by using strange grammar and ambiguous statements; however, his poems maintain a strict form. Like every Dream Song, this one is a pseudo sonnet that has three stanzas with six lines each. This Dream Song contains weighty objective correlatives that make art out of simple feelings. In this case, that simple feeling is vulnerability.

[Stanza 1]

Huffy Henry hid the day,
unappeasable Henry sulked.
I see his point,--a trying to put things over.
It was the thought that they thought
they could do it made Henry wicked & away.
But he should have come out and talked.

What does it mean to hide the day, as Henry does in the first line? Although the word usage in this line is strange, it gives the reader the feeling that Henry is suppressing something that is too big to be hidden--a whole day. The space between "Huffy Henry hid" and "the day" encourages the reader to fill in the blank. For example, if you add some intuitive words, such as "away from," the line has a very different meaning than the original line: "away from" show a departure, but it seems that the evidence of Henry's departure is being hidden. "A trying to put things over" sounds like the cliché that essentially means "trying to get away with something."

Who is the they Henry refers to in this poem? This they is a vague and all encompassing word, making the reader think that Henry is paranoid of everyone. "They" make Henry feel "wicked"; however, Henry is described as a "huffy," sulky child who has to hide from his problems instead of talking about them, making Henry seem like the victim. He is so vulnerable that thoughts alone can shame him into hiding.

Berryman has a strange use of grammar in line 5. He says thoughts "made Henry wicked & away." How can "away," which is an adverb, modify Henry? The syntax here is unconventional, but it works. Our mind fills in a word like "go" to deal with the awkwardness of "made Henry...away," continuing the them of departure in this poem.

Henry's situation of being victimized by the regulating factors of his conscience embodies Berryman's new approach to his poetry. In the *Dream Songs* Henry's uncensored desires are given the spotlight, giving a realism to these poems.

[Stanza 2]

All the world like a woolen lover
once did seem on Henry's side.
Then came a departure.

Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
I don't see how Henry, pried
open for all the world to see, survived.

The image of the world as a “woolen lover” has the dual effect of associating Henry with a child-like innocence, since woolen can refer to a blanket, as well as with a lack of sexual innocence, since the blanket is referred to as “lover.” A “woolen” blanket reminds the reader of a baby’s first blanket that he carries with him throughout his childhood. It is a substitute for his mother and provides a sense of comfort and safety. “Lover,” on the other hand, has a sexual connotation, and conflicts with this image of Henry as a child, though it still works to paint Henry as the victim of unfair circumstances. The lover “once did seem on Henry’s side,” but “Then there came a departure,” or a separation, suggesting that the lover, the “all the world,” left Henry. This “departure” is a change of feelings towards the world, much like the change of Berryman’s approach to his poetry. The last three lines of this poem parallel the feelings of Adam and Eve after they ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. With this new wisdom, they were able to see the world as it really is, but along with that access to the truth, they realized that they were naked and this made them ashamed. Henry is “prided/open” and vulnerable like an oyster that has been broken open to expose its soft insides.

[Stanza 3]

What he has now to say is a long
wonder the world can bear & be.
Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea

and empty grows every bed.

The image of a bird singing on the top branches of a sycamore tree gives the reader a sense that Henry used to glorify himself and elevate himself to a position of respect. The last two lines depict an image that brings despair. The sea is a constant and powerful force. It wears away the earth slowly but steadily over time. “Every bed grows empty” is a reminder of our mortality--the fact that everyone must die--as well as a realization that nothing is permanent, and eventually all things either change or are lost.

In this poem, Berryman masterfully uses objective correlatives, such as “woolen lover” and the image of a shellfish that is “pried open” to express how Henry feels about the departure of something important to him and his resulting feelings of vulnerability.

Dream Song #4

Dream Song #4 does a good job of showing that Berryman’s use of personas are effective in representing the different levels of the psyche (which Freud named the id, ego, and super ego). The id makes up our instinctual and uncensored desires, the ego tames and filters these desires, and the super ego is the locus of our sense of morality, making us feel guilty for the aspects of our id that we are unable to control. In this poem, the source of Henry’s lust is his id, the first speaker is the ego, and Tambo acts as the super ego.

[Stanza 1]

Filling her compact & delicious body
with chicken páprika, she glanced at me
twice.

Fainting with interest, I hungered back

and only the fact of her husband & four other people
kept me from springing on her

This poem equates lust with eating. Women are objects to be consumed to satisfy a hunger, a base need and desire. Henry is eating dinner, and his hunger is a metaphor for his desire to have the woman he sees. His hunger for her is so strong that he is “fainting,” showing that his desires are a source of weakness, in the same way that Prufrock’s desire to have the mermaids sing to him causes him to drown.

What keeps him from satisfying this extremely intense hunger is the fact that there are other people watching. If he and the woman were alone, he would have devoured her. It is society’s standards and expectations that shape the moral standards of the super ego, the thing that curbs the desires and instincts of the id. His super ego makes him feel guilty. Henry is discontented because he suppresses his id. This poem exposes the inherent internal conflict created when civilization’s standards regulate people’s most natural and basic desires.

The super ego--although it causes Henry to feel guilt--makes it possible for him to be in the presence of women without becoming a danger to them.

[Stanza 2]

or falling at her little feet and crying
'You are the hottest one for years of night
Henry's dazed eyes
have enjoyed, Brilliance.' I advanced upon
(despairing) my spumoni.--Sir Bones: is stuffed,
de world, wif feeding girls.

The continuation of line 12 into line 13 creates a sudden swing into the next stanza that shows the other side of Henry’s desires. In the first stanza, he is a crazed and hungry animal that is

willing to do violent things to satisfy his hunger, but in the second his desires make him a desperate man that is willing to beg the woman for attention. “Dazed eyes” give the impression that he is put into a trance by her beauty and “brilliance.”

Putting “(despairing)” in parentheses suggest that we should read the lines two ways: with or without this set-off, nonessential element. Henry “advanced upon (despairing) my spumoni,” gives the impression that Henry gives up on pursuing his craving--the woman--by replacing her with a pastry treat--spumoni. The lines read without the parenthetical word included shows us Henry’s fantasy in which he acts on his impulsive desires.

In this poem, the world seems to be ignorant of Henry’s violent struggle inside his head. The woman is eating. The husband is feasting. The world is stuffed. Everyone seems to be satisfied with their food, except Henry, who must curb his hunger by filling up on images of women indulging in things other than himself--their own food and their own husbands.

[Stanza 3]

--Black hair, complexion Latin, jewelled eyes
downcast . . . The slob beside her feasts . . . What wonders is
she sitting on, over there?
The restaurant buzzes. She might as well be on Mars.
Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry.
--Mr. Bones: there is.

Henry is admiring the woman with flowery language, where as he was quite vulgar in the last stanza by calling her “the hottest one” and comparing her to “spumoni,” an Italian dessert; however, his thoughts turn vulgar again as he thinks about “What wonders is/she sitting on,” which are in reference to her sexual treasures. Henry’s super ego is such a powerful force that the woman might as well be a million miles away on Mars. This line shows how powerful the super

ego is, since it can make the small distance in the restaurant seem impassable. Henry, so disgusted by his lust, says “There ought to be a law against Henry.” Tambo reminds him that there are laws against the fantasies in his head: the government’s laws against rape, society’s social laws against vulgarity, and God’s moral laws against lust.

Dream Song #14

Dream Song #14 shows how persona can keep a personal poem from becoming extremely self-absorbed. Henry’s capacity to speak in the third person shows that he can examine himself from an out of body perspective. Berryman is not simply using the illusion of personality as a channel for his own self-indulgent confessions, but rather to give the reader a sense that Henry feels close enough with the reader to tell him or her his most personal thoughts.

[Stanza 1]

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored
means you have no

In most of the Dream Songs, Henry seems to act as though Tambo is the only one listening, but in this poem, he acknowledges that the readers can also hear him. He calls them “friends,” and tells them an anecdote from his mother, which gives this poem a very personal feel.

[Stanza 2]

Inner Resources.’ I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,

literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,

The fact that Henry becomes bored with himself shows that he is not self-obsessed. Many of the criticisms of confessional poetry stem from the idea that confession is a narcissistic practice, making the confessor unable to see himself in relation to others. The lines in this second stanza also make it difficult to say that Berryman is being self-indulgent through his personal poetry. The feelings he expresses through Henry seem genuine and authentic because they are surprising. Berryman was a university English professor, a Shakespearian scholar, and is even the writer of this collection of poems.

[Stanza 3]

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

The image of the dog running away into the mountains correlates with the theme of many of the Dream Songs, which is departure. The tail is the dog's physical display of his emotions that he cannot hide. When a dog is happy, he wags and when he is ashamed, he tucks his tail between his legs. People can hide their emotions by manipulating their body language, but a dog does not have a super ego that would drive him to do so. The dog is man's foolish best friend, giving the impression that Henry's inner self is subordinated and foolish. At the end, we get the sense that the companion is departing from the master. The last word, "wag," is oddly out of place in this

sentence, since it cannot be an object that is being left behind because it is a verb. “Wag” paints the image of a dog’s single and confused wag of his tail as something undesirable happens, such as the departure of his master.

In this poem, Henry speaks in the third person and shows that he can see himself from a distance. Berryman’s use of multiple personalities in this poem questions the idea that personal poetry yields to the poet’s free floating emotions and sacrifices aesthetics. Berryman’s personality does not interfere with the success of his poetry, as Eliot warned it would. Instead, Berryman uses personality as a technique to aid in the delivery of this poem.

Dream Song #36

Just like Lowell’s poems in *Life Studies*, Dream Song #36 explores many of the same themes found in Eliot’s poetry, such as coping with death, indecisions, and fate.

[Stanza 1]

The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who’s there?

—Easy, easy, Mr Bones. I is on your side.

I smell your grief.

—I sent my grief away. I cannot care

forever. With them all again & again I died

and cried, and I have to live.

Here, Henry realizes that no matter a person’s status in life, everyone dies all the same. This is a theme that Hamlet explores in Shakespeare’s play when he imagines the dust of Alexander stopping a bunghole. Tambo’s comforting words of “Easy, easy, Mr Bones. I is on your side” are a sign that Henry cannot change the fact of his mortality and must find another way to deal with this problem by simply coming to terms with it. “The Waste Land” ends with the same

sentiment. The entire poem grieves the decay of the past into a deathly shadow of its once glorious self, but the mantra “Shantih Shantih Shantih” shows that it is possible to find enlightenment in resigning and extinguishing the “burning” passion, a suggestion that Buddha makes in his “Fire Sermon.”

[Stanza 2]

—Now there you exaggerate, Sah. We hafta die.

That is our ‘pointed task. Love & die.

—Yes; that makes sense.

But what makes sense between, then? What if I
roiling & babbling & braining, brood on why and
just sat on the fence?

In this stanza, Henry asks indecisive questions similar to the ones asked by Prufrock in Eliot’s poem. Tambo says that “our ‘pointed task” is to “Love & die.” Prufrock also feels that one of his purposes is to find love, but his efforts are thwarted and his feeling of inadequacy comes mostly from society’s (and women’s) expectations of what type of man he should be rather than his own desires. Henry’s question, “What if I...just sat on the fence?” is similar to Prufrock’s question, “Do I dare/Disturb the universe?” Both characters are unsure if they should elevate themselves to the role of the hero in a play or rather remain one of the supporting characters.

[Stanza 3]

—I doubts you did or do. De choice is lost.

—It’s fool’s gold. But I go in for that.

The boy & the bear
looked at each other. Man all is tossed
& lost with groin-wounds by the grand bulls, cat.
William Faulkner’s where?

(Frost being still around.)

The image in this last stanza is similar to a theme in “The Waste Land” in which the speaker is powerless to escape his fate of “Death by Water” foreseen by the tarot card reader. The image of the constellations, “the bear” (ursa major), “the grand bulls” (Taurus the bull), and “the cat” (Leo), as attacking man. “Man all is tossed/& lost with groin-wounds” by the constellations, which represent fate--a force that is too powerful for Henry to ever hope to challenge. He searches for an alternative, even though he knows it is about as good as fool’s gold.

In this poem, Berryman reveals the conflict between the expectations for life and the disappointing reality. The back-and-forth banter between Mr. Bones and Tambo is similar to the effect that Eliot achieves in “The Waste Land” by using fragments from classic works to show the conversation of literature through out time.

Dream Song #76: Henry’s Confession

In this Dream Song, Henry focuses on a life event that almost too transparently correlates with a tragic event in the poet’s life, the death and suicide of Berryman’s father. This is precisely the kind of personal involvement that Eliot advises against in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” This poem, however, takes an observation of an autobiographical tidbit and produces an insightful metaphor.

[Stanza 1]

Nothin very bad happen to me lately.
How you explain that? —I explain that, Mr Bones,
terms o' your bafflin odd sobriety.
Sober as man can get, no girls, no telephones,

what could happen bad to Mr Bones?

—If life is a handkerchief sandwich,

Using the metaphor of a “handkerchief sandwich” for life exposes Henry’s disappointment with his own life. Life is sandwiched by bouts of crying. First, you are born and are ripped from the comfort of your mother’s womb and thrown into a world full of pain and disappointment. In the end, you cry as you lose everything--your loved ones and your life.

[Stanza 2]

in a modesty of death I join my father

who dared so long ago leave me.

A bullet on a concrete stoop

close by a smothering southern sea

spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.

—You is from hunger, Mr Bones,

The strange word “agone” in the second line of this stanza seems to be a combination of ago and gone. It resembles the word agony as well. This made up word serves to create a feeling of despair after this untimely separation with his father.

Tambo says, “You is from hunger, Mr Bones,” implying that Henry is so hungry that he will even eat the measly handkerchief sandwich that life is serving him. Henry describes death as “modesty” and he describes the scene of his father’s death as being “by my knee,” providing the image of Henry kneeling next to his father’s lifeless body, a position of extreme resignation and surrender. Describing the location of his father’s death as “on an island” creates a feeling of isolation. The sea is an image used frequently in Eliot’s poetry, as well as Lowell’s, and Berryman uses it as a dangerous force of nature. In *Dream Song #1* it wore away the earth and

made every bed empty. Here, the “smothering southern sea” is associated with the death of his father.

[Stanza 3]

I offers you this handkerchief, now set
your left foot by my right foot,
shoulder to shoulder, all that jazz,
arm in arm, by the beautiful sea,
hum a little, Mr Bones.
—I saw nobody coming, so I went instead.

At the beginning of the poem, the handkerchief is a symbol of grief, but when Tambo offers his friend a handkerchief, it is a comforting gesture. Tambo encourages Mr Bones to ignore the tragic thing that has happened in his life and to continue his performance in the minstrel show in which the actors are creating the illusion that they are lighthearted and happy as they dance and hum and sing “by the beautiful sea.” Calling Henry “Mr Bones” fits perfectly with his mood--he feels as though he should be a bone dry corpse. The last line of the poem breaks out of the black-face dialect as Henry still has not been cheered up by Tambo. The fact that Henry “saw nobody coming” implies that he sees no salvation, such as religious salvation through Christ. “I went instead” gives the reader the impression that Henry will join his father in “the modesty of death” by his own doing--suicide. This departure from life echoes the theme . of departure developed in Dream Song #1.

Henry’s talking about this extremely personal event makes us feel distant rather than sympathetic. Even Tambo does not share Henry’s feelings about the tragic event in his life and does not offer any comfort other than a handkerchief and encouragement to continue on with the show. This personal event makes the reader feel distant, but Berryman seems to be using this

“flaw” in exposing the personality of the poet to reiterate Henry’s feeling of isolation and separation from the world, putting to good use a method that Eliot said would fail.

CONCLUSION

When Robert Lowell and John Berryman were first labeled with the unfortunate name “confessional poets,” the critics tended to overemphasize the self-reflective nature of their poetry and overlook their artistic merit. My goal in this thesis was to focus on the similarities between the confessional poets and the modernist poets, rather than the first obvious difference between the two--the subject matter for their poetry. Eliot chose to write using fictional situations, while Lowell and Berryman used events that could be traced back to their personal lives. The problem with saying that the confessional poets broke with the traditions of the modernists poets, just because of this obvious difference in content, makes it difficult to see that these two generations of poets had a lot in common. In fact, the modernists were probably the biggest influence on the style, technique, and tone of Lowell and Berryman’s poetry, which is evident when one recognizes that these two confessional poets used objective correlative, allusions, and personas with the same cleverness that Eliot did in his poetry. Lowell and Berryman used these techniques with brilliance and artistry to explore many of complex themes that Eliot found important in his poetry.

After putting the relationship between the modernists and the confessional poets in perspective, I was then able to evaluate the use of impersonality in Eliot’s poetry and the use of personality in Lowell and Berryman’s work. My conclusion is that neither approach is better or worse than the other. Each technique has flaws and benefits that are used to achieve certain

desired effects suiting each poet's interests. The successful poetry that Lowell and Berryman produced challenges the idea that Eliot's theory of the impersonality of the artist is not dogma, but rather generation's aesthetic preference. *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell and the *Dream Songs* by John Berryman are invaluable contributions to the canon of American poetry and were influential trailblazers for the new movements in poetry that would follow them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) Berryman, John. *Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.
- 2) Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." *The Riverside Chaucer*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- 2) Collins, Billy. "My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory Driven Poetry." *Poetry*; Aug 2001.
- 3) Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature: Second Edition: Volume F*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002. Pp. 2075-2079.
- 4) Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet and His Problems." *The Sacred Wood*. 1920.
- 5) Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Sacred Wood*. 1920.
- 6) Eliot, T.S. "The Wasteland." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature: Second Edition: Volume F*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002. Pp. 2079-2091.
- 7) Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color*.
- 8) Kirsch, Adam. *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005.
- 9) Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2003.
- 10) Lowell, Robert. Interviewed by Frederick Seidel. *The Paris Review*. 1961.
- 11) Lowell, Robert. *Life Studies*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956.
- 12) Ramazani, Jahan, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry: Volume 2*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.
- 13) Rosenthal, M.L. "Poetry as Confession." *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews*. New York: Persea Books, 1991.
- 14) Travisano, Thomas J. *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the making of a postmodern aesthetic*. University of Virginia Press, 1999.

ACADEMIC VITA of Vanessa Shalkey

922 Heritage Hills Drive

York, Pennsylvania 17402

vmshalkey@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and International Politics, The Pennsylvania State University, Spring 2012

Minor in Spanish

Honors in English

Thesis Title: The Confessional Poets: Removing the Mask of Impersonality with
All the Skills of the Modernists

Thesis Supervisor: John Marsh

Awards: Dean's List

Activities: Penn State Equestrian Team

Schreyer Honors College Consulting Group

Mission work in La Cucarita, Dominican Republic with the Diocese of Orlando