

## An Introduction to "*The Boston Trio*": Sylvia Plath with Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton

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In an interview with A. Alvarez for *The Observer* in 1963, the poet Robert Lowell asserted, "Inspiration's such a tricky word...we all know poetry isn't a craft that you can just turn on and off. It has to strike fire somewhere" (76). The question of the location of this elusive "somewhere" – this inspirational moment in the trajectory of Sylvia Plath's career is one of the main concerns of this paper. This pivotal moment and literary shift is often cited as occurring late in Plath's life, with motherhood and the break-up of her marriage to Ted Hughes providing the fuel for the powerful work of *Ariel*. However, several years earlier, in early 1959, Plath briefly audited a poetry class taught by the revered American poet Robert Lowell at Boston University. It was here, alongside fellow poet Anne Sexton, that Plath gained new perspective regarding her work and her own position in the emerging currents of American poetry. Plath would later describe the developments occurring at the time in a 1963 radio broadcast, saying of Lowell: "the shift in tone is already history" (Plath, *The Spoken Word*).

During this time Plath was orbiting within a vibrant poetic community in Boston itself. Here, alongside her contemporaries, Plath analysed her own creative output and the works of others in a critical and artistic context. This unique intersection of influences helped to reshape Plath's writing, and would later enable her to reach new heights of creative expression. My research suggests that a re-positioning of emphasis from the *Ariel* period to this earlier phase in Plath's career may offer new ways of understanding Plath's work and her poetic development. Understanding Plath's unique relationships with Lowell and Anne Sexton is vital to understanding the period and the impact it had upon Plath and American poetics on a broader scale. By introducing new terminology for the group which was made up of Plath, Lowell and Sexton, and identifying them uniquely as, "The Boston Trio," we may be able to consider Plath's work as part of a unique poetic resurgence occurring in Boston in the late 1950s, one that helped to transition American poetry into a radically new period of literary expression.

For Sylvia Plath, as for any other writer, her literary influences were varied and constantly evolving. Plath's journals reference many writers, from Edna St. Vincent Millay to W.H. Auden and D.H. Lawrence; she has also referred to Virginia Woolf and many others.

Luke Ferreter explores some of the most prominent of these influences, with particular emphasis on Woolf, in his study of Plath's fiction. Ferreter asserts: "[Plath] made numerous references in her journals to attempting to learn style, technique and even content from the writers, both literary and popular, whose work constituted her contemporary milieu" (17). While all of Plath's influences were undeniably important, there is value in addressing periods of Plath's career where physical, as well as literary, engagement occurred. As Peter K. Steinberg suggests in his liner note introduction to *Sylvia Plath: The Spoken Word*: "Plath absorbed her surroundings" (6). Furthermore, Heather Clark ascertains in *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, that while many critics, "argue for readings of Plath that resist any biographical perspective," she deems it necessary for one to "examine, rather than condemn or ignore, [Hughes'] presence in and influence upon Plath's writing life" (5). This paper asserts, similarly to Clark, that the presence in and influence upon Plath's writing life of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, needs to be examined more closely in critical work.

In his memoir *The Fading Smile*, poet Peter Davison describes the years between 1955-1960 in Boston as a "poetic renaissance," and one of "the most exciting poetic surges" ... ever to take place in America" (12, 14). Boston, Massachusetts, is a city known as "The Hub," or the "Athens of America" and in the late fifties it was a bustling center of intellectual and economic growth with a well-established legacy as "a city of letters" (O'Connor 97). The fifties saw the emergence of the Poets' Theatre, a small space in Cambridge where poets and dramatists could present their work to an eager public and Boston literati. In his review of the Davison's memoir, Dana Gioia regards the Poets' Theatre as "the central institution" of the era – describing the "small Cambridge group dedicated to reviving verse drama" which, "displayed extraordinary energy by producing new plays mostly from young and unestablished poets" (danagioia.net). The tone of Boston at the time was centred on poetry; institutions such as the Poets' Theatre and central characters in the city provided young writers with a unique scaffolding under which they could develop their own creative expression.

In the late fifties Boston was also a base for the esteemed poet Robert Frost during the months of March to June and October to Christmas (Davison 15). Frost acted as an anchor for many other poets who came to the city, "he took his place at the center of Boston literary life, no matter who might be the gilded visitor of the current Harvard season" (15). Davison also chronicles a dozen poets who called the city home during the period; he included, and suggests that in 1959, "nearly every one of the poets of my chronicle ... achieved some poetic breakthrough that marked a permanent change" (13). This paper offers an abridged

introduction to a larger project in progress regarding this era in Boston and Robert Lowell's 1959 Boston University workshop. By describing the intricacies of this particular historical juncture and establishing the positions of Plath, Lowell and Sexton at the time, it is the aim of this paper to introduce these three poets as a collective, whom I have termed, "The Boston Trio" and offer a starting point for considerations of Plath as one of the key figures of this era.

Prior to 1959, events leading up to and surrounding the first encounters of Plath, Lowell and Sexton would establish, in each of their lives, an environment that was conducive to fruitful artistic reciprocity. Plath moved to Boston in September 1958 but had first encountered Robert Lowell at a reading at Smith College on Tuesday, May 6th, 1958 (Plath, *Journals* 379). This reading took place during Plath's teaching year in Northampton and during a period when she was finding consistent creative expression difficult, merely due to the weight and responsibilities of the teaching profession, "it took much dedication to maintain the appropriate mindset for teaching" (Steinberg, *Sylvia Plath* 70). Plath writes in her journal about reading Lowell the night before seeing him read, and comments that she had experienced a similar reaction to him as she had had to the first poems she had encountered of her husband Ted Hughes. She describes, "Excitement, joy, admiration" and, "desire to meet & praise," and continues by quoting a line from Lowell's poem, "The Exile's Return". She highlights his phrases, which she found, "tough, knotty, blazing with color & fury, most eminently sayable" (*Journals* 379). In this journal passage, influence was being borne from tradition; coincidentally Lowell had placed the narrative of "The Exile's Return" within a rich literary lineage. As Andrea Scott suggests in her study of Cold War poetry: "The poem's opening and concluding lines are derived from two famed literary exiles, Thomas Mann and Dante, positioning Lowell's literary voice in that cosmopolitan, but tragic tradition" (116).

It is likely that Plath heard Lowell read some of his newer poems at Smith that afternoon in May,<sup>1</sup> among them, Lowell's now infamous "Skunk Hour," a chilling ode to society's decay, and the writer's own tortured mind. Undoubtedly Lowell's lines, "My mind's not right" and, "I myself am hell, nobody's here" would have deeply resonated with Plath's own experiences of mental anguish, causing an intimate literary connection to emerge as Lowell's smoky voice transmitted the lines to his audience (Lowell, *Life Studies* 104). Echoes

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<sup>1</sup> Recordings of Robert Lowell held by The Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard College span the months of May, June and July of 1958 and feature, among other earlier works, "Memories of West Street and Lepke" and "Skunk Hour" from Lowell's 1959 book *Life Studies*. It can be suggested that the Smith reading would have featured similar work.

of "Skunk Hour" can later be found in Plath's "Blue Moles," written in late 1959 after Plath's experience in Lowell's classroom. Just as Lowell's "mother skunk...swills the garbage pail" and "jabs her wedge head in a cup of sour cream," so to do the moles of Plath's poem, "Delving for the appendages/Of beetles, sweetbreads, shards – to be eaten / Over and over" (104, Plath, *Collected Poems* 126). This desperate scavenging and desolation of both the rodent characters and the poetic voice connects the poems indefinitely.

Lowell's newer writing which Plath heard in 1958 would later emerge more fully in the book *Life Studies*, first printed in America in on May 11, 1959 (Davison 3). The work had been heavily impacted by Lowell's attempt to write his memoir (Mariani 234) and had also been shaped by Lowell's experiences during a 1957 reading tour of the West coast of the United States, where he had encountered Beat writers including Allen Ginsberg. In a 1961 interview with Frederick Seidel for *The Paris Review*, Lowell discusses how the spontaneity of his West coast readings had helped reform his writing style from his more formal odes to the New Criticism, "more and more I found that I was simplifying my poems... I'd make little changes just impromptu as I read" remarked Lowell in the interview (12). Mariani goes on to also suggest that the energy and explosion of poetry Lowell had found in California led him to be intensely dissatisfied with his own writing style, spurring great creative change for both Lowell and his contemporaries (251). It was during this period of tension that Plath and Lowell's lives became more closely entangled. They would later meet again socially in Boston, with Plath recounting the fondness she saw Lowell display toward his wife Elizabeth Hardwick at a social engagement attended by herself and Hughes (*Journals* 463). Plath's attendance at Lowell's Boston University workshop however, would not begin until February 1959. According to Sexton, Plath's presence was supposedly due to her, "kind of" following her [Sexton] in (Sexton, *The Barfly Ought to Sing* 6).

Anne Sexton's literary position prior to Lowell's workshop was made up of a brief poetic education formed through her interactions with the poet W.D. Snodgrass, who had been one of Lowell's students in the early fifties when Lowell taught at the now infamous writing program at The University of Iowa. Snodgrass, who Sexton, in her own words, "had made a sort of pilgrimage to meet" mentored the young poet and encouraged her to study with Lowell (*Classroom at Boston University* 3). Sexton had also worked under the tutelage of poet and critic John Holmes, in writing classes at the Boston Center for Adult Education in 1957, forming friendships with other poets here, including George Starbuck, Sam Albert and her lifelong friend Maxine Kumin, a selection of writers biographer Diane Middlebrook would later call a "tight little group" (96). Sexton had turned to these writers and centres of

literary learning after becoming enraptured with poetry in 1956 when her therapist had advised her that this sort of creative expression might be good for her personal development and psychological recovery. In 1958 Sexton wrote to Robert Lowell, sending him a sheath of poems and requesting admission into his class. He obliged, telling Sexton that her poems, "move with ease and are filled with experience," explaining he had been reading her poems with "envy...after combing through pages of fragments of my own unfinished stuff" (Lowell, *Letters* 326). Sexton became firmly entrenched in Lowell's class in late 1958. How Plath "followed her [Sexton] in" is not really known, as it seems Plath's engagement in the social and literary circles of Boston meant she was more likely to have found Lowell's class independently of Sexton. Perhaps though, because of the short time period between Sexton beginning studies in the workshop (September, 1958) and Plath joining (February, 1959), Sexton felt she had established some claim on the class, making it hers to be followed into.

The workshop, in the Spring (January-May) of 1959, was attended not only by Plath and Sexton, but also by George Starbuck, and Kathleen Spivack, among others. Lowell had predicted prior to the beginning of the term that his class would contain less than fifteen students, however Anne Sexton's sketch of the group suggested that it "consisted of some twenty students" (*Classroom at Boston University* 3). Official Boston University records list enrolments for the class, EN305 in the Spring semester of 1959 at a total of only five, with three women and two men officially signed up for the course.<sup>2</sup> This tally of did not include those students who took the class unofficially and without credit, a category into which it seems Sexton and Plath both fell. Lowell had written a letter to his Aunt Harriet in late 1958 about such students, explaining: "I'm getting ready for my courses and seem to be getting several quite good special students, going to Boston University just for my poetry writing class" (*Letters* 327). The exact number of students who worked in the class is not known, but it seems the group was intimate, and Lowell directed his seminars as "conversational classes" (*Paris Review Interview* 3).

In the workshop poetic development was of the utmost importance. "Lowell conveyed a sense of the central importance of poetry; he alternately scolded, prodded, encouraged, ignored, protected, and pitted his students against each other to spur their own development" says Spivack, who after writing several smaller memoirs of Lowell, Sexton and Plath in recent decades, reminisced about the workshop on a grander scale in her 2012 book, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle* (*Robert Lowell: A Memoir* 183). Of particular interest in this

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<sup>2</sup> Information courtesy of the Registrar's Office, Boston University.

memoir are Spivack's detailed descriptions of the spatial arrangement of the classroom, she describes how the students in the class would gather around a large table, with Lowell at the helm, when he was not pacing toward the window or perching on the window sill itself (24). This is an image Sexton had also highlighted in her poem, "Elegy in the Classroom". She writes how on her final day in Lowell's class she found him: "disarranged/squatting on the window sill...watching us through the V/ of your woollen legs" (*Complete Poems* 32). Many other memoirs of Lowell as a teacher also help to establish an idea of what the mood of the workshop would have been. In his memoir of Lowell as a teacher in Iowa in the early fifties, Robert Dana describes how in Lowell's classroom the "mood was one of excited uncertainty... [Lowell] was known to be a complex and difficult man," Dana goes on to praise Lowell as a teacher and comment that in the classroom his demeanour was often, "thoughtful and scholarly" (50).

The face of American Poetry underwent rapid changes in the middle of the twentieth century and Plath, Lowell and Sexton and the workshop itself all played pivotal roles in the shifts that occurred. The three writers maintained independent, yet affiliated poetic identities after their engagement with each other in the classroom and beyond, and while criticism often tries group them with many of their contemporaries, including writers like John Berryman and W.D. Snodgrass, the poets' personal distaste for the "Confessional" label<sup>3</sup> suggests that this category of analysis is alone, ineffectual, in describing both their strengths and their parallels as poets. Related literature often touches on the fact that Lowell, Sexton and Plath knew each other and vibrant biographical sketches like David Trinidad's *"Two Sweet Ladies": Sexton and Plath's Friendship and Mutual Influence*, describe Plath and Sexton's unique friendship and alluring "mystique" (29). However there are only a small number of works that deal with the three poets together, and most, if not all of these deal with them as "Confessional Poets," rather than as correlating poetic identities, existing beyond this label. Heather Cam's brief study from 1987, "'Daddy': Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton", is one of a mere few critical works which engage the poet's texts side by side and search for traces of influence. There is a distinct lack of critical work looking into the impact the trio had on each other simultaneously, as well as no distinct theory of what this trio were collectively, and what this meant for the poetic tradition as a whole.

Alternatively, a new theoretical frame needs to be developed in which to read Plath, Lowell and Sexton's poetry, a frame that can be defined by the notion of influence. However

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<sup>3</sup> In his preface to *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*, Adam Kirsch describes both Lowell and Plath's "unanimous distain for the idea of 'Confessional' poetry." (x)

defining the parameters of literary influence is not easy, influence itself has been victim to rigorous criticism in recent years, relegated to the background in much critical work and presented as merely a kind of "source hunting" with no real academic merit (Primeau 3). Studies based on the paradigms of literary cause and effects have also been positioned as archaic precursors to the more "voguish" field of intertextuality (Clayton and Rothstein 1991). However it can be suggested that without influence, literature simply does not exist – no one writer exists in a vacuum. All writers are part of a greater lineage of creators, part of a "Tradition" as T.S. Eliot suggested in 1919.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the word "literature" comes from the Latin "litterae," the collective noun for the word "letters" – further emphasizes this point. A notion of plurality is inherent in both the etymology and the definition of the word "literature" itself. In literature there is not merely one work, but many works, and the ways in which these works connect and relate to each other, as well as the ways in which their creators interact, cannot be discounted.

The practice of engaging with the sources of Plath's creative imagination for the purpose of critical appraisal is not new, but the suggestion that Plath's involvement with Lowell and Sexton was pivotal to her development as a writer is rarely emphasized in a critical context without an inclusion of the "Confessional"<sup>5</sup> poetry label. While Plath, Lowell and Sexton are usually aligned under this moniker, it is a definition severely lacking in its attention to the workshop itself, and to the idea that Plath, Lowell and Sexton and their works can be envisioned as a dynamic triad, which existed within and beyond their literary, "school."

New considerations of the vibrant period, which was Boston in the late fifties, and new appraisals of Lowell's Boston University Workshop need to be developed in order to more fully understand and theorise the work of Lowell, Plath and Sexton, both independently and collectively. "The Boston Trio," were a vital component of an American poetic renaissance in the mid-twentieth century, and it is hoped that this paper will serve as a critical introduction to this unique historical juncture and future research which is currently underway.

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<sup>4</sup> Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "Tradition and the individual talent." *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36-42.

<sup>5</sup> In his 1959 review of Lowell's *Life Studies*, critic M.L Rosenthal first names and identifies this type of poetry as, "the most naked kind of confession" (154).

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