



# LITERARY QUEST

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## Spiritual Quest in the Select Poems of Robert Lowell

**Dr. P. Renuga**

Associate Professor, Department of English, Sri G.V.G.Visalakshi College for Women, Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu, India.

### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore the spiritual anguish experienced by Robert Lowell, a postmodern poet of America. As a representative poet of his age, Lowell reflects through his poetry the contemporary man's failure to penetrate into the existing human value system. The unfolding drama of Lowell's religious experience exhibits his spiritual nausea that envelops him from which the parched soul longed to be liberated. The soul's complete subjugation, its helplessness before God and the experiences of the 'sinking soul' are the necessary prelude to mystical ecstasy. Further, Lowell's illumination, spiritual regeneration, and the reaffirmation of God's covenant with man are explored. It is established that man requires a religion which is both scientific and rational.

### **Keywords**

Robert Lowell; Spiritual Anguish; Regeneration; Religion; Rational.

According to *Catholic Encyclopedia* the term “*Spiritualism* has been frequently used to denote the belief in the possibility of communication with the disembodied spirits and the various devices employed to realize this belief in practice” (435). It is generally used as a way of life, where the believer establishes communion with God, the Supreme Being. If understood properly, it stands as a binding force in a society, but when misunderstood and used as fundamentalist approach, it sows the seeds of discord paving the way for disintegration or dissensions at the international level. A spiritual quest is a continuous journey and it is not a direct jump from error to truth. Rather, it is a series of stages leading one to the higher plane of life. Spiritualism is the elevation of a deep sense of one-pointedness towards God. There is a long spiritual striving in the poetic career of Lowell for an ideal pattern that would impart unity and meaning to the flux of feelings, events and experiences that make up the disorder of daily life. His poetry embodies the intense religious feeling and the inner craving of the soul. One could witness the unfolding drama of a spiritual quest in his devotional Catholicism. Lowell as a spiritualist is not tied to creed or dogma. He is much worried about the removal of God and providence from the universe. He speaks of a world in which the individual has been increasingly cut loose from the traditional anchors of religion, socio-political alignments, family relationships and a defined self-image. Lowell asks, when the very roots have been poisoned, how the branches can blossom and flower?

Lowell is deeply moved not only by moral but by physical horror and disgust, but had a kind of Samson like ferocity. In his terrible isolation from God, from divinely ordained standards of conduct, and even from his own self, he experiences the terrors of an unsheltered existence. He wrestles with God and he has entered into the heart of the “land of unlikeness” (Mazzaro 28). In *For the Union Dead*, Lowell expresses the terrors of human life in the modern urban society, a society technologically advanced but spiritually empty.

The use of Christian cosmos enables the poet to use his poetic subject both in religious and less religious elegiac poems to describe the relationship between man and God. Lowell does not always speak like a mystic. But, sometimes, the zealous moralist in him indignantly incriminates those responsible for the present evils in the society. His Catholic stance, prompted by the disgust of his Protestant forefathers' materialistic and sacrilegious attitude, eloquently expresses anger towards socio-economic dilemma. By effectively juxtaposing the Biblical past and the contemporary history, Lowell's voice as a devout and angry reformer modulates accordingly and his moralistic vision stresses the need to eschew the sins against humanity in order to make the world a land of peace.

Lowell's realization of his protestant ancestors' inability to live up to their ideals resulted in his conversion to Catholicism. It is a culmination of a long spiritual struggle of an earnest being in search of the meaning of life in general and of his life in particular. His old beliefs began to disintegrate but they have not been strongly substituted by the new faith. He needed perhaps not only to seek an ultimate cause for things but also to keep his religious sensibility unimpaired. This radical move of Lowell shook a great deal the long protestant genealogy of his family. However, he did not stick to Catholicism even for a few years. The dichotomy between religious precepts and their diverted practices were the main reasons for his conversion. As evident from his later works, the poet did not allow himself to be shattered by those negative pulls. His religious dilemma would in no significant way alter his spiritual destiny. In his later poetry, Catholicism almost ceases to be a fertilizing force.

In the poem "The Dead in Europe," the dying man's cry is heard resoundingly knocking the firmament thus:

After the planes unloaded, we fell down  
Burned, buried together, unmarried men and women  
Not crown the thorns, not vion, not Lombard Crown,

Not grilled, and spindle spires pointing to heaven  
could save us. Raise us, Mother, we fell down  
Here hugger-mugger in the gellied fire;  
Our sacred earth in our day was our curse. (6-12 LWC 56)

Chiding war as an anathema, Lowell implores Mary to rescue the people from the hell fire of man's tyrannical designs and redeem the planet from the abhorrent clutches of War. The epitaph of the "Indian Killer's Grave," brings out ironically the enigmatic dualism prevalent during the Second World War. The wild American landscape, with its original inhabitants, is viewed as an expression of the Devil rather than God and he assails the Puritans for their hatred of the land and their preference for idealism. He talks of the irrelevance of the Puritans to the modern Boston. The Puritans reject the human body in religious experience. But the poet suggests the soul's complete subjection, its helplessness before God, and the experiences of that "sinking of the soul"

"Waking Early Sunday Morning," embodies an intensely inward meditation on spiritual crisis. The poet indicates his tormenting inner conflicts in an initial cluster of radically ambiguous images. "O to break loose," (1 SP 141) suggests that he himself is to be in chains yet the freedom he seeks is curiously restricted; seemingly self-affirmative, Lowell's opening stanzas possess a strong suicidal content. The salmon is "alive enough" (8 SP 141) only "to spawn and die" (8 SP 141). The poet envies those fish not for their freedom and the vitality but for their unconsciousness as they are also death-bound like him. Unlike him, they know nothing of their non-freedom, death, injustice, remorse, cruelty, and anguish. The poet prays for a condition of simplicity, for relief from mental pain: "O that the spirit could remain tinged but untarnished by its strain!"(33-34 SP 141). The poet's world and mind are darkening, receding from rather than approaching the visionary encounter with God. For all its errors, Christianity gave darkness some control and left a "loophole for the soul" (48 SP 142). Lowell could not celebrate human life without God but experiences such a life as utter constraint bound by

violence and death. No alternative moral force exists to counter the darkness of the human spirit, which manifests itself in a rising tide of oppression, atrocities and war. The disappearance of God has brought neither pagan joy nor a divinity of imagination but only anguish. In the poem, "The Blind Leading the Blind," his feelings of spiritual anguish soar high as his people are spiritually blind. "They are blind-blind to the road / And to its Maker" (16-17 LWC 69).

Prolonged sea sickness produces a temporary condition of "anhedonia" in most persons. Professor Ribot has proposed the term to denote pathological depression which is characterized by dreariness, dejection, lack of zest, and passive joylessness. A Catholic Philosopher Father Gratry has attributed the term "anhedonia" to the religious evolution of an individual (qtd. in James 110). Besides having a melancholic mood, the spiritual aspirant has a psychical neuralgia, an active anguish which is unknown to healthy life. Such anguish may sometimes be characterized by the quality of irritation, exasperation, self-mistrust, self-despair, anxiety and fear. Under such circumstances, the entire consciousness of an individual is choked with the feeling of evil that the sense of being in the world is lost for him altogether. Moreover, the querulous temper of his misery keeps his mind from taking a religious direction. Tolstoy has presented in his book *My Confessions* a wonderful account of the attack of melancholy which led him to have his religious conclusions. Lowell too experienced the same religious melancholy as that of Tolstoy which resulted in a passive loss of appetite for all life's values. For a span of time, he was totally withdrawn, from the world which looked remote and strange. He had moments of perplexity, and knew not how to live or what to do. He hung upon the boughs of life and knew not the means to quench his thirst for spiritual love. In the troubled sea of life, he was trying to find the meaning of life.

Lowell's religious melancholy had another dimension also. Like John Bunyan, he too had troubles over the condition of his own personal self. He was a typical case of psycho-pathetic temperament and he was beset by doubts,

fears, and insistent ideas and became a victim of psychological breakdowns. In his unending pursuit of Truth, first he perceived that life was meaningless, and took into account only the finite life. He was looking for the value of one finite term in that of the other. His crisis was the setting of his soul in order, the discovery of its genuine habitat and vocation. As a result his interior became a battleground of storm and stress and there was an intense struggle to maintain stability and equilibrium. He felt the strife between two hostile selves, one actual and the other, the ideal. In his restless search for Truth and purity of life, Lowell was distracted by the struggle between the two selves. Speaking from his condition of death-in-life, Lowell urges earnestly to pity the whole human race as it inexorably falls into death-in-life status more appalling even than his, one devoid of consciousness and of yearnings for freedom and life. In “To Peter Taylor on the Feast of the Epiphany,”

Peter, the war has taught me to revere  
the rulers of this darkness, for I fear  
That only Armageddon will suffice  
To turn the hero skating on thin ice  
Where Whore and Beast and Dragon rise for air  
from allegoric waters. (1-6 LWC 52)

The poet's fear impels him to see that only the Day of Judgement will redeem man and his war. War is compared to a false Armageddon. The great violence is the perversion and mockery of Christian ritual, symbolism and belief, which by that very transgression or abuse confirms the ultimate relevance of Christianity. Yet within this urban apocalypse, this tableau of brutishness and death, he characteristically detects yearnings for freedom, connection and endurance. Lowell's illumination, regeneration, is a stimulus, an excitement, a faith and a force that reinforces the positive willingness to live, even in the full presence of the evil perceptions that made life seem unbearable earlier. In the poem, “Villon's Prayer for His Mother to say to the Virgin,” the poet pleads:

Although my soul is not much worth  
Saving, my Mistress and my Queen,  
Your grace is greater than my sin-  
Without you no man may deserve,  
Or enter heaven. I do not lie:

In this faith let me live and die. (5-10 IMT 21)

It is the faith that gave the poet the possibility of living. Faith is a sense of life, by virtue of that sense he did not destroy himself but continue to live on. The process of remedying inner incompleteness and inner discord was not a sudden, abrupt recovery. This inner unification occurred in a gradual way. The new birth is away from religion, produced a new stimulus such as love, compassion and humanism.

Lowell claims for spiritual regeneration and freedom from the spirit of violence and hatred. Being a spiritualist, he keeps his thoughts on the higher energies of love and harmony. He has a reverence for life that goes to the essence of all beings and to engage with life itself at a deeper level than merely the material world. To him, the physical world is an arena for growth and learning with the specific purpose of serving and evolving into higher levels of love. He has focused on empowering himself and others with higher and higher levels of consciousness and achievement. According to him, injustice could not be eliminated by retaliatory injustice. He insists that man requires a religion which is both rational and compassionate. There is an urgent need for man to create a spiritual home, where he can live without surrendering the rights of reason or the needs of humanity. Lowell was able to achieve the harmony of spiritual sympathy because he did not start with a message or a philosophical system which could be harnessed to a theory. His humanism came directly from the plenum of daily life on earth, from a sense of "wholeness which is holiness," from an acute poignant pursuit of all aspects of life with intellect, emotion and above all the spiritual insight which all great poets possess. He sought a balance

between the thrust of modern science and the ethical spiritual satisfactions which gave meaning and purpose to what is called progress. His insistence on the cultivation of sympathy and the sharing of great and inherent traditions of different civilizations, are all stimuli to the essential religious atmosphere of life. The necessity of building religion on the common ground of daily experience that accepts the pervasive power of divine living through the revelations directly link man with God and his world. Only such a world is unique and essential for the eternal purpose.

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