# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

## A. Background of the Study

Bipolar Disorder, historically known as manic depression, represents one of the most complex challenges in modern psychiatry. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines it as "a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks." This condition manifests through alternating episodes of mania and depression, creating what psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison (1993) describes in Touched with Fire as "a strange and often brutal marriage of fire and ice in the same mind." The intricate relationship between this disorder and artistic creativity has long been observed, with Jamison noting that "the manic-depressive temperament has been, and is, disproportionately represented among poets and other artists."

The confessional poetry movement, emerging in mid-20th century America, provides particularly fertile ground for examining this relationship. As literary critic M. L. Rosenthal (1967) first articulated, confessional poetry "breaks away from the modernist impersonality" and instead "reveals the poet's own psychological vulnerabilities and private sufferings." Within this movement, Robert Lowell stands as a pivotal figure, whose documented struggle with bipolar

disorder profoundly shaped his artistic vision. As biographer Paul Mariani (1994) notes in Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell, "Lowell's manic episodes and depressive collapses were not merely personal tragedies but became the very wellspring of his creative genius."

Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding the poetic representation of bipolar disorder. Freud (1923) himself, in The Ego and the Id, established that "the ego's position is like that of a man on a tightrope, who must maintain his balance against the winds of instinct and the weight of conscience." This metaphor becomes particularly resonant when applied to the bipolar experience, where, according to psychopathologist Emil Kraepelin (1921) in his seminal work Manic-Depressive Insanity, "the patient's mental state oscillates between the poles of exaggerated self-confidence and profound self-annihilation."

In *Waking in the Blue* Lowell provides a stark depiction of the depressive phase of bipolar disorder. The poem's institutional setting and the speaker's fragmented self-perception exemplify what psychologist John T. Maltbie (2017) identifies as "the ego's collapse under the superego's relentless criticism during depressive episodes." The poem's imagery of confinement and psychological disintegration reflects Kraepelin's observation that in depressive states, "the patient feels himself broken in his mental and bodily powers, worthless, and incapable of any achievement."

Conversely, *Skunk Hour* demonstrates what clinical psychologist David J. Miklowitz (2002) describes in The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide as "the mixed state - a dangerous combination of depressive emptiness and manic agitation." The poem's progression from social observation to personal despair and finally to desperate survival instinct mirrors Jamison's (1993) characterization of bipolar disorder as "a world of intense, contradictory emotions held in unbearable tension."

*For the Union Dead* expands this psychological exploration to encompass what Freud (1930) in Civilization and Its Discontents termed "the discontents of modern society." The poem's tension between historical idealism and contemporary decay can be read through the lens of what psychologist Otto Fenichel (1945) identified as "the ego's struggle to reconcile internal conflicts with external realities." This aligns with Kraepelin's observation that manic-depressive patients often display "an unusual sensitivity to social and moral issues."

The theoretical foundation for this analysis draws significantly from Anna Freud's (1936) elaboration of defense mechanisms in The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence. Her work helps illuminate how Lowell's poetic personae employ various psychological strategies to manage the extreme states of bipolar disorder. As noted by contemporary psychoanalyst Nancy McWilliams (2011) in Psychoanalytic Diagnosis, "patients with bipolar conditions often develop sophisticated defensive structures to contain their volatile emotional states."

Previous scholarship on Lowell has acknowledged his mental health struggles, but few studies have systematically applied Freudian psychoanalytic theory to examine how the dynamics of id, ego, and superego specifically manifest the symptomatology of bipolar disorder across these three key poems. As literary critic William Doreski (1999) observes in Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors, "While critics have noted the psychological intensity of Lowell's work, few have pursued the precise mechanisms by which his poetry translates psychological suffering into artistic meaning."

The significance of this approach is twofold: it enhances our understanding of Lowell's poetry by providing a systematic psychological framework, while also contributing to what psychologist James Hillman (1975) termed "the poetic basis of mind" - the recognition that literature can provide unique insights into psychological conditions that complement clinical understanding.

Therefore, this study is here to fill the academic gap by conducting a systematic investigation into how Lowell's poetic representation of his experience with bipolar disorder is manifested through dynamic conflict in the structural model of Freud's psyche. By applying a strict Freudian psychoanalytic framework, this study will dissect Lowell's three iconic poems—*Waking in the Blue, Skunk Hour and "For the Union Dead*—as complex literary case studies. This in-depth analysis will trace how the primitive impulses and kaotic energy of the id that reflect the manic phase, the violent impact and the incessant criticism of the superego that triggers the depressive phase, as well as the negotiation efforts and

the ego defense strategies that seek to stabilize the two, interact with each other in the poetry text. The interaction of these three psychic forces does not only describe symptoms, but collectively forms a deep psychological narrative. This internal conflict, in the end, materialized what psychiatrist and literary scholar Jennifer Radden (2003) called "the phenomenon of madness transformed into art"—an attempt to capture and articulate the subjective experience of madness into a powerful and enduring aesthetic form. Thus, this study not only stops at identifying psychic mechanisms, but also argues that Lowell's poems function as a medium of transcendence, where personal mental suffering is processed into a work of art that contains universal values about human suffering.

## B. Problem Formulation

Based on the background above, this study formulates the problems as follows:

1. How are the manifestation of Id, Ego and Superego in Robert Lowell's poem *Waking in the Blue, Skunk Hour and For the Union Dead?*
2. How does the dynamics between id, ego, and superego in these three poems reflect the experience of bipolar disorder

## C. Research Objectives

This study is to:

1. Analyze the manifestations of Id,Ego and Superego in Robert Lowell’s poem *Waking in the Blue, Skunk Hour and For the Union Dead?*

2. Analysis the dynamics between id, ego, and superego in these three poems reflect the experience of bipolar disorder

## D. Significance of the Study

1. Theoretical Significance:

This study is expected to contribute to the application of psychoanalytic theory in literary criticism, particularly in analyzing confessional poetry.

2. Practical Significance:

The findings of this research can serve as a reference for academics and literature students interested in psychoanalytic literary criticism and the poetry of Robert Lowell.