



## Sappho – A Lyric Poetess

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### Abstract

Lyric is a short poem that expresses the personal thoughts, emotions and feelings. Lyrics are combination of words that make a song. The word lyric was derived from Greek word lyre. Lyre is an ancient musical instrument consisting of a U shaped frame with strings attached to it. Lyre is considered a yoke lute, an instrument with one or more strings. Lyric is a form of poetry that unlike epic and drama, does not tell a story but it expresses the personal feelings of poet. It is shorter, melodic and contemplative. Lyric is common kind of subjective poetry and considered to be amongst the earliest form of poetry in the history of English literature. Its origin is in Ancient Greek. It began as personal, emotional verse expressing poet's inner state, love, grief and personal experiences. Greek poet Sappho (c 610 – 570 BC), Alcaeus, Anacreon and Pindar were archaic and classical musician poets well known for their lyric poetry. It is believed that Sappho has written more than 10000 lines of poetry. She got the title "The Tenth Muse" and "The Poetess" for her remarkable poetic work. Her lyrics were full of emotions and spontaneity. Her range was wide. Although she wrote poems on love, family and religion, but best known for her love poetry. Most of Sappho's literary or poetic work is now lost and the survival literary work is in fragmentary form. Only 'Ode to Aphrodite' is in complete form. Mostly she wrote elegiac and iambic poetry. She wrote about the experiences of women. She expressed her personal, female experience through lyric love poetry. She explored human values through her own female experience. She tells of the prayers and rites of women, as well as their longings. Sappho wrote nine books of lyric poetry, and invented the Plectum (stringed instruments). She also wrote epigrams, elegiacs and solo songs. Her poetical work is a rare example of a woman speaking of her love for another woman.

**Key Words:** - emotions, subjective, experience, humanity, music, Sapphic, ancient, instrument.

Lyric is a short poem that expresses the personal thoughts, emotions and feelings. Lyrics are combination of words that make a song. The word lyric was derived from Greek word lyre. Lyre is an ancient musical instrument consisting of a U shaped frame with strings attached to it. Lyre is considered a yoke lute, an instrument with one or more strings. "in classical Greek, the word "lyre" could either refer specifically to an amateur instrument, which is a smaller version of the professional cithara and eastern Aegean barbiton, or lyre can refer generally to all three instruments as a family"(1). Greek sense of lyric poetry – poetry accompanied by the musical instrument lyre, first attested in Stainer and Barrett's 1876 Dictionary of Musical Terms. (2) Lyric is a form of poetry that unlike epic and drama, does not tell a story but it expresses the personal feelings of poet. It is shorter, melodic and contemplative. "Rather than depicting characters and actions, it portrays the poet's own feelings, states of mind and perceptions"(3).

Lyric is common kind of subjective poetry and considered to be amongst the earliest form of poetry in the history of English literature. Hudson says about lyric "a lyric is almost unlimited in range and variety, for it may touch nearly all aspects of experience, from those which are most narrowly individual to those which involve the broadest interests of our common humanity. Thus, we have the *convivial or bacchanalian lyric*; the lyric which skims the lighter things of life, as in the so-called *verse de societe*; the *lyric of love* in all its phase, and with all its attendant hopes and longings, joys and sorrows; the *lyric of patriotism*; the *lyric of religious emotion*; and countless other kinds which it is unnecessary to attempt to tabulate." (4).

There are many qualities of a good lyric, depending on the poet's moods and style:

1. Simplicity is the attractive feature of a good lyric. Lyric is a short and simple poem. It

conveys the poet's innermost thoughts and feelings which touch the heart of readers.

2. Lyric expresses the single emotion and feeling of the poet. A good lyric can touch the heart and soul of the reader and can transport to him in another world.
3. Musical quality is most important quality of lyrics. It makes it more attractive and popular. Poet uses various devices to enhance the music of their lyrics; musical quality makes lyric a truly special form of expression. Music is the language of soul and it touches the heart of everyone.
4. Lyric is an expression of moods and emotions of a poet. The best lyrics are emotional in tone. Sometime poet also analyses his emotions intellectually. Emotions are ever changing. If poet is happy, he sings happy song; if poet is sad, he sings sad song. So lyric is the best way of expressing moods and emotions, and shares with the readers.
5. The best lyrics are the expression of intensity of emotions such as intensity of love, anger or sorrow. In love lyric poet expresses the deep intense love which he feels for his beloved. Intensity of emotions comes directly out of the heart of poet and touch to the heart of readers.
6. Spontaneity is also important quality of lyric. Poet sings effortlessly, or expresses his emotions. Spontaneity makes lyric beautiful. William Wordsworth says "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility." (5). Its origin is in Ancient Greek. It began as personal, emotional verse expressing poet's inner state, love, grief and personal experiences. Greek poetess Sappho (c 610 – 570 BC), Alcaeus, Anacreon and Pindar were archaic and classical musician poets well known for their lyric poetry.

## Sappho

Sappho was ancient Greek poet. She is regarded as one of the greatest lyric poet. She was born in the town of Eresos to an aristocratic, socially prominent family and lived most of her life in Mytilene, the most important city of island of Lesbos, though her parentage is uncertain. She was orphaned at the age of six. "the information about her life recorded in ancient sources was derived from statements in her own poetry that ancient authors assumed were autobiographical, along with local tradition." (6). Little is known about Sappho's personal life. Her parent's names are uncertain. She had three brothers - Charaxos, the wine merchant in Egypt, Larichos, the wine pourer at the Mytilenean town hall (the position of pourer was generally reserved for men of aristocratic birth) and Eueygios. She was married to Kerkylas of Andros a wealthy person, and had a daughter named Cleis (named after her mother). Her two brothers Charaxos and Larichos are mentioned in her poetic work 'Brothers Poem' or Brothers Song' (Brothers Poems is a series of verse rediscovered in 2014. The poem is in address form to an unknown person by Sappho herself) and her daughter Clies is mentioned her fragments 98 and 132. Rayor and Lardinois write about her " Her poetry - which, with the exception of a single complete poem, survive only in fragments - is the only contemporary source for her life" (7).

She was banished from Lesbos and forced to live in Sicily around 600 BC and continued to work around 570 BC. It is said about her, that she killed herself at early age by leaping from the Leucadian Cliffs due to her love for the young sailor Phaon, as he rejected her love. She was counted among the greatest poets of antiquity. She was referred as 'the poetess' just as Homer was called 'the poet'.

It is believed that Sappho has written more than 10000 lines of poetry. She got the title " The Tenth Muse" and "The Poetess" for her remarkable poetic work. Her lyrics were full of

emotions and spontaneity. Her range was wide. Although she wrote poems on love, family and religion, but best known for her love poetry.

Most of Sappho's literary or poetic work is now lost. Only 'Ode to Aphrodite' is in complete form and the survival literary work is in fragmentary form. Mostly she wrote elegiac and iambic poetry. Rayor and Lardinois write about her poetic works " Sappho probably wrote around 10000 lines of poetry, today, only about 650 lines survive, of which just one poem the 'Ode to Aphrodite' is complete, and more than half of the original lines survive in around ten more fragments. Many of surviving fragments of Sappho contain only a single word-for example, fragment 169A is simply as a part of a dictionary of rare words"(8).

In her poetry she explored individual identity and personal emotions like desire, jealousy and love and lives of women. " Sappho was one of the first Greek poets to adopt Lyric I - to write poetry adopting the viewpoint of a specific person in contrast to the earlier poets Homer and Hesiod, who present themselves more as conduits of divine inspiration"(9). She wrote about the experiences of women. She expressed her personal, female experience through lyric love poetry. She explored human values through her own female experience. She tells of the prayers and rites of women, as well as their longings. Sappho wrote nine books of lyric poetry, and invented the Plectum (stringed instruments). She also wrote epigrams, elegiacs and solo songs. Her poetical work is a rare example of a woman speaking of her love for other woman. Rayor & Lordinois write about her " beyond her poetry, she is well known as a symbol of love and desire between women. With the English words Sapphic and Lesbian deriving from her name that of her home Island respectively"(10).

She spent most of her life in Lesbos, where she ran an academy for unmarried young women. Sappho's school devoted itself to the instruction in poetry, dance, music and cult of

Aphrodite and Eros. (Aphrodite is the Greek Goddess of love, passion, lust, pleasure, beauty and procreation and Eros is the Greek God of love and sexual desire). Her poem about Eros, have been argued to show sexual favour to both men and women and discuss such things with equal passion. She earned a great reputation as a poet and a dedicated teacher. It may have been a type of 'finishing school' to prepare aristocratic girls for marriage and was dedicated to the goddess of love. Sappho's poetry was about the struggles of love and desire. She also became associated with loving women. She and her poetry also inspired the origins of the word Lesbian, which came from the Island of Lesbos where she lived and worked. Through her writing of love, she became a lesbian icon and an inspiration and comfort to many. Lesbian women therefore have also called themselves 'Sapphic Women, Sapphic Sisters or daughters of Sappho meaning women who love women. Sappho holds such a important place in the lesbian community that many women make the pilgrimage to visit Lesbos, where Sappho was born. This place became centre of Lesbian tourism. One of the meter in which she composed her poems is known as " Sapphic meter" or the "Sapphic stanza", which consists of three lines of eleven beats and a concluding line of five. Her verses are full of melody, which fascinated her readers. Her poems are appreciated for spontaneity, simplicity and honesty. She wrote in the Aeolic Greek dialect which was difficult for Latin writers. The writer of New Comedy parodied Sappho as both promiscuous and Lesbian. The term Lesbian is derived from the name of her home island Lesbos. Her reputation as a lesbian caused Pope Gregory to burn her poetic work in 1073.

Sappho was able to live as she pleased or wished. The historian Wendy Slatkin writes " considering the severe restrictions on women's lives, their inability to move freely in society, conduct business or acquire any type of non-domestic training. It is not surprising to find that no names of important (female) artists have

come down to us from the classical era, only the poet Sappho received high praise from the Greeks. Plato referred to her as the twelfth Muse. Significantly, she came not from Athens or Sparta but from Lesbos, an island whose culture incorporated a high regard for women" (11).

Sappho's surviving poetic works are her deeply personal reflections on desire, love and loss. She understood this clearly and focused her works on the human emotions. Aldrich and Wotherspoon write about the content of her poetry - " Sappho is the first Greek poet to write expressly about the feeling generated by love. The best example of this is found in what is perhaps Sappho's most famous fragment - phainetai moi - which also stands apart from surviving love poetry written by men in that it talks about the physical manifestation of emotion. The physical manifestation of love in Sappho's lyrics is not expressed as sexual. There is next to nothing in any of her fragments that mentions any sexual act between women" (12).

In Ode to Aphrodite the only complete poem, Sappho is requesting for help to goddess of love to win the love of a young woman. Her poems are melodious and performed publicly at events or parties. About her poetry, Stobaeus relate an ancient anecdote, he writes - " Solon, (one of the wisest men and counted among the seven sages of Greece) of Athens heard his nephew sing a song of Sappho's over the wine and since he liked the song so much, he asked the boy to teach it to him. When someone asked him why, he said " so that I may learn it, then die" (Florilegium 3.29.58). That anecdote shows the significance of Sappho's song that such a sage famous for his wisdom was deeply moved, and he desired to learn her song. Her poems continued to be performed, sung and admired by readers and performers long after her death. She loved her poetry and referred it as her 'immortal daughters'. She was accomplished poet of her time. She had immense talent of poetry that made her famous and popular. Leon writes about her popularity as a poetess - "Not



only was her work sung, taught and quoted but the very phrases she coined from love, that loosener of limbs to more golden than gold, entered the Greek language and were used so much they eventually became cliches" (13).

Most of her work survive as fragments so it becomes difficult to determine the true meaning of her poetic work. Her poetry is highly regarded in ancient Greece, but unfortunately very little of it survives to modern day. Her poetry was usually written to be accompanied by the playing of the lyre. Her poetry was considered new at the time because she often focused on humans and the emotions of life, rather the works of the gods. She was so popular that statues raised and coin minted with her name and image in her honour. Historian Vicki Leon comments about her popularity - "Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos, proudly issued Sappho coins, some have been found that date to the third century A.D. nine hundred years after the poet's death. Sappho (or rather her fame) cornered the ancient equivalent of the T-Shirt concession too; her portrait and name appear on vases, bronzes and later, much Roman art" (14).

Although much of her life and death remain a mystery, her work has had a very significant impact on many women and their identity. Sappho's work has been influential to many women and are still relatable centuries later continuing to prove her place in history as one of the greats. Renowned for her lyric poetry, Sappho's work often explored themes of love and desire, and she is celebrated as one of the first female Greek author and poet. Revered as a bold and autonomous woman, she has become an emblematic figure for feminist movement across history. Her work expressed a singular and inventive voice that has inspired countless writers over the centuries. Her poetry is notable for its intimate portrayal of personal experience and relationship, and her use of vivid imagery and melodic language has secured her lasting fame as an icon of lyric poetry. Sappho's legacy endures as she continues to be revered as an

emblem of female voice and expression in literature.

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