



CONFESSING TO HER MULTIPLE LIVES: THE POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON (1928 – 1974)

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ABSTRACT

This research aims at focussing on the Confessional poetry of Anne Sexton during her rather eventful and manic life. Though short-lived, her sharp and at times shocking use of words, bold, private images enables her to deliver in terms of poetry what she could not, perhaps achieve in the claustrophobic air of domestic life. Her poetry is ripe with the colour of depression, disappointment and a certain disengagement that ultimately distances her from the spheres of family and society. Her close camaraderie with the likes of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and W. D. Snodgrass helps readers analyse the various artistic channels of this fleeting personality. The direction of her poetic imagination combined with the deep-rooted anxiety gnawing between her self and the other magnifies her into one of the most controversial and yet striking faces of this movement. Latching on to her need of a personal poetic diction and an untraceable aura, the research attempts to flow through the cracks in her psychological being and ultimately develop what remained of her as a poet.

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“to recreate the syntax and measure of poor
human prose
and stand before you speechless and
intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected
yet confessing out the soul
to conform to the rhythm of thought in his
naked and endless head...”
Allen Ginsberg, (*Howl* 1956)

Crumbling under her myriad selves, Anne Sexton’s poetry reveals through the journey of words the labyrinthine setting that resides inside a disturbed mind. Intimate, almost with a sense, similar to that of trespassing someone’s private journals, her works bared her deepest and often darkest desires for the world to read, scrutinize and often condemn. Poetry for her was a recluse, a momentary escape route from her otherwise troubled mental state; keeping her

more or less sane to survive the wild, twisted world she built around her.

The genre of Confessional Poetry fit Sexton like a glove. She enrolled for workshops from Robert Lowell at the Boston University and made close acquaintances with the likes of Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck, meanwhile enhancing her only too verbally extrovert spirit. Over countless martinis at the Ritz-Carlton, the two women *compared suicide attempts, discussed their mutual enchantment with death, critiqued each other's work, and gossiped over drinks and free potato chips*¹.

While studying confessional poetry, it is of key importance to understand that these poems do

¹ Keenan, Katherine Rose. *When Ariel Found Mercy Street: The Influence of Anne Sexton on Sylvia Plath's Poetry*. Plath Profiles, 2013.

not intend to signify a poet's cry for help or his/her need for rescue or redemption from society. Cataloguing these poems as such would disintegrate the basic composition of the confessional movement, which only resorted to writing for its cathartic value. When M. L. Rosenthal first used the term 'confessional' to describe Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) he stated that these poems reveal "experiences or emotions that are more or less shocking – hatred of one's parents, children, spouse, or self, lust, voyeurism, suicidal fantasies, madness."²

In 1960 when her first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* came out, readers were struck with the dramatic use of language and descriptions as intimate and fine as the filigree that adorned the even dingy dimensions of the human tapestry. Liberating, shocking, nursing- Sexton's poetry checked every box for the role of an overnight sensation. Given the autobiographical nature of her debut work, the poems exposed her combined stay at the mental institution fighting her illness and depression and juxtaposing that with her journey back to the reality of life and the distant glimmer of death.

Writing in an age of vehement criticism, the poetess almost found necessary permission in the works of close associate and mentor, W.D. Snodgrass. It 'held me and hurt me and made me cry'³ she said, on reading *Heart's Needle* (1959), a collection that dragged her to the edge of the personal chasm that she kept blocked within her for years. Without having received any former training in writing, Sexton gained her selective, yet longstanding popularity by what she made out of her painful life; writing about her father in *Daddy Warbucks* in a style that also inspired contemporary poet Sylvia Plath. Rejecting the more stereotypical 'feminine' themes for their poems, both Plath and Sexton embraced the not so subtle art of exhibitionist and confessional poetry, intertwining their words with the personal grievances of their past,

² Rosenthal, Macha Louis. *Poetry as Confession. The Nation, 1959*

³ Perkins, David. *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*. Belknap Press, 1989.

the disappointment of the present and the hollow, naked vision of a fruitless future.

Her tryst at the asylum, the morning *walk from breakfast to madness*⁴ seemingly contributed to a heavily metaphoric reading of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, calling forth readers to peel the layers of Sexton's fragile, inner psyche in the process. *Bedlam* reflected her stay at the institution against the backdrop of her days back home. As she recounts the gulping down of the 'splendid pearl', 'the pink, the orange, the green and the white goodnights', she believed that she was making her nights more bearable and her conscience less harrowing.

Sexton was perhaps too broken to realize who she truly was; tearing down age old notions of moral conduct and the expected polite, feminine behavior, she was spinning forbidden content around walls of potent, personal experience- she was a rebel, a liberator. Indeed, her poetry with all its nuances connected with women readers all around, unifying their disturbed selves with the solitary power of words, at a time when the very identity of a non-male writer was thoroughly neglected and subdued. The inherent beauty of Anne Sexton's poetry lies in her almost naïve honesty. The harmony that survives in between the knowledge of the beautiful and the utmost ugly weaves a surreal, patched blanket of hope, despair and longing through all her poems. Her statements are full with risk, over stepping the apparent perimeters of shame and disgrace- norms and gender restrictions.

Anne Sexton's poetry spoke volumes about her isolation at the asylum, her doctor, Dr. Martin Orne, the memories she gathered during her stay, all combining to testify line after line the 'bedlam' of her inner madness. Her later works *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) and *Live or Die* (1966) for which she went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1967 breaks away from her otherwise stern form and structured meters. These poems show her maturity as a writer and more significantly as a woman who had been tip toeing on

⁴ Sexton, Anne. *To Bedlam and Part Way Back..* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1960.

the tight rope of an almost sensationally damaged life. Her poetry conveys a sense of yearning for a gladder time and yet immediately retracts as if in a manner of having sensed a terminal dead end. This is the confession in her poetry- her untapped vulnerability that is only allowed to peek and never asked to stay. With time, her poems grow darker, the theme of death looming larger with every failed suicide attempt as if indicative of the burden that life itself had become for her: *Suicides have already betrayed the body*.

In *All My Pretty Ones*, not only do we find the poet grieving over the loss of her human bonds, we also see her bracing herself for the finality of the journey and its affairs. Alluding perhaps in the same vein as Macduff in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Macbeth*, the collection chronicles her coming to terms with the vicious circle of life and inevitability hovering over the living. The twin deaths of Sexton's parents in 1959 (her mother's succeeded by her father's) led her to cling on to writing for dear life. Her poems thinly conceal her feelings of bitterness towards them and thus vividly capture the essence of the conflict between holding them responsible for desolating her and lamenting their loss. Using it as a vehicle to transport herself from these worldly sufferings, she used poetry as a defense, as a healing ointment to veil the scarring of her reality.

Sinfully direct, she does not retract from exposing the underbelly of her apparently peaceful private life. Sexton's is a poetry of deliberate explicitation; drawing from the works of her contemporaries, she perfects in her suitable way, the art of story-telling: in a manner that is both gruesome and therapeutic. Her works and letters throw light on the dissatisfaction she gained from being the person who she was, *a plaster doll* in *Self (1958)* to a self proclaimed *possessed witch* in *Her Kind*. In one of her interviews, Diane Middlebrook author of *Anne Sexton: A Biography (1992)*, recalls that "*her (Anne Sexton's) self mythology was of somebody who rose out of mental illness, discovered her talent and immediately*

became a poet..."*⁵ For Sexton, poetry was a haven and perhaps the only practice that could keep her insanity at bay.

Much like Plath, Sexton too was fascinated by the idea of death and this vision managed to trickle down to most of her later poems, reflecting the similar mind sets that they shared in their artistic lifetimes. In the poem *Sylvia's Death*, the poetess frantically rebukes Sylvia Plath on having achieved the impossible and the grand exit without her. Addressing her as a *thief*, the poem captures a sense of jealousy on the part of the poet who feels betrayed at having failed to even put a stopper to her own life.

The entire body of work that Sexton authored till her well-designed suicide repeatedly reflected on the psychological and social trauma that she struggled to cope up with all her life and finally succumbed to in 1974. Whilst battling this mental condition, the feeling of resentment towards her parents and the inability to deliver herself fully as mother and wife, she led herself into seeking fulfillment from poetry. Only by drifting into this bottomless abyss of introspection did she find solace, comfort and a temporary cure for the static depression from being a self-explorative suburban housewife.

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⁵ Middlebrook, Diane. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. Vintage Books, 1992.