

## Anne Sexton and the Feminine Voice in American Poetry

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Anne Sexton, one of the first of the confessional poets, studied under W.D. Snodgrass, John Holmes and Robert Lowell, and *workshopped* with Sylvia Plath and Maxine Kumin. However, she disliked categorizations of her work that labeled her female and confessional. And she felt that her poetry, though it shared a personal component with that of Plath and Lowell, was quite different; was, in fact, quite her own.

That is another lump I dislike: 'female poets lump,'  
the 'confessional poets lump,'  
or 'Lowell, Sexton, Plath lump.'<sup>1</sup>

In response to criticism from her teachers and readers that her poetry was too private, she insisted that she wrote in the only way possible for her. Rigorous in her efforts to purify her poems of excess emotional baggage, she claimed that her teachers and classmates had shown her what to leave out of her poetry, rather than what to put into it. Her later success as a teacher of creative writing centered on passing that message on to her own students.<sup>2</sup>

Anne Sexton entered the poetic arena later in life than most poets do, but experienced surprisingly quick success. Except for a brief period during high school, when she wrote poetry imitative of Sara Teasdale, Sexton neither read nor wrote poetry until she was 28 years old. She had dropped out of her freshman year at a junior college to marry. After 10 years of marriage and two children she suffered a series of nervous breakdowns. Her psychiatrist encouraged her to educate herself through televised adult education courses.

During one of these she became interested in lyrical poetry and began to write about her experiences as a patient in a mental hospital. After working for some time on her own she mustered the courage to take creative writing seminars. Her poetry was first published in various magazines and then collected for publication in the United States and in Great Britain. Eventually her poems were translated into several European and Asian languages. Giving advice to an aspiring poet Sexton said,

It seems to me that T.S. Eliot and maybe Rimbaud were around 19 or 20 when they wrote some great poems. But that is the great exception. I started to write seriously (nine hours a day) when I was 28....I did not get anything published (although I wasted some important 'growth time' trying to) for about three years. This was very quick as the 'racket' goes. Usually it takes a

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. **Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979. p. 308.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. **Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979. p. 335.

poet five or six or even ten years. Emily Dickinson never bothered with the whole thing. She was content to write them.<sup>3</sup>

Sexton's highly personal subject matter and anatomically accurate language caused her teachers and other readers discomfort. Some readers, attracted by Anne's graphic imagery of mental illness, found her poetry expressed their own condition. A number of these readers fell in love with her and maintained lengthy correspondences with her.

Much of Anne Sexton's poetry is autobiographical, blurring the distinction between art and reality. She relied a great deal on narrative, combining unusual imagery with a surprisingly formal structure. However, Sexton often altered the objective reality of her experiences to suit the effect of an individual poem. She also wrote, as if in the first person, about people and experiences other than her own. In those poems she was able to transcend her point of view and infuse the poems with a surprising veracity. In at least one poem, 'Red Roses,' she wrote about herself in the third person, describing a loving yet physically abusive relationship between a mother and her child. Although Anne herself was the mother of this poem, she writes from the child's point of view. Her daughter Linda, the child of the poem, becomes a son rather than a daughter of the abusive mother. This mixing of autobiography and invented persona makes it difficult to discern fact from fiction in Sexton's poetry.

Maxine Kumin describes Anne's genre and its relationship to the poet and her audience in this way.

The confessional poem invites the reader in by enlisting her sympathy and identification. The experiences of the confessional poet embody to some degree the national crisis, which need not be political, nor even objectively observable; it can represent an inner and psychological dilemma faced by large numbers of people.<sup>4</sup>

The poems I'll focus on are selected from all phases of her canon. They represent both early and later interests as well as a variety of forms. 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscap, Trickery and Love,' is an uncollected poem published in **Voices: A Journal of Poetry 169**, in 1959. 'With Mercy for the Greedy', 'Somewhere in Africa' and 'I Remember' all come from the collection **All My Pretty Ones**, published in 1962. 'Briar Rose' appeared in the collection **Transformations**, published in 1971. 'The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos' is in the collection **The Death Notebooks**, published in 1974. Finally, we have 'Star-Nosed Mole' from her posthumous collection **45 Mercy Street**, published in 1976.

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. **Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979. pp. 262-263.

<sup>4</sup> Diana Hume George, **Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton**. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. p. 97.

Themes common throughout Anne Sexton's work include incest, death, religion and the female condition. Sexton moves from an inquisition on the crucifixion to a vision of God as mother. And her celebration of the female body and its reproductive capacity fits into her scheme of religion. Sexton struggled with her own confusion over her biological father and the somewhat incestuous relationships she had with her father, maternal grandfather and several male friends of her mother's. This theme of incest becomes clearly apparent in the *Transformations* series of poems. In 'Briar Rose' she retells the Sleeping Beauty story with a prologue and epilogue that clearly identify herself with Beauty. In the prologue Beauty exhibits symptoms of regression and schizophrenia. Anne carries her backwards as sperm struggling to the uterus and invokes an image of father seducing a 'doll child.'

In the retelling of the fairy tale she used imagery of emptiness and destruction: 'eyes burnt by cigarettes,' 'uterus an empty teacup,' and 'a certain kind of eraser' which the good fairy uses to counteract the curse. Sexton described the king as looking like 'Munch's *Scream*,' one of the many metaphors in *Transformations* that play on modern art or contemporary performing artists.

In her epilogue, Sexton added the aftermath of Beauty's inability to sleep naturally after her spell is broken. The drugs required to sedate Beauty remind us of Anne's requirement for sedatives and anti-psychotics. The problem arises from her father, the king's, excess adulation of Beauty as a child and the daughter's feeling that her sleep was imposed to mask an incestuous relationship. Flowers typically play a part in Sexton's poetry and the flower here is the honeysuckle, sweet but rank with death. The image of sleep coincides with the crucifixion in the line 'each night I am nailed into place.' Thus Beauty became a Christ figure for Sexton. Beauty's 'death,' which was really a sleeping, atoned for her father the king's sin in neglecting to appease the fairy gods. Her rising from the dead brought the kingdom back to life; but Beauty was condemned to undergo crucifixion each night forever afterward.

Anne Sexton often wrote metrically regular and rhymed poetry. She frequently began a poem by settling on its first stanza and using the metrics and rhyme scheme that evolved in that stanza for her overall structure. She allowed herself to vary that structure later on in the poem, but she usually found that adherence to the structure forced her to polish her language and her vision. Although her meter is generally consistent, it's rarely traditional. She allowed the needs of the poem to keep her meters flexible. The more she wrote, the less tied to form she became. She used blank verse and free verse when they suited the looser structure of her later poems.

She occasionally wrote poems that came to her quickly, with little need for revision. More often she revised poems many times in order to ensure that the meter didn't force the language and imagery into awkward

patterns. She felt that Lowell's greatest contribution to her poetry was to teach her to 'distrust the easy musical phrase and to look for the frankness of ordinary speech.'<sup>5</sup>

Much of Sexton's workshopping with Maxine Kumin was done over the phone. This sharpened her ear and allowed her to focus on the sound of the poem as well as its visual representation on the page. She often wrote to music, both instrumental and operatic. She would listen constantly to a particular recording, whichever one reflected her mood at the time. Her adaptations of Grimm's Fairy Tales, *Transformations*, was transformed once again into an opera, to Anne's delight. And, as a part of a project she worked on to teach creative writing to high school students, she began to read and sing her poems to rock music. This developed into a rock group that eventually played both benefit concerts and for pay.

'Somewhere in Africa,' a poem written on the death of her teacher, John Holmes, illustrates her use of meter and rhyme. She chose a series of seven quatrains followed by a couplet, each line of which contains anywhere from ten to fourteen syllables. Her rhyme tends to be inexact: rhyming plural with singular and relying on weak rhyme in which both the penultimate stressed and final unstressed syllables rhyme. Thus we have psalms/arm, lost/cross, oars/interior, preacher/teacher and hidden/forbidden. Sexton introduced God as woman in this poem, and not only woman, but primitive woman as well. Her imagery of cancer as a flowering bougainvillea coincides with this African goddess. The tropical lushness of her description invariably reminds the reader of the jungles of humankind's motherland.

It's important to remember in reading this poem that John Holmes consistently discouraged Sexton's private imagery and explicit language. His view of the poetic tradition was classical and restrained. He felt that Sexton was dangerous both as a poet and as a person. On several occasions they argued bitterly: in person, in letters and in poetry. One of Anne's earlier poems, titled 'For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further,' cast him as spiritually blind. Although Sexton didn't use her elegy to berate his stance as a poet, she did portray him as betrayed by the very tradition he preached. Her imagery of dessication contrasts with the rage of Dylan Thomas at his father's death. The world Sexton commended Holmes to

robs him of all force and power, is ironically the one he has worked to protect in its literary form: one of decorum, reason, restraint, institutionalized authority. Yet there is no edge of triumph in the speaker's voice.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, in her closing couplet, Sexton placed John Holmes in the same category as the rich treasures of Africa: ivory, copra and gold. Plundered by European colonists through slaughter of elephants, harvesting of

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<sup>5</sup> Steven E. Colburn, ed. *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1985. p.92.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Hume George. *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. p. 108.

coconuts and mining of the native earth, respectively, these invaluable natural resources both forced the African continent into the twentieth century and tolled the death knell for its traditional way of life. Significantly, Sexton imaged Holmes with the ivory, copra and gold floating down the river (life) to the sea (death).

In a very different vein, 'I Remember' flows as a run-on sentence, in the very way memory returns to the poet. Sexton's lines in this poem are short, varying from five to eight syllables in length. At first glance there seems to be no rhyming pattern. However, through the use of repetition and variation of end words, Sexton achieves a sense of unified rhyme. Assonance, alliteration and sibilance help this effect, too. Of the twenty-two lines in this poem, only a few don't fit into the pattern of rhyme. Sexton even plays with internal rhyme in this very short poem: snore/color/more/worn/your/warm/alarm/door. Her end rhymes follow interesting patterns, as well. For example, she moved from feet to night to neat to sight in one section. In addition to the exact rhyme, she varied the vowel sound in night to arrive at neat, her rhyme with feet. Was, one of her repeated end words, appears both at the beginning and end of the poem.

In a letter to a friend, whose profession was psychoanalysis, Anne discussed her private conception of language. She meant by language a symbolic method of communication, which may or may not be verbal. This description gives insight into her use of imagery in poetry. She communicated via metaphor rather than in a straightforward manner.

Language is the opposite of the way a machine works. Language is poetry, maybe? But not all language is poetry. Nor is all poetry language....I think language is beautiful. I even think insanity is beautiful (surely the root of language), except that it is painful.  
Language is verbalizing the non-verbal. (That's what makes it so complicated.) Holding hands is better than saying 'I love you.'  
Language in action is symbolic. Language in words is, too, but it is more difficult to follow.  
To eat raspberries (I just ate a cupful) is to live. To take sleeping pills (four a night every night as I do) is to die.<sup>7</sup>

Anne Sexton had a set of personal images that she used regularly in her poetry. Frequently her imagery involved the female anatomy and bodily functions. She also incorporated modern references to popular figures and events, although she didn't consider her poetry to be socially conscious. Like her subject matter, her metaphors are highly personal.

One of her frequent methods for deriving metaphor was through the use of palindromes. Her favorite, 'rats live on no evil star,' symbolizes her continual sense of bordering on mental breakdown. She identified a vision of rats in the toilet with her stays in mental hospitals. In 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' Sexton connected the nature of existence with the individual's internal 'landscape.'

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. **Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979. pp. 245-246.

Her rats literally transform to stars. In fact, she built her entire rhyme scheme for the poem on that transformation, in conjunction with homonym tricks. Beginning with write, she moved to right and shifted vowels to route, then returned to writes and its homonym rites, which shifted vowels to rats. At this point the palindrome came into play as rats turned into star, which repeated, then shifted to stare, store and back to star, only to end with a tense transformation of her original rhyme word – write – to wrote.

In 'Star-Nosed Mole' she began with the palindrome for God: dog. Her mole is the angel-dog of the pit. Sexton frequently referred to herself as Ms. Dog in her poetry, and here she invested her mole with some feminine characteristics: asking about its sooty suit and its kitchen. She ended by comparing the star on its nose to the cross and invoking the Pieta. Implicit here is the mole's star-nose as the star of Bethlehem, which both announces Christ's birth and foreshadows his death on the cross. Her final image presented the mole as the helpless Christ, whose mother couldn't wake from death, either by crucifixion or drowning.

Sexton also invested the other animals in this series (the bat, hog, porcupine, hornet, snail, lobster, snake, moose, sheep, cockroach, raccoon, seal, earthworm, whale, horse, june bug and gull) with the spirit of the divine. Her 'Bestiary' poems composed the second part of the posthumous work she originally titled **The Life Notebooks**. She later decided she hadn't yet written a counterpart to her **Death Notebooks**, and changed her title to **45 Mercy Street**, an echo of her critically received play **Mercy Street**. The first section, 'Beginning the Hegira,' dealt with her early mental illness, 'Bestiary' with her search for God, 'The Divorce Papers' with her attempt to recreate her life without her husband, and the final section, 'Eating the Leftovers,' with her failure in that effort.

Oddly enough, although Sexton naturally spelled poorly and needed the assistance of friends and editors in preparing her manuscripts, she also intentionally misspelled words for effect in her letters. Perhaps this flippant attitude towards the proper spellings allowed her more freedom to experiment with palindromes and other word correlations in her poetry. Sexton's goal for her diction was for it to be both precise and conversational. Often simple, her language incorporated the terminology of psychoanalysis. To fully understand some of it, the reader must be familiar with contemporary treatments for manic-depression and schizophrenia. In her later poetry she focused on Christ's life and crucifixion, so the jargon of theology also came into play. An early poem, 'With Mercy for the Greedy,' prefigured her Jesus poems. Her focus on the physical attributes of Christ and the cross parallel her later concentration on the psychology of the crucifixion. She admitted to being confused and ambivalent about Christ: 'Oh, I really believe in God -- it's Christ that boggles the mind.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979. pp. 234-235.

In the poem 'With Mercy for the Greedy,' she described her own physical and emotional state as well as Christ's. We have a vivid picture of Sexton moving through her day, with the crucifix swinging at her neck on a strand of package string. There's more than a hint of irreverence in the package string. And, in the midst of her contemplation of Christ's death she invoked a birth in the metaphor of the tapping cross and child's heartbeat. The Christ figure itself contained 'no thorns, this rose:' a pun on Christ's resurrection. Here she addressed the crucified Christ, not the resurrected Christ, and so she concentrated on the horrible aspects of His suffering and death. Ultimately, she was unable to believe in the resurrection, although she acknowledged humankind's need to confess and accept forgiveness: 'Need is not quite belief.'

For this poem Sexton chose a framing form for her stanzas. The first and last stanzas contain 7 lines each, in which the first, second, third and seventh lines are long and the fourth, fifth and sixth are short. The first and second lines use the same end word and the third and seventh lines rhyme. Of the three short lines, the fourth and fifth rhyme and the sixth stands unrhymed. In her three middle stanzas, the first two lines are short and the last four are long. The second and fifth lines rhyme and the third and sixth lines rhyme, while the first and fourth lines remain unrhymed. This idiosyncratic scheme enabled Sexton simultaneously to experiment and conform to tradition. This poem also contains Sexton's strongest statement of poetry as confessional:

I was born  
doing reference work in sin, and born  
confessing it. This is what poems are:  
with mercy  
for the greedy,  
they are the tongue's wrangle,  
the world's pottage, the rat's star.<sup>9</sup>

Again, in 'The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos,' Sexton mixed death and birth with devotion:

This singing  
is a kind of dying,  
a kind of birth,  
a votive candle.<sup>10</sup>

In the same breath she spoke of God and motherhood. Instead of bougainvillea flowering in throats she presented us with a morning glory blooming and shedding its pollen, which then invaded the human heart. The use of blue, traditionally the Virgin Mary's color, reinforced the correspondence between the human and the sacred mothers. Sexton combined nurturing, religious and sexual images in this poem: 'At the cup of her breasts/I drew wine. At the mound of her legs/I drew figs.' Rather than God as mother, we have Christ as both mother and lover. His blood translates to the cup of wine cleansing us from sin. The sexual counterpoint adds physical nourishment to the spiritual nourishment of her holy communion image.

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<sup>9</sup> Anne Sexton. **The Complete Poems**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981. p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Sexton. **The Complete Poems**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981. pp. 365-366.

Sexton incorporated two anomalies in this poem: the guitar with five strings (guitars have either six or twelve strings, although other stringed instruments can have five) and the woman who sang with her fingers, which could be a sexual image or a reference to the singing sound which can be made by rubbing fingertips on wineglasses. In fact, some instruments (such as the organ, violin, viola and cello) can be played in such a way as to imitate the human voice singing. The musical imagery here connects with the rock performances Sexton participated in during the sixties.

One of her later poems, this 'Fury' employs no recognizable form. However, Sexton played with half rhymes and weak rhymes in various places: singing/dying, mother/guitar, thirst/throat/heart/ and olives/strings/holes/fingertips/birds/breasts/legs/figs. She alternated long and short lines in the poem in such a way as to make each sentence its own section. Some sections contain only short lines, others begin with shorter lines and end with a long line, or vice versa. The overall effect Sexton created results in a poem beginning with short lines, expanding and contracting in line length throughout and ending with short lines: a kind of framing effect she regularly employed.

This poem, one of a series of 'Furies,' Sexton wrote while recovering from a fractured hip which kept her invalided for a year. She played on words in the titles of her 'Furies,' ranging from beautiful bones through hating eyes, guitars and sopranos to earth and the jewels and coal to be found therein. She moved from cooks to cocks to abandonment and overshoes, through rain storms and the flowers and worms they engender, to God's good-bye to Sundays, sunsets and sunrises. Like the *Transformations* series and the later 'Bestiary U.S.A.,' 'Furies' is a thematically unified collection of poems.

Since Sexton was primarily self-educated it's difficult to identify her antecedents with accuracy. Some critics compare her voice to Whitman's prophetic voice. And it's easy to see that they share a common embracing of exact language and love for the human body. Both also present the body as a microcosm for society as a whole: the individual embodies the universal.

Sexton's reliance on formal structure and her grounding in the New England landscape are reminiscent of Emily Dickinson. Although Anne did travel occasionally, her anxiety of strangers and strange places made her much like Dickinson: a closeted poet who dwelt mostly on her interior landscape for poetic inspiration. Both employed local flora and fauna for imagery in their poems. Sexton's 'Bestiary' series reflected Dickinson's concern with the habits and habitats of ordinary animals. Though much more flamboyant than Dickinson's, Sexton's early poetry, especially, was carefully crafted with close attention to unorthodox metrics and rhyme. Both women wrote highly idiosyncratic poetry which evidenced little or no connection to the mainstream poetic tradition.

Some of Sexton's later poems admittedly borrow from W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot. Her ambivalence toward religious doctrine, reminiscent of Yeats and Eliot, sheds light on her reasons for including them in her evidently disjointed attempt to familiarize herself with that tradition.

I'm...obsessional only when confronted with terror and then I make up little magical acts to save me...God? spend half time wooing R. Catholics who will pray *for* you in case it's true. Spend other half knowing there is certainly no God. Spend fantasy time thinking that there is a life after death, because surely my parents, for instance, are not dead, they are, good god!, just buried.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately she denied that she could be placed in any poetic tradition, claiming that she hadn't read widely enough in literature to be influenced by the major poets. She acknowledged the influence of a few of her contemporaries, but attributed similarities of theme and structure to the indirect result of Jungian archetypes rather than to her direct response to any tradition. Her metaphor and diction identify her voice as both feminine and confessional, but in her genre Sexton was one of the groundbreakers.

In addition to poetry, Sexton tried her hand at a play and short stories. She felt that in her poetry she was better able to channel her emotion, avoiding the hysteria that constantly threatened intrusion. In collaboration with Maxine Kumin she wrote some successful children's stories which allowed her great freedom with the word play she loved. However, it was within the tight structure of lyrical poetry that her craft shone brightest.

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<sup>11</sup> Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979. pp. 234-235.

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