

ANALELE UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN CRAIOVA
ANNALES DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE CRAIOVA

ANNALS OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF CRAIOVA

SERIES: PHILOLOGY
-ENGLISH-

YEAR XIV, NO.1, 2013

ANNALS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA
13, Al.I. Cuza
ROMANIA

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*The present volume contains the proceedings of
the 2012 Conference on
Language, Literature and Cultural Policies
“**Sites of Dissension, Sites of Negotiation: Conflict
and Reconciliation in Literature and Linguistics**”*

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Voices of Life, Voices of Death in Anne Sexton's Poetry

Felicia Burdescu¹

Abstract: My paper is part of a larger research topic entitled *Suicide-Bound Poets*. Anne Sexton is a well-known American poetess that belongs to *modernity* through the theme, structure and obsessively recurrent motifs of life and death-terminal paths and steps in the poetic universe. In some critical views, Anne Sexton has been associated to confessional poetry, as being highly subjective, since her verse related the biography problems, mental disorder, and psychotherapy of the author. At the same time, Anne Sexton's discourse introduces poetic voices in conflict that negotiate on life, on death, to her thresholds into an imaginary world. In the way we should *objectively* respond to the text, Anne Sexton "is doing justice" to the readers, even though by hooking the audience into a subjective universe, artistically re-creating the chaotic modern world. This is a constant immolation of the poetess' Self, to produce the work of art. Traces of depression and suicide are to be considered in Sexton's volumes, lurking both in technique and artisticité, which are particularly hers.

Keywords: *confessional poetry, Self, poetic voice, depression, suicide.*

Put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard

Anne Sexton is the typical postmodern artist who allowed herself to be engulfed into the abyss of her own tormented thoughts. Depression and suicidal tendencies were often her most faithful companions, and yet, she somehow managed to create a work of art whose uniqueness would quickly turn her into one of the most appreciated female writers of the twentieth century. Spirited and provocative in her early teens, Sexton gradually turned into a recluse after realizing that the life of a suburban housewife she had chosen for herself by marrying young was not as fulfilling as she had expected. The daily routine of an exemplary mother and wife was more than she could cope with and soon after the birth of her second child she was diagnosed with postpartum depression. And yet, it was then that her development into a confessional feminist poetess began. After a year of psychiatric treatment in a mental institution she met Martin T. Orne, the psychiatrist who fully understood Anne's

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problems and helped her express her thoughts and fears through poetry, which became a tool in the process of achieving the independence a woman strove for in a conventional patriarchy.

When Orne met Sexton, he realized her main issues were the acute sense of inadequacy and the complete lack of self-worth she was struggling with. The lack of formal education seemed to have turned her into a woman who was unable to recognize any qualities within herself (Middlebrook, 1992: xiii). As a daughter, she had been living in the shadow of a mother who was thought to be the writer of the family, although her only merit was that of being the daughter of a writer. Anne had been told many times that her writing cannot be compared with that of her mother, despite the obvious lack of talent of the latter. As a wife, she was completely dependent of her husband and she could not function at all when he was away on his frequent business trips, and as a mother, looking after her children brought her on the verge of madness. She loved her children in her own way, but she realized she could not keep them safe. Her mental state continued to decline and she began to experience all sorts of emotions that would put both her and her children at risk. During some episodes of blinding rage she attacked her children, while some other times, when she felt desperate and alone, she tried to kill herself. At this point there was no other option for her family members than to recognize her mental problems and provide the necessary help. She had now completely abandoned the role of a mother and wife and she had taken on the role of the patient, one that she would keep her entire life. (Middlebrook, 1992: 35)

Confessional poetry along with other forms of personal expression such as journals, letters, or autobiographies, was many female modernists' way of celebrating their creativity. Traditional conventions of art production seemed redundant for the artist in search of an identity, which is why many of them turned to the idea of "a life experienced as an art or an art experienced as a kind of life" (Gubar 1981: 252). The modern artist, in general, relies his writing on personal experience and self-knowledge, but the woman artist, in particular, is never satisfied with her condition, which is why her work becomes a means of self-defining. She builds her identity through writing, and, at the core of her creation, we discover a mythology of the self instead of self-knowledge.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, a woman's self becomes objectified in literature only in the presence of a transcendental phallic image to relate with (cf. de Beauvoir, 2009). If artistic

creativity is connected to “biological creativity, the terror of inspiration for women is experienced quite literally as the terror of being entered, deflowered, possessed, taken, had, broken, ravished – all words which illustrate the pain of the passive self whose boundaries are being violated. In fact, like their nineteenth-century foremothers, twentieth-century women often describe the emergence of their talent as an infusion from a male master rather than inspiration from or sexual commerce with a female muse. This phallic master causes the woman writer to feel her words are being expressed from her rather than by her.” (Gubar 1981: 256)

A convincing example in this respect is Margaret Atwood’s prose poem “Mud Woman,” built around the notorious idea of women being the products of male creation through rough symbolism:

When he was young he and another boy constructed a woman out of mud. She began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to essentials. Every sunny day they would make love to her, sinking with ecstasy into her moist belly, her brown wormy flesh where small weeds had already rooted. They would take turns, they were not jealous, she preferred them both. Afterwards they would repair her, making her hips more spacious, enlarging her breasts with their shining stone nipples. (Atwood, 1987: 214)

Anne Sexton begins the adventure of creation from the standpoint of a housewife and a mother who cannot tolerate the constraints of a “normal” society. She learns to write poetry in order to keep her mind occupied with something productive and, in time, writing becomes her sole reason for existence. And yet, like any other woman artist, she too fears the emergence of her own talent. Her engagement in the artistic process keeps her alive, but it does not prevent her from losing control of her mind and body: “I have gone out, a possessed witch, / haunting the black air, braver at night; / dreaming evil, I have done my hitch /over the plain houses, light by light: lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. / A woman like that is not a woman, quite. / I have been her kind.” (Sexton 1981: 15)

I am alone here in my own mind

Eight years of marriage, the birth of two daughters, a psychotic break, constant psychiatric treatment and a television

program called “How to Write a Sonnet” were the necessary ingredients for Anne Sexton’s transformation into an artist. This experience, which she herself called a “rebirth at twenty-nine” (Middlebrook, 1992: 3), was not, however plain and painless, for in the process she had completely given up the tasks of mother and wife. She was never fitted for this role anyway, but when she realized she could write good poetry, she dedicated all her time and effort to this new and fulfilling task.

Anne Sexton’s transformation from a woman led by frustrations and fears into a successful writer acclaimed by public and critics is unmatched. As the third-born girl of a family that seemed drawn “out of a Scott Fitzgerald novel, children of the Roaring Twenties: good-looking, well-to-do, party-loving and self-indulgent” (Middlebrook, 1992: 3), she was expected to behave graciously like her two older sisters with whom she never managed to get along too well. Her father, Ralph Harvey, a successful salesman, dedicated most of his time to his business in the wool industry, and when he was at home, he preferred attending parties and meeting with friends instead of spending time with his youngest daughter. Young Anne must have felt really neglected by her father and, unfortunately, during her marriage she would have to relive the same devastating emotions all over again as her husband also had to travel long distances for business purposes. Anne’s mother, Mary Gray Staples, was the only child of a prestigious family whose members worked in the field of politics and journalism. As a child, she was used to get everybody’s attention and unconditional love and as a mother, she might have been too attentive towards her husband and parties and too inconsiderate of her children’s needs.

Anne was particularly altered because of her parents’ indifference. She could neither respect the dress code imposed by her father, nor behave according to her mother’s wishes. She was always seeking attention and she craved affection, but all she ever obtained were punishments for being too loud, too messy and too troublesome. With parents so preoccupied by looks and appearances, it was impossible for the little Anne not to feel alienated and rejected. She needed her mother’s love, but she was forced to reconcile with the idea that the only person in her family who would love her unconditionally was Anna Ladd Dingley, her aunt, who lived with the Sextons until her death. Anna became Sexton’s most intimate friend and paid much attention to her niece’s needs. She was the only one to notice Anne’s health problems and probably the first person who

realized that the young girl should be submitted to a psychological consult. When Anna's health severely deteriorated, Sexton felt somehow responsible, and when she died, she remained with a deep sense of remorse that would hunt her for the rest of her life.

Sexton's adolescence was a period of experiments and rebellion. Teasing boys and exploring new territories were some of her favourite activities. By the time she was enrolled in a boarding school, she had also become particularly interested in poetry and developed a fascination with death. She began to write poetry, like most of the teenagers, but she quickly gave up her new hobby, mostly because of her parents' distrust in her creative capacity. She even managed to have some poems published in a local magazine, and yet, her socially involved and selfish parents were too busy to notice their daughter's propensity to poetry. They did not recognize her creative capacity and they even made her stop exercising her talent by making her believe she could not compare with her mother who was supposedly the writer of the family.

With an alcoholic father and a controlling mother, Sexton sought refuge somewhere else. She met Alfred Muller Sexton II and right after high school she married him. He knew what it was like to have a family like Sexton's, for his family was quite similar. And yet, the young couple that seemed to walk towards happiness hand in hand was rapidly struck by disaster. After a few happy and fulfilling years, Sexton had her first child and she found herself in the situation to take care of her child alone, as her husband was gone on business trips most of the time. By this time, her feelings of loneliness and abandonment resurfaced and, after giving birth, she was even diagnosed with postpartum depression.

All of a sudden, marriage and children no longer seemed like a good idea for Sexton. She loved her husband and children, but she could not bear the thought of taking care of her daughters alone when he was away. She started therapy and she also began having short affairs that were meant to complete the void caused by her husband's absence. Of course, sexual indulgence did not offer her the peace and joy she craved for, but at least it managed to make her life a bit spicy. At first, no one noticed the troubles she was dealing with, for she always behaved properly when her husband was at home, but her condition gradually worsened, and it soon became clear for everybody that she was unable to look after her own children. At that point, her mother and her mother-in-law intervened and tried to help her take care of her daughters and perform her housewife duties.

Unfortunately, their intervention only worsened her mental state and she soon attempted suicide. As Middlebrook states, right after she took the pills that were supposed to help her sleep, Sexton realized she had made a mistake and called for help, which might suggest that she did not really want to die. Perhaps she wanted to punish everybody for taking away her children, or perhaps she only needed attention. It is impossible to fully understand the cause of such a dramatic gesture, but what we know for sure is that the treatment for mental disorders was limited at that time and that Sexton's suicidal tendencies eventually led to her untimely death.

Sexton's daughter, Linda, was the one who suffered the most during her mother's frequent nervous breakdowns, since most of her random bursts of rage, when Sexton became quite violent both physically and verbally, were directed towards her defenceless young daughter. And yet, the one she hurt the most whenever she attacked her husband and children, was herself:

Both Linda and the typewriter were extensions of herself. Sexton attacked Kayo by attacking herself, the writer in her who was symbolized by her typewriter. Sexton may have attacked Linda to disown that recalcitrant part of her inner being who wished to smear feces on her own mother when she had been so rigid about Sexton's constipation problem as a teenager. (Sanguinetti, Kavalier-Adler 2011: 369)

Therapy with Dr Orne helped her a lot in her development as a writer, but it did not improve her relationship with her family. Poetry and therapy became her sole reasons for existence, and even these were meant to be questioned at some point. After Dr Orne moved to Philadelphia for personal reasons, Sexton continued therapy with other doctors, but the effects were not as positive as before. She started abusing alcohol and sleeping pills, and the fights with her husband became more and more virulent. Sexton did not seem to care about anything but poetry. Her children were more than once witnesses to her drunken fights with her husband and, on several occasions, they even had to find excuses for their parents' behaviour in front of the police forces.

On October 4, 1974 the 45-year-old author ended her life by asphyxiation. There was almost nothing in her behaviour that suggested she would do such a thing. She went to her therapist, she attended her appointment with one of her friends, she put all her

things in order and silently waited to die in her garage while listening to the radio.

All I wanted was a little piece of life

Being a patient in a mental institution seems to have been more adequate for Sexton than being a mother or a housewife. Of course, accepting that she was mentally ill was just as difficult for her as it was for her family. And yet, years later she recognized the experience was very beneficent, for it was the first time when she did not feel alone or misunderstood: "It is hard to define. When I was first sick I was thrilled [...] to get into the Nut House. At first, of course, I was just scared and crying and very quiet (who me!) but then I found this girl (very crazy of course) (like me I guess) who talked language. What a relief! I mean, well ... someone! And then later, a while later, and quite a while, I found out that [Dr] Martin talked language. [...] By the way, [husband] Kayo has never once understood one word of language... I don't know who else does. I don't use it with everyone. No one of my whole street, suburb neighbours" (Sexton; apud Colburn, 1988: 11). To Dr Martin, the one who discovered her talent and encouraged her to write, she even dedicated a poem in which she shows her gratitude for helping her begin her transformation into a writer: "You, Doctor Martin, walk / from breakfast to madness. Late August, / I speed through the antiseptic tunnel / where the moving dead still talk/of pushing their bones against the thrust / of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel [...] Your business is people, / you call at the madhouse, an oracular / eye in our nest. Out in the hall / the intercom pages you. You twist in the pull / of the foxy children who fall / like floods of life in frost. / And we are magic talking to itself, / noisy and alone. I am queen of all my sins / forgotten. Am I still lost? / Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself, / counting this row and that row of moccasins / waiting on the silent shelf." (Sexton, 1981: 3-4)

Of course, Sexton's talent was not enough for her to become an excellent poetry writer. She had always felt inferior for not going to college, but now it was time for her to continue her studies in order to perfect her writing. First, she attended a poetry workshop at the Boston Centre for Adult Education, where she studied under the guidance of John Holmes and met her dear friend Maxine Kumin. Next, she attended the Antioch College Writer's Conference, where she redefined her writing techniques due to valuable advice received