

Anne Sexton's Poetry: Reflections on Death
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Abstract:

Anne Sexton was encouraged by her therapist Dr. Martin Orne to take up poetry about her experiences in her therapist's treatment of her mental illness as this might help others with similar difficulties to feel less alone, thus, there must be a focus on these thoughts or what is related to it, ie, death. The events of Sexton's life are revealed in her poems such as her therapy. Yet, the poems are not as autobiographical as they seem, that they are poems, not memoirs, in which there are recurrent symbolic themes and poetic techniques that make Sexton's work impressive.

Sexton seems obsessed with the idea of death. She wrote about wanting to die, the nature of suicide, and about her suicide attempts before she carried them out. Death to her is horrifying and unpleasant though she viewed death as a state which exists in life; it is "here", ie, in life and all the time ; so, to her , death and life are inseparable— in her heart lies nothing but damage, annihilation, ie, death. Death offers her a refuge as much as her poetry does.

Anne Sexton's Poetry: Reflections on Death

So I can understand how you feel— Yet—you have something to give— a word— a beautiful appreciation of what life— nature— and human relationship does— you are not anyone's baby— You are adult in your sense of decency— Granted —trees rot— plants die— we human fail— but we are spirit— but it's something--- [From Anne Sexton's mother's letter to the poet] (Middlebrook 47).

Anne sexton was born in 1928. She began writing poetry as a teenager, then stopped; she began writing again when she was a suicidal woman undergoing psychiatric treatment, and having two young children (Middlebrook 3). According to the poet's account, she, as an artist, was born at twenty-nine, ie, in 1957; it was not an even development; she broke down completely as a wife and mother, and for a year and a half she moved between extremes of stupefied situation and alarmed agitation; nonetheless, the seeds of her identity as an important poet's life started there (Ibid 4). The way Sexton formulated the story of becoming a poet is as follows: "'The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself. [. . .] It was a kind of rebirth at twenty-nine,'" as such, she

left the domestic world composed of infant-parent dynamics, and burst into the cosmos of poetic art; hence, by the end of the year her first 37 poems came, as she said: "this is just a start for me,...I'm going to aim high, And why not"(Ibid 65,66).

The very beginning of this event was attributed to Dr. Martin Orne, who started Sexton's treatment early in January 1957 and became her longtime therapist at Glenside Hospital. Dr. Orne began keeping extensive records of treatment, including handwritten notes made during her therapy sessions, random, incomplete, and full of private abbreviations. The notes provided a slow-motion documentary of Sexton's conflicts, dreams, fantasies, manipulations, and, ultimately, her development as a writer (Ibid 41). Dr. Orne discovered a large set of formally ambitious poems, neatly typed and dated, which Sexton began bringing to sessions, all of them showed early in her therapy with him, that Sexton began to regard herself as a poet; he encouraged her to take up poetry about her experiences in treatment as this might help others with similar difficulties to feel less alone, while in her first interview she revealed to him that she believed that her only talent might be for prostitution (Ibid 42). A few months later, Sexton's self-disgust and suicidal thoughts returned. Dr. Orne said that his task was to help her develop any resources within her which allowed her to be a person, to attain a sense of purpose; he discussed her poems with her as sources of insight into psychological problems, much less than works of art (Ibid 42, 43).

As such, Sexton's poetry is related to her therapist's treatment of her mental illness, and to her suicidal thoughts, thus, there must be a focus on these thoughts or what is related to it, ie, death. Middlebrook clarified the direct relation between Sexton's poetry and her illness, which corresponded indirectly to her occupied mind with death or to her suicidal thoughts, saying that in poetry Sexton found a true and proper medium for her powers of invention; through " 'the talking cure,'" she came to understand that death symptoms of her mental illness were like metaphors, encoding meanings rich with personal history. In pursuit of such meanings during therapy sessions, she learned techniques of rapid association that later proved valuable at her desk, and later still in the classroom. Apparently Sexton's first clues about figurative language as a mode of thoughts had come during her initial hospitalization at Westwood Lodge. (Ibid 64)

Sexton came to understand poetry as the "art of language," later, she expressed the relation in a metaphor that internalized the doctor as a function of the creative psyche, in other word, she viewed the process of creating

poetry as being subjected to the analyst's treatment when she was "reenacting" a private experiences of terror and the analyst turned them to meanings, the creative mind, in the same manner, made a new reality of her experiences by the means of metaphor (Ibid).

The events of Sexton's life are revealed in her poems— her breakdown, her time in a mental hospital, her therapy, her troubled marriage (ending in divorce), her affairs, and her relationship with her two daughters became transparently the stuff of her poetry, and her verse became far more directly than that of Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath as confessional poetry (McQuade 2474). It is apparently enough that, in her poetry, Sexton revealed her inner perception of herself; and, as a result, her psychological troubles, so as to be classified as a confessional poet like those who, as R. P Draper said: "used their mental struggle as material for their poetry" (Draper, 148); because, in confessional poetry, as M. L. Rosenthal first used the term "confessional," in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* entitled "Poetry as Confession," there was removal of the mask which hides the poet's actual face," when the "speaker is unequivocally himself" (Rosenthal 113); it is personal, autobiographical poetry which explores personal details about the authors' life without mildness, modesty, or caution-- self-revelation achieved through creating the poem ("Confessional Poetry", *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*). Stephen Stepanchev described some of the American poetry after World War II saying that the fragmentation of the poet, which is a part of the fragmentation of modern life in general, led to autobiographical and confessional poetry in—the poet tells his readers about his psychoanalysis and his difficulties (Stepanchev 4,5). Also, Diane Middlebrook defined characteristics and distinctive voice that is understood to be the voice of the poet himself, saying: "Its principle themes are divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood, neglect, and the mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received early in life. A confessional poem contains the first-person speaker, 'I', and always seems to refer to a real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem" (Suarez 27).

Yet, her poetry should not be regarded as a mere recording of her experiences-- in an essay on both *Bedlam* (1960) and *Pretty Ones* (1962), Beverly Fields argued that Sexton's poetry is mostly misread; she argued that the poems are not as autobiographical as they seem, that they are poems, not memoirs, and she went on to analyze many of them in depth in order to show the recurrent symbolic themes and poetic techniques that she felt make Sexton's work impressive (Goh 78). One of the reviewers of *Live or Die* (1966), Sexton's best known book, a *Virginia Quarterly Review* critic, believed that Sexton was "a very talented poet" who was perhaps too honest,

another critic Joel O. Conarroe said: "Miss Sexton is an interior voyager," because she is

describing in sharp images the difficult discovered landmarks of her own inner landscape.... Poem after poem focuses on the nightmare obsessions of the damned: suicide, crucifixion, ...fear, the humiliations of childhood, the boy-child she never had.... It is, though, through facing up to the reality (and implications) of these things that the poet, with her tough honesty, is able to gain a series of victories over them... (Ibid)

Sexton's poetry is compared to that of Emily Dickinson', and she indicated that she read Dickinson; both are occupied with the theme of death and his poetry is autobiographical (McKenna 37). The question which might be raised in this respect is whether Sexton's poetry in its reflections on death implies "a beautiful appreciation of what life is," as her mother said in the epigraph above; or, it is primarily about the suicidal urge; or, at least, death. As Mikhail Ann Long, said: " Most critics agree on the fact that Sexton definitely wrote about wanting to die, and the nature of suicide, from a very personal point of view, "and at least some of Sexton's poetry reflects this suicidal 'lust'"

(Long 1). According to Diane Hume George, there are "at least twenty poems primarily dedicated to explaining what it feels like to want, or need, to die (Ibid.). Kathleen Spivack, in her article "Poet and Friend," noted that "Anne was obsessed with death— one has only to read *Live or Die* (1966), to see to what extent" (Ibid). In "Live", from

Live or Die , Sexton said:

Well, death's been here
for a long time
it has a hell of a lot
to do with hell
.....
by my dwarf-heart's doodle.
The chief ingredient
is mutilation.(Sexton 116)

She viewed death as a state which exists in life; it is "here", ie, in life and all the time ; so, to her , death and life are inseparable— in her heart lies nothing but damage, annihilation, ie, death. Also, she relates death to hell, that is to say, it is horrifying, torturing, and unpleasant; then, one may wonder how suicide came to be her preferred resort. She said about herself:

it was still naked, still killed.
 It was caught
 in the first place at birth,
 like a fish.
 But I played it, dressed it up,
 dressed it up like somebody's doll.
 Is life something you play
 And all the time wanting to get rid of it? (Ibid)

In these lines, the poet expressed her feeling of her body, obviously— it is "killed," she feels her body dead, yet, it is not by accident but by someone, because killing entails a killer. It might be a hint that, in these lines, the idea of killing herself is there in her mind, ie, she would be the killer, more accurately, she would be a suicide. In regard to the suicidal, it does not differ— the psychologist Karl Menninge asserts that one who commits suicide either wishes to kill himself, or to be killed, or to die (Jackson 12). Further, she viewed herself or her life, as a doll to play, it is, in other words, unreal— she doesn't feel it. In *Anne Sexton Biography*, Diane Wood Middlebrook mentioned that during the period after the birth of her daughter she wasn't just tired and low; she was agitated, disoriented, and subject to fits of feeling 'unreal'" (Middlebrook 31). Also, her psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne said: "she was a very difficult patient; she pushed the world of reality away" (Ibid 41). This is apparent in her " Self in 1958," as she opened the poem by raising a question of reality:

What is reality?
 I am a plaster doll; I pose
 With eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall

 Eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.

 I live in a doll's house
 With four chairs,
 A counterfeit table, a flat roof
 A big front door. (sexton 106)

The poet viewed herself as a doll made of plaster, she is not flesh and blood , not a real human being; her eyes are of a doll, open all the time, rigid like steel; her legs are of nylon. This unreal reality of her being stems from the fact that all the world surrounding her is a fake; a doll's house, the people who conduct her lacking warmth because they are like her—dolls. Ibtisam Al-douri said that the poem and the description of the doll's house suggests

the poet's alienation from the world of modern technology;" she is like a free-floating element in a world she can in no way embrace as belonging to her" (Al-Douri 241).

This is the problem with the psychotic patients, they are out of touch with reality; Sexton was officially sick after her first attempt of suicide in 1950 (Ibid 33,35). The line, "wanting to get rid of it" declares a suicidal wish. A critic said that the poem explores a battle with life which many people endure; however, with the speaker the matter differs-- she is unable to truly experience it though she knows the goodness of life, of her suicidal tendencies; she understands her feeling as more of an obsession with death rather than a hate for life ("A Battle with Life in 'Wanting to Die' by Anne Sexton"). Besides; though the speaker is still alive, she relapses into the darkness of her soul; through her vivid use of imagery; Sexton created and exposed her susceptibility to suicide; in regard to the image of clothing: the first lines of the poem are regarded as describing the speaker's ordinary days: "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember. / I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage," the speaker does not think about her fits with depression, she merely walks in her clothing, or goes about her normal daily activities, unhindered by her past unhappiness; yet, the third line, "Then the almost unnamable lust returns", explains her sudden regression (Ibid). In conclusion, death is suicidal in the poet's view.

Another poem , from *Live or Die*, is "The Addict", Sexton wrote when she was forced to undergo a termination of her treatment, with her psychiatrist, Dr Zweizung, with whom she had a love affair, but she could not bear it; thus, a week or so after her talk with Lois Ames, the psychiatric social worker-- she took an overdose of pills and was hospitalized for forty-eight hours; she gave the poem to Ames, in which Sexton treated the suicidal episode as an acting-out of her poem:

Sleep monger, death monger,
 with capsules in my palms each night,

 Don't they know
 that I promised to die!
 I'm keeping in practice.
 I'm merely staying in shape.
 The pills are a mother, but better,
 every color and as good as sour balls.
 I'm on a diet from death. (Middlebrok 295, 260)

In her "Don't they know/ that I promised to die," she declares her permanent intention to commit suicide, because to die is not a choice that

man can make unless he decide to end his life by himself. She said: "it wasn't a serious attempt or I would have succeeded,Part of me is live. But I forgot about the diet from death" (Middlebrook 260). It seems that Sexton not only wrote about her death wish or suicidal tendency, but also she wrote about her suicide attempts before she carried them out. Yet; since she declared that it was not a serious attempt of suicide, then she imagined herself committing suicide while she was writing the poem. This is not applicable to her conceiving poetry which is given above: reenacting her private experiences of terror in which the mind works as an analyst in giving meaning to these experiences and making a new reality of her experiences by means of metaphor; therefore, in this poem it is pre -acting the experience of suicide. Metaphorically, she called herself a "sleep monger" and "death monger," because she continued her seeking death, it offers her a refuge as much as her poetry does. That is why the pills are better than a mother in being kind to her when they are a gentle means that facilitate her transport towards death. It might be inferred that her writing about her attempt of suicide, before fulfilling the act itself, in a way, lessened the tension that assailed the poet on one hand and it lessened the terror of the act, especially that this way of writing is similar to Sylvia Plath's poem, "Edge," which she wrote within the last few days before her death:

The woman is perfected.
 Her head
 Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
 The illusion of a Greek necessity
 Flows in the scroles of her toga,
 Her bare
 Feet seem to be saying:
 We have come so far, it is over. (Alvarez 51)

Sexton referred to her fear of death, saying: "I worry about the minutes before you die, that fear of death I don't have it with the pills" (Middlebrook 216) The wonder how this fear conformed to her repeated attempts of committing suicide could be resolved in reading her poem, "Wanting to Die", which is also from *Live or Die*. She sent the poem to her psychiatrist that followed Dr Orne in her treatment, Anne Wilder, as an answer to the latter's question—"what was the big attraction in suicide?" Wilder, knowing of Sexton's persistent suicidal thoughts, raised this question that almost anyone might have wished to ask Anne Sexton in 1964, ie, she was, a beautiful woman with a comfortable life, a prizewinning poet, the mother of two children; so why did she repeat her attempts of suicide? At the time of this

question, Sexton was not thinking about killing herself; rather, she was thinking of writing about it; Sexton wrote a letter to Wright:

We live at such contrasts . . . you and me . . . me lapping the edges
 . . . me testing death . . . me raging at the fruit, the round moon,
 the arthritic hands, thick with pleasure, the old corpse, the bread
 that I took for a kiss, the love, an infection. . . .It will be very ugly,
 but it was always very ugly and this time I will be part of it. . . I'll
 be its other children.(Ibid 214)

A few days later Sexton sent Wilder the poem "Wanting to Die," which organized much of this material into clear statements about her obsession that sets the suicide apart from others:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
 I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
 Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.
 I know well the grass blades you mention,
 the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.
 Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*.
 They never ask *why build*.(Sexton, 98)

It is not hating life, but, to Sexton, it is as she expanded on this theme to Dr. Orne: "I'm so fascinated with Sylvia's death: the idea of dying perfect"— she said when her old friend Ruth Soter who died of a heart attack: "I would rather that she had killed herself (which seems a matter of free will) than to have died of a heart attack (which seems a matter of being put through a terrifying machine"(Ibid 216); it is for two reasons suicide is attractive: to cure her fear of death, and to feel that she has free will when she chooses the time and way of her death, this is the language of the suicides the poem refers to, the language of will, of what is the means of dying free of fear of death. Also; she stated other means of what Middlebrook called: "intellectualizing about" suicide (Ibid).

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
 have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,

have taken on his craft, his magic.

I did not think of my body at needle point.
Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone.
Suicides have already betrayed the body.

.....

To thrust all that life under your tongue!—
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.
Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say. (Sexton 98)

To Sexton, the more her feeling of self-disgust was renewed, the more her thoughts of suicide became needful, because they are a kind of punishment of a self she hated, the suicide attempts would, from the point of view of her neurosis, settle some accounts; Sexton's image of a split-off aspect, which is helplessly evil, had a life of its own that Sexton longed to destroy, and had possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy" (Middlebrook 21). Suicidal actions are an obsession by which the soul is freed from its poisonous body; the suicides are acting a treacherous act against their bodies; they become addicts to those fatal substances they take by their mouths. It is their way by which they triumph over death.

One reason of Sexton's suicide was her drinking alcohol which became Sexton's chief, self-prescribed medication; it helped generate the curves of feeling on which her poetry lifted its wings, but it dropped her too, into depression, remorse, sleeplessness, paranoia; and it deprived her of "the little critic" in her head that she had summoned to the task of cut, , expand, and cut; she had the drunk's fluency but not the artist's cunning. Loneliness was the other killer. Few of her friends enjoyed her company after she had been drinking; alcohol made her paranoid, and sensitive to slights, given to quarreling and tantrums. As such, in 1974 Anne Sexton took her life to achieve this triumph (Middlebrook 380).

Sexton wrote, on 29 December 1973, a confessional statement, showing the importance of writing to keep her go on living:

I am afraid to die. Yet I think it might do a few favors. If I COULD I'd just die inside, let the heart-soul shrink like a prune, and only to this typewriter, let out the truth. I feel awfully alone — crying in the bathroom so no one need hear — crying over these keys, where they sit as patient as an old granny Can I save myself? I can try . . . I can keep right on trying. Granny, you electric Smith Corona heart, you buzz back at me, and I pray you do not break. I keep forgetting, these last weeks, to thank God each day for something, anything. I do [not?] ask either. But let me right now

thank God for friends, many, many who like my love, swim in it [,]
and for this granny machine. (Ibid)

Eric Jong has an analogous comment on Sexton's suicide saying:

it seems to me that Anne Sexton killed herself because it is just too painful to live in this world without numbness, and she had no numbness at all. All the little denials, all the stratagems of not-feeling by which most of us endure from minute to minute were unavailable to her. Words spared her for a while. With the process of writing the poem, there is a kind of connection which sustains one. Then the poem is done and one is alone again. Other people may enjoy the poem later, but the poet can hardly relate to it. The poet is happy only while writing the poem. (Jong, *The New York Times*)

In a word, she reflects on death in her poetry, yet, when poems end, she has no resort but death.

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شعر آن سكستون: تأملات عن الموت

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الملخص:

شُجِّعت آن سكستون من قبل طبيبيها النفسي أورن مارتن على كتابة شعر عن خبراتها في معالجته لها من مرضها النفسي ، لعل هذا ينفع من هو في مثل حالتها ويخفف الإحساس بالوحدة. اذن كان لابد أن يكون لشعرها علاقة بتلك الأفكار وبما له علاقة بالموت. إن قصائدها قد أفصحت عن أحداثٍ في حياتها كعلاجها النفسي. ولكن قصائدها ليست سيرة حياة ذاتية كما تبدو وإنما فيها مواضيع رمزية وأساليب معالجة شعرية جعلت شعرها يبدو مؤثراً.

تبدو سكستون مهووسة بفكرة الموت. لقد كتبت عن الرغبة في الموت ، طبيعة الانتحار، وعن محاولاتها للانتحار قبل ان تُنفذها. الموت بالنسبة لها مخيفٌ وكريهٌ مع أنها تراه حالة لها وجود في الحياة، انه هنا، في الحياة وفي كل وقت، فكلاهما لا يمكن الاستغناء عنهما—في اعماقها لا يوجد غير الدمار والإلغاء—بمعنى آخر الموت. الموت والشعر كلاهما يمثلان ملاذاً لها.