

# “An Axe for the Frozen Sea Within Us”:

Anne Sexton and the Confessional Poetry Movement

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For centuries, poetry has been a vehicle for universal, objective statements on humanity, avoiding the personality and emotions of the author. In the late 1950s, however, Anne Sexton and others broke taboos and changed attitudes toward poetry when they wrote subjectively about their own lives, expressing true emotion about untouched subject matters, including madness, adultery, and suicide.



Since ancient times, poetry has been a vehicle to define society and culture, to comment on the condition of humanity, and to tell our universal stories. In the last half of the twentieth century, however, even as people seemed to gain a heightened concern for public issues like the Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights Movement, a new class of poets emerged whose writings were turned entirely inward, focusing on the life, struggles, and emotions of the poet and no one else. Anne Sexton, a leader in

this movement of “confessional poetry,” stepped away from the traditional impersonality and universality of poetry to look deep into herself and expose all of the beauty, ugliness, and uncensored humanness within her, and with others like her, she influenced a change in the course of poetry.

In the decades preceding the emergence of confessional poetry, poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and John Crowe Ransom ignored traditional humanistic values and prized, above all, technical brilliance. Their goal was to rework human experience, finding new ways to understand the world (Mack 1375) while using language in new and different ways to call attention to style (Mack 1383). These writers attempted to dehumanize art, to eliminate sentimentality, and to reach their point by applying current conditions to the common cultural heritage rather than human emotions (Baym 1402). If any emotion was expressed it was through a persona, such as Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock, and never through the poet’s self, or through an “objective correlative” used to represent an emotion in external facts and eliminate any personal aspect (Phillips 8).

Attitudes about poetry began to change even before this time, however, as Walt Whitman wrote about his emotional experiences. Then Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams carried on the tradition in the beginning of the twentieth century as more poets began to directly express

emotion from a subjective point of view (Phillips xii). Though previous movements and poets had focused on emotions, the poems were still reserved and limited to publicly acceptable subject matters. It was not until the late 1950s that poetry treating the self frankly and without restraint was pushed to the extreme and became a strong force in literature (Phillips 5). At that time three poets in particular, W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton, were writing poems about their lives, including divorce, insanity, suicide, and adultery, and they were getting a strong, though not always approving, reaction from the literary world. Sexton's poetry, because it was written by a woman, was particularly shocking and revolutionary in the era of the "traditional" wife and homemaker. Following their lead, dozens of poets rose up to write in an unrestricted way about their own struggles and to tell their views of the world, not the experience of humankind in general.

Many critics agree, and it cannot be ignored, that this change was due in large part to the changes in the world that had taken place over the past one hundred years. We began to identify less with nature and predestined love and more with anti-depressants and alternative marriages. Now abuse, broken homes, and alienation are as appropriate subjects for a poem as are a beautiful rose or a perfect love. Robert Phillips, author of *The Confessional Poets*, called the time the great "Age of Autobiography," as we no longer seemed to believe in the general truths about human nature, only the subjective ones (xi), and our writers began to cry out their own stories.

They write out of a need to purge their deepest feelings, not to simply relay events, names, and places (Phillips 7). The subjects of this poetry are rarely beautiful and the words are natural and realistic (Phillips xii). Though the poems are confessional, they might not be literal truths; the loss of one object, for example, may be transferred to a fictitious one, though the feelings represented are true (Phillips 11). Common themes of these poems are alienation, personal failure, and the lost self, real frustrations of the poets told personally, not universally, as previous poets had done (Phillips 13). Although beauty and love make their way into the poems, negative subjects such as these are more common because, as Sexton said in a 1968 interview, "Pain engraves a deeper memory" (McClatchy 27). The poet does not hide behind a persona or search for universal truths, but expresses his or her own personality, concerned only with individual, personal truth. Most importantly, the goal of a confessional poet is to move people, using the poet's experience to stir emotions in the readers who can identify with them. They agree with Franz Kafka's words, which Sexton inscribed



in one of her books, “A book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us” (Sexton 48).

In order to understand this poetry, it is necessary to understand the life of the author. As Phoebe Pennington wrote in her essay, “Poetry and Private Lives,” “Biographies are to such poetry what some thought Eliot’s notes to ‘The Waste Land’ were – ostensible keys to its meaning” (1). Sexton told her own life like a fairy tale in interviews, often repeating the same words verbatim as if she had memorized them (3). Her story was of the oppressed young artist who was forced into the stereotype of the perfect housewife and mother, then, unable to live up to that ideal, she became broken and suicidal until she found her savior, poetry. She went from mad housewife to star. In reality, her life was full of pain, abuse, and self-indulgence, and in the end poetry could not save her from herself.

Anne Sexton was born Anne Gray Harvey on November 9, 1929, in Newton, Massachusetts, the youngest of three girls. Her parents were very much a part of the well-to-do, partying, self-indulgent culture of the time (Middlebrook 4). She felt that she was neglected by her parents and in constant competition with her sisters, always losing (Kumin xxii). Sexton spent much of her childhood covering in the closet of a room in which she was kept by a plastic gate, and she used that room as a major image in many of her poems; the roses on the wall became blood clots and the limbs outside the window, tongues urging her to die (Middlebrook 5). Her father was an alcoholic and stayed drunk more and more often as Anne grew up, often verbally abusing her in front of others until her trust in his love was destroyed (Middlebrook 14). The one person in her life to whom she felt close was her great-aunt, Anne Ladd Dingley,—“Nana” as Anne called her— who came to live with them when Anne was young (Middlebrook 12). Anne spent all of her time at home with Nana, who became the major friend and mother-figure in Anne’s life until Anne became interested in boys. She began to spend much less time with Nana, and during that time Nana’s mental health deteriorated. By the time Anne was fifteen, Nana had been institutionalized for insanity, and Anne would identify with and blame herself for that illness for the rest of her life (Middlebrook 16). After this, Anne’s own depression and unusual preoccupation with insanity and death began to surface even more. In one incident she had a date to go tobogganing on a hill behind her house. When the boy arrived, Anne was not home, and he found her lying at the bottom of the hill, unconscious and bleeding from the head. After carrying her to the house, he discovered that the blood was fake, as was her unconsciousness. Anne had dramatized her own death just to see how he would react, and to her it seemed to be a good joke (McClatchy 19).

In her adolescence, Anne’s main goal was to attract boys, which led her parents to send her to an all-girls school. Anne still managed to have many boyfriends, and she began writing poetry as a teenager after a painful break-up with her first love (Middlebrook 19). She pursued this poetic interest intently, writing several poems a day for a few months, but she stopped after her unsupportive mother accused her of plagiarizing Sara Teasdale. Anne was engaged her senior year in high school and began planning a big wedding to fulfill her long-time wish to be married (Middlebrook 21). While she was engaged, however, she met and fell in love with Alfred Muller Sexton II, nicknamed “Kayo.” They had a brief affair and then, at her mother’s encouragement after false pregnancy suspicions, they eloped at nineteen years old (Middlebrook 22). By the time they were 27, Anne and Kayo had two daughters, Linda Gray Sexton and Joyce Ladd Sexton, and their family was complete (Middlebrook 28). Shortly after the birth of her second

child, Anne began having bouts of depression and anxiety attacks which eventually developed into an extreme dread of being alone with her children because she constantly worried for their safety (Middlebrook 31). Her condition worsened quickly, and she began neglecting Linda and sometimes had sudden attacks of rage that led Anne to slap Linda's face or to choke her. Fearing her own behavior, Anne no longer trusted herself with her children and confided in her family for help (Middlebrook 33). "I was a victim of the American Dream," Anne said in a 1968 interview. "I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out" (McClatchy 4). Following her initial breakdowns, despite therapy and medication, Anne had several more breakdowns, was hospitalized, and made numerous suicide attempts (Middlebrook 35). In 1956, Anne began seeing the psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne. He tried, as many therapists had, to help her break through her difficulties and find a sense of self-worth, but their sessions resulted in little progress. She told him once that the only talent she might have would be for prostitution; she could make men feel powerful sexually, but that was her only worth.

One day, she saw a program on television in which a Harvard professor was lecturing on sonnets. Anne noted the form and wrote several poems that night. She brought her work to Dr. Orne, who was quite pleased and encouraged her to continue writing. Receiving his approval, she wrote three to four poems every day (Middlebrook 42). In these poems, Anne brought out and understood the causes and effects of her illness with which she had not yet come to terms. "I understand in a poem what I haven't integrated into my life," she said of using poems as therapy. "Poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious" (Phillips 2). More than that, writing poems gave her a purpose and gave her life value (McClatchy 4). Her long-time friend Maxine Kumin said in a forward to Sexton's *Complete Works* that poetry was what kept Anne alive for the eighteen years following this. "Without this rich, rescuing obsession," Kumin said, "I feel certain that she would have succeeded in committing suicide in response to one of a dozen impulses that beset her" (xxiii).

In 1957, Dr. Orne persuaded Anne to enroll in John Holmes's poetry workshop in Boston (Kumin xxiii). This was a huge step for a woman who had felt inadequate in school, had never gone to college, and was recovering from a nervous breakdown (Bernard 2), and finding people there who would support her interest and feed her ambition, particularly Maxine Kumin, her successful career began (Kumin xxiv). The workshop would break off later into a private group of five poets who would meet every other week for years, making literary history with such award-winning pieces as George Starbuck's *Bone Thoughts*, John Holmes's *The Fortune Teller*, Kumin's *Halfway*, and Sexton's *To Bedlam and Partway Back* (Shomer). However, Sexton gave the credit of the poet who influenced her work the most to W. D. Snodgrass, whose book *Heart's Needle* tells of his personal struggle in a custody battle for his daughter (Phillips 6). The poems moved her and gave her the courage to write about her own life. She began writing her first book, *To Bedlam and Partway Back*, explicitly describing her madness and her hospitalization, though her mentor Holmes tried to tame her and shy her away from such subjects that were still considered inappropriate for poetry (McClatchy 8). Sexton wrote to Snodgrass, telling him about her writings and how she felt about his, and they began exchanging letters regularly (Middlebrook 91). Snodgrass helped her get into a class taught by Robert Lowell, an accomplished poet who was breaking ground himself, writing a book on his own mental illness

called *Life Studies*. Working with Lowell, Kumin, and her workshop, Sexton published her first book in 1960 and continued to write obsessively for years after that. Kumin was beside her through all of her work, as they kept their phone lines connected all day long in order to talk each other through new poems and countless revisions (Shomer).

Sexton became more famous, winning almost every award available to American poets including the Pulitzer for her book *Live or Die* in 1966 (Phillips 80), and the demand for her theatrical poetry readings increased to a lucrative business (McClatchy 3). Success brought her a greater sense of independence and took even more time away from her family, which Kayo had trouble dealing with, and he began to become abusive (Middlebrook 80). Her beloved aunt had already passed away, and both of her parents died within three months of each other (Middlebrook 116). She also began to have frequent extra-marital affairs with many different men. Those events provided more material for her poetry, but also led to the continuation of her mental illness, now combined with drug and alcohol addiction. “The wish, the need, and above all the gift to please others defines Sexton’s life,” April Bernard wrote in a review of Sexton’s biography. As a child it was her parents and Nana; as an adult she was excessively anxious to please her therapists, to please men sexually, and to charm her daughters and her friends. Finally, her greatest wish was to please the audience of her poems (Bernard 3). Kayo became more abusive, and Anne finally felt strong enough to leave him (Middlebrook 371). Her friends, knowing how she had depended on Kayo, rallied around her to be sure she would not be alone (Middlebrook 372). Still, she had an overwhelming sense of loneliness that would not pass despite her attempts to fill it with her work, therapy, drugs, and religion. She stayed drunk most of the time, which many critics felt damaged her later poetry because it numbed the critic in her head that moved her to revise and perfect. “She had the drunk’s fluency, but not the artist’s cunning” (Middlebrook 380). Finally, on October 4, 1974, she put on her mother’s old fur coat, poured a fresh glass of vodka, sat in her garage in the driver’s seat of her old red Cougar, turned on the ignition, and turned on the radio (Middlebrook 397). After many attempts over many years, she finally had the death with which she had been obsessed for her entire life.

Those who knew Anne Sexton, though saddened, were not surprised by her death. Many were afraid, however, for the impact it might have on the lives of her readers and aspiring poets who followed her work. They equated her madness with her talent, looking also to Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and many other well-known poets who had been mentally ill, and particularly to Sylvia Plath, who had committed suicide years before. Poet Denise Levertov addressed her fears in an elegy to Sexton a few days after her death that took place at what would have been Sexton’s next poetry reading (McClatchy 74). Levertov warned the listeners that Sexton’s mistake was in her inability to separate her depression and obsession with death from poetry itself and that her readers should not make the same mistake. “To recognize that for a few years of her life Anne Sexton was an artist *even though* she had so hard a struggle against her desire for death is to fittingly honor her memory. To identify her love of death with her love of poetry is to insult that struggle” (McClatchy 80).

Sexton’s troubled life is chronicled in her poems, and she holds nothing back in telling it. While the frankness of her revelations attracted many readers, a number of poets and critics took offense (Kumin xix). In a review of her first book, James Dickey wrote:

Anne Sexton's poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author's life that one's literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan rather than to be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering. (McClatchy 117)

Others questioned her judgment and tact in addressing her subjects so personally. Mona Van Duyn, reviewing *Love Poems*, suggested that, "because neither revulsion nor amusement is a fair response to a poet of this much talent," the reader must consider the poems fictional and separate them from the author, or else Sexton would be guilty of crude exhibitionism (McClatchy 140). Even her teacher and fellow confessor Robert Lowell said, "Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author." Anne's response to criticism was the same as it had been as a child and in her marriage: to shock, to defy, to dare, and to press even harder (Kumin xxii). Her personal changes are apparent in her autobiographical poetry, though she used fictitious references or altered facts from time to time for the sake of the poem (McClatchy 22). For example, she often referred to her children as if she had only one daughter, and she never had a brother, an illegitimate child or an abortion as some of her poems suggest (Phillips 74). Many of her poems, however, were true "line by line" and those containing "altered facts" had truth behind them, according to Sexton (McClatchy 22). Over the course of her career, despite the criticism and objections of many, Sexton grew very popular and respected, influencing many after her, particularly women. Maxine Kumin said, "Women poets...owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter" (Kumin xxiv).

In her first book, *To Bedlam and Partway Back* (1960), Sexton places herself directly into a mental hospital "with no history or apology" (Phillips 76) in the first poem, "You, Dr. Martin." The poem is dedicated to the psychiatrist who advised her to write poetry as a kind of therapy, and it is a short but detailed description of life inside the hospital, the other patients, and the author's own health. Unlike many of her poems, this has a rhyme scheme, but she keeps it from feeling forced by altering the pattern occasionally and using unpredictable rhymes like "are" and "oracular" or "sins" and "moccasins". Though the poem is addressed to Dr. Martin, the focus is on the author, as she includes herself in her description of the patients as "the moving dead" and "large children." She creates a realistic image of all of them lined up like children in school through the dinner lines, and she mentions that there are "no knives for cutting your throat" to stress the desperation of those in the hospital and how they have to be constantly protected and supervised. Her feelings for the doctor are expressed as love and admiration, as for a father or the "god of our block," as she calls him in the poem. In the last stanza of the poem, Sexton expresses her loneliness and desire to be healed:

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.

With that introduction to her condition, Sexton takes the reader into her madness with the poems to follow, describing her grief for her mother and great-aunt, her guilt toward her daughter, and her feelings of her own lost self (Phillips 76).

Sexton's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Live or Die*, published in 1966, debates the constant question in Sexton's head: to live or to die. In "Sylvia's Death," an elegy to Sylvia Plath, Sexton addresses her friend's suicide with sadness and remembrances, but the emotion that pervades the poem is jealousy. She told her psychiatrist once, "Sylvia Plath's death disturbs me. Makes me want it, too. She took something that was mine, that death was mine" (Morrow 1). She had actually discussed suicide with Plath many times, trading stories of past attempts and dreaming of new ones while drinking martinis at the Ritz in Boston for hours with George Starbuck (McClatchy 120), whom she calls "our boy". In the poem she questions Sylvia with pain for her lost friend and longing for the same fate:

Thief!—  
how did you crawl into,  
  
crawl down alone  
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,  
  
the death we said we both outgrew,  
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,  
  
the one we talked of so often each time  
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,  
  
the death that talked of analysts and cures,  
the death that talked like brides with plots,  
  
the death we drank to,  
the motives and then the quiet deed?

Sexton remembers the connection they had in sharing that desire for death and sees Sylvia's death as a final poem and "an old belonging." She ends the poem crying out to her familiar friend that she will miss:

O tiny mother,  
you, too!  
O funny duchess!  
O blonde thing!

Despite her obsession with death, Sexton ends her book with a decision and a poem called "Live" in which she finds values in the world worth living for and chooses, for the time being, life (Phillips 82).



Sexton's *Love Poems*, published in 1969, shows a change in the author as she seems less bitter and loses her preoccupation with her parents' deaths and her madness. These poems are still quite unlike poetry of the past, especially those dealing with the subject of love. These are not beautiful and sentimental verses in the tradition of classic love poems. They are, instead, unlovely, without nostalgia or romance, and they deal more with loss, loneliness, and alienation than with love (Phillips 82). In her poem, "For My Lover, Returning To His Wife," she addresses an extra-marital affair that is ending. She describes her lover's wife as a practical, stable part of his life, shaped over the years to fit his needs and "as real as a cast-iron pot." She calls herself "a luxury": mysterious, interesting, indulgent, but not lasting, like "littleneck clams out of season." In her description of the wife, Sexton shows a recognition and understanding of her and his bond to her through their history together and their children that she knows through her own experience as a wife and mother:

She sees to oars and oarlocks for the dinghy,  
has placed wild flowers at the window at breakfast,  
sat by the potter's wheel at midday,  
set forth three children under the moon,  
three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo,  
done this with her legs spread out  
in the terrible months in the chapel.

Sexton may also be considering her own family and her failures in it as she has abandoned them in madness and has been unfaithful to her own marriage. With this understanding, she releases her lover without self-pity, jealousy, or vengeance because she knows his wife's essential place in his life. She describes the wife's needs, which are the same as her own:

for the fuse inside her, throbbing  
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her  
and the burying of her wound—  
for the burying of her small red wound alive—  
for the pale flickering flare under her ribs,  
for the drunken sailor who waits in her left pulse,  
for the mother's knee, for the stockings,  
for the garter belt, for the call—

The final imagery she uses for the wife summarizes her status as she tells her lover to "climb her like a monument.../She is solid." In the last lines of the poem, Sexton makes the great contrast between herself and her lover's wife and faces the fact that she is dispensable, not with despair or shame, but with stoic resignation, "As for me, I am a watercolor. /I wash off."

In her least confessional work, called *Transformations* (1971), Sexton reworks Grimm's fairy tales, which she remembers from the stories Nana told her in her childhood, but keeps them personal by her additions to the stories. She opens the collection with a poem, "The Gold Key," in which she introduces herself as the storyteller:



The speaker in this case  
is a middle-aged witch, me—  
tangled on my two great arms,  
my face in a book  
and my mouth wide,  
ready to tell you a story or two.

Throughout her fairy tales, Sexton addresses her own insecurities, equating herself with Snow White's stepmother, "a beauty in her own right,/ though eaten, of course, by age," and comparing the wolf's deception in "Little Red Riding Hood" to her own: "Quite collected at cocktail parties,/ meanwhile in my head/ I'm undergoing open-heart surgery." The stories shock by taking something familiar and adding just enough of a change to jolt the reader, such as turning a rescued Sleeping Beauty into a pill-popping insomniac. She takes the stories to our time by using contemporary images and referring to popular culture, calling Cinderella and Prince Charming "Regular Bobbsey Twins" in their unrealistic happily-ever-after marriage and telling how the queen in "Rumpelstiltskin" was "as persistent as a Jehovah's Witness" in her refusal to hand over her first-born child.

In her last book, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, posthumously published in 1975, Sexton searches for religion to fill the loneliness left after the break-up of her family. She presents God in many different images, from an island to a poker player with five aces, and she discusses different aspects of her alienation and isolation. That isolation is the central theme of "The Play," in which she is the only actor performing her "solo act." She expresses great insecurity and a feeling of futility in her search for answers and meaning as she is "running to keep up,/ but never making it." She gives hundreds of soliloquies about herself, much like the poems that tell her life stories, and is answered with boos. Finally she addresses her desperate search for God: "To be without God is to be a snake/ who wants to swallow an elephant." Her performance is over:

The curtain falls.  
The audience rushes out.  
It was a bad performance.  
That's because I'm the only actor  
and there are few humans whose lives  
will make an interesting play.

She acknowledges her loneliness, her fear of rejection, and her need for other people. The reaction of the audience in this poem is similar to the reactions of critics to Sexton's later works, including this last book. "Something more than over-theatricality drags at the work, so that the last poems are little more than loose bundles of metaphors, none too fresh, in service of the central messages: I am unwell, I am unloved, I am disgusting, I long for death" (Bernard 3). Her critics and friend attribute this decline of her work to the same drug and alcohol addiction that estranged her family and friends at the end of her life.

Sexton wrote about her obsessions, some of which remained constant, such as her debate with life and death, others of which changed, from the indignities of the body to her parents' deaths to

her final search for religion. She wrote about her childhood, Nana, sex, loneliness, suicide, and aging. She wrote tributes to her friends, defenses of her work, and descriptions of her mental illness. She wrote her life, as she said in a 1965 interview with Patricia Marx, to somehow keep it imprisoned in a poem, “in a way like keeping a scrapbook to make life mean something as it goes by, to rescue it from chaos – to make ‘now’ last” (McClatchy 34).

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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