



## **Anne Sexton's Egoist Poetics**

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### **Abstract:**

This essay is going to discuss and analyze the notions of “memory” and “ego” in the poetics of Anne Sexton. As will be explained, Sexton’s poetry deals with highly personal and subjective themes, such as her life-long mental disorder, intimate relations, and bodily experiences. Since Sexton began to write poetry as a protective means against her severe depression, this essay will discuss her poetry as an attempt to reconstruct her self-image and identity. Through her poetry, Sexton



tends to reveal therapeutically her fermenting inner sufferings that may have caused negative feelings of unworthiness and alienation. However, her poetry is not an ultimate expression of a defeated and repressed self. The process of writing itself is the poet's deliberate process of both deconstructing the past and reconstructing the present. That is to say, Sexton's poetics does not merely reflect a subjectivity and selfhood. Rather, it extends to include notions of contradiction, indeterminacy, and historicity which are general characteristics of postmodern poetry in general. This essay, then, argues that Sexton's poetics seems to oppose Modernist impersonal aesthetics. That is, Sexton seems to restore the Romantic speaking voice through lyrical representation.

**Key words:** Confessional Poetry – Subjectivity – Split of the self – lyrical representation – postmodern poetics



## Anne Sexton's Egoist Poetics

### i. Introduction

Born in 1928, Anne Sexton was the youngest of three daughters to Ralph Harvey and Mary Gray Staples Harvey. She lived in Wellesley, Massachusetts, with her two elder sisters Blanche and Jane. Sexton's parents were more than financially comfortable. Her father owned a successful business in the field of the wool industry (Middlebrook 5). Her maternal great-uncle was an established politician and a member of the Congress (Hall 1). Sexton was raised a Protestant. She attended public school in Wellesley until she was seventeen. This essay attempts to analyze the speaking subject in Sexton's poetics. Sexton's speaking voice is not simply, as many critics claim, self-absorbed. Her poems are not only self-centered. Rather, the subject, in many cases, is elusive and indeterminate. Her poems could be seen as "writerly" or "open" texts in which the reader can recall his or her own lived experience. Sexton's poetry gives voice to the unconscious mind.

However, Sexton's poetics combines both spontaneity and deliberation in writing her poems. In this sense, Sexton does not pour out whatever



comes from the unconscious. Rather, she modifies the output with relevance to the self-image or ego she tries to reconstruct. Equally significant, since Sexton started writing poetry at the advice of her psychiatrist, her writing could be seen as counter to the dominant thoughts of suicide, guilt, and unworthiness. This might justify the centrality of the “ego” in her poetics. This does not mean that Sexton’s work does not have social and political significance. Rather, her subjectivity and individuality were at the center of feminist political debates during the 1960s in the second-wave feminism. Sexton’s poetics also does not follow mainstream notions of a ‘fragmented self’ through disruptive language and syntax. Sexton’s poetic form follows a regular language and conventionally stanzaic structure.

Egocentricity in Sexton’s poetics is then a means of reconstructing the ego, through recalling from memory, rather than an end in itself. Applying Barthes’ critical concepts of the “writerly” and “readerly” texts, most of Sexton’s poetic texts are traditionally “readerly” in the sense that their presentation is largely dependent on linear narrative structures. Sexton’s poetry tends to foreground a specific range of themes that were not familiar in poetry at the time. In terms of content,



Sexton's poetics opposes the status quo in its reframing of highly personal experiences as valid artistic themes. In terms of language, it does not adhere to allusive, fragmented, and intertextual language characteristic of Modernist poetry (Ashton 59). Rather, Sexton embraces relaxed diction and everyday expressions. In this particular sense, Sexton's poetics maintains a poetic multiplicity that incorporates both conventional and unconventional registers.

### **i. Anne Sexton, Poetry as a Self-image**

I come like the blind feeling for shelves,  
feeling for wood as hard as an apple,  
fingering the pen lightly, my blade.  
With this pen I take in hand my selves  
and with these dead disciples I will grapple.  
Though rain curses the window  
let the poem be made. (CP 109)

These poetic lines describe the world in which Sexton lived. They also describe the psychological state that triggered her poetry. As have been discussed before, a phenomenological reading of the poetic text makes it "writerly" and "open" for the reader to represent him or herself.



It is worth mentioning here that Sexton does not receive her sense of “ego” or “self” as one but “selves.” It is also significant to notice that the lyrical voice here links with nature as the case in Romantic poetry. However, nature here is not the intended theme of the poem. It is part of the scene that the poet recalls or even composes from her memory and imagination. In other words, the working of “self” or “ego” and “memory” are always operative in Sexton’s poetry. As these lines seem to suggest, it is her identity which Sexton is concerned about. She expresses a need to get rid of any negative aspects of her identity that made her feel alienated and fragmented.

As said before, Sexton’s poetry has its feminist voice that rejects any restrictions made by society. In these lines, she expresses her rejection of the narrow range of roles and negative selves that limit her “self” and make her feel “hexed” and perplexed. In this sense, Sexton’s poetry is a projection of her both emotional and psychological states. Her poetry demonstrates the fights she has started against the world and even against some of the negative “selves” imposed upon her. In other words, Sexton’s poetry at large is the construction of her identity which she has always fought to improve. That is, her poetry is her “self-



image” in all its strength and weakness. Therefore, this essay claims that to better understand Sexton’s poetry as a reconstruction of her self-image, both of her life and poetry should be seen from a phenomenological and existential perspective. In reconstructing her self-image, Sexton employs autobiographical and highly personal elements. She even speaks about her mental disorder in her poetry as a way of healing the “self” and the “ego.” In so doing” she recalls from memory all of the events that have shaped her emotions. Therefore, Sexton’s poetry reconstructs her self-image through healing her “ego” and employing “memory” as a way to confess her sense of guilt, alienation, and deprivation.

The notion of “memory” therefore functions as a therapeutic device, a vent through which she let go of her emotions and feelings. In “Kind Sir: These Woods” Sexton recalls from memory a childhood game of turning around once in the forest and pretending to be lost. Sexton depicts the scene and her experience as follows:

It was as if every pine tree were a brown pole  
we did not know; as if day had rearranged  
into night and bats flew in sun. It was a trick



to turn around once and know you were lost;

knowing the crow's horn was crying in the dark, (CP 4)

The game ends in a fantasy of death. In the last stanza, the poet turns to the reality of being lost in madness and trying to escape that madness to find herself anew:

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind

I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed

and the woods were white and my night mind

saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.

And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course

to look—this inward look that society scorns—

Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse

than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns. (CP 5)

Obviously, it is not the outside world she seems to fear, but the self.

That fear of the self is probably enhanced by society's "scorn" for the "inward look." Sexton's goal is to find and understand herself so that

she will no longer have to fear her "night mind." The "woods" and

"night" imagery express Sexton's fear and sense of lost. In one of her





letters, published in *Anne Sexton: A Self-portrait in Letters* (1977),

Sexton comments on the woods as a place of isolated self:

I really didn't have too much fun in the woods this time . . .

Perhaps I'll write a poem about it sometime: living in the deep

woods is no escape. The trees become mirrors and only your

voice answers back. The deer is not my brother, nor the trout as

I pull him in, slapping at death. (83)

The poem seems to be more terrifying than the letter. In "You, Doctor

Martin," Sexton announces it clearly, when she says: "Not till we are

lost . . . do we begin to find ourselves."

As such, Sexton's poetry itself is her most important liberation. In her

own poetry, Sexton is truly, in her own words, a "woman uncontained,"

one who, despite her fears, attempts to shape her life through words.

Poetry, not death, is Sexton's true liberation. As Sexton expresses her

self-image, the reader then takes the role of a therapist who identifies

Sexton's inner feelings. Sexton's poetry, in this sense, gets the reader

involved in the process of reading. Now, this essay will discuss and

analyze Sexton's poetry as her way to reconstruct her self-image. In so

doing, it provides a biographical account of her life in order to illustrate



how her poetry matches her lived experience. In 1960, she published her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. In this book, Sexton reveals much about her mental illness and family relations. Poems, such as “You, Doctor Martin,” “The Bells,” and “Said the Poet to the Analyst,” record Sexton’s stay at a mental institution. This book also reflects on the troubled relationship with her mother, father, and daughter. The notion of “memory” is obvious in the poems of this book. Calling from memory many of her past experiences, Sexton’s *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is an attempt to come to terms with her past to live in the present. In this sense, the notion of “memory” is closely connected with themes of loss and guilt. The following lines from, “The Kite,” might give an example of Sexton’s use of memory:

Here, in front of the summer hotel

the beach waits like an altar.

We are lying on a cloth of sand

while the Atlantic noon stains

the world in light. (CP 11)

In addition to themes of anger, loss, and love, Sexton wrote about female bodily experiences, questioning mainstream aesthetic and



critical authority. It seems that Sexton succeeds in reconstructing her own “self” celebrating her identity:

Sweet weight،

in celebration of the woman I am

and of the soul of the woman I am

and of the central creature and its delight

I sing for you. I dare to live.

Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.

Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.

Hello to the soil of the fields.

Welcome, roots. (CP 182)

As such, through writing poetry, Sexton created what Virginia Woolf previously called “a room of one’s own” (Woolf 5). Although this led to neglecting her family and children, the parallel life Sexton created for herself kept her creative and poetic impulses fueled and ongoing.

Sexton’s work has received much ambivalent criticism. This is simply because Sexton’s poetics is mainly egocentric and self-expressive. As has been discussed, Sexton centers the notion of the ego as the source of both creativity and suffering. That is, Sexton uses poetry as a



means of reconstructing her own self as well as an attempt to lead her life against any obsession with death, destruction and suicide. Therefore, it is true that Sexton's poetry deals with a specific set of themes that are highly personal, including death, suffering, mental disorder, loss, anger and intimate relations. However, these themes question the established and aesthetic mainstream art that claims objectivity and universality. Sexton's poetry reframes personal experiences as valid subject matters for art. Her egoist poetics repositions the individual at the center of aesthetic perception. Originality and authenticity are, therefore, characteristic of such subjective and egoist aesthetics, since life experiences are always unique. Hence, the significance of "memory" as a poetic means by which the poet tries to come to terms with his or her past. Sexton's search for her own "self" through "memory" is a process of self-healing against traumas and sufferings. In Sexton's poetics, "the listener is someone who must not only be able to listen to the survivor story, but also be able to participate in the retelling of the story in order to help the survivor turn the traumatic "memories"—the images and repetitions—into remembrance and reconstruction (Steele 20).



### **i. Sexton's Intentional Poetics**

Sexton's poetics is always addressed as related to the confessional tradition which incorporates personal subject matters and everyday experiences. However, Sexton's poetry maintains postmodern aspects in terms of the technical devices employed in the poetic text such as its historical aspect and its pluralistic speaking voice which is informed by the split of the self. Therefore, Sexton's aesthetic fingerprint incorporates both subjective, Romantic, and postmodern characteristics. Language is the main medium in Sexton's poetry. It is the only means by which she expresses her emotions and lived experience. The reader depends on the language of the poem to understand its content. Therefore, notions of memory and ego are central to confessional poetry. Moreover, Sexton's poetry often follows a stanza-based form. Therefore, in Sexton's confessional poetry, the poem tends to be a manifestation of the poet's ego as well as the subconscious. The following lines from "The Stand-Ins" illustrate this point:

I woke.

I did not know the hour



an hour of night like thick scum

but I considered the dreams،

the two: Swastika, Crucifix،

and said: Oh well،

it doesn't belong to me،

if a cigar can be a cigar

then a dream can be a dream.

Right؟

Right؟

And went back to sleep

and another start. (CP 527)

Obviously, Sexton's poem demonstrates the workings of the poet's subconscious. It employs an exalted and poetic language whose narrative is recollected from memory. Sexton utilizes her personal life as artistically valid (Perkins 588).

However, in Sexton's poetics, sticking to personal life experiences is the only way out of suppressed individuality. That is, her poetry could be generally seen as an attempt to gain self-knowledge, worthiness, validation, and approval. This is obvious in Sexton's intertextual



references she uses as epigraphs in her books. For example, in her *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton quotes from a letter by Schopenhauer to Goethe in which Schopenhauer refers to the story of Sophocles' Oedipus. Sexton seems to highlight the burden of self-exploration: "But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further" (CP 2). In *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton cites Franz Kafka's imagery that "a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us" (CP 48). This is, it seems, how Sexton perceives of her own writing. Through the notion of "shock," both the poet and the reader can explore their own selves. In her interview with Patricia Marx, Sexton explains that writing "should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt" (561).

Therefore, Sexton's egoist poetics is justified since, through the process of poetic writing, she is trying to gain a sense of the self. In her poem, "Kind Sir: These Woods," Sexton utilizes "memory" and narration to provide her critical view concerning the "self." She announces her search of the self through looking inward:

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind

I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed



and the woods were white and my night mind  
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.  
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course  
to look — this inward look that society scorns—  
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns. (CP 5)

For Sexton, it is the courage to look and search inside that brings an understanding of the self. Sexton's poetic text is then a reconstruction of identity and self-image with no hiding behind a poetic persona or irregular language and form. Although the speaking voice in the previous poem is "caught between the grapes and the thorns," it expresses struggle and desire for freedom. The notion of fragmented personality is thus not mirrored in a fragmentary language or inconsistent form. Rather, the poem's form and language are the speaker's tools to gain self-insight and power. In other words, the poem is not ultimately an expression of alienation. Rather, it is an announcement of the desire to survive and to recognize oneself. Seen within the larger postmodern poetics, Sexton's aesthetic contribution resists stable labels, confessional or otherwise, as limiting and elusive.





For Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern poetics is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political” (4). This applies to Sexton’s poetics since the notion of contradiction stems from the fact that Sexton’s poetic writing is an attempt to reconstruct her ego and identity. However, at the same time, the speaking voice in Sexton’s poetry is not always that of the poet. In other words, Sexton alternates between a true subject or identity, which originates from the unconscious, and a fabricated one, which is mainly poetic. This contradiction, or the notion of the fragmented self, is meant to address what Sexton identifies as the “poetic truth.” As Sexton argues, in her interview with Patricia Marx, “that’s what I’m hunting for when working away there in the poem. I am hunting for the truth . . . a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual cause behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret” (563).

This means that the reader should not be deceived by the directness of what is said since there is always something unsayable and unarticulated: a “secret.” This division gives a better understanding of Sexton’s literary persona, which is not a fixed or a stable entity. In



other words, the speaking voice in Sexton's poetry signifies multiplicity, rather than singularity, a split of the self rather than a wholly defined and identifiable self. Critic Ehsan Azari points out the significance of the division of subjects in relation to literary discourse. He argues:

This strand of reasoning reveals a crucial point for literary theory: any interpretation of literature must be grounded on a plurality of voices, because the subject is the subject of the unconscious. In literary discourse, the subject can say something other than what it is apparently saying. (61)

Sexton introduces a striking account of her multiplicity of poetic voices. The postmodern split of the self is recognized in in Sexton's dialect of what is sayable or said and what is unsayable or unsaid. As put by Sexton:

To have that effect you must distort some of these facts to give them their own clarity . . . in my long poem to my daughter and about my mental illness, I don't imply that I was ever in an institution more than once, but that was the dramatic truth. The actual truth was something quite different . . . and the fact that I have two children was not mentioned in this, because the dramatic



point was I had one child . . . So you don't have to include everything, to tell the truth (564)

Sexton's intentional manipulation of the poetic voice then signifies the postmodern aspect of her aesthetic fingerprint by means of "memory" and "ego."

Moreover, according to Reader-Response theory, it is the reader, as Stanley Fish argues, who is given "joint responsibility for the production of a meaning that was redefined as an event rather than entity" (3). In this particular sense, Sexton's poetics establishes a dialectic between the reader and the text. Meaning, continues Fish, is not a "property of the text; rather, one could observe or follow its gradual emergence in the interaction between the text, conceived of as a succession of words, and the developing response of the reader" (3). In this particular sense, the reader in Sexton's poetics is not totally a passive receiver of the work of art. The reader is given a poetic voice to reflect on his or her own subjectivity and to explore the unconscious. Choosing what to say, hide, or distort indicates that the process of writing, for Sexton, is much more than merely therapeutic. She tends to deliberately reconfigure her self-image as well as that of the reader. In so doing,



Sexton sometimes expresses situations different from reality, hence, the notion of “dramatic” or “poetic truth” which characterizes her intentional poetics. Sexton’s poetic text perpetuates this self-image as always struggling against death-oriented thoughts and negative feelings of unworthiness. In this sense, Sexton’s poetics features a deeply psychological aspect represented by the split of the self or. As critic Joel Dor explains, this dialectic of the true self and the fabricated one, represented by the said and the unsaid or the distorted, indicates a sense of alienation and fragmentation:

In fact, the division of the subject is a breach open to every enticement, every lure. The lure comes about because the subject’s utterance about himself perpetuate a hoax in which he is completely alienated within the imaginary register. (157)

However, Sexton’s poetic writing process, this study argues, does not aim at creating a fabricated identity. It is not the ultimate objective of the poem. However, it is meant to create a “dramatic truth” by which Sexton seems to reconstruct her reality. Sexton’s poetics then seems to deconstruct a repressed identity and subjectivity but in order to



reconstruct a new and healthier one, consolidated and perpetuated poetically by the “dramatic or poetic truth”.

Another postmodern aspect of Sexton’s poetics is the notion of historicity since her poetry is analogous to her life and experiences (Hacht 1454). In this sense, the notion of historicity is related to the notion of the split of the self. That is to say, in Hutcheon’s words, Sexton’s aesthetics is “resolutely historical” (4). The following lines, from “The Wonderful Musician,” might illustrate this aspect of Sexton’s poetics:

My sisters,  
do you remember the fiddlers  
of your youth?  
Those dances  
so like a drunkard  
lighting a fire in the belly?  
That speech,  
as piercing as a loon’s,  
exciting both mayors  
and cab drivers?



Sometimes,  
ear to the bedside radio,  
frozen on your cot  
like a humped hairpin,  
or jolt upright in the wind  
on alternating current  
like a fish on the hook  
dancing the death dance,  
remember  
the vibrato,  
a wasp in the car? (TCP 264)

However, the dialect between the real self and the fabricated one, or the said and the unsaid, or the sayable and the unsayable, brings out another contradiction which is that of the personal or subjective and the impersonal or objective. Sexton's subjectivity does not mean that her poetics marginalizes other notions of Modernist impersonalism as well as Postmodern poetic multiplicity and plurality. In other words, although Sexton's poetics is largely Romantic or subjective in nature, it maintains a postmodern poetic multiplicity or plurality that also



incorporates non-personal, fabricated poetic voices, or, in her own words, a “poetic” or “dramatic” truth (Boynton & Malin 508). The following lines, from “Iron Hans”, are another example of Sexton’s poetic voice which incorporates both the notion of the Romantic subjectivity as well as postmodern multiplicity or plurality:

Take a lunatic

for instance،

with Saint Averton, the patron saint،

a lunatic wearing that strait jacket

like a sleeveless sweater،

singing to the wall like Muzak،

how he walks east to west،

west to east again

like a fish in an aquarium.

And if they stripped him bare

he would fasten his hands around your throat..

After that he would take your corpse

and deposit his sperm in three orifices.

You know, I know،



You'd run away. (TCP 249)

As such, the historical aspect of Sexton's poetry, in light of the dialect of the "dramatic" or "poetic" and factual truths, incorporates both Modernist poetry's claim of objectivity and universality as well as Postmodernist pluralistic poetic voice. As has been discussed, these contradictory notions extend to include not only Sexton's thematic innovation, such as alienation, loss, love and death, but also the poetic techniques, such as the division or split of the subject as well as the notion of "poetic truth," she employs and which frame the psychological depth of her poetry (Davison 153). The third postmodern aspect of Sexton's poetics is its political potential. In Hutcheon's words, Sexton's personal poetry is "inescapably political" (Hutcheon 4). During the 1960s, the personal was correlative to the political in feminist discourse, especially that of the second-wave feminism.

### **i. Conclusion**

Sexton's poetry reflects her favourite themes and overwhelming notions of psychological ups and downs, the agony of depression, loss and alienation. Such overwhelming notions are decoded in her poems





in which she releases her fermenting private memories out of the depths of her soul and mind. Sexton's poetics sustains a personal and subjective character. The scope of Sexton's poetry is deeply mapped by her journey in life. Her poetry is indeed much more comprehensible in light of a biographical account of her life. It tends to engage the reader with lyrical aesthetics which is rooted in the traumatic experience of the poet's personal life. However, it is in the wider postmodern cultural context that her poetics seems to extend outside the boundaries of the confessional mode. Sexton's poetry encodes events and situations from her life which must be understood through a biographical, historical and literary reference. It also embraces subjectivity but it is also pluralistic and inclusive. The plurality and multiplicity of the poetic voice are merely effects of language, since the subject is fluid and in a state of flux (Pettigrew & Raffoul 189). Fluidity and indeterminacy also affect the production of meaning in Sexton's poetics. Such a postmodern reading of Sexton's poetry in general transforms what seems to be a "readerly" text into a "writerly" and "open" text. As Steven Hoffman argues, "What Sexton was searching for was not only transformation of herself, but transcendence, both



obsessions which arose out of the conviction of her own worthlessness” (210).



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## جماليات الذات في شعر أن سيكستون

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### المستخلص:

يناقش هذا المقال مفهومي "الذاكرة" و "الأنا" في شعرية أن سيكستون. يتعامل شعر سيكستون مع موضوعات شخصية وذاتية بحتة مثل اضطرابها العقلي، وعلاقتها الحميمة، والتجارب الجسدية. بدأت سيكستون في كتابة الشعر كوسيلة وقائية ضد اكتئابها الشديد، تستعرض هذه المقالة شعرها كمحاولة لإعادة بناء صورتها الذاتية وهويتها. من خلال شعرها، تميل سيكستون إلى الكشف علاجياً عن معاناتها الداخلية التي ربما تسببت في مشاعر السلبية والاعتراب. ومع ذلك، فإن شعرها ليس تعبيراً نهائياً عن الذات المهزومة المقموعة. إن عملية الكتابة نفسها هي عملية الشاعر المتعمدة لتفكيك الماضي وإعادة بناء الحاضر. وهذا يعني أن شاعرية سيكستون لا تعكس فقط ذاتيتها، بل يمتد شعرها ليشمل مفاهيم التناقض وعدم التحديد والتاريخية، وهي خصائص عامة لشعر ما بعد الحداثة بشكل عام. يكشف هذا المقال أن شاعرية سيكستون، في جانب منها، تتعارض مع الجماليات الحداثية بنزعتها الوضعية غير الشخصية. إذ يبدو أن سيكستون تستعيد الصوت الرومانسي الناطق من خلال التمثيل الغنائي.

الكلمات الإفتتاحية: الشعر الطائفي - الذاتية - انقسام الذات - التمثيل الغنائي - شعر ما بعد الحداثة