

Anne Sexton Forty Years Later

Charlotte Austin questions Anne Sexton's contemporary, Anne Stevenson, about her view of this poet's importance and the effect her work has had on woman's poetry and the women's movement after Sexton's suicide in 1974.

How did you first discover Anne Sexton?

Anne Sexton was big news to American students of poetry in 1960-61, when, after marriage and divorce in England, I'd returned to the University of Michigan to study for an MA in English with the poet, Donald Hall. Sexton's first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, had just been published. W.D. Snodgrass, whom I met through Hall, had paved the way to "confessional poetry" with his post-divorce *Heart's Needle* shortly before; Robert Lowell soon followed suit with *Life Studies*, and Hall, I think, was as surprised and impressed as I was by these developments. Free-flowing, autobiographical writing like this was a radical departure from the craftsman-like poetry of Richard Wilbur, who – more my contemporary than Yeats, Eliot and Frost – had been my primary exemplar up to that time. I must have become aware of poets like Lowell, Snodgrass, Sexton, Plath, Adrienne Rich, in the same year that I discovered the poems of Elizabeth Bishop. Before 1960 I wrote poetry tentatively, full of self-doubt. After 1961, with the encouragement of Donald Hall, I began to indulge my ambition.

Did you meet her? Did you ever see her perform her poetry on stage?

I think I met Anne Sexton once (before she was famous), after a reading I was part of myself at the Hebrew Youth Centre in New York. That would have been in the winter of 1959-60, when I was living in the Upper 90s with my first husband and small daughter. I had joined a writing workshop at the YHA, with Stanley Kunitz, and I attended readings there whenever I could. Then, much later, maybe in 1970, I heard her read at the 'Y' alone – horrified, I have to say, at the way she produced herself. I remember at the end, after reading poem after poem about death urges, abortion and torrid love affairs, she stood in the limelight kissing her hands to her cheering audience before accepting a huge bouquet of red roses. That performance put her out of court for me for a long time.

I'd like to know what particularly intrigues you about her life and work.

Well, after that extremely exhibitionist reading, I decided I didn't like her work at all, but I still had to admit that her first collections affected me. She and Sylvia Plath together, in effect, had given me permission to write about my own divorce and family discontents. Being me, though, and by that time strongly under the influence of Elizabeth Bishop, I had already decided to deflect the stream of my own troubles and write from an historical perspective. So I concocted a story, out of nineteenth and twentieth century family letters (some of them my own family's), called *Correspondences*; in which I tried to show how a twentieth century woman from a privileged Christian middle-class American family could well have found it in her to embrace madness and suicide as desirable alternatives to safe domestic frustration. It wasn't Anne Sexton's talent (which was real enough) or her mental illness (also real) that intrigued me. It was why that talent could only be developed when driven in tandem, so to speak, with a personal death wish. Why were so many women poets of the sixties and seventies driven crazy by their roles as women? I never myself went mad, but I suffered a good deal from the same syndrome of acute misery, unhappy in my roles of daughter, wife, lover and mother.

You say you don't consider yourself to have belonged to the women's movement – although you were writing during this period. What do you think Sexton contributed to the movement?

Well, I don't like gender distinctions. I felt then, and still feel, much as Elizabeth Bishop did about not shackling one's art to any pre-set social or political programme. I'm sure, though, that both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath contributed vitally to the women's movement by appearing to be talented, oppressed women prepared to die for liberation – though this was not true of either one. What does seem to be the case is that they made possible a great deal of today's poetry written by women. Sylvia died in 1963, before the movement really got under way, but Sexton was delighted that so many women artists caught fire from her example. Mind you, Sexton's egotistical drive was much stronger than her gender loyalty or social conscience. Though it may sound unkind to say this, having read Diane Middlebrook's biography, I suspect Sexton was never mentally healthy enough to engage deeply – for all her many lovers – with anyone except

herself. That for eight years she chiefly corresponded with herself through thrice-weekly visits to her psychotherapist means that she was miserably aware of her extreme self-centeredness and hated herself bitterly because of it. That polarized self-love and self-hatred, I suppose, was the sickness snarled at the centre of her.

What was your reaction to her poetry at this time? Were you inspired, intimidated, offended, liberated?

First intimidated, then offended. But, to be fair, probably liberated and inspired at the same time; my feelings about her in the sixties/seventies were in confusion, just as they were, more importantly for me, about Sylvia Plath.

Has your response to her work changed over time?

Yes, I'm much more tolerant now than I was; I pity her, but I'm certainly not envious or resentful, as I suppose I used to be. I simply don't find her poetry nourishing. It's all too much the same. That unvaried tone of furious self-pity gets me down – though I admit I am impressed, sometimes, with the poems' imaginative richness and flow. She worked hard on her poems, and she made them work for her. I used to be dismissive of her talent; I now think, considering how much she depended on it, that she would have died much sooner had her gift not been so strong, conspicuous and instantly popular.

Her style changed over the years, can you comment on this?

Yes, unfortunately the kind of self-expressionist poetry she believed in was not susceptible of further development. Sexton wanted to be remembered as a great poet, and she tried increasingly to amplify her passion for death by plunging into relationships with religion and God. In my view, her poems aren't capable of approaching the self-renunciation any deep religious belief demands. Poor Anne, her last two or three books are so desperately misjudged as to tone, over-painted in glow-colours with sexy images. No wonder even the most sympathetic of priests wouldn't consider her bid to become a Roman Catholic.

Do you have a particular collection, style or theme which you are most drawn to?

Yes, I think her early books, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones*, are her most satisfying. She's best when she slightly makes fun of her own bravura, as in her signature poem, 'Her Kind'. 'The Truth the Dead

Know', written after her parents' death, is a beautiful poem, as is the title poem of *All My Pretty Ones*. Her hospital poems, 'The Operation' and 'The Abortion', work effectively through impressive rhythmic patterns. One of my enduring favorites, 'Old' is not about herself but tenderly describes a fellow patient. I love its last line, "In a dream you are never eighty."

Can you choose a poem and talk to me about it from an academic point of view, by which I mean its structure, the style she uses? I'm interested in her poems in this way, as well as in the emotional reaction people have to her work. I want to know how 'good' they were with reference to the craft.

The poems in Sexton's first two books were largely written in workshop conditions in the late fifties and early sixties, first under John Holmes and later under Robert Lowell. It's interesting to see how carefully she structured them. Look at the first verse of 'Old Dwarf Heart' from *All My Pretty Ones* in which she establishes a six-line stanza, rhythmically free though carefully end rhymed, *abccba*:

When I lie down to love,
old dwarf heart shakes her head.
Like an imbecile she was born old.
Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds
of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.
She knows the decay we're made of.

Dylan Thomas, as well as Robert Lowell, in those days provided models choosing outlandish images and then guiding them syntactically through a controlled form. Sexton's stanza here consists of four simple sentences in which the only obscure reference – "thirty-one thick folds / of skin" – must refer to the poet's age. Under a critical microscope, this fourth line with its enjambment looks and sounds wrong. Even when I was beginning to write, I would never have allowed myself to rhyme *old* with *folds*. That supposed central rhyme ought to be the strongest, but the plural 's' weakens it. Sexton makes what to me is the same mis-sound in the third stanza, rhyming a second line "And worse, the sores she *holds*" with a fifth line, "she is all red muscle, humming in and out, *cajoled* / by time". The clumsiness of that "*holds* / *cajoled*" rhyme is especially noticeable because the first and last lines chime

perfectly: “Good God, the things she *knows*” with “Where I go, she *goes*.” The final stanza turns on a middle rhyme of “wrists” (plural) and “fist” (singular), but the sound-strain there is not so noticeable, with those similar “ists”. Unfortunately, by this time, her subject heart seems to be neither flesh nor soul, (a heart, like a fist, unfolding its arms and wrists?) and when the poem veers off into genealogy, it leaves me, I’m afraid, puzzled and disappointed. Here is the final stanza (the “seventy coats” at the end must refer back to the “thirty-one skins” of age in the first stanza):

Oh now I lay me down to love,
how awkwardly her arms undo,
how patiently I untangle her wrists
like knots. Old ornament, old naked fist,
even if I put on seventy coats I could not cover you...
mother, father, I’m made of.

It may be unfair to pick on this less known, rather awkward example of her work, yet it seems to me typical of what so often goes wrong in it. Like many of Sexton’s poems, this one runs all right, but when you look at it critically, you see it’s missing a couple of cylinders. Form, matter and rhythm are at odds, and the novel image of an “old dwarf heart” can’t hold it together.

Can you comment on the main themes of her work – what do they tell us about her preoccupations?

Anne Sexton’s chief preoccupation was her own sickness and love affair with death. Thanks to her psychotherapist, her addiction to suicide drove her to poetry. Self-hatred, frenetic efforts to find love through sex, resentment of her parents (chiefly her mother), fear, self-doubt, ambition to become a celebrity poet – all these were preoccupations. To me, such intensely selfish and subjective obsessions in an adult are at bottom childish – sick, maybe forgivable, but childish. This is why today her poems sound an enduring voice of permanent adolescence. Such a voice is naturally attractive to actual adolescents, who happily flock to horror movies, pop stars and crazy disco music. To adults, Anne’s poems can sound pathetically sad; maybe even ridiculous to the elderly.

It seems clear now that America itself was going through a prolonged

period of adolescence after World War II. How many European and Russian civilians died in that war? The historian Norman Davis gives a death-figure of twenty seven million, and that's excluding the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust and the Japanese killed by the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Meanwhile, the USA and Canada reclined on the other side of the Atlantic, young, rich, strong, and untouched except possibly by guilt and almost certainly by immaturity. Both Sexton and Plath began to publish in the early 60s, when literary America itself was pretty crazy. Fashionable psychotherapy was probably a good deal to blame, although it's hard to say whether the intellectual craze for craziness preceded or followed the infectious popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Note, though, that I am *not* saying Sexton was faking; nor were Delmore Schwarz, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath. Poets, artists in general in a sick culture are like canaries in a mine full of poison gas, the first to suffer.

Do you feel her work is a kind of documentary of her life?

Yes, of course. Anne Sexton's is one of the great American stories of successful failure. If you can't succeed at success, succeed at failing. But I'm afraid both her life story and her bold confessional poetry opened the way to a great deal of inferior writing today. Snodgrass, Lowell, Sexton and Plath between them set an example, for men as well as women, of what I call 'therapoetry' – poetry written mainly for therapeutical purposes. Not all such poetry is bad, of course. Some of Lowell's and Plath's is superb, and a lot is very affecting, very appealing. Still, it reverses the priorities of art. Wordsworth, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot could transform their personal feelings into memorably impersonal works by drawing the mind away from the sordid miseries of their lives into what Yeats called (suspending disbelief, of course) "the artifice of eternity". They aimed to create the kind of beauty that Bach achieved in his *Preludes* and *Fugues* and Vermeer in his Dutch interiors. Reality, in the best art, is neither escaped nor ignored but expressed in a transmuted form. And this, for me, is the best therapy. I don't need to create it myself; I only need to give myself to its sympathy and understanding. Important art, it seems to me, *looks out* at the world, achieves a perspective *beyond* its immediate chaos and cruelty. Therapoetry looks inward like psychoanalysis and seeks to uncover the poisonous sewers buried in the mind – sewers indeed in need of cleaning

by painful exposure, but not there for poets to wallow in for fear of finding, upon recovery, that they no longer are inspired to write.

It was her therapist who suggested that Sexton write poetry in order to help her to cope with her mental health issues. What do you think about this suggestion? At the time would it have been a revolutionary treatment?

Then? Certainly revolutionary. After reading Diane Middlebrook's biography, I can't believe Anne Sexton would have written poetry without her therapist's encouragement. She owed Dr. Orne a great debt of gratitude, and she knew it. It was when, after eight years, he left Boston and she twice attempted to change her doctor, that she found herself stranded in an unsupported life-situation, *sans* Dr. Orne, who had become her surrogate father, and *sans* her husband, whom she had divorced. You can't read Sexton's story without being full of sympathy for her husband Keyo's long-suffering loyalty throughout their fraught marriage. And then one day he comes home from work, and there's Anne, drunk in the sitting room, demanding a divorce! So, apart from women friends like Maxine Kumin, she had no one at the end to coddle her.

Some say that poetry saved her life (for a while anyway). How much would you agree with this statement?

Yes, this is almost certainly the case. She saw poetry and suicide as the positive and negative poles of her life... as she said coherently in her memoir of Sylvia Plath. I suspect most British readers don't know that Anne Sexton, five years older than Plath, was famous in America well before Plath appeared on the scene. The two poets met in Robert Lowell's writing seminar in 1959. Sexton used to drive Plath and an escort – the poet George Starbuck – to The Boston Ritz after class. There, over “three or four or two martinis” the girls would “talk at length, and in depth” about their suicides. Plath's journal suggests they were friendly rivals before, in the early sixties, Sexton's first two books were greeted by sensational reviews. Plath's *The Colossus* had to wait for recognition. When, in Devon, Plath received from Sexton a copy of *All My Pretty Ones*, she obviously was impressed enough to let its influence seep into the unrestrained and for those times shocking tone of poems like ‘Daddy’ and ‘Medusa’.

Sexton received psychiatric treatment for much of her life. Some people have said that the treatment she received was detrimental both to her mental health and to her later poetry. What are your thoughts on the effects of therapy on her poetry and on its chance of lasting in the future?

Dr. Orne contributed a preface to Middlebrook's biography in which he ascribes the collapse of her personality and her eventual suicide to his own "desertion" of her when he left Boston for a job in Philadelphia. I don't know, of course, but my suspicion is that she would have killed herself even had Dr. Orne remained on hand to hold her hand and tape her sessions. As to how long her poems will out last her life story? Five or six poems will endure, perhaps, like Dylan Thomas's. I could be wrong, but it seems likely that Anne Sexton will be remembered mainly for her influence in bringing about that interesting age of psychoanalysis and infectious insanity that in the 1960s and 70s utterly changed the direction and texture of American poetry.

