

# Revisiting the Poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath



**Risha Kalra**

Assistant Professor

Department of Languages and Mass Communication, The IIS University, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

## Abstract

*Very few poets are able to touch an individual's soul; regardless of the words or themes they deal with. 1950's America saw two such Confessional Poets who, with their sheer rawness and experiences, changed the manner in which proprietors' embraced poetry then. Sexton and Plath were highly related, equally gifted and intense. Both of them had more in common than they thought; from producing similar type of works to their fascination with death and struggle of freedom from 'American Value System' separated them instantly from the rest of the poets of that era. Be it the haunting first collection of Sexton *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* focusing on her stay in asylum and mental illness or Plath's *Daddy* which was clearly one of the best poems of the 20th Century American Literature, these two never seemed to fall short of admirers. The words intertwined by them impressed and lingered all the same. This paper will touch upon the aforementioned – Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath – their poetry in particular and lives in general. It will also extend to the comparisons and subsequent effect on the 20th Century American Literature.*

## Sometimes you just read a poem and it becomes a memory.

Anne Gray Harvey Sexton, proud winner of The 1967 Pulitzer Prize for her collection of poems, *Live or Die* comprising personal and aesthetic ponderings over unresolved grief, never thought she'd end up a poet. Born in an affluent family, grew up with an extravagant lifestyle, Sexton had to elope home on the advice of her mother because of her pregnancy out of wedlock. The young girl, barely 19 years old, had two children with spouse Alfred Mueller.

Confined in the four walls of home playing the role of a housewife and taking care of kids while husband fought Korean War, she suffered from depression and was immediately hospitalized. It was in the hospital, on the encouragement of her therapist Dr. Martin Orne that the soon-to-be-a-poet found a vent to let out her inner anguish and ambivalence through

writing; precisely Confessional Writing. Sexton's poetry transcends across various issues; as for her it wasn't merely a literary exercise or a muscle-flexing norm of artistic expression but crucial, life-giving stay against confusion - and the silence that 'is death' option. As Sexton said, rather proudly, at the peak of her popularity in 1969, "I hold back nothing." From housekeeping to mental breakdown to erotic preoccupation with life and death and everything in between; Sexton wrote it all with an unflinching honesty and remarkable flair.

Her finest poems, in which form and idiosyncratic rhyme schemes are used to contain the roiling emotions, possess a personal immediacy that grabs us and forces us into an intimate relationship with her own experiences: her repeated visits to 'Bedlam', where the inmates *-mind by instinct/ like bees caught in the wrong hive* - her tortured attempts to come

to terms with her mother's death from cancer; her fierce and ambivalent love for her daughters; her ongoing love affair with death. The poems in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) present a savage, almost clinical documentation of madness, illness and pain, and they do so with the authority of a witness blessed with a strong and passionate voice.

In 1960, at the beginning of her rise to prominence, Sexton wrote *Her Kind* – a controlled three-stanza confessional – that concluded *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. The poem illustrates the author's immersion in a New England tradition, the roundup of hapless females to be tormented and executed during the Salem witch persecutions. Through the use of an undifferentiated but double 'I', the poem sets up a single persona identified with madness but separated from it through insight. Two points of view are designated 'I' in each stanza – The witch in stanza one, the housewife in stanza two and the adulteress in stanza three are those who act, or act out; in the refrain, an 'I' steps through the frame of 'like that' to witness, interpret and affirm her alter ego in the same line. The double subjectivity of *Her Kind* as Sexton now called the poem, cleverly finds a way to represent a condition symbolized not in words but in symptoms that yearn to be comprehended. "Her Kind" contains its own perfect reader, its own namesake – I.

Another celebrated and her most read work, *Sylvia's Death* scrolls out like a long, emotion-charged farewell. Penned after just a couple of days of Plath's suicide, the death poem calls out to Sylvia in an unhidden handsome fashion reluctant to terrorize. It is not a tightly constructed poem, the stanzas overflow into each other and the images overlap. But the subject of death is not serious business for the poet who pretends that the friend's death was only to be expected and was the best thing to take place. Nevertheless, there is way more to the poem than just the depiction of anger – It's a complicated mess of emotions which Sexton

was deeply upset about. But the funny thing was how Sylvia upstaged her friend by crawling into death alone. Death is a creepy thing finding an alcove into the death was just like being one up on death. Sexton, who was also at the rim of finding what they called 'peace in dying' believed it wasn't a question of IF; it was just a question of WHEN she would commit suicide. Hence the often quoted comment she made to her therapist, I quote "That was MY death", unquote.

Talking of Sexton and not including Plath would do no justice to the discussion here.

**A strong woman, filled with unparalleled uniqueness and passion for words, tormented by her inner ordeal.**

That is the story of Sylvia Plath summed up in a few words. An influential figure of the twentieth Century American Literature, she is usually remembered for her poems – *Ariel*, *The Colossus and Other Poems* and roman-a-clef *The Bell Jar*.

A gifted student and mature individual, Plath became the first person to win a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1982. Her interest in writing emerged at an early age and she started out by keeping a journal. Bagging her first scholarship at the Smith's College for published work, Plath spent time in New York City during the summer of 1953 working for *Mademoiselle* Magazine as a guest editor. Later, acquiring a Fulbright Scholarship at the Cambridge University, London; Plath met her future husband Ted Hughes. The couple had a stormy relationship which ended in separation owing to Hughes act of infidelity.

She gave up to the societal pressure and inner demons while fighting for her quest of I quote "forging her own identity, for being herself and not what others expect her to be" unquote. Feminists portrayed her as a woman driven to mental illness by an over-bearing father, a disloyal husband and the demands that motherhood called upon her. The trauma of not being able to cope up anymore worked as a catalyst and she gassed herself in the kitchen.

“Dying/ is an art, like everything else,” Plath remarks in *Lady Lazarus*, I do it exceptionally well.’ Her poetry is beautifully shaped, talking of nature- Sea, fire, moon whiteness, against the figures of domesticity and violence, the pleasures and pains of living in the world. “I’ve got to.... speak them to myself”, she said for the later poems. The poems concerning the affections that tie us to this world, like ‘Morning Song, which is about the birth of her daughter, are notable for their wry tenderness; whereas those that describe the mask one puts on for the world, such as, *The Applicant* are full of corrosive wit. What characterizes all this work is the sheer seductiveness of Plath’s voice: she conjures up the roots of her own violence and leaves the reader magnetized.

In her artful poem *Daddy*; the speaker creates an extremely figurative image of her father, using many different metaphors to describe her unsure relationship with him. Plath said “It is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex.” The poem centers on her tendency to recreate aspects of the relationship in later adult relations, her attempts at suicide and her desperate need to come to terms with all the above things. She says, he’s like a black shoe that she’s had to live in; like a statue that stretches across the United States; like God; like a Nazi; like a Swastika; and, finally, like a vampire. Though the speaker gets her revenge, claiming that she’s killed both her father and the man she made as a model of her father; i.e. her husband; the poem shows her struggle to declare that, no matter how terrible her father was and how much he remains in her mind; she is now through with him.

Another in the row is the poem *Ariel*. *Ariel*, in which her impulse towards oblivion and the pain that generated that impulse were rendered in distinctively brutal ways – at once daring and deliberate; compel the reader to participate in the poet’s despair. At the most fundamental level, this poem deals with horse ride and the horse going wild. With an extremely professional and compact language, it highlights meditation on fear and exhilaration, control and release, life

and death all at once. She is known to be writing, ‘not only for the reading eye, but for the listening ear’; her poems, and in particular this one, spans all kinds of rhymes, repetitions, echoes and reverberations. *Ariel* starts from early morning darkness and moves to a crazy gallop by the horse, making the speaker “hauled through air”. This sudden change is initially feared and later appreciated which ends on forming sync between the wildly galloping *Ariel* and the speaker.

Now; if we let the two poets in a face-off; we will see interesting similarities and contrasts between them, forming a silver lining of the present paper. The two became friends while Plath performed audit of Robert Lowell’s poetry class at Boston University. It was the well-known ‘triple martinis’ gatherings post Lowell’s class in which they shared their respective experiences of suicide attempts and mutual enhancement with death over drinks.

Classmate Katherine Spivack recalls, of Plath as, “as reserved and totally controlled as well as unapproachable to the younger writers. She was composed, neat, and held in a tightly buttoned print blouse and neat cardigan. She spoke quietly, with utmost control; while on the other hand, for Sexton, who favored silky flowing dresses and flashy jewelry. Her entrances were dramatic: she stood at the door, rattling her bracelets, and dropped books and papers and cigarette butts. The men jumped to their feet, found her a seat, said Spivack. Absolutely opposite with no common layer, Plath, first noticed Sexton when the latter was singled out for her work in Lowell’s class. Moreover, it was Lowell who compared them and thought that tightly pulled in Plath would somehow benefit from Sexton’s looseness.

What made Anne and Sylvia stand out from their male classmates and professor was their unique, yet mutual idea that death would make them even freer, even more insightful than anything else they could find in life. Both women thought that death could be a good escape from the madness that men provoked in them. Unlike the fondness and nostalgia for traditional

American values that became Robert's signature, Sylvia and Anne's view of what these values did to their independence almost completely separates them from other confessional poets of those times.

They could have been drawing each other into a friendly two fold bet every night at the Ritz, one that would allow them to write about death's true nature and eventually find it out for themselves. To George or to anyone else in the bar watching, they might have been witches. Even Anne and Sylvia may not have known they were casting irresistible spells on each other, wrapping themselves in natural, sometimes pagan ideas that did not yet have a place in the American life.

To conclude, while some of these similarities in the works of Plath and Sexton may purely coincide, it is still fascinating to note that Plath didn't lack creativity or talent nor did she borrow it from Sexton to create her own unique art. Plath's *Ariel* poems, in turn, influenced Sexton's later poetry (Trinidad 27-29). On the other hand, Sexton believed in untouched writing. Her poems had a certain familiarity in them and

successfully interpreted the raw human soul and its desires and limitations. The Ritz Trio is famous throughout literature and so it appears that those hours spent rehashing suicides and critiquing poetry over drinks at this very bar left an indelible mark on both of these "sweet ladies."

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