

HER KIND

WOMEN ICONS IN ANNE SEXTON'S

HER KIND

By

Instructor: Mohamad Fleih Hassan

English Dept./College of Arts/Anbar University

Abstract

Anne Sexton (1928-1974) is one of the major feminist American poets of the twentieth century. She introduces feminist ideas and issues into her confessional poetry. *Her Kind* is one of Sexton's confessional poems that deal with the image of woman in the modern society. In her poem, she presents female stereotypes that are going through personal struggles. Sexton's *Her Kind* is about a woman who is seeking her life through struggling for recognition by anti-domesticating herself in the masculine world. Sexton's poem is a serious attempt to understand woman's estrangement of the world she lives in. Sexton categorized those women who suffers a lot in their endeavors to conform with the prevailing feminine stereotypes. She encouraged them to break the falsified conventions of the masculine society. The paper shows that there are three iconic images of women in the three stanzas of Sexton's poem; the 'possessed witch' in stanza one, the conventional and traditional housewife in stanza two, and the adulteress in stanza three, whose society continues to misunderstand her, therefore, Sexton celebrates her for She sees the world differently. This poem is about all women, for the speaker says she has "been her kind," and that she is no longer of her kind because she changed into new different woman.

أيقونات النساء في قصيدة آن سكستون "نوعها"

آن سكستون واحدة من الشعراء الأمريكيين البارزين المدافعين عن حقوق المرأة في القرن العشرين. قدمت الشاعرة قضاياها وأفكارها الخاصة بحقوق المرأة من خلال الشعر الاعترافي. ففي قصيدتها "نوعها"، تتكلم الشاعرة عن صورة المرأة في العصر الحديث، وتقدم صورة نمطية للمرأة التي تعاني الكثير من الصراعات الشخصية. فهذه القصيدة تدور حول امرأة تبحث عن حياتها من خلال الصراع من أجل الوجود عن طريق الثورة ضد العالم الذكوري. فهذه القصيدة عبارة عن محاولة جادة لفهم غربة المرأة في عالمها الذي تعيش فيه. حيث صنفت الشاعرة تلك النساء اللواتي تعاني كثيرا في محاولة الانسجام مع الصور النمطية الأنثوية السائدة. فلقد دعت الشاعرة تلك النساء إلى كسر التقاليد المزيفة للمجتمع الذكوري. تبين هذه الدراسة أن هناك ثلاثة صور بارزة للنساء في قصيدة الشاعرة وهي الساحرة في المقطع الأول من القصيدة وصورة ربة البيت التقليدية في المقطع الثاني وصورة المرأة البغي في المقطع الثالث والتي يساء فهمها دائما من قبل المجتمع الذي تعيش فيه. لذا احتفت الشاعرة بهذه المرأة لكونها ترى العالم بشكل مختلف. هذه القصيدة تتكلم عن كل النساء لان المتكلمة كانت واحدة من هؤلاء النساء إلا أنها الآن تحولت إلى امرأة جديدة مختلفة.

HER KIND

Confessional Poets changed poetry forever because they write about very personal issues. The Confessional Poets wrote down everything going on inside of their heads or hearts. The topics of depression, alcoholism, death, isolation, or adultery were all laid bare by those writers. The writers did not discuss private topics only, but they were opening up their personal lives to their public. They familiarized the talk about issues like marital infidelities, painful personal failures, mental health breakdowns, and incidents of psychological anguish.

Anne Sexton (1928-1974), was one of the major figures of the Confessional school of poetry. She was born in Newton, Massachusetts, and spent some of her life in Boston. It is rumored that she may have been abused by her parents, which left deep fissure in her character. In 1945, Anne attended the school of Rogers Hall, in which she started writing poetry. She was known for being beautiful and daring. At nineteen years of age, she eloped with Alfred Sexton in 1948 and remained married to him until 1973 with two children. A mental illness dominated most of her life; she had several mental breakdowns in the 1950's. Apparently, during her husband's service in Korea, she had love affairs and sometimes abused her children, which caused problems that did nothing to help her mental stability. She attempted committing suicide many times. Her therapist, Dr. Martin Orne suggested writing poetry for her as an outlet for her grief and depression. She worked with several famous American poets, and in 1967, she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. In 1974, she returned home, shut herself in her garage, and started up her car. The poisonous exhaust of the car suffocated and eventually killed her.

Anne Sexton concentrates on a kind of writing that is textually rather than biographically confessional, self-reflective, auto-referential, and auto-

HER KIND

representational. Sexton's confessional poetry demands to be read in these terms. It foreshadows the markedly self-reflexive tendencies of more recent American poetry. The language of the confessional text continues often to be read as "transitive and referential," as a truthful representation of the lived experience of the writer. The Confessional poem is still read as an expressive and realist mode, offering privileged and reliable insight into the personal experience of its writer.¹

Sexton incorporated female struggles and feminist ideas into her poetry. Sexton's *Her Kind* uses historical and biblical references that demean women and uses strong female stereotypes that are going through personal struggles. Witch is a recurring theme in this poem, which is used to represent all that is evil in a woman. Sexton's *Her Kind* is a portrayal of a woman, likely herself, who has struggled to live her life freely but has been tortured by her endeavors to compromise herself with the standards and conventions of a male-dominated society. In *Her Kind*, the persona is a powerful female character who is admitting to being a social outcast. The poem could certainly be interpreted as Sexton's interpretation of her own life portrayed by this character that is unwilling to conform to social expectations and so becomes an exile who gives herself the title of a "possessed witch". Using the word 'witch' strongly implies being evil and sinful, so this declaration is used to compare modern women with the women of the European Inquisition in the sixteenth century who would be punished for being non-conformers and heretics of the female gender. She seeks recognition through enhancing diabolic attributes to anti-domesticate herself in the masculine world.²

Commenting on Sexton's poem *Her Kind*, Middlebrook says:

HER KIND

Sexton was the first to tap the constraints women felt in conforming to prevailing feminine stereotypes, perhaps because she was developing her art under the psychological influence of a mother identified not with self-sacrifice but with writing. The last poem Sexton wrote for the manuscript of *Bedlam*, "Her Kind," shows her trying to do just that.³

In Anne Sexton's works, the personal difficulties which she experienced in her own life as a woman, daughter, and mother, were the source of subjects of her poems, which become more universally the problems of identity and social role in a middle-class culture intent on erecting stereotypes of women, and gender barriers to their achievement and emotional expression. Sexton's *Her Kind* was first published in her book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, which appeared in 1960. Themes of the book centered upon Sexton's powerful emotions rose from childhood, hospital routines, her parents, her daughters, the presence of death, and her own breakdowns. The publication of this book put Sexton in the spotlight. She used to refer to herself as a "witch" as in this poem "I have gone out, a possessed witch, / haunting the black air".⁴

Sexton in her mental fits was thinking of death as a means of liberation. She is trying to explain why a woman might feel so persecuted that she'd find it easy to identify with women who died because of society's screwed up conventions. She showed solidarity with women who broke that conventional lifestyle. The speaker in this stanza seems to think of that. The speaker doesn't give a specific name. She's an outsider and a social misfit. She has powerful imagination, by which she connects with all sorts of outsiders. *Her Kind* is one of the Confessional poems that

HER KIND

deal with the image of woman in the modern society. Sexton herself was so wild in her adventures contradicting the stereotypical image of woman.

A. Walton Litz describes the themes and attitudes of Anne Sexton in the early period of her life saying:

In the early poems the stance and voice frequently are of a child who is lost, fearful, and dependent on a male authority figure. The poet assumes a more active voice as she deliberately attempts to reconcile herself to time, death, and her own psychological impulses. She also begins to explore her relationships with the women in her life. Several of the poems assume a fictional voice, but in them, too, the speaker generally is confronting the realities of life, death, and loss.⁵

The structure of Sexton's *Her Kind* provides presents three iconic images of women. The first iconic image is presented in the first stanza through the individualization of '*a possessed witch*'. The speaker sees herself possessing magical powers:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, L. 1-3

Images are drawn by Sexton to create the spell of magic for the reader. A magical atmosphere is created through the use of these words '*possessed, haunting, dreaming evil, and twelve-fingered*'. The twelve-fingered witch in this stanza gives

HER KIND

that woman the power of flight and the power to dream. With twelve fingers, she is distinguished and powerful, yet such characteristic left her abandoned, 'lonely thing'.

Elizabeth Gregory talks about being out of the older ways of life of Anne Sexton in her essay, *Confessing the Body*, saying:

... Sexton's phrase also indicates a more general willingness to be public about things the culture usually shames its members into silence about. Their kind do not die of shame; instead they contest the rule of shame that has enforced the age-old silence about female experience and about the life of the body at the same time that they dispute their limitation to that subject. Rather than being possessed by special occult powers of femininity, both 'witches' might be said to be possessed of a special access to poetic authority in opening up the repressed (occulted) feminine to public view.⁶

The speaker started describing herself as a '*possessed witch*', which sets the tone for the imagery which will control the first stanza. By claiming to '*have been her kind*,' the speaker takes a step back from the woman she's been describing. The witch is not just an image any longer: she's a metaphor for every woman who happens to share her feelings and position in life. This poem is built around one central refrain: '*I have been her kind*.' Such a tight structure helps to craft the sense of a speaker with a very definite sense of herself. Each stanza starts with the repeated phrase "I have" which makes the poem a kind of declaration.⁷ Sexton is

HER KIND

defining and re-defining her speaker's identity with every stanza. She's confident about who she is and who she's been.

Anne Sexton in *Her Kind* chooses to exploit the image of a purely fictional, purely female figure as the symbol of all the things that people fear about women. Sexton claims the scariness and the strength of her images. Women aren't always sweet. Sometimes they're scary. And Sexton thinks that can be a good thing. This poem is about all women, for the speaker says she has "been her kind," suggesting that she is no longer "her kind" but has evolved into something else.⁸

The speaker of this poem is remembering all the things that she has been in the past: a lonely witch, obsessed, and the victim of persecution. There are few things to be known about the speaker – but what is certain is that she's a woman. The confessional mode of writing the poem through the use of 'I' in the first line of the poem, makes the speaker leave no room for anyone to be in doubt about who's experiencing what she's about to describe.

This is a woman of the night. She's all alone, doing the things that only witches do. Witches are doing things outside the bounds of normality. Witches are seen as strange creatures, partly because they're women. They use their spells not to help their lot, therefore, they have been condemned and persecuted for centuries, especially in a patriarchal society that doesn't recognize the power of these women.

She describes her life at night doing the things that keep her apart from the rest of her society. She's drawing back to think about categories of people – the sorts of women who don't quite fit society's mold. Society tells her that she's not a woman. And she believes that:

HER KIND

I have done my hitch

Over the plain houses, light by light:

lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.

A woman like that is not a woman, quite.

I have been her kind.

L.3-7

The last line of the first stanza functions as a declaration of the speaker's self, '*I have been her kind*'. The speaker puts some distance between the possessed, witch-like woman and herself. A distance affirms that she's one of her "kind." It's a space that turns the witch-woman into an elaborate metaphor for what our speaker's experiencing.

Sexton's speaker is a witch who flies by night. Her immediate neighborhood seems to be suburbia, given that she rides '*over the plain houses,*'. She has double life: housewife by day and witch by night. With her extra fingers, she distinguishes herself from normal women who are merely sweeping dust with their brooms in the plain houses. She does not cope with such woman for '*A woman like that is not a woman, quite.*' The real woman is the one who would conform to social norms. But then the speaker declares her kinship to the mad housewife/possessed witch figure: '*I have been her kind.*' The repetition suggests either that she has lived many previous lives before this one, or that she is identifying with multiple recurrences of this archetype throughout history.⁹

The second stanza presents the icon of a housewife. In this stanza, Sexton portrays the conventional and traditional role of woman. She cares for her family only. The speaker talks about the secrets of witchcraft. The speaker creates her own

HER KIND

world, which is completely removed and alienated from the rest of society. Psychoanalytically, "warm caves," refer to hidden spaces which can be filled with various kinds of things. These things mentioned, 'carvings, shelves, closets, silks, innumerable goods' help to create a separate safe space for her:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods; L. 8-10

Here is another woman whom Sexton has been, that is the mother and wife. She goes into warm cave, a place of confinement, which she is expected to make a home of. The speaker chooses to care for strange things, '*fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves*'. She's not cooking supper for the family. She described them as bugs and elves, which implies that she is not perhaps fond of caring and cooking and cleaning for them. Sexton wants the readers to feel the strangeness of her speaker's chosen supper companions. The reader feels the paradox between companions. In this, she is also an outcast - shunned for being an unnatural mother and wife. As a housewife and mother, she should love her family. But there's something wrong with her, therefore she is just 'misunderstood.' She '*has been her kind*'.¹⁰

The first line of the second stanza shows the world of a woman who chooses not to participate in normal life. The society succeeds in impressing his views upon her conception of herself. Therefore, this 'whining' woman is misunderstood by her society, '*a woman like that is misunderstood.*'

The third stanza focuses on the iconic image of a prostitute. This speaker sees herself as mainstream society sees her. she addresses herself directly to a man

HER KIND

who's choosing to help drive her to some hazardous place. Historically, witches are doomed to face their tragic end on stakes. The kind of woman here is not hiding herself. She is not afraid. She waves her "nude arms" to the watching crowds:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind. L.15-16

This woman will be tortured for her difference. She has been pulled and stretched by torture devices intended to encourage a confession of her difference. Though society continues to misunderstand this woman, Sexton celebrates her. She sees the world differently. Therefore this woman is '*not ashamed to die*' because she has lived her life on her terms. She does not care for the false standards of the society. She has been this woman, and she doesn't care what society thinks of her. She celebrates her difference.¹¹

Though naked arms could be a sign of human frailty, but the speaker seems to be thumbing her nose at the '*villages going by.*' She's not scared. In fact, she's greeting the very world that's about to condemn her. Though she is approaching her end but she is careless. It doesn't matter whether she's burned at the stake or tortured in the inquisition. Death won't take away her sense of self. She is not scared though she will face the trial of witches, which is the burning on a stake.

The speaker returns to her refrain, expressing her sense of identification with a misaligned woman. She may face death, but she will not retreat back from her

HER KIND

beliefs or her sense of self, '*A woman like that is not ashamed to die. I have been her kind*'.

There are three iconic points of view in the three stanzas; the witch in stanza one, the housewife in stanza two, and the adulteress in stanza three. In '*Her Kind*' Sexton shows what kind of woman she was, and what kind of poet. This poem is not spoken through a mask, but it calls the attention to the difference between pain and the representation of pain, between the poet onstage in print-flippant, glamorous, crafty- and the woman who experienced pain and bitterness in her life.¹²

Sexton's poem is a serious attempt to understand woman - her sense of estrangement, and her impulse toward death. Sexton's witch tries to be something of value to the community. Her witch is essentially harmless, therefore '*A woman like that is not afraid to die*'. If she seems cast in the role of a martyr, embracing madness in order to domesticate it for the rest of the community, it is nevertheless a martyrdom which this aspect of Sexton accepts with a peculiar zest.¹³

The poetry of Anne Sexton catches the feminist's eye and ear in special ways. Many of her experiences and feelings are the product of a society that oppresses women. The anger and excess that run through so much of her poetry are uniquely hers, but there are echoes of the same kind of rage in the poetry of many of her contemporaries.

Notes

HER KIND

- 1- Jo Gill, *Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry*, Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 2004), Hofstra University Ltd., p. 62. URL: <http://www.jstor.org>. Accessed: 10/03/2010
- 2- Gabriella Arsenault and Dr. Robert Lapp, *Feminist Witches and Poetry*, <http://www.oppapers.com/essays/Feminist-Witches-And-Poetry>, p.1. Accessed in 10 /11/2011
- 3- Diane Wood Middlebrook, "On Her Kind", *Modern American Poetry*, Ed. Cary Nelson, 1 Jan 2000. Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 9 March 2003. [http://www.english.uiuc.edu /maps/poets/s_z/ sexton/ herkind.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm). Accessed on 10/10/2011
- 4- Christopher Macgowan, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Blackwell Guide to Literature*, (USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004, pp. 139-140
- 5- A. Walton Litz (ed.), *American Writers, A Collection of Literary Biographies*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), p. 672
- 6- Jo Gill (ed.), *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006). p, 41
- 7- Joanna Gill, "My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot": *Anne Sexton and the "Impersonal Theory of Poetry"*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 1/2, Modern Poets (Autumn, 2003), Indiana University Press, p. 44. URL: [http:// www. Jstor . org](http://www.jstor.org). Accessed: 10/03/2010
- 8- [http://www. shmoop.com/ her-kind / gender - theme. html](http://www.shmoop.com/her-kind/gender-theme.html). Accessed on the Internet 10/10/2011
- 9- The Mezzo Cammin: *Women Poets TimeLine Project*, pp.5-6. [http://www. Mezzo cammin.com/timeline/timeline.php?vol=timeline&iss= sexton](http://www.MezzoCammin.com/timeline/timeline.php?vol=timeline&iss=sexton)
- 10- Marina DelVecchio, *Unnatural Women in Anne Sexton's Her Kind*, p.1 [http://marinagraphy.com/unnatural-women-anne-sextons -her-kind](http://marinagraphy.com/unnatural-women-anne-sextons-her-kind). Accessed 2011.
- 11- Ibid., p. 2
- 12- Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, (London: Vintage Ltd., 1991), p. 2

HER KIND

13- Greg Johnson, *The Achievement of Anne Sexton* , The Hollins Critic 21, no.2, June, 1984, p. 1

Bibliography

- Arsenault, Gabriella and Dr. Robert Lapp. *Feminist Witches and Poetry*. <http://www.oppapers.com/essays/Feminist-Witches-And-Poetry>. Accessed in 10 /11/2011
- Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007
- Gill, Jo. *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006
- Gill, Jo. *Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry*. *Twentieth Century Literature*. Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 2004). Hofstra University Ltd. URL: <http://www.jstor.org>. Accessed: 10/03/2010
- Gill, Joanna. "My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot": *Anne Sexton and the "Impersonal Theory of Poetry"*. *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 27, No. 1/2. Modern Poets (Autumn, 2003). Indiana University Press. URL: <http://www.jstor.org>. Accessed: 10/03/2010
- Johnson, Greg. *The Achievement of Anne Sexton* . The Hollins Critic 21, no.2, June, 1984
- Litz, A. Walton Ed. *American Writers. A Collection of Literary Biographies*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981
- Macgowan, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Blackwell Guide*

HER KIND

- to Literature. USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood. "On Her Kind", *Modern American Poetry*. Ed. Cary Nelson. 1 Jan 2000. Department of English. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 9 March 2003. [http://www.english.uiuc.edu /maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm). Accessed on 10/10/2011
 - Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. London: Vintage Ltd., 1991
 - Salvio, Paula M. *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007
 - Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. New York: Mariner Books, 1981.

Internet Sources

- <http://www.shmoop.com/her-kind/gender-theme.html>. Accessed in 10/10/2011
- <http://www.mezzocammin.com/timeline/timeline.php?vol=timeline&iss=sexton>. Accessed on 2011.
- <http://marinagraphy.com/unnatural-women-anne-sextons-her-kind>. Accessed on 2011.