

The Dual Literary Biography of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: *A Review of Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton by Gail Crowther* by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick

Gail Crowther's *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton* provides an expert account of two of the most important poets of the twentieth century: Pulitzer-Prize winners Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Anne Sexton (1928-1974). Through the course of the book, we engage with the lives and works of these two writers topically and thematically, a powerful and effective way to structure a dual literary biography. As a result of the format and approach, we can see the similarities and differences emerge between Plath and Sexton, whom Crowther grounds in their literary, cultural, social, and historical contexts. Moreover, Crowther's writing will captivate scholarly readers and a more general reading public as she deftly synthesizes archival materials, literary texts, biographies, and interviews. The majority of the interviews have not been previously cited, and an insert of photographic images, several published for the first time, is included as a noteworthy addition. Crowther's book sets the example for a dual literary biography in its encompassing and smart treatment, and it is remarkable, too, in its empathetic and energetic tone: this reader marveled at how Crowther produced a work

that is both scholarly and a page turner.

From the very beginning, we are alerted to the fact that this book is a significant contribution to Plath studies and Sexton studies because it assumes an unabashedly feminist, literary, biographical, and sociological framework within which to interpret and present these women writers and their contributions. Crowther explains how Plath and Sexton constituted literary, feminist rebels before the advent of second wave feminism, how they "trouble what society and culture does to women" and how their personal and literary "voices disrupt dominant ideals" (xvii). We see the structure deftly laid bare in the chapter titles: *Rebels, Early Days, Sex, Marriage, Mothering, Writing, Mental Illness, and Suicide*, followed by an Epilogue, in which we encounter thoughtful reflections about the contours of Plath and Sexton studies from the 1960s to our own day. The book traces how Plath and Sexton participated in a social rebellion, one in which the domestic merges with literary and business worlds; women function as agents and authors of their own lives; and women become agitating advocates for women's participation, equity, and equality in all aspects of their lives, despite

the dearth of feminist models. Part of Plath's and Sexton's appeal might lie in their hybridity: as both conformists and rebels, they illustrated and proved what female genius can do and what female rebelliousness can look like in the twentieth century, but their lives and work also surface the obstacles and hardships faced by women who assume the roles of poet-wife-mother simultaneously and who both strive for and chafe under conformity. Crowther's intersectional feminist approach takes into account gender but also race, social class, age, ability, and sexual orientation, all the while locating these within specific geographical, historical, and cultural moments and spaces in the lives and literature of the authors. One cannot underscore enough how significant her approach is: it promises to reorient us as readers and scholars in the literary scholarship and in our cultural understanding of these two literary giants. Consequently, Crowther refuses to abide by sexist overtures; she refutes the notion of Plath and Sexton as "crazy, suicidal women, an attitude that impressively manages to sweep up sexism and stigma toward mental illness and suicide in one powerful ball of dismissal" (8). Rather than let sexist jokes about Plath's suicide slide, for instance, or unchecked bias run rampant in literature as a discipline, Crowther recognizes them for what they are. A focus of this book is to "humanize the women," just as archival artifacts and realia do (9).

In an unflinching and courageous fashion, this book takes on gendered violence, trauma, and other ugly subjects with vigor and sensitivity. We encounter topics ranging from domestic violence to emotional and symbolic violence in chapters three, four, and five. One takeaway: Plath and Sexton's lives offer material and lessons we can learn from and from which we *should* learn. With sensitivity, Crowther delves into the common scenario that those who are abused and traumatized find themselves: they can turn their pain and suffering inward and

defeat themselves, as appears to be Plath's case, or they can turn it outward and hurt those closest to them, as we see with Sexton. Another unsavory subject is inequality and/or inequity in the workplace, specifically in the literary marketplace. In forging ahead as literary rebels, Plath and Sexton experienced, at times, what we would call imposter syndrome today (152, 154-55), despite the fact that they were highly regarded poets. But we must remember that they worked in a sexist field, one that exhibited a "lack of diversity, lack of equal pay, lack of recognition, [and] sexist reviews" (146-47). Chapters seven and eight deal with mental illness and suicide respectively, and readers learn that, notwithstanding having advocates on their side, Plath and Sexton suffered tremendously through poor healthcare (i.e., botched electroconvulsive therapy and poorly understood and poorly monitored experimental drug therapies). It is all the more remarkable that Plath and Sexton led, as Crowther summarizes in chapter eight with respect to Plath, a life that can best be described as "[r]esilient, strong, intelligent, caring, political, and no-nonsense" (210).

Powerfully, Crowther concludes that we cannot do away with Plath or Sexton because the lives they lived and the literature they produced comprise a legacy that led us to where we are today: "They played their part in blasting open taboo subjects that have allowed the rest of us to walk much easier down a path that was pretty much forbidden to them" (233). Furthermore, we must acknowledge that they engaged in "exposing all those wrongs that still exist, and all those universal themes that will never go away: love, death, sex, pain, joy. They were so ahead of their time and the ripple effect of their rebellion travels through the decades, playing its own part in the long, slow struggle that is social change" (232). We have Crowther's book to thank for centering and delineating these important lives, literary texts, and legacies.