

When *Ariel* Found *Mercy Street*: The Influence of Anne Sexton on Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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It has often been stated by critics that the poems Sylvia Plath wrote during the months before her suicide differ vastly from her earlier work. These differences are seen not only in Plath's creative process during the writing of the poems, but also in the voice of the poems. The poems which make up *Ariel*, her most famous volume of poetry, demonstrate an unbridled rage and stark honesty. Her earlier poems, on the other hand, show restraint and calculation. But what stimulus could have spurred this transition in her poetry has never been pinpointed exactly. But, perhaps, some revelation can be found by revisiting 1959 Boston. During that late winter, while auditing Robert Lowell's poetry class at Boston University, Plath formed a fascinating friendship with another female poet whose name would also become synonymous with confessional poetry: Anne Sexton. Those familiar with either or both of the poets' lives most likely have heard of the "triple-martini"¹ fueled gatherings, along with poet and Houghton Mifflin editor George Starbuck, between the two women (Plath 480). During these meetings after Lowell's class, Sexton and Plath compared suicide attempts, discussed their mutual enchantment with death, critiqued each other's work, and gossiped over drinks and free potato chips at the Ritz-Carlton hotel. While the jury is still out on what exactly the poets drank (some sources claim it was martinis, some say Sexton only drank "stingers"²) and how often they actually met, it has not stopped these meetings between Plath and Sexton from becoming almost a literary urban legend. But legend aside, it seems that Sexton's raw and unapologetic honesty had an undeniable influence on the tightly clenched Plath's formation as a poet who was just beginning to discover her own voice. Plath herself even stated her admiration of Sexton's work in a 1962 interview with The British Council, stating "I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also of her experiences as a mother: as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems, and

¹ On May 3, 1959, Plath wrote in her journal that she, referring to Sexton, Starbuck, and herself, "felt our triple martini afternoons at the Ritz breaking up" (*Unabridged Journals* 480).

² In an interview with biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook, Starbuck insisted that Sexton only drank stingers during their gatherings at the Ritz (Middlebrook 107).

yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting" (Alexander 305). With that being said, Sexton's influence on Plath can be traced in several of her poems written after the two poets' introduction, including many of Plath's final poems such as "Ariel," "Daddy," and "Lady Lazarus."

The depictions of Plath and Sexton's Ritz gatherings are made even more interesting by the descriptions of the two poets' personalities. The outward personas of Plath and Sexton, as remembered by former classmates, play out much like contrasting female archetypes: the good girl and the bad girl. Boston University classmate Kathleen Spivack recalls in her memoir *Robert Lowell and His Circle*, that "Sylvia had a neat, co-ed prettiness. She wore pleated skirts and buttoned down, pink long-sleeved shirts and a little pin; a kind of a frozen woman student's uniform. She often wore "Liberty" blouses, buttoned to the glottis. Sometimes she would fold her camel's hair coat carefully about her shoulders. She carefully positioned herself at the long table in Lowell's classes, often at the foot of the table directly opposite Robert Lowell" (32). A similar statement about Plath is also made by Spivack in David Trinidad's essay, "Two Sweet Ladies: Sexton and Plath's Friendship and Mutual Influence." Trinidad mentions that Spivack "remembers Plath as 'reserved and totally controlled as well as unapproachable to the younger writers.' She was "composed, neat, held in, in a tightly buttoned print blouse and neat cardigan. She spoke quietly, with utmost control" (22). Plath's cardigan wearing co-ed persona was quite different from Sexton, a high school graduate from an affluent family who, believing she was pregnant, ran away at age 19 to elope. Vis-a-vis Plath, Sexton's taste in clothing and her classroom behavior were completely opposite. Sexton favored "silky flowing dresses and flashy jewelry" (Spivack 54). If Spivack's memoir is any indicator, Sexton also knew how to make quite the entrance. "Anne was often late, because she was too nervous about coming to Lowell's class to get herself there," recalled Spivack. "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" (54). Sexton's flare for the dramatic extended to how she read her poetry aloud in class. Spivack remembers, "Her hoarse voice breathed extravagant enthusiasm and life. Her hands shook when she read her poems aloud. She smoked endlessly" (Trinidad 22). Sexton proved she could be quite a defiant student as well, often smoking in the classroom and using her shoe as an ashtray.³ In a 1959 letter to mentor W.D. Snodgrass, Sexton even admits to behaving

³ See page 38 of *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait Letters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.

rebelliously in class. On January 11 she writes, "The class is good. I am learning leaps and boundaries. Tho(ugh) I am very bitchy acting in class. I don't know why but I am very defensive around Lowell (I think I am afraid of him) ... so I act like a bitch with these sarcastic remarks... The class just sits there like little doggies wagging their heads at his every statement. For instance, he will be dissecting some great poem and will say "why is this line so good. What makes it good?" and there is total silence. Everyone afraid to speak. And finally, because I can stand it no longer, I speak up saying, "I don't think it's so good at all. You would never allow us sloppy language like that." ... As you say, I do act aggressive" (48-49).

Plath, ever the competitive student, would have most likely taken notice of Sexton's work when Lowell singled it out for praise (Spivack 34-35). He felt that Sexton's poems "move with ease and are filled with experience, like good prose," telling her in a September 1958 letter, "you stick to truth and the simple expression of very difficult feelings, and this is the line in poetry that I am most interested in"⁴ (Middlebrook 91). Lowell also began comparing Plath's work to Sexton's, an ego boost to Plath, who in her diary entries seemed to have been unhappy at first with the class. On February 25, Plath had written "Lowell's class yesterday a great disappointment: I said a few mealy mouthed things, a few BU students yattered nothings I wouldn't let my Smith freshmen say without challenge. Lowell good in his mildly feminine ineffectual fashion. Felt a regression. The main thing is hearing the other student's poems and his reaction to mine" (471). Plath goes on to write on March 20, "criticism of 4 of my poems in Lowell's class: criticism of rhetoric. He sets me up with Ann (without the e) Sexton, an honor, I suppose. Well, about time. She has very good things, and they get better, though there is a lot of loose stuff." Perhaps, as Trinidad points out, Lowell felt that the tightly controlled Plath could benefit from Sexton's "looseness" (22). Plath herself noted the differences in Sexton's work and her own in a diary entry from April 23: "Have rejected the Electra poem from my book. Too forced and rhetorical. A leaf from Ann Sexton's book would do here. She has none of my clenches and an ease of phrase, and an honesty" (477).

But the aspect of Sexton's writing that Plath seemed to benefit the most from was its highly personal subject matter. Like Plath, Sexton experienced bouts of depression as well as a mental breakdown and suicide attempt, which culminated with her being hospitalized. In

⁴ In Lowell's letter accepting Sexton into his Boston University workshop, he expressed his admiration of the poetry she had sent him (Trinidad 21).

addition, both Plath and Sexton were undergoing psychotherapy while they were attending Lowell's class together. The fact that Sexton often made these experiences the subject of her poetry must have struck a chord with Plath, who was grappling with how to explore similar experiences in her poetry. In the same February 25 diary entry, in which she had expressed dissatisfaction with Lowell's class, Plath had also written about examining her personal demons in her writing: "My main thing now is to start with real things: real emotions, and leave out the baby gods, the old men of the sea, the thin people, the knights, the moon-mothers, mother and brother and father and family. The real world. Real situations, behind which the great gods play the drama of blood, lust and death" (471) This aspiration is further noted in Paul Alexander's biography of Plath, *Rough Magic*: "Plath now wanted her poetry to deal with matters closer to the bone. Instead of writing about subjects like goblins, the Lorelei, and fairytale characters, she would confront weighty issues-issues of the self" (229). Because she was already writing about "weighty issues," such as depression, suicide, adultery, and family secrets, Sexton most likely served as an inspiration to Plath. Furthermore, the poems Sexton was work shopping in Lowell's class, such as "The Double Image," "My Friend, My Friend," "Her Kind," "The Moss of His Skin," and "You, Dr. Martin" would have especially stimulated Plath, who was not only was struggling to break through emotionally in her poetry, but also in her psychotherapy with Dr. Ruth Tiffany Beuscher. Sexton noticed Plath's struggle with a breakthrough in her poetry, stating in her memoir of Plath, "The Barfly Ought to Sing," "...I felt she dodged the point and did so perhaps because of her preoccupation with form. Form was important for Sylvia and each really good poet has one of his own. No matter what he calls it- free verse or what. Still, it belongs to you or it doesn't. Sylvia hadn't then found a form that belonged to her. Those early poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that). I felt she hadn't found a voice of her own, wasn't, in truth, free to be herself" (9).

One issue that had always haunted Plath was her father's untimely death when she eight years old. Plath was beginning to broach the subject in therapy, discussing at times how she blamed her father's death on her mother as well as her feelings of abandonment. Finally on March 9, at the urging of Beuscher, Plath decided to do something she had never done before: visit her father's grave. The experience unearthed conflicting emotions in her, as she shows in a journal entry written that same day: "Felt cheated. My temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead. How far gone would he be? No trees, no peace, his headstone

jammed up against his body on the other side. Left shortly. It is good to have the place in mind" (473). Ten days later after visiting her father's grave, still consumed with emotion, Plath wrote the poem "Electra on Azalea Path." The narrator of the poem is a young woman in her twenties, who visits her father's grave for the first to seek his forgiveness (Alexander 230). It is only at the end of the poem that the source of the narrator's guilt is revealed: it was her loved the killed her father. Besides Plath's visitation to her father's grave, perhaps another source of inspiration for "Electra on Azalea Path," was Sexton's poem about her own tense relationship with her father,⁵ "The Moss of His Skin." Even though Sexton's father was very much alive when she wrote the poem, the narrator in it is speaking to the corpse of her dead father and imagines she lies in the his coffin "down beside him...to sink from the eyes of mother" (Sexton 26-27). Similarities between "Electra on Azalea Path" and "The Moss of His Skin" are seen in the following lines:

Sexton:

The black room took us
 like a cave or a mouth
 or an indoor belly.
 held my breath
 and daddy was there,
 his thumbs, his fat skull,
 his teeth, his hair growing
 like a field or a shawl.
 I lay by the moss
 of his skin until
 it grew strange. (26-27)

Plath:

The day you died I went into the dirt,
 Into the lightless hibernaculum
 Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard
 Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard.
 It was good for twenty years, that wintering -

⁵ Sexton's father suffered from alcoholism and volatile mood swings during Sexton's adolescence and she would often be the brunt of his drunken rages (Middlebrook 13-14).

As if you never existed, as if I came
 God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly. (116)

Another work of Sexton's that Plath would have read or heard read in class was "The Double Image," a sequence poem about her relationship with her cancer-stricken mother and her separation, due to her mental breakdown, from her youngest daughter. "The Double Image" seems to have had some influence on a poem Plath's poem "Poem for a Birthday," written during Plath's stay at Yaddo in the fall of 1959. While "Poem for a Birthday" was most likely heavily influenced by Theodore Roethke⁶, there are also resonances of Sexton's poetry, as well. This is seen particularly in the last two sections, in which the narrator describes being a patient in a hospital where "they can doctor heads, or any limb" (137). Some of the lines in the poem that are possibly parallel to Sexton's lines in "The Double Image" are:

Sexton:

Death was simpler than I'd thought.
 The day life made you well and whole
 I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
 I pretended I was dead
 until the white men pumped the poison out. (36)

Plath:

Sickness begins here: I am a dartboard for witches.
 Only the devil can eat the devil out.
 In the month of red leaves I climb into a bed of fire. (135)

However, Sexton's influence extends from "Electra on Azalea Path" and "Poem for a Birthday," both written in 1959, to the poems Plath wrote at the end of her life in 1962. Despite a rift in their friendship towards the end of April 1959, the two poets still maintained enough of a correspondence that Sexton sent Plath an advanced review copy of her second book, *All My Pretty Ones*.⁷ As Trinidad states, "I think it's important to point out that Plath read *All My Pretty*

⁶ Plath had been reading Roethke's sequence poems while at Yaddo (Wagner-Martin 167-168).

⁷ Plath was furious when Sexton had a book of poetry published before her. Plath attributed this success to the fact that Sexton was having an affair with Starbuck, who was a junior editor at Houghton Mifflin at the time (Trinidad 23).

Ones just weeks before beginning to write her *Ariel* poems. Plath wrote no poems between August 13, 1962 (a week before she wrote her "thank-you note" to Sexton) and the end of September, when she, in essence, kicked Hughes out of Court Green" (24). One example of a poem contained in *Ariel* that perhaps echoes Sexton's work is "Lady Lazarus," which seems to mirror the imagery contained in "Her Kind." In "Lady Lazarus," the narrator invokes images of a suicide's resurrection; a woman who is reborn more powerful and terrifying than before. She is a female Lazarus who comes back from the dead, stating "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air" (247). The poem's narrator resonates with Sexton's witch-like narrator in "Her Kind," who has "gone out, a possessed witch, /haunting the black air, braver at night, dreaming evil, 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" (15). Both narrators in these poems have survived suicide, only to come back as potent and feminine archetypes that are no longer women; they are fearsome goddesses of destruction. Trinidad notes another echo of Sexton's work in "Lady Lazarus" that is seen in the lines: "They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls." Similar imagery is seen in the lines of Sexton's poem, "Fortress," which appeared in *All My Pretty Ones*, "...from my right cheek: a spot of danger / where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul" (66).

But, perhaps the *Ariel* poem that most heavily contains Sexton's influence is "Daddy," as noted by Heather Cam in her essay, "Daddy:" Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton." "Daddy" seems to have borrowed and "slightly altered its rhythms, rhymes, words, and lines" from a relatively unknown poem of Sexton's, "My Friend, My Friend" (429). Cam points out that "My Friend, My Friend" "appeared in *The Antioch Review* during the summer of 1959, but Plath may have seen it some months earlier, late in 1958 or early in 1959, during one of Robert Lowell's workshops at Boston University, or after one of his classes when Plath, Sexton, and George Starbuck customarily retired to the Ritz bar to continue their discussion informally over martinis" (430). Cam also notes that Plath wrote "Daddy" on October 12, during "the most intensely creative period of Plath's brief life" (431). Interestingly enough, it was during this same month that Plath also noted her admiration of Sexton's work in The British Council interview with Peter Orr. Plath's "Daddy," as Cam explains, "repeats and echoes" the AABB rhyme scheme that is seen throughout, "with the exception of the last stanza which adds a line with an A-rhyme to the basic quatrain, 'My Friend, My Friend.' 'Daddy' also borrows 'do,' 'you,' and 'Jew,' as well as

implements Plath's own rhymes of 'shoe,' 'Achoo,' 'blue,' 'du,' 'true,' 'through,' 'who,' and 'glue.' Also similar is Plath's 'gobbledygoo' to Sexton's 'bugaboo' (431). Trinidad also points out another similarity between the two poems, that Cam may have missed, which is the references to "white skin" that both poems make in their opening stanzas (25). The lines below given further illustration of how much the two poems mirror each other:

Sexton:

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
 With no special legend of God to refer to,
 With my calm white pedigree, my Yankee kin,
 I think it would be better to be a Jew. (Cam 429)

Plath:

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (222)

While some of these similarities in the works of Plath and Sexton may purely coincidental, it is still fascinating to note them. However, it is not to say that Plath lacked creativity or talented by borrowing from Sexton but that it actually further demonstrates her excellence as a student, as well as her ability to creatively channel her influences to craft her own unique art. It also important to point out the Plath's *Ariel* poems, in turn, influenced Sexton's later poetry (Trinidad 27-29). And so it appears that those hours spent rehashing suicides and critiquing poetry over drinks at the Ritz left an indelible mark on both of these "sweet ladies."⁸

⁸ George Starbuck referred to Plath and Sexton as "two sweet ladies" in his collection of poems, "Bone Thoughts" (Trinidad 21).

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