

SEX AND SELFHOOD IN THE POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON

One of the first impressions one gets on reading Anne Sexton's poetry is the pervasiveness of the sexual. It is a theme that is present throughout and seems to confirm the fact that in the twentieth century, female writers are not afraid of being intensely personal. However, it is necessary to examine the significance of sex at a level which goes deeper than the merely provocative because what woman *is* and how she is assessed depends primarily on her acceptance of or challenge to the sex-role she is assigned. Women's problems are not in fact sexual at all but those of identity and the two questions are sometimes confused. The quest for identity on the social, personal, artistic and existential level is the predominant theme in Sexton's poetry and the role of sex and the sensual is central to our understanding of her work.

Anne Sexton has stated explicitly, "The great theme we all share is that of becoming ourselves, of overcoming our father and mother, of assuming identities somehow" (Sexton 1977: 28) The importance of the search for a stable centre of self, for self-realization and fulfilment as a woman, a poet and above all as a person in her own right is manifest in her poetry. It was a quest that was repeatedly frustrated as the poet found herself trapped in one destructive relationship of dependence after another. Her identity was condemned to depend always on her family, her lover and in the last desperate stage, on God. Her sense of self was located in external foci; like many women, who she was and her reading of how they saw her depended on the evaluation of others. It is telling that the discovery of her illegitimacy at the age of forty-three had a devastating effect on her. She accuses her father of taking "the you out of the me" (Sexton 1972: 45). Phyllis Chesler, in her study "Women and Madness" (Chesler 1972: 294) diagnosed this aspect of the female condition: "Woman's primary ego-identity is rooted in a concern for limited and specific 'others', and for what pleases a few men".

There is a clear pattern of hope, fulfilment and disillusion traceable both in the corpus of her work as a whole and in individual poems. She initiates the search, reaches a fleeting moment of fulfilment and then the mirage evaporates leaving the horizon bare. Her poetry runs on the need to feel whole as a person and to communicate this experience -poetry as a purgative for the poet and an experience for the reader. But, as she acknowledges, need is not quite belief and it is lack of belief in herself, in the possibility of throwing off the bonds of dependence that ultimately led to the failure of relationships. Sexton saw poetry as a therapeutic tool on the one hand and she hoped that it would reach into the deepest levels of the soul, that it would "serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us". (McClachty 1978: 28) It is ironic that what she admires in a poem is its ability to lead to action when her own poetry leaves one with the sensation that the poet failed to probe beyond her own preestablished parameters. Sexton herself did not believe that poetry solved problems. To give expression to the problems was valid in itself. Hers is the poetry of statement not of analysis. Apart from the effect

sought for on the reader, for the poet, the writing of poetry was to be an act of self-realization. But, analogous to the sexual experience, its effects are transitory, fleeting moments of self-expression attained at great odds. The woman poet, like the woman who expects regeneration and self-development from the act of sex must perforce battle against the social values which condemn her to play out the "American Dream role". To write and search the wastelands for meaning, to play with words is to "feel too much" ("The Black Art"). The woman writer is frequently the witch, a desexualized aberrant female. The witch, in the poetry of the 1960s defines the independent female who threatened established values by rejecting her sex-role stereotype, and therefore was ostracised and branded as mad. Sexton identifies with this figure and admires her strength of character. She is the possessor of knowledge which brings her freedom but she has attained it at the cost of her sexuality. The witch moves stiffly, her arms cannot embrace. She is a freak of nature and a social outcast. "A woman like that is misunderstood". ("Her Kind") Sexton acutely feels this social pressure to conform and the lack of an identity which embraces both her status as a woman and a writer. In "The Black Art" (Sexton 1962: 65) the woman poet writes "as if cycles and children and islands weren't enough". Phyllis Cresler states that "madness is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of the sex-role stereotype" (Cresler 1972: 56)

On the other hand, and in spite of the striving to achieve selfhood by stripping off all bonds and ties with others, the following observation about woman's poetry holds true for Sexton: "they have an intense craving for unity, mutuality, continuity, connection, identification and touch". (Ostriker 1975: 56) Anne Sexton rarely moves out of this realm of experience. It is through sexual love that she hopes to find the supreme expression of unity and mutuality. She needs it to enrich, reaffirm her identity and leave her whole but she is ultimately aware that the life-giving powers of sexual love turn out to be destructive and disfiguring and imply a certain annihilation and death of the self, at least for the woman. Sex is the battleground of hope and expectation with experience. The imagery underlines the profound deception and the devastating personal immolation that is the aftermath of heterosexual love. Meaningful sexual contact with men is impossible as it casts the woman in a passive role. The passivity of women in the sexual act is a metaphor for the role assigned to them in society.

The relationship between man and woman is found wanting, empty and alienating. The reason is partly because Sexton has a tendency to treat the sexual experience in isolation and idealize its perfection. It is these moments that set the standards for life. The quality of the emotion in the visionary moment is what the hum-drum experience of life is judged by. Escapism avoids painful confrontation with reality and this is precisely the process at work in her treatment of sex. Woman is the victim. Sexton accepts the stereotypes rather than question them, thus avoiding having to face up to woman's inadequacies and to examine her role in her own enslavement. Her life was a fleeing from one protective figure to another in an effort to shield her from herself and her reality, culminating in the flight towards God, the arch-protector.

Given this tendency to idealize experiences in isolation, to simplify the consequences and use them as a benchmark for the evaluation of everyday life, the domesticity of marriage becomes

a desert, a masquerade, a no-man's land inhabited by ghost-like figures. This theme is dealt with in "Man and Wife" (Sexton 1969: 27-28) and "The Farmer's Wife" (Sexton 1960: 27). Both poems portray married life as the battle of hope against experience, where sex becomes a life-draining habit leaving both partners together but alone. Sex provides no meaningful communication and the woman is left "minds apart from him / her own self in her own words" ("The Farmer's Wife"). "Man and Wife" portrays an even more devastating picture of marriage. The couple here are not lovers and neither do they know each other. All they share is a squalid debased existence. In *Transformations* (Sexton 1971) a wry, embittered and humorous version of Grimm's Fairytales, to live happily ever after is to be imprisoned in "a kind of coffin", a "museum case". In contrast to this bleak landscape, there is the persistent idealization of past encounters, another road of escape from reality. "I Remember" (Sexton 1960: 29) is a nostalgic reminiscence of what could have been an adolescent summer romance. The appeal of memory lies in part in the fact that it is in the past. Any past time is better and at the very least, an escape from reality. Physical contact alone is not a guarantee of communication. On the contrary, it can sharpen the sense of isolation and loneliness. "The Traveller's Wife" (Sexton 1977: 25) expresses this idea:

Although I lie pressed close to your warm side
I know you find me vacant and preoccupied.

In her treatment of the heterosexual relationship Sexton is conditioned from the outset by the realization of its potential failure because she is aware of the extent of the sacrifice involved and the demands that will be made on her. There is the feeling that the whole thing is an act, a desperate attempt at make-believe. The vagina is a "theatre" in the "pantomime of love". This fatalism appears to be the key to the failure of her relationships - the lack of belief which undermines the experience from the start and the unreasonable demands placed on sex as a regenerative force.

The exploitative, dehumanizing nature of heterosexual relations for women can be traced through the imagery. Women are products to be consumed, delighted in without further consequence by the male. Sex is for him a momentary pleasure-giving experience analogous to the act of eating. Thus woman is "a luscious sweet", "strawberry preserve", "as lovely as a grape" "a pear" who will be licked, swallowed, lapped up or tasted. Women feed men, not only in the initial stages but throughout their lives, not only materially but spiritually. The preparation of food was and still is in many places, together with reproduction woman's defining function. In the America of the 1950s and 1960s the only definition of fulfilment for the woman was to be the housewife -mother. Anne Sexton expressed her unease with this role on numerous occasions "I was a victim of the American dream, the bourgeois middle-class dream. ... I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life" (McClatchy 1978: 3-4) The imagery associated with food brings one aspect of the male-female relationship into focus - for the man it is an act of greedy self-gratification; for the woman one of destruction. Fruit, sweets, puddings are all pleasure-giving but not essential. Woman, for man, is like a plate of

delicacies on the buffet table but is not the main course. For man sex is the cherry on the cake, delightful but dispensable.

Women are also dolls. In *Transformations* open contempt is repeatedly expressed for the typical female "rolling her china-blue doll eyes / open and shut". The doll, pretty, manipulable, receiver of the fantasies of its owner can be given away or exchanged just as in this volume women are given in marriage or won by men like fairground prizes, a reward for their cunning and strength. In "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" (Sexton 1971: 73-79), the happy carefree daughters are victims of the man, who, with his "magic" deprives them of their nights of dancing. They are in harmony with themselves and their bodies. He robs them of their private inner lives, full of spontaneity and vitality. He trails them like a poacher down into the depths to their secret place and, supported by the girl's father, the male figure of authority, cuts them off from their source of life, reducing them to mere sad shadows of their former selves when he chooses one in marriage. Another kind of death, another kind of imprisonment. Woman has all the forces piled against her. Man is a predator and hunter, constantly on the alert to take advantage of the weak. He is aided and abetted by the forces of nature which endow him with magic powers. He has, however, an irresistible attraction, like the hypnotic gaze of the snake, willing woman to give herself up to him and his charms in spite of her better judgment. The male figure in the poetry is practically reduced to his penis, source of his power and charm.

The penis is a serpent, instrumental in woman's Fall, master of cunning and deception. It is also a worm which feeds on dead and dying flesh. It takes on a life and autonomy of its own and represents pure animal vitality. At times the penis is a pistol and a stick, linking it with destruction and domination. In Sexton's point of view the active element in the relation is man who invades, bites, and wears down the woman - both physically and emotionally. Man invades woman's existential space in what amounts to rape.

Violation of woman's integrity is rendered through the gradual disintegration and dismembering of the body. Women constantly lose limbs and sense organs - "Their arms fell off them ..." (Sexton 1972: 30). In the heterosexual relationship the impulse to self-destruction and the desire to be destroyed by others come together. Woman knows that her submission to man's will and physical force will destroy her but submits because this is really what her self-destructive, suicidal impulse wants. This can be seen in the fact that it is the speaker herself who often attacks her body with shovels, scissors and knives in an act of systematic and resolute destruction. But the self-inflicted dismemberment or the slow erosion of the coastlines of the self by man is accepted or consented to in the hope of rebuilding, rebirth and recreation. This is the outcome which defines the relationship with women.

Sexton suggests that women can only come into their true selves through alliance with other women. Man is the obstacle and alliance with him through marriage is tantamount to living in a coffin. He will like the farmer in "The Farmer's Wife" convert "that brief bright bridge" into habit and routine, degrading it and divesting it of its regenerative, unifying power.

In "Little Red Riding Hood" (Sexton 1971: 61 - 68) the wolf masquerading as the Grandmother, a kind of "transvestite", eats Little Red Riding Hood "like a gumdrop" but the woman's rebirth is a statement about the power of lesbian love. The girl's essential vitality, symbolized by her red cape and the love that unites the two women is capable of restoring life but only through the symbolic death of the male figure who is "killed by his own weight". Sexton suggests that women can only come into their own by alliance with each other and at the expense of the male. "Rapunzel" is a parable in which, in contrast to the detached, uninvolved voice in the other tales in *Transformations*, the narrator is personally involved. As in "Little Red Riding Hood", the relationship between the young and the older woman yields the spiritual and emotional sustenance that the writer asked of love:

A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.

While all about them falls into decay and an apocalyptic end nears, the lovers hold, touch and exchange gifts. They inhabit a gentle, feminine world, founded on the sensual rather than the sexual; a world of ephemeral delicacy, fragile and threatened. This relationship provides mutuality and continuity. They are fully compatible and the age gap itself is a source of continuity "come touch a copy of you". They are protected by this tender sensual love:

But we have kept out of the cesspool.
We are strong
We are the good ones.

But despite its erotic quality and the apparent fulfilment it is a hidden love, magic but clandestine and ultimately unnatural in the eyes of society. It is man, in the form of the prince who intrudes, carrying with him the values of the outside world. His arrival, it is suggested, represents the force of social correctness. He penetrates, through subterfuge and the malignant power that men are endowed with shattering the harmony and unity, a beast, with muscles in his arms "like a bag of snakes" and his "dancing stick". He is the snake in the Garden of Eden, offering temptation and a precursor of the loss of innocence. The "dancing stick" hypnotises and is his instrument of control and submission. The prince "dazzles" Rapunzel, in spite of her initial repugnance. Here the dilemma of all women and one which creates a focus of tension in Sexton's view is implicit but, characteristically is not submitted to further probing. Women offer themselves in sex and succumb to man in the hope of arriving at meaning but with the knowledge that they are entering into what is ultimately a suicidal relationship. Society says "A rose must have a stem" but our sympathy lies with Mother Gothel who is left with only the dream of perfect love.

"Song for a Lady" in *Love Poems* (1969: 44) endows the lesbian relationship with a quasi-religious quality which is justified and authentic, lacking the strident brittleness of the religious

poetry in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Sexton 1975). The relation between the two women is natural and they identify completely with each other. There is no bitter aftertaste that swells to the surface in heterosexual encounters. The cocoon, however, is threatened by the diseased outer world and its recriminations:

the window pocked with bad rain
rain coming on like a minister.

In this relationship there is no struggle for power and domination. The poet is enriched by her lover who makes her "rise like bread", an image which contrasts with the heterosexual relationship where woman is licked clean "like an almond". Because there is real trust there are no feelings of regret and disillusionment. The force of the poem comes from the physical love and tenderness which encourages growth in the speaker. Whereas man is reduced to his penis, his symbol of identity, the woman lover comes across as a multidimensional figure, a complex blend of characteristics: she is "beautiful" and "dreary", "active" and "passive". This is also true of the woman called Barbara in "There You Were". (Sexton 1976: 111-112) She uses her power not to abuse the speaker's vulnerability but to restore her identity, to "rebuild her house" and face the turbulent sea that represents the forces of society. The power of these poems lies in the fact that Sexton really believes in the regenerative balm of female love: "flowers smash through the long winter."

The depth of Sexton's disillusion with the heterosexual relationship and man's shortchanging of women is evident in "The Jesus Papers", a series of nine poems in *The Book of Folly* (Sexton 1972: 56-64) which examine the uneasy and at times disturbing relation between human sexuality and God-made-man in the figure of Jesus. The language is bold and often blatantly crude, the tone is ironic and imbued with bitterness. Jesus is an unsatisfactory figure, a cruel caricature of man, a compendium of his defects. The series of sketches which concentrate on ordinary episodes from the life of Christ, profile for Sexton, the oppressive, power-hungry male. The human who has rejected his sexuality is contrasted with the rich palpating world of human and animal sexuality. The Jesus who emerges finally is a hollow figure who failed to bridge the gap between the human and the divine and in Sexton's hierarchy of values, where sex had regenerative power, this rejection is unnatural and ultimately the rejection of salvation. Jesus emerges as the role model on which man has fashioned his despotic treatment of women. In the first poem of the series "Jesus Suckles" we see the mother-baby relationship as a precursor to the heterosexual relationship insofar as it is a struggle for power. Mary is a lily, a rock and a sweet. The child Jesus is like algae, but his god-like status allows him to affirm "I own you".

The issue of the male's greedy necessity to destroy and draw off women's vitality and spontaneous sensuality is dealt with in "Jesus Raises up the Harlot", a poem which unites the main questions that worried Sexton in relation to the figure of Jesus and by extension, man. In order to be saved the harlot's sexuality must be destroyed. When Jesus symbolically lances her

breasts he creates a "little puppy", "His pet". Ironically, this salvation is death in another guise and implies that sensuality is sinful. The figure of the harlot is in a sense facing the conundrum of all women who are guilty of selling their sex in return for protection and security. It begs the question of how far woman is instrumental in her own imprisonment. Sexton merely leaves the question in the air and does not offer an answer or a solution.

Mary, traditionally considered to be the perfect model for womanhood is a figure which in this series of poems emerges with the ambiguity and contradictions that characterise women's reaction to men. Like the women in Sexton's poetry, she feeds the male ego and she accepts the role that she has been assigned even though it amounts to a life-sentence. "Jesus Unborn" deals with the Immaculate Conception - with a twist. The Angel is an executioner who "covers her like a door / and shuts her lifetime up". The instinctive and natural young girl yields to his will without murmur. She shares the passivity of women because it is the only way to survive. And this is the no-win situation that all women find themselves in - either accept the norms of a patriarchical society and live a half-life or reject them and lapse into madness where all feeling is held in suspension, where there is only a cotton-wool numbness. Whatever alternative she chooses it leads to a kind of madness. Madness is the state where women are finally reduced to mechanical objects, puppets and play out this role, perhaps, it is suggested, the most sincere of all. It is the last frontier where the denial of their right to be leads to their identification with objects. It represents the limits to which women are driven in society. The inanimate world is a world woman can identify with and this absorption of the personality into the objects that populate her middle-class life and imprison her there is a stark and frightening reflection of her true role in society. In fact, roles change; inanimate objects take on a grotesque range of human characteristics. The keys of the typewriter can cry while the speaker is bereft of emotion and relieved of a burden:

I have become a vase that you can pick up and drop at will
Inanimate at last ...

Jesus' rejection of his sexuality is akin to man's rejection of his as the path to empathy with woman, a means of enriching their mutual existence. Jesus died not once but "over and over". The natural eroticism of the human world is sharply contrasted with his abstinence. He is ultimately a figure created from human need who feeds us from "invisible plates" and we believe because "we need / we are sore creatures" ("Jesus Dies".) The truncation and perversion of his sexual needs convert his penis into a chisel ("Jesus Asleep") and Mary into the lifeless centerpiece of the sculpture.

The last stage of Anne Sexton's search for identity and the freedom to be herself saw the abandonment of human relationships and a not quite convincing turning to God. This period of her development brought a new perspective on the role of sex as a means of fulfilment into centre stage. The sexual act acquires a mystical facet. It is a moment of transcendence which unites man and woman with God. However, taken in the context of her work this affirmation

lacks conviction as does all her religious poetry. The voice is at times hysterical and overstrained as if she were trying to convince the reader and indeed, herself of something in which she did not truly believe. There are two poems in the collection *The Awful Rowing Toward God* which achieve a tone of conviction. "When Man Enters Woman" describes with lyrical beauty the sex act which culminates in the moment of perfect unity:

and the man
inside of woman
ties a knot
so that they will
never again be separate.

This moment of reunion takes on a mystical character - in their wholeness and having recaptured the pre-fall harmony they connect with God and bridge the gap between human and divine, between man and woman. But the poet's fixation with the moment in isolation indicates that she is escaping into a fantasy world. Ultimately Sexton admits that this is an illusion and is left only with the memory, like Mother Gothel, of paradise lost:

Though God
in His perversity
unties the knot.

Sex, love, religion and poetry - all of them failed as a means of self-realization. Man was repeatedly deceptive, words were treacherous and faith in God was just a "small wire" which like the umbilical cord thrust her back into the relationship of dependence she had repeatedly sought to throw off. In *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, her last collection, we begin to discern as if through the chinks in a curtain the first glimmers of self-knowledge. The first is the acknowledgment of a basic fact; in order to give love, to be enriched by a relationship, one must first love oneself. But Anne Sexton is obsessed with her badness and in this volume her vehemence is frightening in intensity and loathing. She feels she is the source of evil, that she breeds it within herself and although she does recognise the necessity to cherish herself it is the hate that wins out.

The second truth that emerges in this later poetry is the admission that she was in search of a dream and that the hopes she invested in sex, love or whatever were born out of her need, a destructive absorbing need. In *The Awful Rowing Toward God* the word "dream" is employed over and over to refer to her faith, her hopes to find a resting place, the motivation behind her work and life. She diagnoses her personal tragedy in "The Fish That Walked":

a lady of evil luck
desiring to be what you are not
longing to be

where you can only visit

Maria O'Neill
Universitat de Lleida

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