

## An Analysis of the Suicidal Tendency in Sexton's Confessional Poems: A Reading of "Sylvia's Death" and "Suicide Note"

Noor abu Madi<sup>1</sup> & Shadi Neimneh<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

---

This paper argues that Anne Sexton unfolds many psychological patterns in her confessional poems "Sylvia's Death" and "Suicide Note" to express the dilemma of a woman caught up in the trap of domesticity, irrationality, and death desires. Sexton's poems are analyzed to explain the reasons that stand behind the persona's strong eagerness to die. We closely examine the suicidal tendencies that are found in the deep psyche of a troubled woman, paying attention to the basic problems women have always suffered from, theoretically not clinically. This analysis tackles issues like depression, domestic slavery, and death wish. We discuss why this analysis is relevant and why Sexton was chosen for this kind of analysis. In addition, we prove through such poetic confessions the persona's profound depression that is a result of the social oppressions practiced against women. Our choice of textual evidence highlights the lines that show the persona's irrational fears and suicidal tendencies in the form of a death wish and as a way out of the social, domestic, and familial imprisonment. The language Sexton uses in describing the way Plath succeeded in her suicide mission in "Sylvia's Death" is full of envy and reproach, and it paves the way for Sexton's "Suicide Note" to come out as a real note left by the author before her actual suicide eight years later.

---

**Keywords:** Confessional Poetry; Psychoanalysis; "Sylvia's Death"; "Suicide Note"; Women; Death Wish; Suicidal Tendency; Depression; Anne Sexton; Criticism and Analysis

### I. Introduction

"If a man has a firm determination to avoid sin, he won't fall into narcissism, into compromises with temptation, into tricky and double-dealing. Instead of sinking into unconsciousness, he will consciously imitate Christ, his master and his friend." (Sexton, 1966) Insanity, depression, or mental illness that leads to suicide is not exclusive to those who usually suffer from traumatic events. Sometimes the past keeps on haunting the sensitive spirits of those who cannot live with its pressures. Finding a way out of all that drama is variant and not limited to suicide. Some people find their tranquility in resolving their problems by exiling themselves in place or in mind, preferring to remain silent so that they can repress their anxiety and cope with it; others find their peace of mind in confessions when they pour out what they have of sadness and despair on the papers of their notebooks, or when they sit with a psychologist to reveal their neuroses, fears, and anxieties in a Freudian talk cure fashion. Literature has always been a reservoir for intimate feelings, where poets and writers express their pride, suffering, pain, and love. It has also provided psychology with a great source of psychological registers of actually complex feelings of people who exist along with their life problems. The psychoanalytic literary theory attempts to unfold the secrets of different types of literature in order to illuminate the reader regarding the intricate relationships between writers and their works, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how readers can receive and read such works.

---

<sup>1</sup> Noor abu Madi is a lecturer in English in the Language Center at Hashemite University, Jordan.

<sup>2</sup> Corresponding Author/Dr. Shadi Neimneh is assistant professor of English and chair in the English Department at Hashemite University, Jordan. Email: [shadistar2@yahoo.com](mailto:shadistar2@yahoo.com) or [shadin@hu.edu.jo](mailto:shadin@hu.edu.jo)

Since most kinds of literature describe psychological and emotional states, it is legitimate to explore the psychology that produced such texts or their relevance to our mental lives. In fact, it is axiomatic in literary studies that psychoanalytical criticism explores the language of literary texts to explain “meanings or unconscious intention” (Harmon and Holman 416). Interior motives and psychological states are the focus of psychological interpretations of literature. And when it comes to confessional poetry, “public and sometimes painful display of private, personal matters” becomes the most important feature of such poetry (Harmon and Holman 115). This poetry tells something essential about the self, and hence its autobiographical value. Literature by women is full of references to suicide or actual cases of suicide. Virginia Woolf committed suicide by drowning herself in a river, filling her pockets with stones to achieve such an end. Emily Dickinson wrote vehemently about morbidity, illness, and death. Sylvia Plath, another neurotic poet, suffered from depression and eventually committed suicide. The American poetess Anne Sexton, (1928-74), was a kindred spirit in this regard. She was born in Newton, Massachusetts for upper-middle-class parents and to an alcoholic businessman father who spent most of his time drinking and ignoring his wife who devoted her life to the domestic domain (George, 1986). As a poet, critic, wife and a mother, Sexton had a very busy life, but not busy enough to keep her from attempting suicide several times during her lifetime right from her 28<sup>th</sup> birthday. As a depressed young pretty woman, Sexton was repeatedly institutionalized to treat her depression, with writing poetry as a method of treatment. What she went through inspired her poetry with a modern voice in which she used the “new” confessional style that was adopted then by Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and others (Gill, 2008). Sexton composed great poems, especially her Pulitzer Prize winning volume *Live or Die* in 1967. Her confessional poetry paved the way for psychoanalytically informed readings to penetrate a woman’s heart and mind to get to the answer of why a woman would resort to suicide and be so envious of those who committed it.

Psychoanalysis emerged in European cities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and thrived through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as both an approach to literature and a method of treatment practiced by Sigmund Freud and his followers. While psychoanalysis survived on foreign shores, it was severed from its own past (Makari, 2008). This approach focuses on studying human’s behaviors and societies. Moreover, it also examines the mind and its troubles. Psychoanalysis achieves its purpose through investigating the mind and the way an individual thinks, by generating general theories that can be applied on those who share the specified symptoms and finally finding a treatment for those who suffer from psychological disorders and dilemmas. Although this philosophy took a shape mainly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its roots can be detected thousands of years before in the ancient philosophy of Plato which established the idea that man understands his world from within, emphasizing by that man’s “individualism” and inner being as opposed to deceptive external realities.

In addition, Stoicism, the school of philosophy in Athens about 300 B.C., shared some psychological theories that reveal suicide as a resort “when circumstances made existence no longer bearable” and when “one could voluntarily withdraw from life by suicide” (Malikow, 17). This shows one of the reasons that lead man to suicide; and it will be explained in terms of secular humanism and Freud’s contributions in understanding the secrets of the human soul, its defects, and its problems. Victim of depression can find a way out of it by talking about it, by confessing what they have in mind in order to let go of the emotional burden depriving them from sleeping or leading normal lives. Psychoanalysts attempt revealing those moments of despair and the reasons behind them to justify man’s tendency to terminate his existence every time one gets to the conclusion that life is not getting any better and never will (Max, 2009). From such a moment, suicide becomes the solution to get to a better place, away from meaninglessness, depression, and pain. In that case, one would dream the night, by looking on the moon and announcing with a loud proud voice to “the Starry night”, telling it how much s/he is longing to die: “this is how/ I want to die” (Sexton, 1962).

In fact, the existential thought of philosophers like Albert Camus make it obvious that confronted with the absurdity of this life, man can opt for physical suicide or intellectual/philosophical suicide in the form of a passive embrace of religion or hope (*Myth of Sisyphus* 3-8, 21-37). Those who choose to end their lives are, in a sense, firmly stating that they are in control over their lives. Suicide, as Julia Kristeva argues, is tantamount to asserting that man’s will is stronger than God’s, that the human ego has “supreme power” (259). For Camus, suicide is “confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it” (5). It is also often “a solution to the absurd” (5) as one kills “oneself because life is not worth living” (7). In this regard, suicide is a solution to an existential dilemma. This article aims at examining the suicidal tendencies in the confessional poetry of the modern female poet Anne Harvey Sexton.

It will apply psychoanalysis mainly to Sexton's poem "Sylvia's Death", focusing on certain psychological issues like: depression, domestic slavery, and—most importantly—death wish (the Freudian "Thanatos" as the "instinct of death" or (self-) "destructiveness" *Civilization and Its Discontents* 66). For Freud, this death instinct is a major force in life. Sadism and masochism are but "manifestations" of such a destructive instinct (66). This instinct can be directed "inwards" in subtle ways (67), thus ending in suicide. As two principles governing life, Eros (the life instinct associated with pleasure and sexuality) and Thanatos are in a state of conflict (84). Then the research will move on to discuss parts of her poem "Suicide Note" focusing on other psychological issues like ageism and suicidal confessions. These poems were composed in 1963 and 1966 respectively. The analysis will be limited to highlighting certain psychological issues in these two poems, though theoretically not clinically.

## II. "Sylvia's Death"

Sexton's poetry may seem personal and highly private. The private soul of the poet appears when she conducts what is called "confessional poetry" to reflect her personal life and intimate secrets. This mode of writing appeared in the late 1950s with a group of post-war poets like Robert Lowell, who initiated this mode of writing, along with Sylvia Plath and her close friend Anne Sexton (Gill, 2008). Writing in an autobiographical way may seem too personal and subjective, but when we look at it from another angle, we should also acknowledge the courage of the poet. The ability to let out what she has buried down of emotions and secrets deep inside her unconscious in the creative poetic act reflects a true image of what she has in mind to inspire the reader, captivate him/her or even push him/her far away. From a psychiatric point of view, confessions are seen: as offering a relief from the sense of guilt which surpasses any medicine or remedy developed by the psychiatrist or the psychoanalyst. For the removal of guilt and all the brood of fears, worries, dreads and anxieties that stems from it, confession is the unfailing remedy. (Ellmann, 221) Thus, Sexton's therapists advised her to write poetry in order to translate what she has from negative feelings into poetry. In this regard, the creative poetic act becomes purgative one allowing the poet to discharge emotional states and repressed desires.

In *February 17, 1963* Sexton recorded a masterpiece of mixed feelings in her poem "Sylvia's Death", which depicts Plath's suicide after a long battle with the misfortunes of life. In this poem, she confesses her depression, anger, death yearning and domestic imprisonment; added to that is her celebration of alcohol as a pain reliever. In the first two stanzas, Sexton laments Sylvia's death, by drawing an image of the domestic life Sylvia used to have, with the house being a box that is built by stones, full of spoons used to feed the hungry mouths of the children in the house.

The poem begins with an apostrophe to Sylvia Plath invoking household entrapment as a form of death in life: O Sylvia, Sylvia, with a dead box of stones and spoons, with two children, two meteors wandering loose in a tiny playroom, Sexton projects her own attitude toward the slavery and the imprisonment of domestic life; where she cooks, feeds the children and raises them. These domestic chores were exhausting to both Plath and Sexton, especially because they conflict with their essence as poets and literary women. Sexton associated Sylvia's death with her depressing domestic life, which is an exact copy of Sexton's own life. The persona is interrogating Sylvia as if she were alive, asking her exclamatory questions about the last letter she sent to Sexton, telling her that she once told her about "raising potatoes/and keeping bees?" which is a typical domestic duty of a housewife that somehow shows a kind of devotion to her job as a mother and a wife just like her mother, her grandmother and her great-grandmother. In the words of some critics, Women's roles from ancient nation-states display numerous similarities, beginning with childbearing and child rearing, and including the harvesting, gathering, and preparation of food; weaving and textile manufacture; midwifery; nursing and healing; various creative, economic, and ritual charge of domestic affairs. (Kramarae and Spender, 55) Sexton is shocked by Plath's courage to put all that behind her and "crawl down alone/into the death" silently without clearly showing her suicidal tendency in her poetry or in her letters to her friend. Sexton called Plath a "thief" because she put herself to death without waiting for her friend who needed that as much as Plath did. The speaker also badly wanted to die. Here she confesses her death wish and attests to a possible suicidal tendency: Thief – how did you crawl into, crawl down alone into the death I wanted so badly and for so long, With a melancholic voice, Sexton confirms her suicidal wishes, especially in her dynamic repetition of "the death" several times in the poem, which intensifies her own death anxiety and her deep rooted belief that suicide is the way out.

Moreover, her repetition of “death” is close to what Epicurus (350 B.C.) said about the attitudes we may have toward death, but nothing explains its absurdity when we deeply reflect on it. In the words of one critic, “Death is nothing to us, because when we are, death is not. When death is, we are not” (Malikow, 33). Sexton describes the kind of death wish she used to share with Plath, and the idea of it that has taken over their health thinking about it all those years. Death always wins when it eventually comes, but this time it did not collect both lives; it took one to leave the other to suffer the bitterness of envy alone. Both Plath and Sexton got fed up with living as housewives, and they used to share their wishes of suicide over a glass of martini. Sexton is not shy to declare her attachment to alcohols, when she ‘somehow’ wanted to remind Plath of the death that they “talked of so often each time/[they] downed three extra dry martinis in Boston... the death [they] drank to,/the motives and the quiet deed?” Both Sexton and Plath were indifferent to their roles as mothers, and they were considered “doubly deviant” in not conforming to the traditional role of mother, woman, and nurturer” (Kramarae and Spender, 53). They allowed themselves to be under the control of alcohols, which exposes the death wishes buried in their deep unconscious, regardless of the consequences they both would endure. Alcoholism is often viewed as a self-destructive behavior, leading in extreme cases to serious health problems.

Depression in Sexton’s poems comes out to be directly influenced by the fact that she is a wife and a mother. It was defined as a pervasive and sustained emotional state characterized by feelings of sadness, despondency, discouragement, pessimism, and despair (Bryant and Peck, 253). It is scientifically proven that women suffer from depression more often than men do. Some studies suggest that a woman’s chemical makeup jeopardizes her to get depressed; added to that are the changes her body undergoes when she gets sexually involved, and after giving birth to a child. For Sexton, getting married will bring a man and his children to become the source of women’s misfortunes, which may later motivate them to commit suicide. Death is like a sadist who wants to finish a job, waiting to make the speaker commit a long-awaited-for suicide: to do his job, a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib, and since that time he waited under our heart, our cupboard, and I see now that we store him up year after year, old suicides. The window in the wall is an indication of the house where a family lives, which is almost like a prison with one small window that allows little air and light to come through. In that prison, there is a “crib” which is an indication of a baby child who constantly needs a mother to take care of, which adds another burden for the “maid-like” mother, and prevents her from living happily. As a thought and an intention, suicide grows bigger by time, even though they (Plath and Sexton) attempted to hide it under their “cupboards” when they practiced their duties day after day and year after year. Sexton shows her envy of Plath now that she is relieved from that absurdity of living. Sexton wanted to die too, and she tried that several times without being able to finally “ride home/with [their] boy”, but Plath succeeded eventually, and now she went home, to her grave, with her dear best friend death. Sylvia’s suicide/death is described as “a mole that fell out of one of your poems”. This relationship between life and art in the case of Sylvia also came true in the case of Sexton.

### III. “Suicide Note”

The title of this poem is highly indicative of what the poem is all about. Here Sexton is being open toward her wish to die, not because she is so “narcissistic” and self-centered, but because living or dying is a matter of personal choice, leaving behind some residues of her life and her legacy to be analyzed by her daughters and granddaughters. This is what the first two stanzas of her poem may suggest to the reader before he/she moves on with the rest of the poem. Indeed, the poem begins by projecting alienation from social life and expressing a wish not to be born in the first place. Hence, the poem articulates a return to the womb motif whereby the speaker wants to return to a primal stage before birth into a harsh life, assuming that no one will be affected by her death and that there is no good reason to continue with this futile life:

better somehow  
to drop myself quickly  
into an old room.  
Better (someone said)  
not to be born  
...

According to physician Ron Haki, such a hope to return to the mother's womb can occur when "a chronically painful condition gets to be too much or unbearable" (<http://primal-page.com/ufo.htm>). In this sense, suicide is an escape from social life and domestic duties. Life stages with their varieties are not so important to Sexton or the “persona” in the poem.

Childhood, adolescence and adulthood, as normal life stages are of no value or essence; to die quickly is the best thing to be done in the midst of all that absurdity of living, and it would have been even better if she was not even born, so she will not have to deal with the misfortunes that come along by ageing. According to some critics, Death is an integral part of life throughout adulthood. Psychologist Carl Jung proposed that adult development is characterized by a process whereby one moves from the omnipotence and immortality of young adulthood to the confrontation of physical aging and loss of loved ones (Bryant and Peck, 312). Sexton clearly declares her intention of committing suicide in series of images about death along with its essence to her. She had what is called “cultural gerontophobia”, which can be defined as “fear of growing old or fear of the elderly, the latter demonstrated by the multibillion-dollar cosmetic surgery industry to obscure the aging process” (Bryant and Peck, 288). As a former super model and an attractive middle-aged woman, Sexton was terrified by the idea of getting old and useless, because she thought that her beautiful ‘blood colored’ mouth would turn into the dull color of clay, with small blue eyes that barely see. Sexton’s fear of becoming physically weak is a universal issue that is highly associated with the way old people are treated in many communities, especially when it comes to sending them to nursing homes to be taken care of by others, which, in itself, is a nightmare to Sexton.

Sexton composes her poem with apparent fragmented parts making it, somehow, hard to understand. In “Suicide Note”, Sexton moves on to talk about her hunger for Jesus, using the biblical allusions to describe his death when he was young. She declares in such allusions her attempts to die the same way Jesus had; intentionally “Before he grew old/he rode calmly into Jerusalem/in search of death”, young and relieved. Sexton discovers “the rupture death brings which is often accompanied by a theme of resurrection, analogous to the cycle of nature, leading to a renewal of life” (Kramarae and Spender, 299). The speaker articulates her death wish in the form of a mystical union with Christ who is a figure for sacrifice and willing death.

However, her desire to die is expressed in terms of an alternative instinct, which is hunger (not for life but for death):

Once upon a time  
my hunger was for Jesus.  
O my hunger! My hunger!

She looked for an escape, and she happily found one, not because she hated life, but because she did not have the courage to deal with life’s bitterness like age and disease. Sexton emphasizes her wish to die young and happy by trying to convince the addressee that since everyone is supposed to die some day, why not go ahead and do it now rather than wait so long to have it, without a long struggle with old age and disease. In fact, death is presented as a better “route” than life:

But surely you know that everyone has a death,  
his own death,  
waiting for him.  
So I will go now  
without old age or disease,  
wildly but accurately,  
knowing my best route ...

This stanza summarizes Sexton’s multiple suicide attempts which were finally fulfilled when she locked herself in her house garage, and poisoned herself with carbon monoxide. She was highly inspired by the same successful method conducted by Sylvia Plath ten years before. She did exactly what Sylvia once wrote about the suicide that she declared she would never commit: “No, I won’t jump out of a window or drive Warren’s car into a tree, or fill the garage at home with carbon monoxide and save expense, or slit my wrists and lie in the bath. I am disabused of all faith and see too clearly. I can teach, and will write and write well” (Gill, 69). Sexton died at the age of 45 in 1974, leaving behind many literary accomplishments in poetry, criticism and fiction.

#### IV. Conclusion

This paper discussed the suicidal urge in two of Sexton's confessional poems: "Sylvia's Death" and "Suicide Note." We tried to show the psychological problems Sexton suffered from with an attempt to analyze them and figure out the reasons behind her death wish. Sexton had issues with what she had been trying to fulfill over the last fifteen years of her life. She wanted to have control over her death, not letting illness or ageing kill her slowly like her own mother who died of breast cancer. Such a death of her mother drove Sexton into a huge fear of getting old and sick, which in turn made her resist dying weak, ugly, and poor. In that case, "suicide really is . . . the only possible way to express the true self – at the expense of life itself" (George, 112). Sexton's confessional poems shed light of her suicidal tendency, making her poetry simultaneously psychological and autobiographical. In fact, this preoccupation with death and suicide in the poetry of Sexton makes her works represent a universal death wish in the form of a Freudian *thanatos*, the aggressive instinct of death as opposed to the life instinct of *eros*. If literature vents the unconscious as Freud would it in articles like "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," Sexton's poetry becomes suggestive of the underlying death instinct functioning in the human psyche. Death is an elemental part of life. Ironically, it is a justification for life for some people in the sense that they live to have this life over with and terminate in death. Neurotic writers with depressive symptoms can make their works capture their death-related fantasies. Interestingly, the neurotic act of creating a literary text, giving birth/life to a text, is the opposite of the thematic preoccupation with death in the selected poetry of Sexton we discussed in this article.

#### Works Cited

- Bryant, D. Clifton and Peck, L. Dennis. *Encyclopedia of Death and Human Experience*. California: SAGE Publications, Inc. 2009.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage, 1960.
- Ellmann, Maud. *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*. London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1994.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton & Company Inc, 1961.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Creative Writers and Daydreaming." Jan. 1, 2015. Posted Nov. 6, 2008. <<http://voidmanufacturing.wordpress.com/2008/11/06/creative-writers-and-daydreaming-by-sigmund-freud/>>.
- George, Diana Hume. *Oedipus Anne: the poetry of Anne Sexton*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Gill, Jo. *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, London: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Haki, Ron. *The Love that Wasn't: a study of personal hurts*. Dec. 31, 2014. <<http://primal-page.com/ufo.htm>>.
- Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.
- Kramarae, Cheri and Spender, Dale. *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Kristeva, Julia. "About Chinese Women." Trans. Sean Hand. *Psychoanalysis and Woman: A Reader*. Ed. Shelley Saguro. Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000. 245-260.
- Makari, George. *The Creation of Psychoanalysis: Revolution in Mind*. Australia: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.
- Malikow, Max. *Suicidal Thoughts: Essays on Self-Determined Death*. Plymouth: Hamilton Books, 2009.
- Sexton, Anne. *Live or Die*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.