“And I had to learn why I would rather die than love”:

Anne Sexton’s “Double Image” as Confessional

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“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code”

Anne Sexton once declared in an interview with Patricia Marx, “I’m hunting for the truth […] because behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life” (Colburn 74). Through this “secret life” of Anne Sexton she reveals autobiographical truths to further emphasize the poetic truth of her writing. In her poem” The Double Image,” Sexton demonstrates destructive language, a constant consciousness of war, and personal psychological stress throughout the poem. These traits exhibited are best described by M.L. Rosenthal’s *The New Poets* as confessional.

Anne Sexton lived her life until the age of 28 behind a mask of the American, conventional housewife. In this time of her life, Anne had just given birth to her second child, Joyce. With this addition to her family, came the additional stressors that pushed Sexton over the edge. In an interview with Barbara Kelves, she admits “I was trying my damnedest to lead a conventional life”, however, “the surface cracked […] and I had a psychotic break and I tried to kill myself” (Colburn 84). Her suicide attempt lead to her hospitalization and an important family decision to remove Joyce from her care. Joyce was consequently sent to live with her grandmother and stayed with her for the next three years; while Anne went to live with her mother to recover once discharged from hospitalization. It was obvious to Anne that “her family was not very sympathetic about her problems” (Middlebrook 37), especially in regards to her mother, Mary Gray. Sexton described Mary Gray as being, “the top billing in our house” (37); thus suggesting at the amount of attention she demanded and the attention she neglected from Sexton. One effort she made to give attention to Anne was having a portrait painted of her; however, later on in life, Mary Gray had the same portrait done for herself. She was known to compete with Sexton in an effort to suppress her, but keep her attached. When Mary Gray was diagnosed with breast cancer, “she attributed her problem to Sexton’s breakdown” (47). Once she had gone through with surgery, a radical mastectomy, she started writing poetry in a style very similar to that of Sexton, coincidentally adding to the competition and beginning of the separation between mother and daughter.

Consequently, Sexton’s “second suicide attempt, in May, occurred about six weeks after her mother’s surgery” (47). In the time of her hospitalization, after the attempt, she began to embrace the idea of writing as therapy as she “put some aggression into something constructive” (52). She began to understand her mental illness and the ways that writing portrayed those signs and symptoms. Once discharged, she continued this writing therapy and also became stabilized on an antidepressant. With this stabilization, she began to see Joyce for longer periods of time. Finally, “in 1985, [poetry] was restoring her motherhood [and] that summer Joy returned home to her parents’ house for good” (79). These important biographical instances mentioned above are the basis on which Sexton’s “breakout” poem, “The Double Image”, is constructed upon.

“The Double Image” exhibits the confessional literature traits classified by M.L. Rosenthal in *The New Poets*. He describes a common tone of voice seen throughout modern literature as a,“centrifugal spin toward suicide of the speaking voice”(Rosenthal 7-8). Though Sexton does completely allude to suicide itself multiple times through her work, this confessional trait emphasizes her thoughts of total despair recognized by her use of destructive language. When referring to her complications with taking care of Joyce, Sexton remarks, “Death was simpler than I’d thought” (Sexton 36 line 23). She is exhibiting her hopelessness in her own capabilities of motherhood. Sexton completely exposes this sense of hopelessness when she comments, “And I had to learn why;/ I would rather;/ die than love” (40 lines 142-144), after her explanations of her visits from Joyce. This line exhibits Sexton’s of utter hopelessness in her incapability to care for Joyce after she began to live her life again outside of hospitalization. Through Sexton’s tone of language, she truly exhibits this “suicide of the speaking voice”.

M.L. Rosenthal describes a common state of consciousness within the modern, confessional writer. He states, “War is more than a theme or subject for modern writers. It is a condition of consciousness” (Rosenthal 10). Throughout “The Double Image” Sexton exhibits this consciousness of war through her remarks of witches. She first mentions “The blame;/ I heard them say was mine;/ They tattled;/ like green witches in my head;/ letting doom leak like a broken faucet” (36 lines 17-20), referencing a choking incident with Joyce. Later on, she mentions these witches disapproving living with her mother and the denying the forgiveness of her father. In her last remark of the witches, the readers can come to terms with what she is at war with. She states “I wintered in Boston;/ childless bride;/ noting sweet to spare;/ with witches by my side;/ I missed your baby hood;/tried a second suicide” (39 lines 117-120). This war with the witches symbolizes the inner war between Sexton’s mind and societal pressures. Due to her failure to care for Joyce and the necessity to live with her mother, Sexton felt that she was “not succeeding at being a woman” (Colburn 61). This societal idea of the perfect women induced this consciousness of war throughout the poem and throughout Sexton’s personal life.

In regards to personal life, M.L Rosenthal describes the use of personal crisis in modern, confessional works. He explains, “The private life of the poet himself especially under stress of psychological crisis becomes a major theme. Often it is felt at the same time as a symbolic embodiment of a natural or cultural crisis” (Rosenthal 15). In “The Double Image”, Sexton emphasizes the psychological stress from the temporary loss of her daughter and separation from her mother. She uses the ‘mother-child theme” mentioned in her interview with Patricia Marx (Colburn 82) to suggest the idea of the mother-daughter relationship in society. She described this ideal relationship as, “more poignant than Romeo and Juliet” ( Middlebrook 87), within society. After Sexton’s suicide attempt, she needed to live with her mother; but describes this experience as “this is how I came to catch her;/ and this is how I lost her” (Sexton 37 lines 54-55). Sexton believed society to think “The loss of this earliest love is presumably “more poignant” because it cannot be avoided” (Middlebrook 87). She attributed this unavoidable loss of the earliest love to the loss of her mother to cancer. Through this loss, she saw herself within her mother in “the cave of the mirror” (41 line 167), realizing she needed Joyce in her life to fulfill this relationship just as her mother needed her. She ends the poem with the line, “I made you to find me” (42 line 201), as she reveals to herself that what her mother wanted from her, attention and love, is what she wants and needs from Joyce.

“The Double Image” exhibits the confessional traits explained by M.L. Rosenthal. This confessional writing is seen in modern writers to this day. Writers are using personal, controversial experiences to reveal, “the truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life” (Colburn 103). One might ask: “What is the purpose of this personal, controversial work?” Coincidentally, Anne Sexton answered this question in an interview with Harry Moore, by stating, “I hope that they will become the central theme to someone else’s private life (Colburn 50).

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