

# Religion in "with mercy for the greedy"



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Anne Sexton's confessional lyric poem, "With Mercy for the Greedy" (1962) displays many ways of how she interprets life around her. Sexton tries to believe in religion to have a sense of believing in something, mostly because of her friend "Ruth", who urges her to go to a Catholic confessional. Sexton realizes that "Need is not quite belief" (19) when she tries to accept the cross given to her but cannot connect to the true meaning of the cross. Sexton cannot confide in the cross so she is constantly searching for something or someone to confide in without feeling judged. In this particular poem, it is hard to not see that her religion is writing poetry, writing is her confessional. A reason for feeling without hope could be because she cannot bring herself to finding the true meaning of religion like her friend Ruth does. Sexton is almost mocking faith in this poem, emphasizing that real earthly relationships are more important to her. She has a hard time understanding the true meaning of religion because God is not right there in front of her, whereas her friend Ruth is. She feels the need to be able to confide in someone that will give her feedback without judgement, she favors human connection.

The main reason why Sexton is having a hard time accepting this cross is because she cannot get herself to accept what Christ represents. In the poem she says, "He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef" (16). Sexton is mocking the fact that Christians praise the suffering body of Christ, that people cannot see or speak to. Therefore, Sexton does not want to be held accountable to God because she cannot have a body-to-body relationship with him. Instead she wants to be held accountable by her friend Ruth that will not judge her the way she feels that God would. She does not believe in

this spiritual relationship mostly because it is something that she cannot physically see. Her poetry is where she confesses and allows herself to be truthful and honest. This is interesting because most people just blindly believe in faith even though people cannot physically see God, instead Sexton believes there's no reason to believe in God when she can confide in personal relationships.

Here I will argue how there are other examples of Sexton expressing her feelings about faith. In one of Sexton's other poems, "Rowing" (1975), she talks again about not wanting to conform to believing in religion like other people do. It is important to recognize the name of the book that "Rowing" was published in, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, this already displays her opinion on religion to her readers. In this poem, Sexton is basically saying that she is seeking God but, must walk her readers through her turns and complicated interpretations. An example of Sexton walking us through her journey is when she says, "the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison/ and all of that, saws working through my heart, / but I grew, I grew" (21-23). This is asking readers to interpret the struggles that she went through in trying to find her way to God. Using words like "saws working through her heart" (22), implies that it was not an easy experience but using words like "I grew" (23) implies that these rough times only made her grow stronger as a person. This is just another way that Sexton is proving that maybe the pain and struggles are not worth believing in a higher being. There is no reason for her to go through the painful path of believing and trusting in God, when she has earthly relationships with people that give her feedback and truly care about her.

There is a complicated feature about Anne Sexton that keeps readers interested because there is always a somewhat mysterious edge in her writing. The word choice that she uses to describe her spiritual journey almost keeps her readers guessing on what the next chapter in her poetry is going to bring about. Sexton dedicates a whole section of her book to "The Jesus Papers" that are all about Jesus and his journey as a person that are detached from the typical interpretation of Jesus being this "divine" being. This section is often criticized because it is seen as disrespectful to God's word, the Bible, and often even considered "blasphemous". These writings are recognizing Jesus as a living breathing human being just like everyone else in the world. Sexton cannot wrap her head around the concept of Jesus being a divine individual. She sees Jesus as just another person that started at birth, lived, and died. Readers can see Sexton's feelings very clearly in this series because she is more straight forward with the way that she presents her ideas. For example, the titles of the poems say enough in themselves like "Jesus Suckles", "Jesus Asleep", and "Jesus Cooks". Sexton tries to portray Jesus as a man that did everyday things just as other people did and belittles the divine aspect of Jesus. This is just another example of how little she believes in the aspect of blind faith and also how unnecessary she thinks believing in a God really is.

There are several lines in "The Jesus Papers" that can be analyzed for examples to imply that Jesus is just another regular being. For example, in "Jesus Suckles" Sexton says,

I am small

and you hold me.

You give me milk

and we are the same

and I am glad. (15-19)

This is where baby Jesus is “ talking” to his mother, Mary, telling her that in fact he is not divine but, just another person. I argue that Sexton believes that the more she belittles the story of Jesus, the more she is basically defending her beliefs. She does not feel the connection that others feel to religion, so if Sexton makes other people understand her point of view, there will be less people like Ruth trying to push her to do more religious things, like the catholic confessional. Sexton needs the personal connection that she gets with people like Ruth, she does not believe that someone can have that personal and intimate relationship with someone that people cannot see and have a conversation with. The thought of religion is almost mundane to her, she has no interest in even entertaining the thought of Jesus being “ divine”. Her mind is made up and there is no point in trying to change it. However, she will give her attention again to the concept of religion if someone that she deeply cares about asks her to give these religious ideas thought, such as Ruth.

In “ With Mercy for the Greedy” it is hard to understand why Sexton chose this title for this poem, considering the poem, on the surface, has nothing to do with greed. It can be argued that the poem is in fact about the opposite of greed because Sexton entertains the idea of religion solely because her dear

friend Ruth is passionate about the Catholic faith. Just because Sexton is entertaining the idea does not mean however, that she is enjoying giving religion a shot. Early in the poem a cross is given to Sexton from Ruth, this is where Sexton calls the cross " your dog bitten cross, / no larger than a thumb" (5-6). The meaning behind the use of this particular phrase is hard to understand because it can be argued that this phrase can mean several things. One of the valid arguments being that she referenced the size because she was also referencing the small amount of interest in her faith that never quite develops. Sexton is very careful and deliberate with her word choice to convey a very specific message in all of her poems.

Sexton's religion was her poetry, getting feedback from many readers and critics about her poems, and being able to confess to all her readers about her deepest darkest feelings. This started because of a priest that once told her " God is in your typewriter", this gave Sexton all the confidence to awaken her readers spiritually and hoped her readers would interpret her writing as " mystical". The true definition of " mystical" is " having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence" which is exactly what Sexton does when she digs deeper than the surface to describe her feelings. As shown previously it can be concluded that Sexton argued against religion so much because of the way that it had impacted her throughout her life. She was so invested in her writing that she wanted others to understand her passion and be inspired to become passionate about believing in human interactions and confessional poetry rather than divine spirits.

#### Works cited

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