

# Creativity vs. psychological health of anne sexton

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A number of creative individuals have taken their own lives, including John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and many other writers. The large number of such cases suggests that there may be a functional relationship between creativity and psychological health. This relationship seems to vary across domains, with the rate of suicide especially high in certain groups of artists. This may suggest that there may be something unique to those domains that either draws suicide-prone persons into the domain or has an impact on the individual such that suicide is considered and often attempted.

When the poem writing by Anne Sexton entitled Her Kind you can closely compare how Anne's mental health affected her poetry and how her poetry affected her mental health. The American Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Anne Sexton took her own life in 1974 via carbon monoxide poisoning before reaching the age of fifty. Her life and work are especially interesting because her poetry was clearly tied to her own psychiatric treatment. She began writing with only moderate formal education (a high school diploma), but after being published she was given honorary degrees from several universities, including Tufts, Radcliffe, and Harvard.

Sexton's poems, many dealing with suicide, read together with richly researched recent biography, enhanced by biographer's access to tapes of Sexton's sessions with her psychiatrist and by foreword by that psychiatrist, permit unusual opportunity to understand the interrelationship of her illness, her treatment, and the meaning of suicide in her life. Whatever was on her mind seemed to come out in her poetry whether it was about sex, madness or death. " Readers tend to be generous in their praise, celebrating the

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poetry primarily because it so fully and openly reveals Sexton's personal pain" (Anne).

Basically, the speaker of " Her Kind" is outcast because she is powerful. Traditionally, society expects women to lead sheltered lives. Women are to be obedient, quiet, and timid. They are viewed as gentle and kind, not " dreaming evil" (Line 3, Sexton). The modern, liberated woman completely shatters this tradition by courageously speaking her mind and living an independent life. She is empowered as she seeks education and a stable career instead of a domestic life. Since the modern woman does not fit the traditional label, " A woman like that is not a woman quite" (Line 6, Sexton).

Society would view this line of the poem as a negative slam on the modern woman and paraphrase it by saying, " She's not quite right in the head; therefore, she does not belong here in civilization. " Anne Sexton was a poet and a woman, but most importantly, she was an outcast. Subjected to nervous breakdowns and admitted to a neuropsychiatry hospital, Sexton must have been all too familiar with the staring eyes and the judging minds of the public. Just being a woman in today's world often can be enough to degrade a person in the public's eye, let alone being labeled as a crazy woman.

But Anne Sexton did not let society remain unchallenged in its views. She voiced a different opinion of women through poetry. In Anne Sexton's " Her Kind" she embraces society's negative stereotype of modern, liberated women and transforms it into a positive image. Two voices, the voice of

society and the voice of Anne, duel about the issue of the stereotype of modern women. Like Anne Sexton, the speaker in this poem is an outcast woman. Sexton was born in Massachusetts on November 9, 1928, to Mary Gray Staples and Ralph Churchill Harvey, who were known to drink regularly and sometimes heavily.

They were somewhat prominent and quite socially active. Scholars suggest that they may have valued their social engagements over their family responsibilities. There is some evidence that Sexton's mother was jealous about her very early writing (Long). Sexton did not have obvious creative aspirations, but instead seemed to think more about a family of her own. At one point her mother accused her of plagiarism and had that particular writing examined. It was deemed to be original, but many scholars suggest this incident affected Sexton's relationship with her mother.

Sexton's aunt on her father's side attempted suicide in early childhood, lived several decades in an apparently stable marriage, and eventually committed suicide just before she turned seventy. The family believes that if her aunt's suicide had any sort of influence on Sexton, it was probably informational (e. g. , the aunt modeling suicide) rather than genetic. Biographers place great emphasis on Sexton's psychiatric treatment, which was significant as evidenced by the content of her poetry. And, it is possible, given her nonconformism that Sexton suffered from a borderline personality disorder.

There are reports of her schizophrenic language, for instance, as well as her tendency to enter some sort of trance at the end of her psychiatric treatment sessions. She apparently did not want to end the sessions, perhaps because

of emotional and social needs. “ Sexton’s writing seems so personal she is often labeled a ‘ confessional’ poet” Anne did not agree with this title and preferred to be called a “ storyteller” (Middlebrook). For instance, in her poem titled “ Her Kind” she writes, “ A woman like that is not a woman, quite. I have been her kind” (Sexton).

Many people would automatically assume that Anne was speaking about herself in her poem, especially according to those who believe her poetry is confessional. But in reality, “ she considered the speaking ‘ I’ in her poetry as a literary rather than a real identity” (Middlebrook). Not everything she wrote was necessarily about her but rather perhaps a form of therapy. Diane Middlebrook believes Sexton conveys the terms on which she wishes to be understood: not victim, but a witness (Middlebrook). Through reading Anne Sexton’s poem “ Her Kind” we get a better understanding of Anne herself.

She was a strong character who used her writing as therapy. Doctors never knew that her writing would have such an impact on the world. She writes specifically in her poem “ Her Kind” about what she went through in society as a woman. Through Anne’s writing it improved her mental health. It was an outlet for her feelings. Her writing was true and honest and something many women would never talk about much less publicly write about. Her mental health inspired her creative writing which in turn helped her mental health to some degree. Her honest writing became her outlet and a way of therapy.

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