

Example of anne sexton research paper

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



This paper throws a light on the life of the famous American poet, Anne Sexton. The paper discusses her personal life, career life, her style of writing poeties and reviews she has received with the period of time on her poems.

Anne Sexton's Personal Life:

Anne Gray Harvey Sexton was a famous poet and playwright of her time. She was born in Newton, Massachusetts. Her father was Ralph Harvey who was a successful woolen manufacturer. Her mother was Mary Gray Staples. She was an unwanted third daughter in the family. She was raised in a middle-class environment. Her life remained uneasy due to the fact that her father was alcoholic and her mother has been frustrated by family life. Fighting with her tough family environment, Anne found peace in tying a close relationship with her maiden great-aunt, Anna Dingley, whom she used to call 'Nana'. Whatever Anne could not share with her parents, she used to discuss with Nana. Anne went through difficult situations because of her parents. She faced a hostile behavior from them and feared that they might abandon her. Later, Nana's death also gave Anne a big trauma (Sexton 3).

Anne was not a very good student. She did not like school at all. She could not focus on her studies and her disobedience towards her teachers made them talk to her parents to seek for a counselor. But, her parents did not take the teacher's advice. Anne's parents sent her to a boarding school called Rogers Hall in Lowell, Massachusetts. At that time, she started writing poetry and acting. Her beauty charmed many men towards her. At the age of nineteen, she eloped with Alfred Kayo Sexton II, even after being engaged to someone else. Anne also became a fashion model during Kayo's service in Korea. In 1953, she gave birth to a daughter. Kayo, then became a

salesperson in Anne's father's business .

However, Anne went into depression after Nana's death in 1954. She gave birth to a second daughter in 1955. Her depression worsened. She started abusing her children due to her depression. Her therapy continued. It was at that time that her therapist encouraged her to write poetry. From 1975 onward, she began focusing on her poetry career. She joined several Boston writing groups and focused on mastering her writing skills. Poetry became the centre of her life. ' To Bedlam and Part Way Back' was published in 1960 which received good reviews. Like other poets such as W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell, Sexton was able to prove her readers about her capabilities and competence. Her life was reflected in her poems. Sexton was excellent in writing poetry technically. It was meaningful to those readers who lived the same life with fear and anger like Sexton did .

Sexton's Career Life:

Sexton lost both of her parents in 1959. At that time, seemed the only way to bring stability in her life. Her marriage was disturbed. Her husband began physical abuse as she embarked upon her career and continued to become a celebrity. Sexton published ' All my Pretty Ones' in 1962. Her poetry started becoming famous in England in 1964 such that an edition of the best ones was published as a Poetry Book selection. Sexton even received the Pulitzer Prize for her work done in 1966 by the name of ' Live or Die'. She further received many honours, certificates and grants such as Frost Fellowship to the Bread Loaf's Writers' Conference in 1959, the Levinson Prize, the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, the American Academy of Arts and Letters travelling fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, Ford Foundation grants,

Shelley Memorial Prize, an invitation to give the Morris Gray reading at Harvard, honorary degrees, distinctions and professorships at Colgate University and Boston University .

Sexton, As a Teacher:

Sexton wrote poetry with the hope that it would give solace and comfort to those suffering from mental illness just like her. Sexton acts as a mentor, guide and a teacher in her poems. She used personae to teach people how to fight with their difficulties. The themes of many of her poems contain themes of loss and mourning to those who have threat of cancer, addictions, sexual distress and madness. Sexton is considered to be a symptom or a signal of melancholic and non-normative teacher (Salvio 21).

Reviews Regarding Sexton's Poetry:

One may call Anne Sexton's poetry autobiographical as it reflects her deeply personal feelings. Her poems illustrate her mental illness which she was going through at that time. It was due to her several years of illness that her poetry career began. It all started when she had to make several long stays in mental hospitals. Poetry came in her life as a therapeutic tool. Sexton's psychoanalyst told her to write during her sessions regarding what she was feeling and thinking. ' To Bedlam and Part Way Back' is a collection of Sexton's psychiatric struggles. Such kind of poetry reveals the innermost feelings of the poet. It can also be termed as confessional poetry .

The readers, when they give reviews regarding Anne Sexton's poetry, they raise two questions. The first question that is being raised is whether her poetry should be considered confessional. The reply to this question is that it

is a fact that the term ‘confessional poetry’ is not far behind when we talk about Sexton’s poetry. Anne Sexton confesses that she had been influenced by W. D. Snodgrass when writing confessional poetry. However, critics often say that poetry is not supposed to be confessional and so personal. But, when Anne saw Snodgrass write it this way, she assumed she also has the permission to give poetry a confessional flow .

The second issue that is being raised by the readers and reviewers is of consistency in Sexton’s work. Sexton’s work is sometimes praised but is also sometimes criticised. ‘To Bedlam and Part Way Back’ received a mixed response. The subject of the work was praised but, somehow, the poems failed to do justice the way it should have done. However, there have been positive reviews as well. For instance, Melvin Maddocks is of the opinion that Sexton’s book of poems is full of exact flavours of people and places. They illustrate the patterns of life. Reviewers think that some of her poems flawed, but overall Sexton’s poetry have achieved good reviews .

‘Live or Die’ is known to be Sexton’s best book. A Virginia Quarterly Review critic was of the opinion that Sexton was a very talented and skilled poet who was too honest in poetry. Confession is good for one’s soul but it may sound boring and tiresome to the readers. However, she has also received positive reviews. One of the positive comments was that Sexton was an interior voyager. ‘Transformation’, which is a redo of Grimm’s fairy tales, diverts from her usual confessional style. ‘Gail Pool’ was an illustration of her colourful imagery. It had a witty style to which she received comments such as an astonishing and a wild book. Her earlier work had lacked control but her skills got polished when writing ‘Gail Pool’. ‘Transformation’ is

another of her piece of writing which shows objectivity. It shows growth and development in poet's mind and strength .

Sexton turned back to her confessional mode of writing in ' The Death Notebooks', ' The Awful Rowing toward God', and ' 45 Mercy Street'. These books have been praised as well as severely criticized than her early writings. Readers recognize deterioration in quality of her last writings. Readers are of the opinion that her poems became less intense, less interesting and lost its charm as one book followed another. ' Awful Rowing' is touchy but it is not considered to be very good. Her early poems depicted introverted states in extroverted style. The later poems seemed to lose its charm and control .

On the other hand, not all readers criticized her later poems. Many readers are of the opinion that she was uneven and excessive her poetry. It was due to the fact that she was daring enough to explore the other side which nobody did before. ' The Death Notebooks' is one such example .

Sexton's poetic significance is often overlooked. She is a poet with full of courage and confidence. She dares to write on the forbidden subjects which no one gathered courage to write on. She has artistry in writing formal poems as well. There are writers and poets who have written on the usual subjects with a usual writing style just like everyone else. However, the best part about Anne Sexton is that she tops in writing poems which no one else could have written .

Sexton's Poetic Career:

Sexton attended her first poetry workshop led by John Holmes. Sexton was very nervous about getting herself registered for the workshop. She even

called her friend to accompany her in the first session. She received recognition in her early writings. A number of them were accepted by *The New Yorker*, the *Saturday Review* and *Harper's Magazine*. Later, Sexton studied with Robert Lowell at Boston University along with George Starbuck and Sylvia Plath .

It was W. D. Snodgrass who encouraged Sexton in her poetic career. She met Snodgrass at the Antioch Writer's Conference in 1957. She was inspired by his poem 'Heart's Needle' which was based on a theme of separation from his three-year old daughter. She read the poem when her own daughter was living with Sexton's mother-in-law. She, then, wrote 'The Double Image' which shows the relationship between a mother and a daughter. Sexton also started writing letters to Snodgrass and their friendship bloomed .

Sexton came across Maxine Kumin while working with John Holmes. They became good friends and remained till the rest of their lives. Sexton and Kumin wrote four books together on children. In the late 1960s, Sexton's illness affected her career. Even then, she managed to continue her work. She collaborated with musicians and added music to her poetry. In 1959, her play 'Mercy Street' was produced .

Subsequent Controversy:

When Sexton attempted suicide attempts, she worked with therapist Dr. Martin Orne. Sexton was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. During the sessions, he used unsound psychotherapeutic techniques. He used hypnosis and tried to recover repressed memories. Those memories were of her childhood that inflicted childhood sexual abuse. This abuse was disproved in interviews with her relatives. According to Middlebrook biography, a separate

personality by the name of Elizabeth emerged in Sexton during hypnosis. Dr-Orne did not encourage the emergence of the new personality and eventually it disappeared. Dr. Orne concluded in the end that Anne Sexton was suffering from hysteria. Moreover, the Middlebrook biography states that Linda Gray Sexton had been sexually abused by her mother. Linda Gray published her autobiography in 1994 in which she tells about her own abuse .

Middlebrook published the controversial biography of Anne Sexton with the approval of Anne’s literary executor, Linda Gray Sexton. Dr. Orne had given the tapes of the therapy sessions to the Middlebrook which were then forwarded to The New York Times and The New York Times Book Review. Controversy continued and the tapes were released publicly. The public release of the tapes revealed Sexton’s violent behaviour towards her daughter Linda .

More controversies took place when it was claimed that Anne Sexton had had an affair with the therapist who came in place of Dr. Orne in 1960s. Dr. Orne considered this affair to act as a catalyst, which he believed, led her to suicide .

Death:

It was during her writing of ‘ The Awful Rowing toward God’ that she committed suicide and passed away. She had lunch with the poet Maxine Kumin to review the script for ‘ The Awful Rowing toward God’. It was supposed to get published in March 1975. When she returned home, she removed her jewellery, had vodka, locked herself in garage, started the

engine of the car and attempted suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning. She is buried at Forest Hills Cemetery & Crematory in Boston, Massachusetts .

Conclusion:

Anne Sexton, an American poet, is known for her highly personal and confessional mode of writing poetry. She has won numerous awards and honours. However, she has received both positive and negative reviews regarding her style of writing poetry. The themes of her poetry reflect her suicidal tendencies, battles against depression attacks and her relationships with her family. She is a daring poet who explores those areas and subjects which no poet has ever done. She is a great teacher, guide and mentor to those people who are surrounded by sufferings in their lives just like Sexton was surrounded. She serves as a helping hand to such people with grief and sorrows. All in all, Sexton was a wonderful poet at heart.

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