

Anne sexton "cinderella"

Family



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Kelsey Hoffman Professor Maier Literature by Women 3 December 2004

And the Clock Struck Reality: Anne Sexton's retelling of Cinderella

Michelangelo, perhaps the most gifted sculptor and painter of all times, once said that "geniuses stand on the shoulders of other geniuses." As Michelangelo built upon the brilliance of his predecessors, Anne Sexton does the same with her poem "Cinderella". Fairy tales originated as oral traditions and were passed along and sculpted by thousands of story tellers. Each raconteur changes elements in the story to fit their individual needs. Sexton reinvents "Cinderella" as a poem and integrates the story with her own opinion and commentary. Sexton's version of this classic story contrasts the rosy images of human happiness conjured by fantasy with the banality, decay, and despair of everyday life. She conveys this message with a sadistic tone and modern language, while drawing upon her own hardships and American culture. Throughout her life, Anne had many personal struggles. Her childhood, though privileged in monetary terms, was also one of deprivation and abuse. Anne's mother and father both struggled with alcoholism, a struggle which, according to her biographers, influenced Sexton's substance abuses later in life. In addition to the alcoholism, Sexton also experienced other abuses by her parents; Sexton's biographers describe her mother as "neglectful" and her father as verbally abusive (Middlebrook 57). Anne Sexton attended Garland Junior College for only one year and married Alfred Sexton in 1948 at the age of 19. Their marriage was unstable and Anne Sexton was continually engaged in extra-marital affairs. A few years into union, Anne had two children, Linda and Joy, and was hospitalized for postpartum depression after the birth of both children (McCartan 2). Her depression was severe, and Sexton was suicidal for most of her adult life. On October 4, 1974, shortly

<https://assignbuster.com/anne-sexton-cinderella/>

after the release of *Transformations*, Anne could no longer stand the pressures of her existence and committed suicide (McCartan 35). This biographical information is essential to understanding Sexton's influences in writing "Cinderella" because the poem was written out of personal turmoil. The majority of Sexton's poetry is confessional style, but through her interpretation of "Cinderella", Sexton gives herself a more discrete outlet for her passions (Ostriker 255). Her biographer Diane Middlebrook notes that this poem was "a way to place her struggles 'in legend rather than personal history'(37)." There are two notable examples of this in "Cinderella." First, the father and step-mother are reminiscent of Sexton's own parents. In the poem the father is distant and the step mother is the cause of all of Cinderella's hardships. Anne's mother and father both struggled with alcoholism, a struggle which, according to her biographers, influenced Sexton's substance abuses later in life. Secondly, Sexton describes the way she sees herself through the stepsisters. She describes them as, "pretty enough / but with hearts like blackjacks (Sexton 11)." Sexton too, was very pretty, but her depression often made her cold, harsh, and full of turmoil (Middlebrook 91). Another part of her personal life that Sexton brings into the poem is her longing for inner peace. This is indicated at the end of the fifth stanza. The poet writes, "Whenever she wished for anything the dove / would drop it like an egg upon the ground." The majority of the poem follows the Brother's Grimm edition of the fairy tale; this section however is Sexton's own variation. Sexton implies that she wishes her personal problems could be solved as instantaneously. She goes as far as to call special attention to this concept by ending the stanza by saying, "The bird is important, my dears, so heed him" (11). In addition to adding her own personal history to <https://assignbuster.com/anne-sexton-cinderella/>

the story, Sexton modernized that fairy tale with her critique of current culture. She brings the tales into current times with modern syntax and an array of anachronisms: "[Cinderella] slept on the sooty earth each night / and walked around looking like Al Johnson" (Sexton 11). With this poem Sexton attempts to break down the feminine stereotypes of her time. In "Cinderella" the step sisters mutilate themselves in order to win the prince. Sexton's message here is that women shouldn't have to conform or change who they are for men. She also warns that if you drastically change yourself for someone the internal hardship will not go away or "heal up like a wish" (Sexton 11). Sexton continues by critiquing societies' feminine expectations, mocking the term "happily ever after." Alicia Ostriker, one of Sexton's literary critics, notes that, "half of Sexton's tales end in marriage, and most of these marriages are seen as some form of either selfishness or captivity" (257). This is illustrated in "Cinderella" in the final stanza, Sexton writes, Cinderella and the prince / lived, they say, happily ever after, / like two dolls in a museum case / never bothered by diapers or dust, / never arguing over the timing of an egg, / never telling the same story twice, / never getting a middle-aged spread, / their darling smiles pasted on for eternity / Regular Bobbsey Twins. / That story. (Sexton 11) To convince the reader that happy endings do not exist, Sexton uses sarcastic and sadistic language. She mocks "Cinderella" because she wants her readers to live in reality and not waiting for prince charming. Her commentary is not just on the fairy tales, rather, the societies which spawn them. In Conclusion, with her poem "Cinderella" Sexton not only created a wonderful retelling of a beloved tale, but a critical evaluation of how the story relates to her life and the impact it has on cultural expectations. On her reconstructing of fairy tales, Sexton herself

<https://assignbuster.com/anne-sexton-cinderella/>

said, " I take the fairy tale and transform it into a poem of my own, following the story line, exceeding the story line, and adding my own pizzazz"

(Middlebrook 336). And pizzazz is one thing that Anne Sexton definitely had.

She was a brilliant artist that marked the beginning of feminist poetry.

Though her death was unfortunate and spirit and distinct voice still shines through her poem " Cinderella."