

Confessional Mode, Persona and Point of View in Sexton's

Selected Poems

By

Dr. Asmaa Khalaf Madloul

College of Education for Women

University Of Anbar

Abstract

Anne Sexton is an innovator and creator of new language and a new type storytelling she present a new way of confronting her experience by adopting unseen directness. She shows ability in using unique poetic structure. Her confessional poetry is used for cultural goals. Sexton's confessional mode of poetry is the main technique of her writing that reveals her repressed anguish and deepest emotions through verse. Her confessionalism surpasses its limited frame to have social and public intentions. She also employs the first point of view to refer to all, she wants to create from her readers sharers in her poems. She varies the voice of narrators from child to watch. Sexton is an innovator and creator of new language and a new type storytelling she present a new way of confronting her experience by adopting unseen directness.

النمط الاعترافي والأدوار والراويين في قصائد منتخبة للشاعر اني سكستن

الملخص

ان سكستن ابتدعت لغة حديثة وأسلوب جديد في سرد القصة في الشعر . والشاعرة أظهرت قدرة في توظيف البناء الشعري بأسلوبه الصارم المعتمد على أصول شعرية عريقة لكنها لم تنسى الشعر الحر المتمرد على قواعد الشعر المعتادة . كتبت الشاعرة شعر الاعتراف والذي وضفته لإغراض ثقافية وليس شخصية وهذا هو الجديد فيما قدمت حيث أنها لم تحصر شعر الاعتراف في حدود ضيقة بل كان الضمير (انا) يشير الى غيرها مما يحملون نفس الالم. وكان الصوت المسموع في قصائدها متنوع من صوت الطفل الى الساحرة. وقد أوجدت الشاعرة اسلوبا جديدا في سرد القصيدة السردية بنقل تجاربها الشخصية بطريقة غير مباشرة لتعمم وتخلق نوع من المشاركة مع القارئ

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Anne Sexton (1928-1974), a sensitive poet, endures a painful childhood, a traumatic parental relation and a hard battle with depression; The important characteristic of her poetry was the immediacy of her words in which she traced her emotionality with intimate details to add universal touches to them. This made her the least confessional observant

in history. Sexton wished to free her pen to show the reality of women's experience with "unnerving candour" (Roberts 207); this distinguished her from other confessional poets. She was associated with the "Confessional" poets of the 1960s, along with Sylvia Plath, the early poetry of W. D. Snodgrass, and Robert Lowell. Sexton tried via her poetry to face her interior pain and reveal the personal difficulties which she experienced in her own life as a woman, daughter, and mother. Her indulgence in revealing woman's suffering in different stages granted her a role in unfolding the problems of identity and a social role in a middle-class culture intent on erecting stereotypes of women, and gender barriers to their achievement and emotional expression. Kumin stated that only Sexton and "no other American poet in our time has cried aloud publicly so many private details" (xix).

Sexton's confessional mode of poetry is the main technique of her writing that reveals her repressed anguish and deepest emotions through verse. For her, confession is a "technique...for producing truth" (Foucault 59). The connection between art and life can be traced to reveal a mutual relation or one identity to such extent that some regard "a life experience as an art or an art experience as a kind of life" (Gubar 252). Confessional poetry, which was introduced as a genre by W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell in the mid of 1950s, begins with the autobiographical experience of the poet and is usually expressed in the first person. Though Sexton is

associated with the “Confessional” poets of the 1960s, along with Sylvia Plath, the early poetry of W. D. Snodgrass, and the Robert Lowell (Hall 1989 33), it is argued that such "a classification limits her achievement and significance" (McGowan 139). In this respect, Sexton writes "it [confessional poetry] is difficult label...because I'll confess to things that never happened" (Coburn 134).

Confessional poetry in 1959 is used to describe a new poetry which appears as "documentary verse" (Perloff 80). Sexton begins to draw from her personal experience to craft what became known as her “confessional poems” about depression, suicide, women’s bodies, family secrets, love affairs, war, God, and the complexities of human relationships" (Skorczewski vii). Her poetry is known to be therapeutic, autobiographical and as Lowell said her poetry is "not just confessing" (Hall 1989 33). It puts the speaker himself at the center of the poem that is regarded as "the private life" (Rosenthal 63). Confessional poetry appeals to her; she admits that "the most interesting poetry was written out of personal experience" (Hall 1989 1). Through this technique, Sexton grants her readers an opportunity to participate in the poem and find a voice for their own experiences. Thus, "the reader is alive in her poem and has existence" (Rosenblatt 129). Via her address to her readers, Sexton wants to create a:

Discursive and productive relationship between text and readers...the confessional text takes as one of its subjects the complicity of its own audience in the generation of its meaning... paradoxically, the self-disclosure in her work is made always with a view to its reader; while ostensibly focusing inward, it also looks outward and away from the self. (Gill 2004 58)

In "Wanting to Die," she commences with a direct address to her present reader stating, "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember " (C.P. 142) to complete a discussion with her reader that occurs outside the limitation of the poem. The confessional poem is different from any other personal poem because the speaker and the reader are unified in the poem. Therefore, the poetic voice does not represent the poet only, but other voices. This interchangeable connection with the reader creates the crux of this new technique in poetry. The principal point in confessional poetry is the recognition of the voice of the poet in the poem. Confessional poetry is "usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself" (Hall 1989 33). The voice of Confessional poetry is described as "the naked ego" (Jones 30).

Sexton is the speaker and the main persona in her complete work. Nearly all her poems are written in first person, and almost all her work is autobiographical. She reveals her soul to her reader to offer him a direct access to her state of mind. Even when her voice is hidden, it is heard

from her masked persona to be Sexton herself; under any mask, she insists on "the persistence of the confessional element in her work" (Neil 207). Jones in his "Necessity and Freedom" states that the "world of her persona, the "I" of the poems which undergoes a continuing development and is clearly related intimately and painfully to the poet's autobiography" (Jones 31).

In adopting the traditional literary characterization, most notably in the fairy tales of "Snow White," "Cinderella" and "Rumpelstiltskin", Sexton's voice remains the central figure, and the new character reveals her own psyche. Her insistence on the use of first person singular and the autobiographical voice is part of her rebellion against past traditions and imitation; according to her "such restrictions mirror the life-boundaries she wants to overcome. The adoption of looser forms asserts her sense of personal freedom" (Bixler 154). She sometimes writes in the third person as it occurs in "The Red Roses" when she describes the physical abuse of her daughter. Substitution of roles is apparent here:

she never laid a hand on him,
only the wall laid a hand on him.
He gets red roses in different places,
the head, that time he was as sleepy as a river,
the back, that time he was a broken scarecrow,(C.P. 492)

This makes us believe that confessional poetry does not only offer autobiographical events, but it can be "national crisis...it can represent an inner and psychological dilemma faced by large number people" (George 1987 97). The best example that proves her style of mixing reality with fiction is in this poem. The poet leaves her real voice of the experience, which is the mother to "speak in a child-like voice" (Bixler 143). Her daughter, Linda, emerges as a son in this poem. The negative aftermath of such a mixing is the loss of believability of autobiographical fact:

Tommy is three and when he is bad
his mother dances with him.
She puts on the record,
"Red Roses for a Blue Lady"
and throws him across the room.
Mind you. (C.P. 492)

In spite of being "confessional poet and adopting "I" in telling her poems, sometime the persona is not to be identified with the writer" (Lacey 8). Sexton admits that "I'll often just assume the first person and it's someone else story" (Colburn 134). In her "Two Sons," she tells of a woman who blames her two sons for marrying without her acknowledgement or consent. In reality, Sexton does not have sons, but

daughters. She admits that she can "distort the literal fact to present the emotional truth that lies under them" (Cowley 349). So, this proves of her adopting the dilemma of her hero to be her own and to be told within "I" poem:

Both of you monopolized
with no real forwarding address
except for two silly postcards you bothered to send home,
one of them written in grease
as you undid her dress
in Mexico, the other airmailed to Boston from Rome. (C.P.
122)

Even when another persona is used, it will not be far from the poet. Maio states that persona is "closely associated with the poet's public self. It is his or her mask through which a personal experience can be related with both the subjective expression and the objective stance" (24). Sometimes the persona in Sexton's poems splits into two roles. The speaker of "Old Dwarf Heart" is both lover and daughter who are physically struggling with each other. The poem opens:

When I lie down to love, old dwarf heart shakes her head
Like an imbecile, she was born old.
Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds

of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.

She knows the decay we're made of. (C.P. 54)

Confessional poetry is the poetry of melancholy and pain, and it is depicted by Rosenthal as "a poetry of suffering" (Rosenthal 1967 79). Being a confessional poet, Sexton reflects the dark side of her life using this technique of poetry. Her father, her broken marriage, lust to death, addiction, mental breakdown, hospitalization and other disturbing subjects are delineated in her poems. Her poetry reflects the passivity and powerlessness in conquering pain. Amid her strife, she tends to surrender. Thus, death is selected to be the sole solution in her poetry. Phillips states that "all confessional art ... is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed" (2).

The intrinsic aim of Sexton's poetry seems to explore the meaning of her life and the lives of others. Her continual search for the lost god and her lost self is shown in a large body of her poetry. Thus, her poetry turns to be journey from the beginning to the end under different banners like: journey for the search of identity, God and meaning in life. Unfortunately, she is frustrated in all these journeys. She desires to expose her private experiences and indulge in any truth and experience in

the universe that can enrich her poetry. She exploits her pen to offer the impasse of women in modern age:

As a confessional poet, Sexton's writing is in many ways a candid autobiographic record of her Struggle to overcome the feelings of guilt, loss, inadequacy, and suicidal despair that tormented her. Informed by years of psychotherapy, Sexton's carefully crafted poetry often addresses her uncertain self-identity as a daughter, wife, lover, mother, and psychiatric patient. (Bomanto 351)

Sexton selects Confessional poetry to be the field that reflects her as a poet and a woman. She is considered one of the best writers who tackle taboo themes and expose her life through poetry. The most important characteristic of her poetry is its focusing on unspeakable subjects. Issues like drug abuse, sexual guilt, alcoholism, suicide, insanity and depression, which are typically considered shameful or embarrassing, are discussed openly in her poetry. Sexton brings these hidden subjects openly to force the social institutions to acknowledge their existence in a society that closes its eyes and ears to ignore their existence. She depicts her surrender to drug- addiction in her "The Addict":

My supply
of tablets

has got to last for years and years.
I like them more than I like me.
Stubborn as hell, they won't let go.
It's a kind of marriage.
It's a kind of war
where I plant bombs inside
of myself.(C.P. 165-66)

During her years of psychiatric treatment, her poetry is joined with her therapy. Many of her poems depict the process of her treatment. She searches for treatment through poetry. She admits that "Poetry led me by the hand out of madness. I am hoping I can show others that route" (Middlebrook, 1991 309). During Sexton's first few years of psychiatric treatment, she selects her poetry to narrate her life and record her worried soul. She begins during this period to return to her violent past and register her painful blights like incest, mental illness and loneliness. In spite of the refusal of her society of such topics, she presents them openly. Sexton spent many years in psychotherapy, and it is not surprising that she incorporates that experience in her art.

Sexton's style uses techniques like free association from therapy into poetry, mingling a "concrete interpenetration of poetry and psychoanalytic method" (George 1986 31). Her poetry explores psychotherapy in special volumes and in individual poems including,

“You, Dr. Martin,” “Said the Poet to the Analyst” and “Cripples and Other Stories.” For instance, “Flee on Your Donkey” is a long narrative poem that indicates “how far Sexton has come, both personally and poetically” (Hall 1989 56). It describes the speaker at the registration desk of a mental hospital, trying desperately to convince herself to flee rather than check in. Her madness is depicted as hunger in the poem:

Six years of such small preoccupations!
Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!
O my hunger! My hunger!
I could have gone around the world twice
or had new children — all boys.
It was a long trip with little days in it
and no new places. (C.P. 99)

Sexton’s poetry is a container of factual elements that provides a brief history of the poet. Her “The Double Image” for instance, provides biographical details of her private life like identifying her members of family, stating time and place, identifying the speaker’s age, revealing her mental state, her hospitalization and “shows the potential of memory to come to term with the past in a positive way” (Hall 1989 25). She details her mother’s disease:

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead. (C.P. 37)

Sometimes Sexton writes with different points of view by "incorporate [ing] many styles or points of view" (Kadar 148) in the same volume. The irregularity of structure appears clearly in her **Love Poems** (1969). The variation does not appear in the style or point of view only, but also in its themes that are related with sex, body and love. In writing this volume, the author seems to reject any type of organization since it is not divided into sections. Because of this lack of structural organization and the intimacy of the poems, it is regarded as a diary or a "pillow book" (Kadar 148). In "The Celebration of Uterus", she praises her uterus with everyday language:

Everyone in me is a bird.
I am beating all my wings.
They wanted to cut you out
but they will not.

They said you were immeasurably empty
but you are not.
They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong.(C.P. 181)

The confessional style of Sexton usually contains a narrative that includes strange imagery. She modifies even objective experiences to be told in her confessional style. By doing so, she makes the reality mix with fiction for the sake of art. She insists on the immediacy and superiority of the first person even if she tells the experience of other not of her own. She acknowledges that she sometimes adopts "the first person and its someone else's story" (Heyen 134). She selects the point of view with persuasive aura to narrate her poem. She also denies her real persona to speak in another voice.

Much of Sexton's writing is narrated from a child's perspective since "child-like voice" (Bixler 143) allows her to mediate the restriction and dominance of the world. In "Those Times" and "Baby Picture," she gazes at her picture of seven years old and adopts the voice of a girl who considers her lost identity in childhood. The childish voice is clear in "Baby Picture":

Anne,
who were you?
I open the vein

and my blood rings like roller skates.
I open the mouth
and my teeth are an angry army.
I open the eyes
and they go sick like dogs
with what they have seen.(C.P. 362-63)

Sexton exploits childlike quality as borrowing the structure of nursery rhyme that is used for traditional poems and songs for young children. Adopting this rhyme "requires no stanza or sentence breaking here" (Hall 1989 21). This is very clear in "Ringing the Bells":

And this is the way they ring
the bells in Bedlam
and this is the bell-lady
who comes each Tuesday morning
to give us a music lesson
and because the attendants make you go
and because we mind by instinct,
like bees caught in the wrong hive. (C.P. 28)

"Protestant Easter," subtitled as 'eight years old', is told from the point of view of an eight year old. It traces "the innocent association of Easter season with Jesus and the resurrection with her parents" (Hall 68). The fresh childlike voice adds innocence and authenticity to the poem:

When he was a little boy
Jesus was good all the time.
No wonder that he grew up to be such a big shot
who could forgive people so much.
When he died everyone was mean.
Later on he rose when no one else was looking.
Either he was hiding or else
he went up.
Maybe he was only hiding?
Maybe he could fly? (C.P. 128)

Sexton is an innovator and creator of new language and a new type storytelling she present a new way of confronting her experience by adopting unseen directness. . She adopts autobiographical She allows her readers to feel an intimate connection, or identification with the voice in the poem via this technique, she grants her readers an opportunity to participate in the poem and find a voice for their own experiences in the poem; She adopts the open-end poem to encourage the readers to respond to her poem and be active. She insists on the immediacy and superiority of the first person even if she tells the experience of other. She was a poet and a writer who used the personal to peak to cultural concern.

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All the subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Hereafter referred to as C.P.

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