

“The Abortion”

Discussion Guide for Teachers

- 1. Who is the speaker of this poem? (a woman who has had an abortion) How do you know?** *The students point initially to textual evidence in the final line; the title; the middle of the poem, where the “little man,” the abortionist, is compared to the fairy tale character Rumpelstiltskin, who wanted to claim the firstborn child of the queen as his own; perhaps also to the narrative of a trip, to and from the “little man”.*
- 2. Is that unnamed woman the author (Anne Sexton)?** Yes, and no. Answering this question requires the students to know something about the life of Anne Sexton and to compare and contrast Sexton’s historical experience of an abortion with that of the woman who speaks in the poem. Asking and answering this question should enable a deeper dive to “confessional poetry” as based in the poet’s own life, but also generalize to facilitate the reader’s personal identification with the speaker.

*The following notes may assist the teacher in facilitating the students’ understanding of how Anne Sexton may have approached her writing of this poem in an effort to achieve healing: See Diane Wood Middlebrook’s, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, esp. 120-125.¹ Sexton, the mother of two little girls, had an abortion in 1960. During the previous year, her mother had died of cancer, her father of a stroke, and she herself had surgery for the removal of a non-malignant ovarian cyst. Sexton was pregnant when her father-in-law, George Sexton, was killed in a car accident. Unsure of the father of her unborn child, a patient undergoing regular psychiatric treatment (and previously hospitalized for postpartum depression and suicide attempts), Sexton tried to persuade her reluctant husband, Kayo, who wanted another child, that she was not healthy enough to have another baby. In early May, 1960, Sexton’s mother-in-law accompanied her to a doctor who performed an illegal abortion.*

The event of the abortion (as evidenced in another poem, “With Mercy for the Greedy”) is connected with Sexton’s awakening interest in religion. Her friend Ruth Soter had converted to Catholicism. To her, Sexton confided that she had had an abortion. Soter mailed her a wooden cross, which Anne wore for a time around her neck, and she urged Anne to seek forgiveness through the Church’s sacrament of confession. Sexton responded with a poem dedicated to Ruth Soter, entitled “With Mercy for the Greedy.” See text of this poem in Appendix B: Additional Poems found on page 102]. This poem indirectly refers to the aborted child, identifying the baby with the cross and with her own possibility for spiritual rebirth. It also directly proposed a parallel between Sexton’s confession of sin in her poetry with sacramental confession.

- 3. How has Sexton broadened the personal experience of an abortion to make it an experience in which others can share? Is her tale the confession of “everywoman” and “everyman”?** *In answering this question, the students may point to the ways that Sexton draws parallels between the body of the woman and the natural features along the path of her journey driving to and from the abortionist: the springtime budding of Mother Earth, the humped mountains (similar to a pregnant woman’s womb), the cracked and sunken earth from which coal has “evilly” been taken; the tinny flatness of the highway on the way back.*

¹ Middlebrook, Diana Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

The students may also point to the speaker's "cowardice" (until the last two lines) in calling abortion by other names and in rationalizing her decision through a faulty "logic."

4. **What is the significance of the repeated phrase in italics, the refrain of the poem? Why does Sexton say "somebody" instead of "someone"?** *The students may note its psychological effectiveness, its philosophical element, its formal similarity to a refrain in a ballad or a lament, its abstract distance from the concrete detail of the bloody baby, whom the woman bleeds, but who also IS the bleeding woman (a "babe"; its riddle-like quality).*
5. **Why does the woman "change [her] shoes" before she begins her journey?** *The students may think about the symbolism of shoes as reflecting a path of life, a choice made here between bearing the unborn child or ending its life.*
6. **Why has Sexton chosen to write this poem in tercets (three-line units)? How is the form appropriate to a poem about pregnancy and abortion?** *Students may notice that the first and third lines in each tercet rhyme, enclosing a middle line that does not, just as the speaker of the poem is having difficulty with what is in her "middle," the baby enclosed within her. The students may also think of Dante's Commedia, which is composed in tercets, and wonder about what sort of spiritual journey the woman has taken. (Dante places unborn babies in Limbo. See Inferno, Canto 4.)*
7. **Why does Sexton compare the green mountain to a "crayoned cat"?** *Students may reply that children play with crayons, that the woman has her unborn baby in mind. This springtime creativity, this hope of new life, is going to be cut off.*