

## Biography: Anne Sexton (1928-1974)

### Biography

In the introduction to the collected poetry of Anne Sexton, her close friend and fellow poet, Maxine Kumin describes her first encounter with one of the twentieth century's stunning literary voices. "Anne Sexton I remember her," Kumin recollects, "as I remember her on our first meeting in the late winter of 1957, tall, blue-eyed, stunningly slim, her carefully coiffed dark hair decorated with flowers, her face skillfully made up, looked every inch the fashion model. And indeed she had briefly modeled for the Hart Agency in Boston. Earrings and bracelets, French perfume, high heels, matching lip and fingernail gloss bedecked her, all intimidating sophistications in the chalk-and-wet-overshoes atmosphere of the Boston Center for Adult Education."<sup>2</sup>

Anne Gray Harvey Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts on November 9, 1928 to affluent parents, Mary Gray Staples and Ralph Churchill. Her unhappy childhood was marked by profound experience of being unwanted by her parents. According to her biographer, Diane Middlebrook, it is quite possible that Anne was sexually abused as a child. She had a difficult time in school growing up, and in 1945 her parents sent her to Rogers Hall, a boarding school in Massachusetts, where she began writing poetry and acting. After one year at Garland Junior College, and just shy of her twentieth birthday, Anne eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton II (nicknamed, "Kayo"). Together they had two daughters, Linda Gray Sexton (1953) and Joyce Ladd Sexton (1955). It is well known that Sexton had numerous extra-marital affairs before her divorce from Kayo in 1973.

Sexton had an abortion in 1960. During the previous year, her mother had died of cancer, her father of a stroke, and she herself had 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.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout her adult life, Sexton suffered from recurring bouts of depression beginning after the birth of her first daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, in 1953. In 1954 she was diagnosed with postpartum depression



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*The writing actually puts things back into place. I mean, things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into order again, and the world is again a little more sensible, and real. I'm more in touch with things.*<sup>1</sup>

—ANNE SEXTON

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Patricia and Anne Sexton. "Interview with Anne Sexton." *The Hudson Review* vol. 18, no. 4, (1965): 560-570. JSTOR, Web. 14 Jan. 2019. [www.jstor.org/stable/3849705](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3849705)

<sup>2</sup> Kumin, Maxine. "How it Was." *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*, Ed. Linda Gray Sexton. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

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after suffering her first breakdown. Sexton would continue to struggle with mental health issues. She attempted suicide several times over the course of her adult life and was periodically institutionalized at the neuropsychiatric hospital, Westwood Lodge. Sexton began writing poetry in the mid-1950s at the prompting of her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne.

By 1957, she had joined several Boston area writers' groups, where she developed relationships with other contemporary poets like W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath. She published her first volume of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, in 1960. She would go on to publish over a dozen volumes of poetry, including three posthumous works and *Live or Die* (1966), which earned her the 1967 Pulitzer Prize.

Sexton's poetry is often classified as confessional poetry, and many, though not all of her poems draw on her personal experiences. In her poetry on abortion, Sexton expresses guilt, love and faith, trauma, silence, and laments loss. Though the subjects she took up were often controversial and criticized—abortion, addiction, menstruation, and adultery—her poetic genius was widely acclaimed during her lifetime and after she committed suicide at age 46.†

### Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Auu5fTGY5OQ> Audio of Anne Sexton reading/commenting on her poems  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfvS\\_fgbuDI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfvS_fgbuDI) Excerpts from home videos and of Sexton reading her poetry  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3tUtgKqsqs> Audio of Anne Sexton reading, "All My Pretty Ones"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a-25dg9STc&t=635s> Part 1 of interview with Anne Sexton's biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trwCfS8zXZg> Part 2 of interview with Anne Sexton's biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook

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