

Anne Sexton 1928-1974

Early Life

Born Anne Gray Harvey in 1928 in Newton, MA

3rd of three daughters (Jane 1923 and Blanche 1925)

Father: Ralph Churchill Harvey – owned a wool business

Mother: Mary Gray Staples

Both of her parents were children of the roaring twenties—good looking, affluent, party loving, self-indulgent. Anne said it was like growing up with characters out of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Anne was raised mostly raised by a nurse. Ralph enforced a very formal household. He never sat down to dinner without a jacket and tie. He even had his underwear ironed! He was very fussy about the children's appearance, and Anne was loud and messy. So she was often left out when manners mattered. She ate in the kitchen with the nurse until she was 11. Both parents drank heavily, and her father was often cruel to her. From *Anne Sexton: A Biography* by Diane Wood Middlebrook: "Forgiveness came very hard to Anne. She retained distressing memories of her father's drinking binges, partly because in childhood she didn't recognize them. 'He would just suddenly become very mean, as if he hated the world,' she later told her psychiatrist. 'He would sit and look at you as if you had committed some terrible crime. He hated everyone! Mostly I remember the expression on his face.' It seemed that he singled her out for verbal abuse when he was drinking, complaining that her acne disgusted him and that he could not eat at the same table with her. She felt invaded by his expressions of revulsion, and it seemed that no one tried to shield her from these attacks. His drinking permanently destroyed her trust in his love" (14).

When she was a child her great aunt moved in with the family--Anna Dingley. She had never married, and had worked as a reporter. The children called her nana. Anne spent a lot of time with nana, because she gave her attention she didn't get from her parents. They often took "naps" together—and later it was determined that nana had acted inappropriately with Anne during those times—creating an incestuous relationship.

The family moved to Weston and because of their wealth, Ralph no longer had to work. He began drinking even more heavily, and sequestered himself in his room. He drank until 1950, and spent the family fortune.

In addition to addiction, mental illness also ran in the family. Nana became mentally unstable as she aged, and even had electroshock therapy. Anne's paternal grandfather had numerous breakdowns. Anne blamed nana's illness on herself. She had begun to ignore nana when she was 13 and boys became more important to her. As an adult, she often said nana was talking to her

when she was having her own breakdowns. She became very social, then had one boyfriend from 8th grade through high school graduation – Jack McCarthy: “The depressions Sexton was to associate with her teenage years did not find their way into Jack’s memory of her. But he did recall an event that disturbed him deeply at the time. One evening when Anne and Jack were about fifteen years old (Nana had just been hospitalized for the first time), they made a date to go tobogganing on a steep hill behind the Harveys’ house. Jack was late. When he arrived, Anne wasn’t there, but at the bottom of the hill he could make out, by moonlight, her motionless body in the snow. He ran down to her and found her unconscious, bleeding from her head. After he took her up to the house, he discovered that the blood was mercurochrome: she had been faking unconsciousness, dramatizing her own death. She considered it a good joke on him” (19). Her parents didn’t want her settling for the first boy she was involved with, so they sent her to boarding school to break them up. They later regretted this decision, and even asked Jack to take Anne back.

When some of her poetry was published in the school yearbook, her mother suspected that she was plagiarizing, and she sent it to a professional writer she knew. He assured her the poems were original and showed promise. This hurt Anne. She was always trying to impress her mother, who called herself a writer although she never published.

Adulthood

After high school Anne attended finishing school. She became engaged, then met Alfred Muller Sexton II (Kayo) in 1948 and decided to elope with him. She slept with Kayo, felt guilty, went back to her fiancé, slept with him, then broke up with him. They eloped because she thought she was pregnant. She got her period as they were on their way to elope, but decided to go ahead with it. She was 18. Kayo was attending college, but he dropped out, and they moved in with his parents. He got a job working in the wool business owned by her father. A year later they moved into their own apartment, and she fell in love with another man (a married couple they had befriended). Her mother insisted she stop seeing the other man, and she took an overdose of sleeping pills. She saw a psychiatrist and stayed with Kayo.

In 1950, during the Korean War, Kayo joined the naval reserves and he was shipped overseas. She began having meaningless affairs: “When he’s gone I want to be with someone, I want lights and music and talk. When I say running I don’t mean running from something, but something I express by action—people, people, talk, talk, wanting to stay up all night, no way to stop it. I don’t really want to have an affair with anyone, but I have to; it’s the quality of action. I first had this feeling, I suppose, when I was dating, after Kayo went into the service. Pound, pound, pound heart: makes me feel crazy, out of control” (26-27).

Anne became pregnant in 1952, and gave birth to Linda Gray Sexton in 1953. They bought a house with her mother’s help. Kayo became a traveling salesman in the wool business.

Their second child, Joyce Ladd Sexton, was born in 1955.

Anne was not a good mother: “Anne Sexton learned to love her children deeply after they had grown up enough to offer care in exchange, but looking after them during their infancy brought her to the brink of madness. She had a hard time coping with the physical and psychological demands of Linda’s babyhood; the addition of newborn Joy to the household intensified her difficulties” (31).

She was diagnosed with post-partum depression and prescribed medication: “Sexton’s psychological state took a definitive turn for the worse five months after entering treatment, when she developed a morbid dread of being alone with her babies. She was able to pinpoint the occasion on which this fear overtook her: it was March 1956, near Easter, when Kayo was away on his first long business trip. In the background was Sexton’s parents’ recent move to Annisquam, a fashionable seacoast town forty miles northeast of Boston. Joy was about seven months old, and had croup. A neighbor sat with the children while Sexton went to a party with the wife of one of Kayo’s business associates. ‘I came home late and heard Joy choking, like a dog barking. She couldn’t breathe!’ Sexton later recalled. ‘I ran in and turned on the shower (for steam), then spent the whole night in the bathroom with her, thinking she was gong to die.’ Joy recovered, but Sexton didn’t recover from her fears for the children’s safety. From then on, whenever Kayo left home on a trip that would keep him away overnight, she would stop eating and grow weepy, fearful, and listless” (31-32).

She also became negligent, and then became violent with Linda: “Her self-preoccupation made it hard to pay proper attention to Linda, whom she decided to put in the nursery school run by a nextdoor neighbor, just a few steps from the Sexton’s back door. On Linda’s first day Sexton showed her the way, but then she began seeing her off with a wave rather than taking her to nursery school by the hand. It was several days before she discovered that Linda, shy and fearful of strangers, had been hiding in the garage all morning. Increasingly, Sexton became prone to episodes of blinding rage in which she would seize Linda and begin choking or slapping her. In later life she recalled with great shame a day she found Linda stuffing her excrement into a toy truck and as punishment picked her up and threw her across the room. She felt she could not control these outbursts, and began to be afraid that she would kill her children” (32-33). Her in-laws stepped in to help, and she was sent to Westwood Lodge for three weeks, where her father had been treated for his addiction.

After Anne’s discharge, Linda was sent to live with Anne’s sister for five months, and Joy spent the next three years living with Kayo’s mother.

At age 28, Anne got worse, and overdosed on barbiturates. She called her mother-in-law after she took the pills, and spent three more weeks in rehab: “I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can’t build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I

was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself' . . . She was now officially 'sick,' quite possibly 'insane.' She took on the role of patient, which she did not abandon for the rest of her life. The family in turn began to adjust to an illness with symptoms of unpredictable, irresponsible behavior that required long-term treatment, which was both expensive and uncertain of results" (35).

She didn't feel she could function when Kayo was away: "I am so alone—nothing seems worth while—I walk from room to room trying to think of something to do—for a while I will do something—make cookies or clean the bathroom—make beds—answer the telephone—but all along I have this almost terrible energy in me and nothing seems to help. . . I sit in a chair and try to read a magazine and I twirl my hair until it is a mass of snarls—then as I pass a mirror I see myself and comb it again. . . Then I walk up and down the room—back and forth—and I feel like a caged tiger" (36).

Her psychiatrist encouraged her to write: "At her first interview with Dr. Orne back in 1956, Sexton had told him that she thought her only talent might be for prostitution: she could help men feel sexually powerful. He countered that his diagnostic tests indicated she had a good deal of undeveloped creative potential, and he later proposed that she might try to do some writing about her experiences in treatment. This might help others with similar difficulties to feel less alone, he suggested" (42). She seemed encouraged, but in May 1957 she tried to kill herself again: "A few months later Sexton's suicidal thoughts returned, and the little strengths she had been cultivating in therapy withered under renewed onslaughts of self-disgust. On 29 May 1957 she attempted suicide again. Dr. Orne met her at the hospital, Sexton later recalled, and told her, 'You can't kill yourself, you have something to give. Why, if people read your poems (they were all about how sick I was) they would think, 'There's somebody else like me!' They wouldn't feel alone.' This was the message Sexton called her turning point: 'I had found something to do with my life'" (43).

She enrolled in poetry class, and attended therapy regularly. In 1957, she developed an alter-ego Elizabeth, and either remembered or made up an incestuous relationship with her father. She also engaged in an affair as Elizabeth. Elizabeth was everything Anne wouldn't allow herself to be. She also often lied in therapy.

In 1959 she met Sylvia Plath in Robert Lowell's poetry class. They became friends, and would go out for drinks and compare their suicide attempts. She also met Adrienne Rich at a party hosted by Lowell. According to Rich, "I remember feeling that suddenly there was this woman whom Lowell and people around Cambridge were talking about, this woman who was going to publish a book called *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. I would never have acknowledged it at the time, but I felt threatened, very competitive with her. There was little support for the idea that another woman poet could be a source of strength or mutual engagement. I think I suspected – and not because of some profound character defect in me—that if she was going to take up space, then I was not going to have that space. I didn't expect her to be such a knock out—tall,

tan, wearing white, and looking very gorgeous. And I gathered that she didn't think of herself as an educated person, didn't think of herself as an intellectual. It was as if she was thrown into a room full of Harvard types and literary critics and so on: all these super-achieving people" (110-111).

Sexton's mother died of cancer in 1959, followed by her father's death from a stroke later in that same year. In 1960, she found out she was pregnant. She wasn't sure it was Kayo's, and convinced him she wasn't healthy enough to have another child; she sought an illegal abortion.

Later Life

In 1960 she also published *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. It was nominated for the National Book Award. She began to do public readings – performance art with a band backing her up. She also drank heavily. During this time she also met and became friends with writer Maxine Kumin.

The relationship with her husband became violent, and he entered therapy. He got his violence under control, and she missed it: "I can no longer act it out with Kayo—he no longer beats me. Therefore I start dreaming about it and it's clearer to me: when I feel depressed I keep wanting to hurt myself, but he no longer does it. I need to be punished, then forgiven. Never realized he was actually doing this for me" (156).

Her second book was *All My Pretty Ones*, and it was again a commercial success. Even though Anne was not formally educated, she was much more successful during her life than Plath was.

Sexton was intensely affected by Plath's suicide in 1963: "The news of her death plunged Sexton into reverie about their conversations all those years ago, which she distilled into a poem titled "Sylvia's Death" and later expanded into a memoir. ...Plath's death saddened Sexton, but it also roused her own death wish, never far below the surface....Sylvia Plath 'had the suicide inside her. As I do. As many of us do. But, if we're lucky, we don't get away with it and something or someone forces us to live'" (199-200).

Sexton went on Thorazine for awhile, but found she couldn't write while on it. She continued to have numerous affairs. In 1964 she started seeing a new therapist and even had an affair with him. Then she attempted suicide again, an acting out she later depicted in "The Addict."

She published *Live or Die*, and won a Pulitzer for it in 1967. Then came *Transformations*, *The Book of Folly* and *The Death Notebooks*. She left Kayo in 1972. She made two more suicide attempts and engaged in numerous other romantic involvements. She became a heavy drinker. Anne Sexton then took her own life in 1974. After lunching with Maxine Kumin, she drove home. "In the peace of her airy kitchen she poured another glass of vodka to sip while she phoned her date for the evening and changed the hour of their meeting. She seems to have talked to no one else, and she wrote no notes. She stripped her fingers of rings, dropping them into her

big purse and from the coat closet she took her mother's old fur coat. Though it was a sunny afternoon, a chill was in the air. The worn satin lining must have warmed quickly against her flesh; death was going to feel something like an embrace, like falling asleep in familiar arms. Fresh glass of vodka in hand, Sexton let herself into the garage and closed the doors behind her. She climbed into the driver's seat of her old red Cougar, bought in 1967, the year she started teaching. She turned on the ignition and turned on the radio" (397).