

From Anne Sexton to Her Daughter, Linda

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Abstract: “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” and “Pain for a Daughter”—two poems in Anne Sexton’s book *Live or Die* that were written as messages for the sake of her daughter, Linda—present opposing attitudes towards existence. While praising life in the former, she eulogizes a darker side of the same subject in the latter. In consideration of such content, this paper analyzes the two poems to cast light on the antagonistic emotions affecting the poet when faced with self-inflicted ultimatum to make a final choice between life and death.

As the title of Anne Sexton’s (1928–74) third collection of poems, *Live or Die* (1966), so aptly alludes, the suicidal poet was determined to make a personally imposed choice between the two basic alternatives regarding existence available to her—to remain alive in the world of the living or to take the action that would allow her to leave it according to her own timetable. In fact, the title chosen for this collection of her work derives from lines in an early draft of her friend Saul Bellow’s (1915–2005) novel *Herzog* (1964)—lines which Sexton includes in the epilogue:

With one long breath, caught and held
in his chest, he fought his sadness over
his solitary life. Don’t cry, you idiot!

Live or die, but don’t poison everything. . . . (ii)¹⁾

This message had such an effect on Sexton that some of the poems in the collection celebrate life and being alive while others reveal a desire to welcome death which was an unseen but pervasive presence that found its way not only into her mind, but also into her lines. This fluctuation between continuing existence or else ending it all is a vital characteristic of *Live or Die* according to Caroline King Barnard Hall.²⁾ This is further given credence through a careful examination of the poems possessing similar motifs or audiences. That being the case, the express purpose of this paper is to analyze the two poems addressed to her daughter, Linda Gray Sexton (1954–), in *Live or Die* so as to carefully and with consideration illuminate both the affirmation of life and the morbid attention given to death.

“Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” is a birthday poem penned when Sexton’s elder daughter, Linda, was eleven. As well as rejoicing Linda’s perceived growth, the speaker-poet implies a motherly apprehension concerning her daughter’s future:

My daughter, at eleven
(almost twelve), is like a garden.

Oh, darling! Born in that sweet birthday suit
and having owned it and known it for so long,
now you must watch high noon enter—
noon, that ghost hour.

Oh, funny little girl—this one under a blueberry sky,
this one! . . . (62)

Linda, the poet’s physical rather than literary creation, has thrived to reach eleven years of age as if she were, in fact, a “garden” nourished in such a way as to experience growth in the soil of maternal love. Symbolizing childhood purity, morning is slipping away to be followed by “high noon”—a term juxtaposed in this instance with the “ghost hour” which is ordinarily suggestive of midnight and therefore implies darkness, uncertainty, and potential trouble. It is revealed that the mother feels concern that her daughter is approaching the teenage years which will eventually lead to adulthood with its plethora of troubles. At the moment when one cycle in the garden achieves completion, the next cycle commences tinted by impending dark shadows of life. The sky that was so clear and bright fades away only to be replaced by one that is “blueberry” colored in such a way that the “funny little

girl” faces the cessation of that youthful period of life distinguished by its purity and safety.

Depicting the transition of the eleven-year old girl from her previous childhood state to the life of a teenager is the imagery of little plants:

Or I think even of the orchard next door,
where the berries are done
and the apples are beginning to swell.
And at once, with our first backyard,
I remember I planted an acre of yellow beans
we couldn't eat. (62)

Even if the garden—in this instance Linda herself—retains at that moment a relative state of innocence, it is pointed out that various uninvited threats to wholesomeness could possibly issue from the neighboring orchard where “the berries” of grown-ups’ logic flourish and “the apples” that could provide her with the knowledge of evil are ripe. Even her mother is an accomplice in this possible eventuality due to the fact that she filled an acre of the garden with “yellow beans” which are already beginning to wither so that they are totally unable to supply sustenance to her daughter. Here, then, is a reference possibly signifying Sexton’s belief that mental illness contributed to her being, in her own mind, a bad mother responsible for the emotional and physical abuse she brought upon her child. Or else, it is simply a motherly caution to her daughter to prepare her for the menacing facets of future life. Either way, the “garden” with its acrid crop of “yellow beans” is not a “secret garden” that can magically be revived by children in the manner of the dreamy world of the well-known novel *The Secret Garden* (1909).³⁾ It is considered that whatever it is will gradually be assimilated into the practical and sometimes malicious ideology of adult existence.

And yet, the speaker goes on to urge her daughter to confront maturity and enjoy it comfortably even if it appears frightening and unfavorable before actually being experienced: “Let high noon enter— / the hour of the ghosts” (63). Women at the beginning of the Sixties in twentieth century America were still liable to the strictures of a male-centered society in such a way that the actualities of adult life could be quite hard on them. Men were metaphorically compared to “young Romans” who were “bare to the waist” (63) at midday—dominant beings able to assault women both physically and emotion-

ally whether or not such attention was originally welcomed by the women themselves. The changes in appearance that Linda was going through at eleven were—according to the poet—preparation for initiation to female sexuality eventually making possible the bodily union with men:

Oh, darling, let your body in,
let it tie you in,
in comfort.
What I want to say, Linda,
is that women are born twice. (63)

At birth, a female child is a new life destined to mature and eventually give the gift of life to the next generation. As one who has experienced a renewal of life at the result of giving birth to Linda, Sexton feels a newfound strength as a mother within herself. The very act of giving birth caused her to feel that the mind is inseparable from the body—that together they provide not only a sense of unity, but also become the fountainhead of life energy. Unfortunately, the poet’s mental condition eventually made it necessary for her to leave her young daughter in the care of relatives. That she was traumatized and filled with guilt as a result of this can be perceived in the italicized lines: “*Oh, little girl, / my string bean, / how do you grow?*” (63). With these same words, however, the poet is expressing amazement at the seemingly quick and dynamic growth of her child from an “embryo” (64) in her womb into a girl already exuding the aura of womanhood. In the wonder at the nuances of life, the mother encourages her daughter to appreciate her body that “is telling the truth” (64)—the truth about what life is. In this manner, Sexton, “an old tree in the background” (64), is willing to pass the baton of young womanhood to her precious daughter who in turn sprightly attempts taking a step forward away from her past and into her future.

This poem was written at a time when a huge amount of Anti-Vietnam War demonstrations were taking place throughout the USA. This included the Boston area where Sexton resided. Among the demonstrations held in that area was a read-in at Harvard’s Sanders Theater to which Sexton was invited for a poetry reading. To the surprise of the other participants, Sexton read the poem “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” whereas other poets—such as Robert Bly (1926–), Galway Kinnell (1927–), and Adrienne Rich (1929–)—read protest po-

ems political in nature.⁴⁾ Why she did so had to do with the relationship she enjoyed with her daughter. Linda was Sexton's "string bean" who was in the midst of the process of ripening – an ongoing development that held her mother-poet in its thrall. In the real world outside of the "garden" of childhood, Linda would – as she went forward carried upon the stream of life – encounter such negative facets of existence as misunderstanding, jealousy, hatred, and death. At that moment of time, however, the circumstances surrounding her were as yet so beautiful and pure that her mother was drawn into a mother-daughter celebration of life. Though the Vietnam War clearly represented suffering and death to most others, Sexton's focus at the time was elsewhere. It was, in fact, upon her daughter. As a result, her reading at the Sanders Theater had a surprising effect on the members of the audience who deeply craved a cease-fire followed by peace and a tranquil, untroubled life. Sexton's "string bean" became for them an inspiration for life over death.

On the other hand, the poem "Pain for a Daughter" is a disturbing portrayal of the dismal side of life facing her daughter as she grew. The poem starts with the scene where Linda carries on an all night vigil for her sick horses:

Blind with love, my daughter
has cried nightly for horses,
. . . .
tending this summer, a pony and a foal.
She who is too squeamish to pull
a thorn from the dog's paw,
watched her pony blossom with distemper,
the underside of the jaw swelling
like an enormous grape.
Gritting her teeth with love,
she drained the boil and scoured it
with hydrogen peroxide until pus
ran like milk on the barn floor. (83)

The use of the expression "Blind with love" possibly indicates a degree of strong motherly concern – perhaps even jealousy – on the part of the poet due to the fact that she feels the pony and the foal are monopolizing her precious "string bean's" attention to the extent that her daughter undergoes serious suffering. And yet, because Linda proves herself mature enough to take on the responsibility of nursing these equine patients, Sexton gives her overall

approval to the situation. Unfortunately, the outcome is death in spite of all the young woman's attentions. After that, Linda – "Blind with loss all winter" (83) – makes regular visits to the neighboring stable to go horseback riding. Going there can be considered to have been an attempt on her part to erase the sad memories and feelings of loss that were assailing her. Nevertheless, she is never able to successfully overcome them.

Meant to be a comfort to assuage a young lady's distress, a thoroughbred then enters her life. Unfortunately, it is so big, powerful, and full of energy ("the flaming horses" [83]) that it cannot be managed. As a result, it becomes yet another source of deep pain and anguished suffering. The chains formed from such painful links cannot be severed:

Blind with pain she limps home.
The thoroughbred has stood on her foot.
He rested there like a building.
He grew into her foot until they were one.
. . . .
three toenails swirled like shells
and left to float in blood in her riding boot. (83–4)

During these painful episodes, Sexton – the speaker of the poem – is unable to find the means to take an active, supportive part and is, therefore, relegated to the role of simply being an observer of her daughter's misery. In fact, the basic message conveyed by this poem is that not any of the motherly care and comfort offered is able to undo what has happened to Linda.

In the last stanza is a portrayal of what will befall a pregnant Linda one day in the future:

Blind with fear, she sits on the toilet
her foot balanced over the washbasin,
her father, hydrogen peroxide in hand,
performing the rites of the cleansing.
She bites on a towel, sucked in breath,
sucked in and arched against the pain, . . . (84)

At the beginning of the poem, the poet's daughter is "Blind with love." Later, she is beset by the onset of "pain" while experiencing a sense of "loss" from the accident caused by her beloved equines. Even after that physical "pain" disappears, the remnants of fearful suffering continue to plague her throughout her life bringing ever new bouts of "fear" – the current one being caused by the approaching moment of childbirth. Having treated her

equine patients with “hydrogen peroxide” earlier in her existence, this adult woman – who is on the verge of delivering a new life – becomes in turn the patient being treated with the same antiseptic. As a mother herself, Sexton well understands that she can be of no practical help in these circumstances. Neither can her husband who can only act to disinfect his daughter’s body in a futile effort to lessen her pain and fear. The result is that Sexton merely “stand[s] at the door, eyes locked / on the ceiling” (84).

Experiencing the physical pain of delivery, Linda cries out “*Oh my God, help me!*” (84). This utterance is not an appeal to her mother who experienced the same type of fear long before when she herself went through childbirth. Rather, “Oh my God” is a commonly used expression when experiencing strong emotions, fear, or pain, and is not usually intended to imply one is actually seeking to communicate with the Almighty. For Sexton, her daughter’s utterance has such an impact that it leads to her remarking: “Where a child would have cried *Mama!* / Where a child would have believed *Mama!* / she bit the towel and called on God” (84). It must be understood that this particular remark – in spite of its appearance – is not a reprimand. Neither does it even signify the mother might be upset she is not being turned to for help at such a moment by her daughter. Shocking, however, is the concept that even one’s mother is relatively powerless to help overcome the fear that can arise in such a circumstance. It is also distressing such a situation results in a child becoming aware that there are limitations to a mother’s capabilities. Incorporating these thoughts, the poem comes to an ominous ending:

I saw her torn in childbirth,
and I saw her, at that moment,
in her own death and I knew that she
knew. (84)

In “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman,” Sexton praises childbirth as a second chance at bring forth new life. In “Pain for a Daughter,” on the other hand, she links childbirth to death. In other words, the poet’s “string bean” is full of the energy of life in the first instance of childbirth while in the second instance the offspring is fatally destined to eventually die. The awareness of the inevitability of death presents a mournful moment for both the mother and daughter. Indeed, the ending of “Pain for

a Daughter” is depressingly gloomy.

The daughter is appreciative that her mother “had spoken frankly of her death, of the loneliness of the life she had led”⁵⁾ in the letter she received when she was sixteen but was written to “the 40-year-old Linda.”⁶⁾ The poem “Pain for a Daughter” can also be considered in a similar light as it honestly discloses experiences with pain and fear when Sexton loved someone or something too much, when she lost beloved ones, when she felt betrayed, when she was subject to despair, when she was bedridden with illness, when she suffered injuries, when she underwent childbirth, when she genuinely realized the inevitability of death, and when she recognized the reality that nobody could help her to survive her own life. In “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman,” Sexton suggests that she will remain at her daughter’s side to provide support in the manner of “an old tree in the background.” However, in “Pain for a Daughter” this position changes when she proclaims that such assistance for living is impossible. The final decision of this American poet who took her own life when she was only forty-six was to choose to believe the principle delineated in “Pain for a Daughter”: pain and fear can be understood but can be neither comforted nor alleviated by anyone else. She embodied her own words in the ultimate form and departed from this world.

In this way, the poems “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” and “Pain for a Daughter” written by Sexton for her daughter present totally opposite attitudes concerning life and death. And yet, both sides of the argument are truthful opinions of the poet expressed in differing circumstances. That there are conflicting ideas, opinions, and beliefs is a conspicuous factor in the book *Live or Die*. Referring to the quotation from Saul Bellow’s novel at the beginning of that collection, Philip McGowan claims that “the binary choice of Bellow’s advice becomes for Sexton a title with an imperative to action: either to live or to die, but not just to exist in passive acceptance or inert indecision.”⁷⁾ In this book, she made use of some very fancy footwork to dance around opposing poles of thought in order to discover the right answer – for her – without becoming “passive” or “inert.” The two poems discussed here are good examples of the agony she suffered to be able to achieve the right “action.” In her quest to reach the correct decision about

whether to live or to die, her frantic voice continues to confer with all readers – particularly with her daughter, Linda.

Notes

- 1) Anne Sexton's lines quoted in the discussion are identified by the pages of the book *Live or Die* (Boston: Houghton, 1966) given in the parenthesis within the text.
- 2) See Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne-G. K. Hall, 1989), 54–72.
- 3) See Frances Eliza Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (London: Campbell, 1993).
- 4) For the details, see Diane Wood Middlebrook's *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 295–7.
- 5) Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994), 6.
- 6) Ed. Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (Boston: Houghton, 1977), 424.
- 7) Philip McGowan's *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief* (Contributions to the Study of American Literature 16, Westport: Praeger, 2004), 49.