

Title: 'Those times' : politics, culture and confession in the poetry of Anne Sexton

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Abstract: This thesis constitutes the first sustained attempt to situate the poetry of Anne Sexton in relation to postwar American politics. While there has been a recent resurgence of academic interest in the politics of mid-century confessional literature, the current crop of poetry scholarship throws focus on the work of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, and has hitherto neglected to examine the ways in which Sexton's creative praxis might be productively re-examined alongside contemporary critical theory and postwar political history. In the following chapters, I interrogate the received status of Sexton's poetry as psychic theatre and, demonstrate the terms-of its political engagement through a detailed analysis of its referential framework, which is, I argue, structured around key crises in postwar American history: the legacy of the Holocaust; the Cold War; the Vietnam conflict, and the rise of feminism. More explicitly, I explain how these historical paroxysms are registered in the metrical arrangements of Sexton's poems. Through reference to the work of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Cathy Caruth, I locate her writing within the psychoanalytic discourse of trauma, in which the traumatic event - though not perceived fully at the time of its occurrence - is unconsciously re-experienced, or 'acted-out', through the repetitive, compulsive, and automatic mechanisms of the subject's speech and behaviour. My thesis thus positions Sexton's poetry as a mode of acting-out, in which the socio-political upheavals of the twentieth century are not only expressed in directly referential terms, but are also woven into the formal fabric of the poetry itself. In addition, the following chapters show how the political lineaments of Sexton's poetry might be usefully illuminated through reference to the Cold War ideology of 'containment' and the interlocking, if vexed, economies of privacy, conformity, and contamination.

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Anne Sexton~ That's how I made it and that's how I'll keep it. If there are no paths, no one will ever find me, and I'll be safe. Anne Sexton And I have a funny feeling I am lost at this moment. -Anne Sexton Except I'm not. Because you are brave enough to come with me on my mental road trip to (k)nowhere. In a great many places and spaces in time, this is true. So simply perfect. I've never read something so fitting of myself as this. Sexton's poetry and her self are one and the same, not in the literal sense of absolute truth to life, but in the sense that her poetry is a means of working out her identity, and that identity, finally, is her poetry. We see the poet sometimes coming to terms with and sometimes defeated by her recalcitrant "dead disciples." In suggesting that the

quest for the truth of the self which she embarks upon is that of Oedipus, she sets up an identification with this archetypal figure that is reiterated many times in her poetry and prose. The mythical reference takes her poetry beyond the realm of individual confession and places it in a literary tradition of self-understanding. 3. that reaches back to Sophocles.