

## A feminist Reading of Anne Sexton's 'The Farmer's Wife'

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From the 18th century's Enlightenment up to World War II, many lonely voices cried out and vindicated the rights of women. John Stuart Mills, Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Stanton were some of those who realized women were a minor group, occupying a subserviant position in society. The echoes of these voices were finally gathered in The Second Sex, written by Simone de Beauvoir right after the War, in which she hypothesizes about why women have become subordinated. Because of the contents of her book, she is considered one of the precursors of what came to be known as feminist criticism.

Civil Rights movement in the United States and England awoke people's consciousness in terms of oppressed minorities, and was the background to the militant feminist movement - popularly known as "woman's lib".

Together with the political activism a new type of literary analysis emerged, enriched by Marxist, Freudian and sociological concepts, although it was not until 1970 that it took an organized form with the creation of the Modern Language Association's

Comission on the Status of Women.

Feminist criticism may be subdivided into three types of literary analysis, according to its final goal. The first one is concerned with the analysis of the images of women in texts, as portrayed by male authors. The second one deals with the examination of existing criticism of female authors, and the third one, called "prescriptive" criticism by Cheri Register, attempts to establish standards for what may be considered "good" literature from a feminist point of view.

Because it is concerned with how women are portrayed and/or considered with relationship to men intra-and extra-textually, feminist criticism questions human relationships. Thus, it is not just an academic exercise, but a political act.

Anne Sexton's "The Farmer's Wife" was chosen for the analysis in this paper for two main reasons: first, because of the modernity of its theme; second, because the author - much identified with the wife in the poem - was potentially a feminist.

Before starting the proper analysis, let us say a few words about the author and her work. Anne Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts, and grew up in Wellesley, where she attended local schools. At the age of 32, her life was such a complex series of events that she didn't really know what she wanted from it. She went for professional help and her psychiatrist advised her to write poetry. Having studied poetry at Boston University with Robert Lowell certainly helped a bit, but the truth is that writing out her problems soon proved a way of coping with them more easily. Her first collection of poems was written in that same year, 1960. And the poet was born.

Her work is deliberately rooted in her being a woman. Her poems tell about her love affairs, her children, parents, nervous breakdowns, an undisguised wish for destruction and death. In direct, almost rude words, she tries to depict raw, crude feelings before time, people or contemplation sooth or change them. Hers is the characteristic attitude of modern poets in face of poetry: for her, poetry must come out as it is, free, natural, perhaps even imperfect. "Poetry must be a shock to the senses, it must almost hurt", said once Anne Sexton.

When she committed suicide in 1974, the literary world had :

its attention caught by the work of this artist, which includes 10 books of poetry and one in prose (letters).

In spite of the confessional tone and private experiences of her poems, one cannot say Anne Sexton writes of the individual, but rather of what is universal and pertaining to all people. Or at least to all the female side of humanity.

### The Farmer's Wife

From the hodge porridge  
of their country lust,  
their local life in Illinois,  
where all their acres look  
like a sprouting broom factory, 5  
they name just ten years now  
that she has been his habit;  
as again tonight he'll say  
honey bunch let's go  
and she will not say how there 10  
must be more to living  
than this brief bright bridge  
of the raucous bed or even  
the slow braille touch of him  
like a heavy god grown light, 15  
that old pantomime of love  
that she wants although  
it leaves her still alone,  
built back again at last,  
mind's apart from him, living 20  
her own self in her own words  
and hating the sweat of the house  
they keep when they finally lie  
each in separate dreams  
and then how she watches him, 25  
still strong in the blowzy bag  
of his usual sleep while  
her young years bungle past

their same marriage bed  
and she wishes him cripple, or poet, 30  
or even lonely, or sometimes,  
better, my lover, dead.

1959

1960

A farmer and his wife are well-known characters in modern American literature because of America's great agricultural power. Also well-known is the situation of male supremacy and female submission, especially before the militant feminist movement of the 60's.

The farmer's wife depicted in this poem by Anne Sexton is not different from the other wives portrayed in great part of the prose of the period. The farmer and she live in a prosperous region of Illinois, where they grow either corn or wheat successfully ("... all their acres look / like a sprouting broom factory", lines 4 and 5). Their marriage has already lasted for ten years, but this doesn't necessarily mean that they are happy together. Man and woman are different in this poem, and this is the main point here. Their differences start to be hinted at in the very first line with the expression "hodge porridge", which is a pun to another expression, "hodge podge" (the accent of some country people may cause the two to be pronounced the same). "Hodge podge" is a mixture of dissimilar ingredients. "Porridge" is boiled oatmeal, usually eaten with milk, a very common breakfast dish in America, especially in the countryside. The farmer and his wife are married and live together, and this is just as common a scene as boiled oatmeal eaten with milk. This metaphor is explored more deeply because of the context in which it is found: "From the hodge porridge/ of their contry lust", lines 1 and 2. Although living together, although "mixture" like oatmeal and milk, although their lust - not love, but raw, wild country lust - binds them together, they are dissimilar in essence.

The first difference evidenced is the role each one plays within the family. The husband is the head of the family, the wife is subserviant. Male supremacy is stated in words like "heavy god" (l.15) and "still strong" (l.26), and also when it is said that "...she has been his habit" (l.7), a fact that both

acknowledge - "they name..." L.6.

The wife is submissive, she does what the husband wants her to do (lines 8 to 11):

as again tonight he'll say  
honey bunch let's go  
and she will not say how there  
must be more to living

And he, in turn, treats her kindly, as we can see in lines 14 and 15: "the slow braille touch of him/like a heavy god grown light". The intense conotation of the adjective "heavy" reveals much of the common thought of what a powerful, dominant man must be like: of relatively great weight and stature, oppressive, rude, violent, hard to deal with. When they go to bed to make love, though, he grows "light", he is not rude anymore, but mild. "the slow braille touch of him" means that he tries to respect her physically, both by touching her softly and by choosing to make love in total darkness (most men, and specially uneducated ones, feel that the woman can be embarrassed by his seeing her naked body or vice-versa).

He tries to be a good husband and she responds to this by being obedient and submissive. In spite of this, or perhaps exactly because of this, monotony is installed. "habit" (L.7) and "as again" (L.8) are some expressions for the monotony of their relationship, especially of their sexual relationship, as it is strongly emphasized in "that old pantomime of love" (L.16) meaning that sex for them is always a sequence of the same rehearsed gestures. It is not a reason, though, for her to reject him, because she wants his affection (L.17). But their differences hinder a complete union during the act, as well as before and after it: "it leaves her still alone" (L.18), "mind's apart from him" (L.20).

In lines 18-29 are some key words to the understanding of what the quintessential difference between them is: "mind's" (L. 20), "her own self" and "her own words" (L.21), "separate dreams" (L.24). The wife is aware of the state of stagnacy of their life together. She realizes that all they have could be better ("... there/must be more to living", L. 10 and 11), but there is no real communication between them ("and she will not say...", L.10). Notwithstanding, she has her own ideas, her own words, her own dreams, her identity. The only way to cope with the situation of

not being able to develop her potentialities fully, as she sees "her young years bungle past" (L.28), is to pretend she is happy living like that: "they finally lie/each in separate dreams" (l. 23-24). Although the context leads us to read "lie" as synonym for "to lay", the homonymous meaning of "not to say the truth" becomes evident.

The wife is also able to see the whole situation with detachment (lines 25-27):

and then how she watches him  
still strong in the blowzy bag  
of his usual sleep...

His unawareness of her as an individual being ("sleep") is already a part of him ("usual") and encloses him completely ("blowzy"). Nevertheless, he remains the powerful ("still strong"). This reveals exactly what the conception of the roles of men and women was at the time Anne Sexton wrote this poem.

The wife cannot change her situation.

So, she thinks. And "she wishes him cripple" (l.30), for maybe then the husband could share suffering; "or poet", for him to have enough sensibility to perceive her inner feelings; "or even lonely" (L. 31), so that her absence could show him how important she is; "or sometimes, / better, my lover, dead" (l.31-32), because only death could end that relationship of dependence established by society, and only then she could be really free.

The strenght of these lines undoubtedly lies on their close interpretation of the reality of the lives of many, not to say the majority of women before the militant feminist movement of the 60's. The farmer's wife is unable to evolve out of her subserviant role as a result of the whole social situation. In spite of this, she is not only aware of her individuality, but also of her husband's unawareness. Potentially, she is "self", and he is "other".

She is the "silent woman". However, her stifled cries for liberty joined all those that were being heard for over two centuries, and together they developed into the American women's movement.

The farmer's wife might have died chained to her subordinate position - just like her author, Anne Sexton, probably did. But they have undoubtedly helped pave the way for other women in the world to achieve, in a very near future, the freedom they have ever deserved.