Masters Essays

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Spring 2016

A RHETORIC OF SUICIDE: AUDIENCE AND THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON AND SYLVIA PLATH

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AUDIENCE AND THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON AND
SYLVIA PLATH

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Deirdre E. Byrne
2016

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A Rhetoric of Suicide: Audience and the Confessional Poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia

Plath

Images of death pervade the pages of Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's poetry.

For instance, in "Flee on Your Donkey," a poem mirroring Anne Sexton's personal

experience in a mental institution, the speaker reflects on how she once "pretend[ed to

be] dead for eight hours" outside her psychiatrist's office (128). Similarly, in Plath's

"Tulips," a poem developed during the author's lengthy hospital stay,[1] the also-

hospitalized speaker professes, "I have wanted to efface myself" (48). In these poems,

both speakers imagine ending their lives by their own hands. Indeed, the language within

the poems constitutes a rhetoric of suicide. This rhetoric presents a romantic depiction of

death, which the speakers want to embrace. Yet, when we analyze this rhetoric of

suicide, we encounter diction, which reflects the internally wounded, and deeply isolated

authors.

This rhetoric of suicide allows Plath and Sexton to transfer their private feelings

of anguish into a public arena, meaning audiences reading their poems can sympathize

with these previously private, internal pains. Incidentally, because the images of death in

poems like "Flee on Your Donkey" and "Tulips" resemble Plath and Sexton's respective

deaths by suicide, critics warn readers against analyzing Plath's and Sexton's poetry in

alignment with their biographies. In his essay "The Language of Apocalypse," Robin

Peel contends that although many readers enter Plath's and Sexton's poems already

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[1] According to Plath's spouse, Ted Hughes, two weeks after Plath suffered from a miscarriage on 6 February 1961, she returned for another two-week stay in the hospital to have "an appendectomy" operation (in Wagner Martin 182-183). During her stay in the hospital, she "received a 'first reading' contract from *The New Yorker*, which meant she was to send all her new poems to that magazine" (in Wagner-Martin 183). As a result, Plath spent much time in the hospital composing poems, such as "Tulips," for this publication.

knowing the two women killed themselves, this knowledge limits readers (174). Despite

Peel's claim, I maintain the aforementioned parallels that link the poetic images of death

to the authors' actual lives cannot be ignored. The "fictive 'I'" [2] speaking in "Flee on

Your Donkey" and "Tulips" echoes the suffering which Plath and Sexton experienced in

their real lives. Thus, Plath and Sexton free themselves from their private suffering by

projecting said suffering onto their public audience within their writing.

This semi-autobiographical style of poetry, which allows Sexton and Plath to mull

over their innermost pains in the writing process, has become a formal school of poetry.

In 1959, M. L. Rosenthal read *Life Studies*, a book of self-reflective poetry by Robert

Lowell—the former Boston University poetry professor to Sexton and Plath—and then

labeled Lowell's style of poetry as "Confessional" (Thurston, par. 4; Britzolakis 3). Soon

after, Plath and Sexton became associated with this label since their poetry invokes

personal experiences. Moreover, their poetry reveals a speaker grappling with

experiences typically regarded as taboo, such as death and suicide. Chris Baldick sees

these autobiographical tensions with taboo issues as essential for recognizing a

confessional poem. He defines confessional poetry in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary*

Terms as,

> An autobiographical mode of verse that reveals the poet's personal
>
> problems with unusual frankness … The term is sometimes used more
>
> loosely to refer to any personal or autobiographical poetry, but its

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[2] I borrow this term from Toni Saldívar's text, *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self*. I maintain that the fictive "I" in Plath's and Sexton's text does not serve as an accurate depiction of Plath's and Sexton's selfhood, but instead, the "I" constructed in their texts serves as a metaphor for their own individuality (4-5). Saldívar sees this "I" as searching for connection. She suggests the "metaphoric image of self depends on … the relation of 'I' to Other—to another subjectivity" (4). As I will demonstrate later in this essay, Plath and Sexton yearn for a connection with another subjective presence that relates to their personal subjectivity. They try to develop this type of connection through writing.

distinctive sense depends on the candid examination of what were at the time of writing virtually unmentionable kinds of private distress (67). Confessional poetry does not simply *confess* the author's personal experience, but instead, it takes a taboo internal conflict, and—through writing—places this taboo topic into a public arena, where readers can consume the conflict.

Through addressing taboo topics like suicide in their poetry, Plath and Sexton attempt to provoke a response from readers. The authors also hope to gain validation through these reader responses. In *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Christina Britzolakis sees Plath as intentionally manipulating her audience into empathizing with the speaker within her poetry. Britzolakis suggests that Plath's poems—and I would suggest Sexton's poems as well—"implicates the reader in a psychic drama" (6). In many of the poems, the speaker—or fictive "I"—addresses "you," which, by my estimation, allows Plath and Sexton to "implicate" audiences into their own private angst. When "you" enters Plath's and Sexton's poems, the fictive "I" manipulates "you" into seeing death as *ideal* and, therefore, an experience not to be feared. Additionally, when Plath and Sexton "implicate" the audience into their poems, this audience then enters what Steven Gould Axelrod calls—an "autobiography of crisis" (3). Upon entering this crisis, the audience identifies with the respective speaker's internal pain. I maintain that *confessing* romantic depictions of death allows Plath and Sexton to feel validated by readers, who outside of their written works may not understand the inner workings of a mind contemplating suicide.

In this paper, I argue that Plath's and Sexton's poetry constitute a rhetoric of suicide in which both poets appear to romanticize images of death in their writing. They

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do so, not only because they feel isolated from their respective communities and peer groups, but also, because—as suggested in their confessional poems—they seek readers who understand their inner torment. These readers—at least for Sexton since she lived to see her work recognized by the general public—empathize with the fictive "I" developed in the confessional poems. Using the rhetorical and cultural theories of Wayne C. Booth and Michel Foucault, I suggest that a confessional poet's wounded "spirit"—or inner psyche—cannot be restored through the "confessional" writing genre, since it prevents these internally distressed writers from making genuine connections with a group of people who could help them feel less isolated. Instead, these tortured and lonely poets further isolate themselves through the use of their fictionalized "I." This "I" ultimately grants the audience the authority to view the authors' real self as their constructed "authorly" self.

In making this argument, I explore how confessional writing connects to the rhetoric of suicide. Drawing from the theories of Booth, Foucault, Britzolakis, Jeffrey Berman, Diana Hume George, and Anne Sexton's biographer, Diane Middlebrook, among others, I demonstrate how Plath and Sexton felt a deep sense of isolation from their communities. Here, I examine how the idea of *confession* allowed the two poets to form a connection with their readers; a connection they hoped would allow these readers to empathize with their feelings of anguish. Since Booth points out, however, that an "implied author" serves as a "second-self," the readers cannot entirely empathize with Plath and Sexton on a personal scale; instead, they merely empathize with a persona of the authors. To illustrate this concept, and to show how Sexton's poems link suicide to rhetoric, I analyze her works "Sylvia's Death," and "Wanting to Die." Next, I examine

how Plath's poem, "Daddy," implicates her readers into her poem. However, her readers render the poem's "I" unstable, thereby preventing Plath from making genuine connections. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the similarities and differences between how these two authors address a rhetoric of suicide in their poetry.

Methodology

To frame this argument, I draw from theories of sexuality and confession from Michel Foucault, and theories of authorship from Wayne C. Booth. Specifically, I use "Part 3: Scienta Sexualis" of *A History of Sexuality* and Chapter 3, "All Authors Should be Objective" from *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault unpacks what he argues is the "truth" behind sex. He claims that various social institutions—government, schools, churches, etcetera—have constructed the concept of *sexuality* as a means of issuing control over others; he questions why a human instinct has become a marker of one's identity. Since Foucault posits that confession drives the construction of sexuality as an identity marker, this explanation of confession in "Part 3: Scienta Sexualis," is particularly germane to my argument. Here, Foucault argues that Western culture continues to value confession as a means of producing "truth" (legally, religiously, and morally). However, confession automatically puts the *confessor* in a submissive role to the *confessant*, since the confessant has the ultimate decision in how they interpret a confession.

In addition to Foucault's arguments about confessions, my paper also draws from Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. In this book, Booth claims that, while an author can choose to "disguise" oneself in fiction, the author "can never choose to disappear" (20).

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Specifically, in Chapter 3, "All Authors Should be Objective," Booth focuses on what he defines as an "implied author," or an author's "second self" created in one's text. Booth suggests that readers "[distinguish] between the author and his implied image" in order to "avoid pointless and unverifiable talk about such qualities as sincerity' or 'seriousness' in the authors" (74). I complicate this idea by pointing out how Sexton seems to want her audience to interpret her fictive "I"—or "second self"—as representative of her identity. Yet, ultimately, as we shall see in Plath's poems, interpreting the "I" in confessional poems as the authors' actual self problematically creates a false sense of connection between readers and the poet.

Overall, both Foucault and Booth provide theories that allow me to understand how audiences come to comprehend the *confessional writing* genre. They also allow me to understand how audiences challenge Plath's and Sexton's authority in maintaining control over determining their text's purpose.

Literature Review

Most recent scholarship on Sexton and Plath revolves around issues of audience, suicide, and notions of confession. More specifically, this scholarship tends to concern itself with how the label "confessional" limits audiences into viewing Plath's and Sexton's fictive "I" as an actual depiction of the authors' selves. Much of this scholarship informs my understanding of how Plath and Sexton *involve* their readers in their poetry by using an authorly persona, which then leads me to question how readers come to construct the authors' identity. Here, I review four scholars' works, which I use to substantiate my argument concerning how Plath's and Sexton's poetry constitutes a

rhetoric of suicide: Christina Britzolakis's book *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Jeffrey Berman's text *Surviving Literary Suicide*, Diana Hume George's essay "Anne Sexton's Suicide Poems" and Diane Middlebrook's biography of Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. These four works provide context about how Plath and Sexton practice confession as a means to build connections with their readers. In this literature review, I provide an overview of these four texts and reveal how these scholars contribute to my argument.

To understand how Plath and Sexton intentionally attempt to form connections with their readers, I look again at Britzolakis's text *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*. In this book, Britzolakis argues that the theatrical elements in Plath's poems place the reader within the center of the speaker's crisis. By applying this scholarship to my essay, I demonstrate how the rhetoric of suicide in Plath's and Sexton's poems is romanticized as a way for the poets to form a connection with their audiences. However, since the authors have created a fictive version of themselves by means of confession, they actually become more isolated. The audience wields the authority to reduce the author to a narrow persona, which thwarts the confessional author's goal of creating a compelling selfhood.

Berman's and George's text helps us understand how Plath and Sexton employ a rhetoric of suicide in their poetry to construct a fictional persona in their writing. In *Surviving Literary Suicide*, Berman examines the consequences of "suicidal writers" writing about suicide, and he makes suggestions about the proper way to address suicide in literature by drawing on his experiences as a teacher. Since Berman has taught many literary works addressing suicide, he tries to help his students see the author in a more

"human" context. He therefore tries to help his students recognize the internal pain that potentially impacted the authors' written works. While my paper does not focus directly on whether or not writing about suicide influenced Sexton's and Plath's death, Berman's work proves invaluable for me. It provides helpful analyses of Sexton's and Plath's "suicide poems." Specifically, I draw from Berman's analysis of Sexton's poem "Wanting to Die," which examines how this poem reflects Sexton's own private suffering.

Diana Hume George's essay "Anne Sexton's Suicide Poems" analyzes how the depictions of death in Sexton's poetry allows Sexton to connect with her readers because, through her poetry, she brings a seldom discussed, taboo topic—suicide—to the forefront. Her analysis of Sexton's suicide poems, specifically "Wanting to Die," demonstrates how Sexton implicates readers into the center of this poem, and how readers then enter into the mind of an individual contemplating suicide. Ultimately, both Berman and George inform my understanding of Plath's and Sexton's rhetoric of suicide. They provide helpful analysis concerning how Plath and Sexton romanticize images of death in their poems, while also revealing how authors who engage in this practice tend to suffer from some form of personal distress.

Finally, to understand what *confession* actually meant to both Sexton and Plath,[3] I refer to Diane Middlebrook's comprehensive biography of Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. This biography details Sexton's upbringing in a dysfunctional family where her alcoholic father verbally abused her, and her mother—a fellow writer—was jealous of Sexton's talents. Moreover, it details the strife that arose in Sexton's marriage to

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[3] In terms of how a biography about Sexton relates to Plath—more specifically—this text details of Sexton and Plath's friendship that developed when they were both Lowell's students at Boston University.

Alfred "Kayo" Sexton as she garnered more fame from her work. Throughout their

marriage, Anne Sexton was physically abused, and, incidentally, she also had multiple

sexual partners, and she even molested her own daughter. Before Sexton's poetry even

became acclaimed, one aspect of her personality remained consistent: Sexton was

infatuated by the idea of suicide. On multiple occasions, she attempted suicide, and as a

result, she was repeatedly institutionalized and legally separated from her two daughters.

In unpacking all of this information, Middlebrook plays an integral role in providing

contexts specifying Sexton's purpose for writing many of her poems.

This biography benefits my argument because it provides a truly authentic

depiction of Sexton. For instance, the book features insight from professional

consultations between Sexton and her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne. Orne preserved

his conversations with Sexton, occurring from 1961 to 1964, on audiotapes because she

struggled with her memory, and recalling important information. Orne felt that recording

their consultations would assist Sexton in adhering to their treatment plans. Orne even

writes the "Forward" to this biography and notes he eventually moved to a different clinic

and, as a result, lost Sexton as his patient. He reveals that Sexton's last psychiatrist

before her death insisted that Sexton stop meeting with her because she grew tired of

Sexton's antics: at this time Sexton abused substances, she was dangerously

promiscuous, and she therefore had little contact with her friends and family. *Anne

Sexton: A Biography* opens with Orne lamenting, "Sadly, if in therapy Anne had been

encouraged to hold on to the vital supports that had helped her build the innovative career

that meant so much to her and others, it is my view that Anne Sexton would be alive

today" (xviii). This provocative statement suggests the preventability of Sexton's death

had she sustained her close relationships and support system. Orne's forward also informs my understanding of Sexton's inner psyche, in terms of how she wrote poetry to free herself from private angst.

Overall these works help us understand *why* images of death pervade throughout Plath's and Sexton's poetry. They also help us realize that Plath and Sexton constructed these images of death to help readers understand the inner workings of their minds. However, the images may not serve the intended purposes of their respective authors, even when audiences do come to sympathize with them. The aforementioned critics reveal how the fictionalized versions of the authors actually prevent Plath and Sexton from forming a genuine connection with their audiences.

Confessional Writing and the Rhetoric of Suicide

In this section, I connect Foucault's understanding of confession to Sexton's and Plath's rhetoric of suicide. Since their rhetoric of suicide reveals an inwardly damaged poet, I examine how "confession" appears to grant Plath and Sexton a means to connect with others. Thereafter, I introduce Booth's ideas concerning an "implied author," and I maintain that by composing a semi-autobiographical fictive "I," Plath and Sexton create an unstable version of their actual self, which prevents the authors from forming genuine connections with readers. I thereby argue that this construction of an implied author within Plath's and Sexton's texts fabricates a meaningful connection between the readers and the real author (the real author being Plath or Sexton).

Writing about death in the context of confession seemingly grants audiences the ability to understand Plath's and Sexton's private anguish. While many individuals view

suicide as taboo,[4] the "I" speaking within Plath's and Sexton's poems attempts to connect

with the readers, earn their empathy, and produce a truth revealing *why* Plath and Sexton

romanticize suicide: as two internally conflicted individuals, they feel deeply isolated by

others in society. Thus, as Foucault points out, the practice of "confession"—be it

religious, legal, or moral[5]—connotes an image of unity between two or more people:

typically the confessor and the confessant. This unity allows the confessor to feel

cleansed of any private guilt by professing this private guilt to another individual.

Moreover, this unity prevents the confessor from feeling isolated and imprisoned by her

own private guilt and anguish. Perhaps, then, Plath and Sexton also view confession as

an essential "[technique] for producing truths" that they can relay to their readers

(Foucault 60). Rather than feeling alone in their yearning for death, Plath's and Sexton's

poetry attempts to provide audiences with a destigmatized understanding of suicide.

The language conveyed through a rhetoric of suicide, which reveals the poets'

deep sense of loneliness and isolation, ultimately connected with audiences in the post

world-war twentieth century. Britzolakis explains that the depictions of suicide in Plath's

and Sexton's poems resonated with readers during this time since Americans were also

conflicted with their personal distress. She maintains that "[t]he theory of confessional

poetry was underpinned by a diagnostic sociocultural narrative" (3). Plath and Sexton

were not the only individuals suffering in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of their readers

identified with their poems because they too had been experiencing private anguish.

Understandably, during this time suffering overwhelmed Americans due to the Korean

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[4] In Diana Hume George's 1984 essay "Anne Sexton's Suicide Poems," she points out, 10 years after Sexton's death that American culture would rather focus on "the sanctity of life" than address issues of suicide (212).
[5] Foucault explains: "one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts, and desires, one's illnesses and troubles" (29).

War, a racially segregated society, the Vietnam War, President John F. Kennedy's

assassination, debates on feminism and contraception, and more. Thus, Britzolakis

suggests that the confessional writers' "recovery of the first-person speaker was supposed

to manifest itself in a new willingness to disclose autobiographical details and to make

rhetorical analogies between the speaker's psychic history and a collective history" (3).

The semi-autobiographical "I" within Plath's and Sexton's poetry was not merely entirely

indicative of their entire selfhood, though. Since many readers identified with this fictive

"I," readers could interpret the "I" as a larger, collective self. Consequently, although

confessional poetry successfully provided an outlet, which allowed more individuals to

discuss suicide, Plath and Sexton had to cede authority over the notions of selfhood in

their writing, since audiences interpreted the "I" speaking in their poems in various ways.

Although Plath and Sexton wrote confessional poetry to make sense out of their

private anguish, the "I" that serves as an emblem for their private anguish also resembled

an unstable depiction of Plath's and Sexton's identity. Regardless, Plath and Sexton still

felt that employing romanticized images of death in their writing granted them a sense of

stability because they believed writing allowed them to convey truthfully their frustration

toward life. To illustrate, a 1959 journal entry by Plath reads, "If I could once see how to

write a story, a novel, to get something of my feelings over, I would not despair. If

writing is not an outlet, what is it?" (qtd. in Berman 136). Writing allowed Plath to

believe she was freeing herself from inner anguish by projecting her anguish onto a

fictive "I" within her poetry. However, the problem remains that an "implied author"

within a text—or a fictive "I"—can never truly be indicative of a poet's entire selfhood.

Booth suggests that "regardless of how sincere an author may try to be, his [or her]

different works will imply different versions [of oneself], different ideal combinations of norms" (71). Indeed, the confessional poet's semi-autobiographical "I" can never fully represent a "sincere" version of Plath or Sexton. Instead, the "I" represents differing aspects and personas, which seem suggestive of the author's actual self.

When readers interpret the poet's invented poetic self, as the poet's authentic self, they unknowingly impede Plath and Sexton from finding one's place in a community. Although Plath and Sexton attempt to use confessional poetry as a way for people to understand their notions of selfhood, the "I" constructed in Plath's and Sexton's poems paradoxically indicates various differing personas, which merely symbolizes the authors' identity. I would compare a confessional poet's fictive "I" to Booth's "implied author" (70) since the "I" allows Plath and Sexton to "[discover] or [create] themselves as they [write]" (71). Booth considers an "implied author" within a literary work to be the author's "second-self" constructed in the writing. Since this "self" is constructed in writing, it cannot entirely indicate an author's selfhood. As such, rather than making a connection with Plath and Sexton themselves, readers of Plath's and Sexton's poetry that empathize with the "I" speaking throughout the poems only make connections with Plath's and Sexton's second self.

By using language to discern personal identity, Plath and Sexton become limited in portraying their individualities, since language only *depicts* reality. Although adhering to the *confessional* writing genre appears like it will grant Sexton and Plath access to the truth, and the ability to connect with others, realistically this idea of confession only illustrates a depiction of truth. Foucault describes the act of confession as an "infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself … a truth [that] the very form of the

confession holds out like a shimmering mirage" (59). By *shimmering mirage*, Foucault

means that the truth that confession supposedly brings about, realistically, turns out to be

somewhat of a delusion for the poets. Incidentally, if language represents the truth, but is

not truth itself, the poet's invented self within the poem is merely indicative of the poet's

actual identity. In other words, the poet's second self cannot truly bring them a

connection with other individuals. Thus, identity cannot be fully realized without treating

language as a metaphor, which represents the purpose of any idea, concept, or theory.

These linguistic metaphors within confessional poetry unify readers to particular poems,

because the poems can connect to the readers' inner psyche and make the audience regard

the written poetic word as a representation of *their* selfhood, as opposed to *the poet's*

selfhood. By personalizing a text, the audience gradually erases authorial intent and

inscribes new meaning onto a writer's words.

A Rhetoric of Suicide in Sexton's Confessional Poems

In this section, I analyze Sexton's poems, "Sylvia's Death" and "Wanting to Die,"

to show how both poems feature elements of this rhetoric of suicide, elements that lead

the speaker to regard suicide as a romantic experience. This section also addresses how

Sexton's poems feature an inherent "obligation to confess" in the hopes that confession

would provide Sexton a connection with her readers (Foucault 60). I maintain that this

"obligation to confess" also reveals a deeply wounded author seeking validation. Since

confession grants an illusion of a connection between writer and readers, I demonstrate

how the problem with *confessing* in writing is that the writer becomes the "subject of the

statement" that they transfer from their private inward selves onto their public audience

(Foucault 61). I argue, that since Sexton's confession leads her to be submissive to the confessant, the connections she makes with her audience are somewhat illusive because audiences are not connecting with Sexton; instead they connect with an "implied Sexton."

Through a means of confession, Sexton transfers her innermost tormented feelings onto her poetry to make sense of her pain. To illustrate, Sexton's poem "Sylvia's Death," written within a week of Plath's actual death by suicide in February 1963, reveals a speaker who privately yearns for suicide. In the poem, the speaker confronts "Sylvia," asking,

> how did you crawl into,
>
> crawl down alone
>
> into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
>
> the death we said we both outgrew (Sexton 16-19).

Previously, the two friends—the speaker and "Sylvia"—publically declared they "outgrew" their interest in suicide. Here, however, the speaker sounds conflicted by Sylvia's death since Sylvia's actions of *crawling into* death appear inconsistent from what the two friends verbalized to one another. The speaker's tone comes across as envious, as she admits that she too *wanted* death *so badly*. The rhetoric of suicide conveyed in this poem allows the speaker to privately convert her own inner suffering to a public arena, with the hopes of cleansing herself from private torment.

This rhetoric of suicide, depicted as something powerful, has brought the two friends together. Interestingly, although the speaker seems envious of Plath's death, she also pines for something else: the mutual understanding of death, which she and Sylvia

shared. The speaker reminisces about the many ways that the two friends were brought together by *death*: they felt they "wore [death] on [their] skinny breasts" (Sexton 20); they would "[down] three extra dry martinis in Boston" (22) "[drinking] to" death (25). The casual rhetoric of suicide found in these passages not only trivializes the act of dying to some degree, but also indicates its continual presence in Sexton's and Plath's consciousness. Since both of these authors suffered from mental illness, they found comfort in the ability to have open and casual conversations about the taboo topic of suicide. In fact, the casual rhetoric of suicide in this poem eventually expands beyond private talks between Plath and Sexton and creates a sphere in which readers could have an open dialogue about suicide.

"Sylvia's Death" indicates that, by connecting with others who understand and empathize with the experiences of the fictive "I," Sexton could restore her own "wounded self." Unfortunately, such positivity is short lived: Jeffrey Berman points out that this poem does not "give any reason why suicide should not be resisted" (175). Despite Berman's reading, I argue that Sexton does not intentionally advocate that suicide provides a viable solution for one suffering from private angst. Instead, Sexton demonstrates how empathy may help to heal a person's wounded psyche. In "Sylvia's Death," Sexton offers an empathetic "reader response" to Plath's literary suicides. Although this poem suggests that Sexton envies Plath, this suggestion does not necessarily imply that Sexton literally wanted to die. However, the notion of death and dying still strikes her as romantic, and depicting it through a romantic lens helps people to empathize with her situation. The speaker calls to the dead Sylvia,

And I say only

with my arms stretched out into that stone place,

what is your death

but an old belonging,

a mole that fell out

of one of your poems? (Sexton 52-57).

To grieve the loss of her friend, Sexton employs a lighter rhetoric of suicide, one that emphasizes the idea of community through the mention of "old belonging." She realized that the "implied author" in Plath's poem had depicted death positively, so in this poem she congratulates the poetic Sylvia on achieving death.

Berman disagrees with this more hopeful reading of Sexton's work and comments, "Sexton's pro-suicide poems implicate the reader in the poet's suicidal crisis, and by portraying death as more attractive than life, they may prove disturbing to those at risk" (xx). As a reader of Plath's poems, Sexton had empathized with her honest depictions of death and suicide. After Plath's death, Sexton maintained that meaningful relationships with other individuals allowed a person to preserve their vitality. She explains, "[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" (qtd. in Middlebrook 200). This poem serves as a reader response from Sexton to Plath, giving a final validation of Plath's "suicide poems." Indeed, by rhetorically confessing a romantic depiction of suicide throughout their poetry, these two poets generate readerly responses with the hope of gaining control over their selfhood.

Sexton's acquaintances attempted to help her gain control over her self. In her biography on Sexton, Middlebrook explores how writing provided Sexton a means for understanding her private anguish. For instance, Sexton's therapist Dr. Martin T. Orne looked for a skill that the author could develop since he realized that part of her personal duress stemmed from her own lack of confidence. "It is difficult to communicate fully how pervasive Anne's profound lack of self-worth was," Orne reflects. "[She was] totally unable … to think of *any* positive abilities or qualities within herself," says Orne (*Anne Sexton: A Biography*, xiii). Orne saw it as his role to "help her develop any resources within her which allowed her to be a person, and allowed her to form relationships on a healthier basis than before" (qtd. in Middlebrook 43). Once Sexton indicated her interest in writing to Orne, he suggested, "she might try to do some writing about her experiences in treatment" since it could "help others with similar difficulties feel less alone" (Middlebrook 42). He encouraged this skill more than anyone else had ever encouraged her before, and he helped her sign up for her first poetry workshop. Writing poetry helped Sexton realize how she could channel her feelings of strife.

By *confessing* her troubles to an audience, Sexton felt others finally understood her, and that she was a part of a community. Sexton even considered writing poetry as her "life's calling." After she attempted suicide on 29 May 1957, Sexton remembers Orne telling her at the hospital, "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" (qtd. in Middlebrook 42-43). Orne's comments to Sexton led her to reflect on the potential connections she could develop with her audience. She realized that having people read her work might

potentially help them feel they too had someone they could relate to. Middlebrook

claims this moment provided Sexton with a revelation. Sexton exclaims, "I found

something to *do* with my life" (qtd. in Middlebrook 43). By *confessing* her own

tumultuous and troubled experiences with an audience, Sexton finally felt less isolated.

       The rhetoric of suicide, which Sexton creates in her poems, appears romanticized

because she, herself, saw life as unbearable and was professing her honest opinion. In

her actual life, Sexton constantly felt lonely and isolated. She saw suicide as an escape

from life and therefore a chance to be reborn. Yet, as she continued writing and her

audience engaged with her poems, Sexton felt it was acceptable to continue writing about

her troubles. In "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience," Alicia Ostriker

asserts that Sexton saw readers

> as potential intimates, and consequently potential sources of pain, much as
>
> she sees the other beings who populate her poems, whom she needs to
>
> need her; Sexton's vocation as a poet was determined to an extraordinary
>
> degree by an assumption of an dependence on readerly empathy (160).

Confessional poets approach their poems hoping that they can use language to create

empathy between the writer and the audience. Sexton, for instance, felt her readers

connected with her torment. However, realistically the readers were only empathizing to

Sexton's "second-self" within her poetry.

       Readers could identify with this "second-self" because the language of Sexton's

poems invites the readers in conversationally to help them understand her feelings. For

instance, in Sexton's poem "Wanting to Die,"[6] as the "implied author," she reveals how

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[6] Sexton initially wrote the poem in response to her friend Anne Wilder, who asked Sexton in 1964 what her attraction to dying was all about (Middlebrook 215). The fact that Sexton *literally* wrote "Wanting to Die" as a response to a real person, but published it later

she sees life as unbearable. "Wanting to Die" begins with the speaker addressing "you"

which immediately implicates readers into the text, thereby creating an intimacy between

the reader and speaker: "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember. / I walk in my

clothing, unmarked by that voyage. / Then the almost unnamable lust returns" (Sexton 1-

3). This poem begins by placing readers in the center of a confession, in which the poet

responds to the reader's presumed question: why would the poet want to die? The

speaker answers this question with no definitive answer, and describes the idea of

wanting to die as an *unnamable lust*, indicating that the desire to die is an addiction. As

the speaker continues to explain this "addiction," readers start considering the downsides

to life. The speaker says,

> Death's a sad Bone; bruised, you'd say,
>
> and yet she waits for me, year after year,
>
> to so delicately undo an old wound,
>
> to empty my breath from its bad prison (Sexton 24-27).

The reference to "life" paradoxically confines the speaker, as the speaker compares life to

an image typically associated with "death": *a sad bone*. On the other hand, Sexton

presents death as a romantic experience in this poem. Death patiently and willingly waits

for the speaker; death seemingly will save the speaker from life's imprisonment. Berman

points out that, here, the speaker's "lust for death enlivens the otherwise dreary nature of

quotidian life. The speaker cannot be dissuaded from her attraction to death despite the

addressee's resistance" (177). Indeed, while the language in this poem clearly

romanticizes images of death, analyzing the rhetoric of suicide in this section allows us to

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for a general audience, further reveals Sexton's efforts to involve her audience, and free herself from personal anguish through a means of readerly connection.

see an emotionally damaged speaker. Incidentally, it appears the point of addressing

"you" in this poem, and implicating the audience into the poem, is so that the audience

will begin empathize with Sexton's fictionalized self.

By implicating the audience into her poem, and allowing readers to see

themselves in conversation with an implied author, Sexton's readers understand her inner

strife. In "Wanting to Die," the speaker admits that "suicides have a special language /

Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*. / They never ask *why build*" (Sexton 7-9).

Here, Sexton's fictive self professes that she considers herself *different* from other

individuals. Yet, "special" suggests that the speaker does not view this difference

negatively. Suicidal individuals never really question why they are suicidal, but rather

they willingly enter into action. As such, this *language* of a suicidal individual appears

more action-based than language-based. For instance, Diana Hume George explains that

Sexton must reject traditional culture's rhetoric of "life" as something worth preserving.

George suggests that, "if [the hearer] is to enter into the linguistic universe of the suicide,

[he or she] must begin to see that for the suicide, killing oneself is a kind of building, a

kind of creating" (218). Here, George insists that Sexton paradoxically creates a

"positive" rhetoric of suicide in this poem. Berman agrees with George's reading and

asserts Sexton's depiction of suicide-as-life grants her "the ability to cheat suffering by

becoming the agent of her own destruction" (Berman 178). Suicides share this

understanding that suffering can be cheated, and Sexton's use of the rhetoric of suicide

allows the poet to connect to her audience in order to feel less isolated. By implicating

her readers into this poem, Sexton helps readers understand the "special language" shared

amongst suicides.

For Sexton, confession provides a means to produce truth, much like Foucault says that Western society does; really, though, the problem remains that Sexton's "I" only represents a persona of herself, meaning readers connect with a fictive version of Sexton, rather than the authentic Sexton. Although Sexton believes *confessing* liberates her from anguish, paradoxically, Foucault suggests that confessing automatically places the confessor in a submissive role to the confessant: "agency … does not reside in the one who speaks" (64). While Sexton's rhetoric of suicide represents an incomplete representation of the poet's "self," Sylvia Plath's "I" is also unstable. The next section demonstrates how, although Plath wants to connect with her readers in order to feel less isolated, the use of writing to develop these connections only increases her feelings of isolation. More specifically, Plath feels more isolated when readers interpret her fictive "I" as her actual self.

A Rhetoric of Suicide in Plath's Confessional Poems

This section explores how audiences responded to the rhetoric of suicide in Sylvia Plath's 1962 poem "Daddy." I chose to analyze "Daddy" because the "implied author"— or fictive "I"— within the poem reflects an unstable version of Plath's self. Since audiences seemingly connect with this unstable implied author, I suggest that Plath's wounded spirit never truly heals through her writing process. Again, drawing from Booth's argument of implied authorship and Foucault's theories of confession, I maintain that readers "inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who" projects a "second self" onto their writing (Booth 71). I show that the choices Plath makes in her poetry influences audiences to view the fictive "I" as Plath's actual self. Therefore, the readers'

"reaction" to the author's second self—or in this case to the poet's fictive "I"—"help[s] to determine our response to the work" (Booth 71). Although Sylvia Plath's "I" in her poem "Daddy" seems particularly unstable, the general public's reaction to this unstable identity only continues to create more of a distance between the actual author (not the author's fictive "I") and the audience.

Like Sexton, Plath started writing confessional poetry to free herself from anguish, and also to develop connections with other individuals. After the death of her father, Otto Plath, Toni Saldivar describes the young Sylvia Plath as internally wounded. Nevertheless, Plath's ambition to pursue writing took off under these circumstances. Saldívar notes that on the morning of 5 November 1940, once Plath's mother informed young Sylvia about her father's death, the "[e]ight year old Sylvia, already reading in her bed, vowed 'never to speak to God again,' but her reading increased, almost obsessively, as her childhood diaries show, and the poems started coming" (8).[7] Plath's interest in writing took off at a moment she felt more alone than ever: not only did she feel isolated by her father, but she also felt isolated by her faith.

The poem "Daddy" reveals how the death of Otto Plath consumed Sylvia Plath's mind and increased her private torment. "Daddy's" speaker reflects, "I was ten when they buried you. / At twenty I tried to die / And get back to you" (Plath 57-59). The speaker in this poem reveals how the isolation she felt after her father's death[8] continued consuming her mind into adulthood, so much, that the internal isolation prompted her to

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[7] According to Saldívar, Otto Plath had been dying ever since Plath was four years old, likely from "undiagnosed diabetes" (3). The Plath children never truly had an opportunity to grieve Otto Plath's death, since their mother, Aurelia Plath did not allow the children to see their father's corpse or attend the funeral service. Saldívar claims that after Otto Plath's death, "[he] was not anywhere for [the Plath children] except in the past, and so their love for him remained there so" (3).
[8] The differences between Plath and the speaker in this poem are clear: speaker was ten when her father died, whereas—as noted previously—Plath was eight years old when Otto Plath died. Still, this clearly serves as a semi-autobiographical poem, but this biographical inconsistency further reveals the *fictiveness* of the semi-autobiographical "I" speaking in the poem.

attempt suicide. Notably, the speaker in this poem does not necessarily reiterate Plath's

personal desire for death. Instead, the speaker concludes, "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard,

I'm through" (Plath 80). Although earlier in the poem the speaker portrays death as a

romantic escape, which allows her to unite with her deceased father, the poem ends with

this empowering proclamation, determining that the speaker now sees herself as *through*

with her father. This proclamation indicates that the speaker will no longer allow the

memory of her father to crowd her thoughts. Indeed, the rhetoric of suicide, here, reveals

a poet—Plath—employing a "second self"—or fictive "I" in her poetry to *process* her

own personal anguish.

For Plath, this rhetoric of suicide connects to Booth's argument about the "second

self," or "implied authorship." Booth points out that many authors strive to maintain

complete *objectivity* in their writing (67). In other words, authors often try not to allow

their biases or personal values to interfere with the characters or narration present in their

fiction. Yet, Booth maintains, "no author can attain to this kind of objectivity" (68). All

authors, in some manner, inevitably project their own biases into their writing. As a

result, Booth argues that all authors, to some degree, construct a "second-self" in their

writing. This second self, or "implied author," "chooses, consciously or unconsciously,

what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the

sum of his own choices" (Booth 74-75). The manner in which Plath composes

"Daddy"—revealing the anguish and isolation she suffered after the death of her father—

reflects an intentional *choice* made by Plath, a *choice* to employ a semi-autobiographical

style of writing. This *choice,* then, leads readers to interpret the "I" in "Daddy" as Plath's actual self.[9]

The importance of the "second self" and the fictive "I," which illustrates this rhetoric of suicide, emerges strongly in Plath's poem "Daddy." Since the "I" speaking in "Daddy" reflects Plath's personal experiences, individuals reading the poem may interpret this "I" as Plath's actual self. Readers interpret the "I" as an embodiment of Plath's identity because Plath made an artistic *choice* to ground her poems in personal experience. To illustrate, "Daddy" alludes to Plath's personal relationships with the men in her life: Otto Plath and her husband, Ted Hughes. The speaker claims to have not only killed her father—"Daddy, I have had to kill you / You died before I had time—" (Plath 6-7)—but she also claims to have killed the man she said "I do, I do" to in holy matrimony (Plath 67); hence, If I've killed one man, I've killed two—" (Plath 71). Realistically, Sylvia Plath never killed Otto Plath or Hughes. However, since this speaker—or "second self"—reflects a version of Plath's self, readers often assume (and understandably so) that this semi-autobiographical "second-self" mirrors Plath's actual self. Yet, conclusively, this "I" merely serves as a "persona" of Plath (Booth 72). This confusion tasks readers with having to "[distinguish] between the author and his [or her] implied image" (Booth 75). The problem remains, however, that since the "I" in the poem closely mirrors Plath's autobiographical experiences, readers often fail to distinguish between Plath's self and her fictive self. Consequently, readers do not end up

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[9] In other literary works addressing death and suicide, readers may not be so prone to interpret the works' speaker or protagonist as the author's actual self since a speaker or protagonist does not always embody the author's actual identity. An example of this lack of autobiographical-embodiment comes from Berman, who points out that many other authors, such as Kate Chopin, romanticize death in their works. Yet unlike Plath, the depiction of suicide in Chopin's work is not semi-autobiographical. In her 1899 novel, *The Awakening*, Chopin's protagonist Edna differs from Sexton and Plath's "fictive 'I'" in that Edna's death by suicide does not mirror Chopin's death. Chopin's death was not self-inflicted, nor did she appear to use the process of writing her novel to unpack or make sense of her internal pain (Berman 27). Readers of *The Awakening* will not necessarily base their assumptions about the author's actual self on the character Edna's persona because the narrator in the text is more removed from this persona.

empathizing with Plath's actual self, but instead find closure with this "second self" employed in "Daddy."

Though readers may feel a sense of connection with the "implied Plath," this connection increases Plath's feelings of isolation because readers mistakenly interpret the "fictive 'I'"—or implied author/second self constructed in "Daddy"—as Plath's actual self. In a 1962 interview with Peter Orr, Plath reveals that she does not even view her poems as entirely autobiographical, but instead, she claims they "come out of her sensuous and emotional experiences." Her poetry therefore reflects more of her private internalized anguish, rather than any external experience. Plath tells Orr,

> I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mini [sic] I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things.

This answer hints that Plath views "Daddy" as neither a reflection of herself, nor as a reflection of history; instead, "Daddy" reflects her psychological self in conflict with the community-at-large. The choices that Plath employs in "Daddy"—such as putting "you" in conversation with the fictive "I"— attempt to connect her personal anguish to "larger things" so her confession sounds more relevant to her readers. This rhetorical move

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employs *confessing* as a technique to develop connections with her readers and thereby earn their empathy.

Plath uses confession in her poetry to help her readers see beyond the second-self employed in her writing, and focus instead on the second-self's projected anguish within "Daddy." Ultimately, readers do empathize with the "second-self" in Plath's poetry. Helen McNeil reveals how "Daddy" generates "a duplicate of Plath's presumed psychic state in the reader, so that we re-experience her grief, rage masochism, and revenge." The *choices* Plath makes by implicating her readers into her poems certainly allows her readers to *feel* her anguish since the language of the poem places readers within the center of the action. To illustrate, Plath manipulates readers into understanding her personal strife, by writing "Daddy" so that it sounds like a children's nursery rhyme. This artistic choice encourages readers to view Plath as vulnerable and therefore empathize more with her pain. The speaker in "Daddy" says,

> You do not do, you do not do
>
> Any more, black shoe
>
> In which I have lived like a foot
>
> For thirty years, poor and white,
>
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo (Path 1-5).

Although denotatively the "you" addresses the speaker's father, hinting toward his influence in provoking her feelings of isolation (the speaker compares this isolation to *living* within a *black shoe*), the "you" may also intentionally include Plath's readers within this strife-bound world. In effect, readers begin to feel responsibility for the "implied Plath's" confinement over the past thirty years. I maintain that Plath's purpose

in making these *confessions* about her isolation, by applying this rhetoric of suicide to

"Daddy," was to allow the general public—or her confessants—to empathize with her

pain and thereafter validate her suffering. Yet, Plath becomes limited because although

the audience empathizes with the "second self," they focus *more* on this "second self"

speaking within the poem than they focus on the actual confession, thereby rendering

Plath's authentic self as unstable.

Rather than focusing on the *confession* within "Daddy," readers fall susceptible to

interpreting "Daddy's" fictive "I" as an authentic depiction of Plath. One of the

concerning the act of confession, according to Foucault, is that "the speaking subject is

also the subject of the statement" (61). Simply put, to readers—or to the confessants—

the fictive "I" speaking in "Daddy" functions as a means to comprehend the message

conveyed in the poem. Therefore, instead of attempting to understand the confession

within "Daddy," readers render a confession's meaning based on their understanding of

the *confessor*. As opposed to analyzing the confession, readers' awareness of Plath's

anguish becomes imperfect because they only view Plath as her poetic depiction of

herself. When readers accept a confessional poet's self-depiction in their poetry as the

poet's true self, this acceptance further perpetuates a tension between the poet and the

community, since the community fails to connect with the poet's private suffering.

In this section of the paper, I have shown, through the example of Plath's

"Daddy," that confessional poetry is not necessarily liberating. Rather, such poetry

enhances Plath's feelings of anguish. In demonstrating this negative effect, this section

illustrates the instability of the speaker's "I" and the instability of the response to this "I."

On the one hand, the unstable "I" reflects Booth's argument regarding how all authors

implicitly write a "second self" into their works. On the other hand, this audience reception resembles Foucault's confession by granting audiences the authority in determining how they interpret the confession, which they receive from the author. In "Daddy," therefore, Plath *confesses* as a means to discover truth. However, the power relation that Foucault identifies reinforces the idea that the confessors—Plath and Sexton—ultimately have no authority over their audience, or confessant. Although Plath may not want her poems to be read entirely autobiographically, her audience has the authority in determining how they interpret the text.

Audience Reception to Confessional Poetry: A Conclusion

Not unlike the work of current celebrities such as Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain, among others whose deaths gripped the public imagination, Plath and Sexton must be read with an understanding of surrounding social context. Their poems, which appear to glamorize suicide, give readers little choice but to connect their writing to the circumstances surrounding their deaths. In other words, one cannot listen to an Amy Winehouse lyric, such as, "They tried to make me go to rehab / I said, no, no, no" without considering the fact that this singer died from alcohol poisoning. Similarly, one cannot listen to Nirvana lyrics that resonated with the teenage angst in the 1990s and not consider the fact that Kurt Cobain committed suicide at the height of his fame.

Thus, this essay has unearthed the implications of writing about suicide, by framing this issue around the works of the Sexton and Plath as confessional poets. I maintain that these authors' writings cannot be read ignoring the authors' biographical reality, especially considering the semi-autobiographical nature of their writing. Drawing

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from Booth's work in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the *implied author*—or the "fictive 'I'"—developed in the poems mirrors the author's self in the poem. Yet this "self" is an unstable self, and therefore cannot truly grant the authors a meaningful connection with their audience. The general public who reads Plath's and Sexton's work is less likely to differentiate the "fictive" or *implied* version of Plath's and Sexton's self from the real, actual artist who developed the work. The challenge, however, is that Plath and Sexton's rhetoric of suicide reveals privately wounded artists who write poetry as a means of transferring their inner pain into a public arena to try and form connections with other individuals. Although the two poets attempt to connect with their audience, trying to earn their empathy, the audience only ends up empathizing with a fictive version of the respective poet.

Likewise, their use of confessional poetry also leads them further away from understanding their place within a community. Drawing from Foucault's arguments in *History of Sexuality*, this essay has demonstrated that the fictitious element of poetry can duplicate the poet's anguish onto a new imagined self within their poetry. Both Sexton's and Plath's confessional poetry addresses taboo topics, and this subject matter provides readers with an outlet to learn about these relatable—yet seldom discussed—subjects. As I have shown, confessional poetry's linguistic style allows for the readers to develop an interpersonal relationship with a poet. This union between the poet and readers allows readers to further empathize with the poet. Additionally, the themes in confessional poetry deal with traumatic situations, which relate to numerous audiences. Due to this universal appeal to one's self, readers frequently confuse the poet in the poem as the author of the poem. Ultimately, this confusion between the author's authentic self and

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the author's imagined and poetic self creates turmoil between the poet and the

community at large.

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