

Reproduction and the Female Body in Anne Sexton's Poetry

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Anne Sexton's oeuvre has most commonly been read as an example of "confessional poetry," a prominent trend in 1960s American literature that has been characterized as a poetic mode premised on personal self-revelation (see Lerner; Nelson). Laurence Lerner, who has significantly contributed to discussions on the confessional mode, claims that nobody was "more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton," consequently, "her name has almost become identified with the genre" (52). Critics approaching Sexton's writing along confessional lines repeatedly single out the disclosure of intimate emotional, psychic, and physical details as the most definitive aspects of her poetry (see especially Lerner 52). Since addressing "intimate" experiences in great detail was regarded in the 1960s as a controversial topic in poetry, literary historical accounts have portrayed Sexton as an iconoclastic poet who, by addressing theretofore "taboo" subjects, recalibrated poetic discourse. Thus, it is the inclusion of formerly "inappropriate" themes in poetry which is regularly foregrounded in assessments of Sexton's poetic legacy. Sexton's close friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin, for instance, highlights the significance of Sexton's novel way of approaching poetic topics in the introduction to Sexton's *The Complete Poems* (1981):

Sexton [. . .] broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring. She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry. (xxxiv)

Although Sexton's poetic achievement of representing previously excluded areas of experience in poetry has been appreciated by numerous critics, the confessional aspect of her writings has also invited a substantial amount criticism. One of the main objections to Sexton's confessional mode is that it is too limited. It has been suggested that by privileging the personal details of her life as opposed to traditionally accepted poetic themes, Sexton not only violated poetic decorum but also failed to address the political and social contexts of 1960s America (Holmes qtd. in Middlebrook 143).

Since the understanding of Sexton's poetry as confessional predominantly focuses on how she exposes states of mind, intimate physical

details, or psychic turmoil that are taken to correspond to her own personal experiences, biographical and psychoanalytic readings have dominated Sexton criticism. Although critics do appreciate Sexton's poetic craft, her ability to employ intricate rhyme schemes and stanza patterns (Holmes qtd. in Middlebrook 143), her formal expertise is usually contrasted with her subject matter which is seen as lacking or one-dimensional. What these interpretations do not consider is that far from indulging in narcissism, Sexton does engage with the broader context of ideological and socio-political concerns of her age. As opposed to the predominantly confessional interpretation of Sexton's oeuvre, I argue that in her poems about supposedly "intimate" experiences, it is possible to discern an awareness of and sensitivity to broader socio-political, historical, and medical discourses and frameworks. This essay will focus on Sexton's "In Celebration of My Uterus" and "The Abortion"—poems that are often cited to demonstrate that Sexton's main concern lies in revealing "shocking" details about the female body. In contrast to understanding the selected poems as merely confessional, my analysis of "In Celebration of My Uterus" and "The Abortion" will show that in these texts Sexton exhibits an acute awareness of the ways in which the female body is imbricated in socio-political contexts. The reading of "The Abortion" will build on Philip McGowan's more recent interpretation, which departs from an emphasis on the psychological aspects of Sexton's poems. While McGowan mainly focuses on the representation of geography and industrial spaces with relation to masculinity, my analysis considers tropes associating the natural landscape with fertility and domesticity. Furthermore, I contextualize the poem not only against the backdrop of (post)industrial masculine activity but also relate it to an environmental catastrophe which took place at the time of writing. Lastly, my analysis explores how the poem's rhetorical strategies raise questions regarding maternal and fetal personhood. As such, this analysis places "The Abortion" at the intersection of broader socio-cultural discourses and practices.

"In Celebration of My Uterus" and notions of (re)production

One of Sexton's most "notorious" poems about female reproductive capacities is "In Celebration of My Uterus," published in one of her most popular volumes, *Love Poems* (1969). The text interrogates how women's reproductive organ is conceptualized with reference to medical understandings of health and integrity, as well as how it relates to women's personal identity. One of the main concerns of the poem is the extent to which the health, or even the mere presence of the uterus contributes to the construction of women's subject position.

The occasion for celebrating not only the reproductive capacities of the womb but the very fact of its existence is that the speaker does not have to undergo a previously proposed hysterectomy. Addressing her uterus, the speaker situates herself in a sharp opposition to medical diagnosis: “They wanted to cut you out / but they will not” (181). Myra Stark describes the opening of the poem as the “consideration of a rejected part of the body ready for surgical excision” (244). Indeed, what is at stake on an individual level is the reintegration of a seemingly dysfunctional, wasteful, or superfluous body part into the speaker’s corporeality. The medical discourse the lyrical I aims to counterbalance defines her uterus as “immeasurably empty” (181)—devoid not only of an evolving life form, a fetus, but also of its reproductive capacities in general, by being “immeasurably” vacuous. According to the surgeons’ diagnosis, the womb is “sick unto dying” (181) thus, it is not simply a dysfunctional body part, but a source of contamination and threat to the overall health and life of the speaker.

The lyrical I deploys various strategies to challenge the idea that her uterus is dysfunctional and corrupting. She emphasizes that the organ is “not torn” (182) and aims to prove that her womb is an integral part of her body, which actively contributes to her general physical vitality. The speaker assigns “voice” to her uterus, which she, then, equates with the song of a schoolgirl. By framing the womb with reference to a stage of life when women are not only at the beginning, but at the height of their reproductive capacities, the poem challenges the idea of the dysfunctional nature of her uterus. At the beginning of the second and fourth stanzas, she also refers to her womb as a “sweet weight” (182). The emphasis on “weight” serves as a counterpoint to the supposed “emptiness” of the organ, while through prolepsis, it also evokes the image of the fulfillment of the reproductive capacities of a functional uterus, insofar as we understand the fetus as the “sweet weight” of a pregnant woman.

The first two lines, “Everyone in me is a bird. / I am beating all my wings” (181), connote not only vitality and functionality, but also the presence of an excessive multitude of life forms. The way this figuration is deployed in an argument attesting to the “legitimacy” and vitality of the organ in opposition to its putative emptiness and dysfunctional nature draws on the trope of the womb as an active, mobile entity. The image of the womb as a vigorous organ plays upon the idea of the uterus as an animal, a prevalent way of conceptualizing how the womb functions in pre-modern understandings of reproduction. Hippocratic writers referred to the womb as “an animal within an animal” (qtd. in Gilman et al. 118); and the mobile nature of the so-called “wayward uterus” was regarded as a force of corruption and the source

of all illnesses traceable in female physiology. According to Robert Con Davis, such claims about reproduction postulated that “the perverse independence of the female body [. . .] takes a kind of animal pleasure in violating its own order of health” (45). The conceptualizations of female corporeality which frame pregnancy as an illness position reproduction as a process which disrupts the normative operations of the body, and aligns it with images of monstrosity. As such, referring to the animalistic nature of the uterus as a strategy to prove its health is highly paradoxical: while trying to undermine the exclusive authority of medical discourse, the text reiterates centuries-old tropes of the womb and reproduction as forces of corruption and bodily disintegration. With this figuration, the poem also points out an inherent aporia in the medical construction of female reproductive functions: if the womb is regarded as dysfunctional, the overall health of the body is considered to be corrupted and threatened by disintegration, but even when this organ *is* seen as operating according to its prescribed functions, it subverts bodily integrity by its very nature. Thus, women can be considered to be excluded from a position of “health” and deprived of the possibility of possessing an unproblematically functional body.

The poem plays upon the paradoxical dynamic of health and pathology in numerous ways, employing the image of the healthy uterus as a constitutive part and, also, a guarantee of the speaker’s integrity. The lyrical I’s claim that she “dare[s] to live” (182) means not only that she (re)claims her (healthy) womb, but it also implies that her capacity to live comes from the animism and vitality of her reproductive organ. Referring to the uterus and its health as “the central creature and its delight” (182) further attests to this idea. In addition, the image of the reproductive organ as “the central creature” of female morphology subverts the conceptualization of a hierarchy of body parts, enmeshed in moralistic meanings and values. In terms of internal body parts, it is the heart that is most commonly positioned as the organ with utmost importance: not only does it provide the “life force” for the whole organism—in contrast with what this poem claims, the womb supplying the “vital spark” that is necessary for life—but it is bestowed with moral superiority too, represented as the locus of emotions, and serving as an ethical faculty. Besides being excluded from such a morally superior position, the womb is located in the abdomen, an area which is associated with inferior and morally more dubious bodily functions, such as digestion and sexuality, therefore, it is often regarded as a source of corruption, contamination, and sin. Thus, positioning the womb as “the central creature” of female morphology also means locating female morphology outside the value-laden economy of body parts in normative discourse. In this context, what the

speaker refers to as “delight” can be understood as what Davis calls the female body’s “animal pleasure in violating its own order of health” (45), as quoted above, which assigns a subversive capacity to the figuration mobilized in Sexton’s poem.

Challenging the conventional cultural tropes of reproduction and placing them in new contexts is a significant feature of the second half of the poem, which situates the reconstituted corporeality and identity of the speaker in a wider temporal and geographical context. Although the last lines of the second stanza, “Hello to the soil of the fields. / Welcome, roots” (182), seem to connote traditional metaphors of fertility, images of the landscape and agriculture are taken further in the following sections of the poem, and they situate the reproductive female body in the context of social, national, economic, and global concerns. In this framework, the life and vitality of the reproductive woman has special significance. As Stark points out, the first lines of the third stanza, “Each cell has a life. / There is enough here to please a nation” (182), build on the Whitmanian tradition of finding and appreciating life in every atom, and initiating a bond with every other member of the community based on this realization (243). Crucially, these lines also establish an alignment between the visceral vitality of the individual and the welfare of the nation.

In the second half of the poem, the reproductive female body is explicitly presented in terms of its correspondence with and contribution to the affluence of society. Not only do the respective lives of the speaker’s cells “please the nation,” but she is also depicted as being possessed by the larger society, as she claims that “the populace own[s] these goods” (182). This idea raises the question of the property rights and the role, or function, of the female body during pregnancy: in this figuration, the woman does not seem to have agency; she is only valuable insofar as she is fertile and carries a child. What is more, it is the populace that owns her uterus and, metonymically, her whole body, thus, she herself is positioned as part of the “goods” that the social body of the nation possesses.

The subsequent section of the poem further elaborates on the association between the fertile land that had been under the threat of corruption and contamination, and the woman who evaded hysterectomy and, thus, regained her reproductive capacity:

Any person, any commonwealth would say of it,
“It is good this year that we may plant again
and think forward to a harvest.
A blight had been forecast and has been cast out.” (182)

In this passage, the female body is metaphorically equated with a fertile land, evoking the traditional association of the feminine with nature. What makes this section more significant, however, is the idea that the speaker is represented in terms of economic production, providing supplies for the whole of society. In this construction, the people and the “commonwealth” have the authority to initiate the reproductive process, the woman/fertile land is only relevant in terms of its/her gestational functions.

The following section of the third stanza is based on the idea that regardless of their specific location and occupation, all women are connected through the celebration of their reproductive organs, since “one is / anywhere and some are everywhere and all / seem to be singing” (182). Thus, the poem constructs a sense of community between women across the world. The speaker enumerates various female figures in different geopolitical locations:

one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,
one is straddling a cello in Russia,
one is shifting pots on the stove in Egypt,
[. . .]
one is stretching on her mat in Thailand,
[. . .]
one is staring out the window of a train
in the middle of Wyoming[.] (182)

This section implies that the (bio)political and economic discourses evoked in the previous passage are operative not only on the level of a particular society or nation, but on a global scale too. The catalogue of women singing in celebration of their uteri is also significant because it further conflates the process of childbearing with economic production and providing supplies for the nation:

one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine,
[. . .]
one is dull at the wheel of her Ford,
one is at the toll gate collecting,
one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,
[. . .]
one is wiping the ass of her child[.] (182)

In this excerpt, looking after a baby is presented as being of equal value as activities that are commonly associated with enhancing the performance of

national economy: factory production—along with a reference to the symbol of American economic and engineering success, the Ford automobile—monetary transactions, and agricultural work. Thus, the text positions childrearing as an essential contribution to national success.

“In Celebration of My Uterus,” then, engages with the representational tradition of the reproductive female body to the extent that it draws on tropes of the vitalistic, wayward uterus, an image which positions female corporeality as unruly and monstrous in its disregard of solid corporeal boundaries. The disruptive capacity of the poem lies in repositioning the idea of the vitality of the speaker’s uterus as a feature which undermines medical diagnosis. The text also situates the process of producing new life in the wider context of national economic production. The focus on a broader socio-political, as well as geographical framework is significant because it challenges arguments that Sexton’s poetry is mostly motivated by narcissism and self-indulgence. “In Celebration of My Uterus” suggests that Sexton’s concern lies not in a solipsistic, self-centered revelation of intimate details, but in the exploration of how personal experience relates to wider cultural and social contexts.

Reproduction and the landscape: “The Abortion”

Recalibrating widely held conceptualizations of women’s reproductivity with reference to broader cultural frameworks is also a significant aspect of Sexton’s “The Abortion” (1962). While “In Celebration of My Uterus” is predicated on the speaker’s joy and relief that she does not have to have her uterus removed, the lyrical I of “The Abortion” willingly undergoes a surgical procedure that is supposed to regulate her fertility, which is constructed as excessive insofar as the pregnancy is unwanted. The poem charts the speaker’s journey to and from a surgeon who performs an abortion. The act of abortion is not described explicitly—instead, the poem focuses on the process of the journey and the description of the landscape. The cessation of the pregnancy is referred to in the text’s last line (“this baby that I bleed” [62]), as well as its refrain (“*Somebody who should have been born / is gone*” [61-62]), which is repeated before the first, fourth, and seventh three-line stanzas. While these references acknowledge the fact that the pregnancy came to an end, they do not necessarily imply that this was a deliberate act. The most overt allusion to the intentional nature of the cessation of gestation is in the fifth stanza, which states that the “little man” the lyrical I met in Pennsylvania “took the fullness that love began” (61). Apart from these brief indications of the termination of pregnancy, the transformations in the speaker’s bodily and

mental states can be traced in her description of the natural environment she witnesses as she drives to and from Pennsylvania.

The description of the landscape the lyrical I's journey leads through is charged with associations connoting various corporeal states. The first three-line stanza, preceded by the first refrain, situates the speaker's departure in the context of transformations in the landscape: "Just as the earth puckered its mouth, / each bud puffing out from its knot, / I changed my shoes, and then drove south" (61). The depiction of the natural environment invokes ideas of fertility and pregnancy in multiple ways. The first line, "earth puckered its mouth," conjures up associations of kissing, thus a romantic relationship, which could, by extension, signify pregnancy. The image of the fertile landscape is strengthened by the description of nature in the second line, "each bud puffing out from its knot," which implies that the journey takes place in the spring. Not only is the notion of spring as a season of (re)birth one of the most frequently used natural symbols in Western culture, it can be suggested that the image of the buds "puffing out from [their] knot[s]" is reminiscent of the process of childbirth.

The second stanza, which situates the poem within the geographical context of Pennsylvania, reinforces the notion of the fertile landscape, which corresponds to the pregnant female body. The first two lines, "Up past the Blue Mountains, where / Pennsylvania humps on endlessly" (61), frame the depiction of the natural environment as one that is evocative of the reproductive female body, especially the word "hump," defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as "a rounded protuberance." As Lawrence Jay Dessner has noted, "hump" could also be read as "a slang word for sexual intercourse," thus, it could also hint at the speaker "remembering the union from which the pregnancy developed" (146). To the extent that the first two stanzas engage with the similarity between the fertile female body and the natural landscape, Sexton's "The Abortion" could be seen as a poem which subscribes to the naturalizing discourses of reproduction. The natural environment is, indeed, framed with references to fecundity, the fact, however, that the speaker's journey through a supposedly "fertile" natural environment culminates in the termination of her pregnancy, suggests that the poem challenges discourses which postulate that childbearing and motherhood are natural and self-evident female roles.

The disruption of discourses which equate fertility and the landscape is also a significant aspect of the third and fourth stanzas, in which the speaker becomes dissociated from the natural environment:

its road sunken in like a gray washboard;
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,
and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives[.] (61)

The third and fourth stanzas, similarly to the second refrain, introduce a threatening and industrialized landscape. Initially, it is the “fertile” quality of the natural environment which is deconstructed: as opposed to a fecund natural environment, suggested by the first two stanzas, the third verse depicts the roads as “sunken in like a gray washboard.” Although the simile of the washboard places the journey and the landscape into a domestic context, the roads are depicted as “sunken” and “gray,” which is in sharp contrast with the protruding mountains’ colorful, “green hair,” described in the second stanza. The figurative equation of domesticity with the lack of vitality and, at its extreme, barrenness in the third verse functions as a critique of ideologies which present dominant familial structures as natural phenomena. The subversion and critique of naturalizing discourses of reproduction and female fertility becomes more explicit in the second line of the third stanza, which states that “in truth, the ground cracks evilly.” Here, as well as in the second and third lines of the fourth verse—“and me wondering when the ground would break, / and me wondering how anything fragile survives”—the natural landscape which was depicted as a fertile space in the first two stanzas, is presented as a hostile environment, which is a source of threat and annihilation.

The third line of the third verse intensifies the speaker’s dissociation from a “purely” natural environment by referring to “a dark socket from which the coal has poured.” The image of disused, dysfunctional coal mines evoked in the third stanza complicates the identification of the female body and pregnancy with the natural environment and the landscape in significant ways. To the extent that the reference to the coal mines situates the journey in an industrial rather than a strictly natural environment, the poem foregrounds that notion of “nature” which can be deployed by ideologies to present various cultural phenomena as “natural” and, thus, normal, are always already man-made constructs that are inscribed by cultural intervention. As McGowan has observed

the industrial/post-industrial landscapes of Pennsylvania through which the unnamed speaker travels are registered as mutilated versions of the female form, sexualized but corrupted (“evilly”) and blunted (“bristly and stout as chives”) by male forms of economic and industrial production. That she too is a product of such systems of historical control and is scarred physically is undoubted. (37)

As McGowan highlights, insofar as we read the landscape as a feminized environment which reflects the mental and corporeal states of the speaker, by representing how industrialization alters and even mutilates the natural environment, “The Abortion” presents the female body as an object of “historical control” (37).

The identification of the speaker’s corporeality and the natural environment violated by industrial intervention is reinforced by the formal and poetic devices of the third stanza and the second refrain. Dessner suggests that the “‘dark socket’ is [. . .] the hidden uterus, site of the abortion that is being commemorated and its menstrual flow, which is being remembered in the pouring of coal” (139). The metaphorical identification of the mine emptied out by industrial activity and the woman whose fetus the surgeon removes is made explicit by the refrain (“*Somebody who should have been born / is gone*”), which immediately follows the line referencing the evacuated coal mines. Barbara Johnson points out that the word “burden” was “the archaic term for both ‘refrain’ and a ‘child in the womb’” (35); as such, there is an etymological connection between pregnancy and poetic form, which Sexton’s “The Abortion” builds on. The poetic devices of the third stanza also contribute to the critique of naturalizing discourses of motherhood. Insofar as we read “washboard” as a reference to domesticity, and “poured” as a metonymy of industrial activity which eradicates the natural environment, the fact that these two words constitute the rhyme of the third stanza disrupts the idea of the home as a natural and self-evidently idyllic space. While the positioning of “washboard” and “poured” create an association between the seemingly opposing spheres of domesticity and industrial activity, by focusing on how the process of mining results in the “pouring” and, thus, depletion of resources, the stanza also implies that domesticity itself can be a site of violation and destruction.

The conflation of the evacuated coal mines and the speaker’s abortion is significant because it grounds the poem in a distinct historical moment. McGowan suggests that the poem marks a time period from America’s past when coal mines were deserted as alternative forms of natural resources gained popularity. He emphasizes that transformations in “the American

landscape [are] resonant of a social history, and its alteration in the middle of the twentieth century is the result of new forms of commodity capitalism and the move to new energy resources” (41). In addition to the socioeconomic reasons outlined by McGowan, there is another crucial sense in which the depiction of the Pennsylvanian mining areas as treacherous and depleted is especially resonant of the reality of American history in 1962, the time of the poem’s writing. It was in May 1962 when the longest lasting coal mine fire in history started and began to devastate nature in Centralia, Pennsylvania (DeKok 20-28). The mine fire has not been extinguished even by 2018, causing Centralia to be “the least populated municipality in Pennsylvania” (Pitta n.p.). The area is characterized by subsidence and numerous cracks “as the asphalt road sinks into abandoned underground works burning underneath it” (Stracher et al. 40). In this context, the description of the roads of Pennsylvania as “sunken in,” and the speaker’s claim of “wondering when the ground would break / and [. . .] wondering how anything fragile survives” can be understood as references to a specific natural catastrophe that has been continuously destroying the Pennsylvania landscape to this day. The idea that the female body has a similar status to the natural environment has a particular significance in this framework. If we read the representation of the precarious landscape as an allusion to the Pennsylvania mine fire, which was caused by human intervention into the natural environment, it could be proposed that this aspect of the poem reinforces the idea that both nature and the female body are affected and actively violated by industrial, economic activity.

It is in this deprived context that the speaker meets the abortionist: “up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man, / not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . . / he took the fullness that love began.” The character of Rumpelstiltskin from the well-known Grimm narrative evokes the genre of fairy tales. While Grimm’s tales have conventionally been associated with the restitution of dominant social structures, the termination of a pregnancy can be seen as an act which disturbs the dominant familial framework. Consequently, the lyrical I negatively identifies the surgeon who performs the abortion with Rumpelstiltskin in order to distance her story from narratives which culminate in the restoration of familial arrangements. The speaker’s story is, in fact, an inversion of the narrative of “Rumpelstiltskin”: Grimm’s fairy tale focuses on a miller’s daughter who is said to be able to turn straw into gold through spinning but is unable to perform the transformation. When the king forces her to prove that she is capable of transforming straw into gold, she receives help from an imp, Rumpelstiltskin, who, in turn, takes the girl’s necklace and ring. When the girl is not able to offer further material goods, she promises to give her firstborn child to Rumpelstiltskin. Since the miller’s daughter is

believed to turn straw into gold, the king marries her, and when their first baby is born, Rumpelstiltskin wants to claim the child as his reward for the help he provided to the girl. Since the girl is resistant, and would like to convince Rumpelstiltskin not to take her son by offering him wealth, Rumpelstiltskin agrees not to take the child if the girl manages to find out his name. After being initially unsuccessful, the girl overhears Rumpelstiltskin singing his name in the woods, and is thus able to name the imp and keep her son.

While in Grimm's tale the imp Rumpelstiltskin helps the miller's daughter in achieving social status and taking part in the construction of a traditional familial structure by marrying the king, the surgeon of "The Abortion" undermines the conventional family framework by terminating the speaker's pregnancy. The disruption of dominant familial/social structures is also discernible in the absence of male agents. As McGowan has observed, "male agency is implicated at a number of levels in this poem: in the scarring of the landscape, in the impregnating of the speaker, and in the actions of the abortionist. At each level, specified male identity is absent [however]: the miners are gone from this place, the father of the child is never mentioned, the abortionist is negatively caricatured" (36-37).

McGowan's conclusion that "the nature and impact of male agency are continually called into question in the poem" (37) is appropriate to the extent that male subjects are either only briefly and negatively presented, or not mentioned in an explicit way. The poetic devices of the fifth stanza, however, do show an acknowledgement of masculine responsibility. The rhyming words are "man" and "began," and their alignment can be read as a signifier of male agency, or responsibility, with regards to the conception of the fetus. The physical absence of male characters, then, can stand for the disintegration of dominant familial structures, which is further aggravated by the abortion.

Apart from significant differences with respect to the conventional framework of the family, the contrast between the narrative of "Rumpelstiltskin" and "The Abortion" is also revelative in the context of financial status. Besides offering a pathway to a heteronormative family structure, Grimm's Rumpelstiltskin also helps the miller's daughter in achieving wealth. In contrast, the "little man" in "The Abortion" does not offer material goods, or anything of financial value, in return for the child. In fact, here, the surgeon is also the financial beneficiary of the transaction, as the speaker is likely to pay him for an illegal abortion. In the early 1960s, apart from cases when the mother's health was seen endangered by the pregnancy, it was not legal in the United States to terminate a pregnancy by surgical

intervention (Calderone 948). Thus, the only way a woman was able to end an unwanted pregnancy was to pay for an illegal abortion, or bribe a doctor to make a case for “therapeutic abortion” (Calderone 949). In both cases, the woman’s financial assets were reduced, as opposed to how the economic status of the miller’s daughter changes subsequent to marrying the king. What establishes a connection between the surgeon of “The Abortion” and the figure of Rumpelstiltskin is the fact that in both Grimm’s fairy tale and Sexton’s poem a child is the basis of economic exchange. This way, the poem also suggests that the process of terminating a pregnancy is not a purely personal, intimate decision, but it is entrenched in a web of financial interactions and interests.

The only explicit reference to the act of abortion is the remark that “the little man [. . .] took the fullness that love began” (61). Such a description of abortion conflates two approaches with respect to the status of the fetus. While the embryo is placed into the context of familial relations and a romantic framework insofar as it is defined as the “product” of love, the surgical intervention constructs the fetus as a medical problem that can be extracted. If we understand the culmination of romantic love as a medical problem, which by extension pathologizes the relationship itself, the line can be seen as a further critique of dominant social and familial structures.

The presentation of the fetus as “fullness” is also in stark contrast with the images of the “sunken” roads and the evacuated coal mines described in the third stanza. The representation of the landscape on the way back from the surgeon reflects the speaker’s “emptiness” subsequent to the abortion: “Returning north, even the sky grew thin / like a high window looking nowhere. / The road was as flat as a sheet of tin” (62). As opposed to the “fullness” of pregnancy which found expression in the “humping” mountain ranges of Pennsylvania, in the absence of the fetus, the environment is also characterized as bare and two-dimensional, “thin” and “flat.” The deprivation caused by the termination of the pregnancy is also reflected in the formal aspects of the poem. While the road to the abortionist is described in detail in four stanzas, the road back home after the procedure is depicted only in a single stanza, and the depletion of poetic images reinforces a broader sense of deprivation subsequent to the abortion.

The closing stanza, which is preceded by the last refrain, marks a crucial rhetorical shift. While the speaker employs the first person singular to relate the experience of the journey to and from the surgeon in the first six stanzas, in the last section, she addresses herself in the second person: “Yes, woman, such logic will lead / to loss without death. Or say what you meant, / you coward . . . this baby that I bleed” (62). McGowan contends that the

closing lines of the poem “signal the actual horror that the poetic conventions of meter and rhyme had been seeking to conceal” (35), suggesting that the preceding stanzas constitute a rhetorical evasion, or displacement, with an aim to deny the trauma of the abortion. The introduction of the pronoun “you,” however, can also be read as a distancing device which functions to deflect responsibility for the termination of the pregnancy, and to construct the abortion not in terms of death but as a “loss” of a lesser degree.

While the adoption of the second person singular might construct the speaker as not liable for the abortion, the final words underscore the ambiguity surrounding agency and responsibility. On the one hand, the return to the pronoun “I” in the closing line can be regarded as the admission of responsibility for the abortion. The phrase “I bleed” attests to the acknowledgment of liability in two main ways. Firstly, the shift back from “you” to “I” presents the extinction of fetal life as a process performed by the speaker, which suggests that she is seen as an active agent rather than a passive victim in the process of abortion. Secondly, the different aspects of the word “bleed” reinforce the idea of the woman’s agentive role in bringing the pregnancy to an end. The phrase “I bleed” could mean that the lyrical I is letting or drawing the blood of the fetus. The latter meaning not only positions the abortion as the agentive action of the speaker, but it also constructs it as an act of murder. On the other hand, “I bleed” can also refer to the woman’s own loss of blood, which suggests that she is, to some extent, the victim of the abortion.

The closing stanza of “The Abortion” juxtaposes two contending frameworks with respect to the moral status of the fetus. The definition of abortion as “loss without death” implies that the embryo does not have the status of a “person,” since the termination of pregnancy is constructed as a loss experienced by the woman rather than the death of a person. Not only does the concept of abortion as “loss” constitute the fetus as a non-person, it also frustrates the boundary between the mother and the embryo as discrete entities by privileging the mother’s experience of deprivation. The use of the word “baby” in the last line, however, assigns a different status to the “lost” entity, because it implies that the embryo is a person. If the fetus is regarded as an entity which meets the criteria of personhood, it can be suggested that it is a being which is clearly distinct from the mother. The fact that “this baby that I bleed” is juxtaposed with the idea of “loss” in the last stanza reinforces the idea that the termination of the pregnancy constitutes the death of a baby. The meaning of the word “bleed,” which potentially connotes the deliberate blood-letting of another person supports the idea of fetal personhood, since conceptualizing abortion as murder is only possible if the embryo is seen as a person. The juxtaposition of opposing views concerning the moral status of the

fetus, and the ideas of personhood that subtend these views highlights that in the context of abortion, the boundaries of the female body are placed under profound scrutiny.

“The Abortion” explores the female body’s entrenchment in a variety of socio-cultural discourses. While the tropes draw on representational traditions of characterizing women and their reproductive capacities with reference to the natural environment, the images addressing the destruction of the landscape due to human activity dislocate conventional discourses surrounding femininity and nature. By alluding to the tale of Rumpelstiltskin, the poem not only explores the question of masculine responsibility, but it also places the text in the context of financial concerns. The questions of interest, responsibility, and agency are addressed on a further level: the closing of the poem raises issues regarding personhood and moral status. Thus, “The Abortion” explores the process of terminating a pregnancy from a wide range of perspectives: from broad frameworks of natural, economic, and historical contexts to the level of personal identity.

Conclusion

I have focused on two representative examples of Sexton’s poems about reproduction and argued that conventional understandings of Sexton’s work as primal examples of confessional poetry limit the understanding of Sexton’s oeuvre insofar as the emphasis on the confessional aspect of her texts privileges ideas of self-revelation as the most significant element of her poetry. Contrary to such an approach, I have shown that Sexton’s writing, apparently addressing intimate details about the female body and reproduction, position personal experience in the wider framework of cultural and social discourses. “In Celebration of My Uterus” explores the experience of the vitality of the speaker’s reproductive organ in the context of kinship with women in other geopolitical locations, also foregrounding how childbearing is implicated in processes of national economic production. “The Abortion” situates the termination of a pregnancy in the context of the Pennsylvanian landscape. The text raises questions regarding the embeddedness of the natural landscape in processes of human economic production, as well as the financial implications of abortion. While the questions of self-identity, personal boundaries, and physical experiences are, undoubtedly, central to “The Abortion” and “In Celebration of My Uterus,” they are not presented in a solipsistic or narcissistic manner, but attest to Sexton’s concern with the experience of the individual in their wider social context.

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