

Jane McCabe on: "Her Kind"

Anne Sexton was brought up to be an affluent, middle-class, suburban housewife. In a 1968 interview, she said,

All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children.... I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white picket fences to keep the nightmares out.

And I think that Sexton differed from most of her successful female peers in that when she wasn't in the hospital, she lived in comfort behind the white picket fences. She was not urban; she was not an academic (her formal education ended at Garland Junior College); and she was not really an intellectual. She lived very comfortably--a sunken living room, a swimming pool--in suburban Weston, Massachusetts: the look of the country, the convenience of town. But this life worried her; she felt personally at odds with its rather dismal comforts. And although she played her part--"I ... answered the phone,/ served cocktails as a wife/ should, made love among my petticoats,/ and August tan . . ."--she was also concerned with the pressure of isolation and uneasy with the particular kind of social expectation that faces a suburban housewife, especially one who is also a poet. She defined her alienation as witchery, and as a "middle-aged witch" she had the magic of words with which to transform even the calmest and most orderly of suburban lawns into a landscape of both nightmare and vision. And this often led her to explore the dangerous borderland between imagination and insanity:

I have gone out, a possessed witch, haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch over the plain houses, light by light: lonely
thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. A woman like that is not a woman, quite. I
have been her kind.

And that kind is "a woman who writes." So, although I would not suggest that Anne Sexton is a feminist poet, I think that her poetry catches the feminist's eye and ear in special ways. Many of her experiences and feelings are the product of a society that oppresses women. The anger and excess that run through so much of her poetry are uniquely hers, but there are echoes of the same kind of rage in the poetry of many of her more explicitly feminist contemporaries.

From "'A Woman Who Writes': A Feminist Approach to the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton." In *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*. Ed. J.D. McClatchy. Copyright © 1978 by J.D. McClatchy

Publication Status:
Excerpted Criticism ^[1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Anne Sexton [2]

Author:

Jane McCabe [3]

Poem:

Her Kind [4]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/jane-mccabe-her-kind>

Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/anne-sexton>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/jane-mccabe>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/her-kind>