



The Awful Rowing Toward God

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The Work

When Anne Sexton committed suicide in October, 1974, she had planned very carefully how her poetry would be published after her death. She considered much of her poetry miscellany or unworthy of publication; these poems have been collected in the *Complete Poems*. Prior to her demise she put together three collections of poetry with explicit instructions to her publisher regarding her wishes about publication dates. The first of these three volumes was *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, which represents several significant departures from her earlier poetry.

As early as Sexton's first book, published in 1960, there are references to God and the Bible. The role of Christ in one's life is also given reference in a few poems, and such would be the case throughout most of her poetic career, with the exception of her book *Transformations* (1971). Still, the core of the earlier books was the presentation and investigation of Sexton's place in the world. Many of her poems tell stories in a lyrical manner, stories that she hopes to decode as the poems accumulate.

The poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* are much more speculative. They ask questions about the individual's position in the world in terms of the Christian religion. Was Christ intended to provide humanity with mercy? When one dies, is it likely that one will find the paradise promised in the concept of Heaven? Some of these poems sound almost panic-stricken in their questioning. The reader should remember that these poems were written, in all likelihood, in the last year of Sexton's life. When Sexton decided to commit suicide this last time, she abandoned the mechanism of all of her previous attempts: overdosing on pills. She chose carbon monoxide gas, which succeeded.

Undoubtedly she knew that her death was assured. The poems take on a more definite attitude than previous poems about her suicide attempts or instincts. Sexton also raises the issue of whether one's actions while alive will affect one's disposition when one dies. She must have known that she was no saint during her life. Would God forgive her transgressions? This book presents far more questions than it does conclusions, and in that respect the book is unique among Sexton's works.

Suggested Readings

George, Diana Hume. *Oedpius Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

George, Diana Hume. *Sexton: Selected Criticism*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

McClatchy, J. D. *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Morton, Richard Everett. *Anne Sexton's Poetry of Redemption: The Chronology of a Pilgrimage*. Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1988.

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