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SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY

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Sexual Empowerment: My Whitman and My Dickinson
Tate Ferris

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Sexuality and Identity

Identity, sexuality, gender: from writers, to poets, to everyday individuals, humans have historically struggled with these themes. Often it is the artists of the time who are able to make salient the issues of the human experience.

Women’s identity and sexuality is not always accepted in society. "The Misunderstood Women in 'Her Kind,'" examines the presentation of the oppressive stigmas that unconventional women have incurred throughout history in Anne Sexton's "Her Kind."

The inherent sexual nature of the human experience is realized by some more than others. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are two poets who fall into the former category. The sexual exploration, empowerment, and identity of these two figures are explored in “Sexual Empowerment: My Whitman and My Dickinson.”

To be human is to be imperfect. “Each to Each” explores what it is to love and to be loved, and the uncertainty and vulnerability that are bound in a relationship. Reflected in our very humanity and identity, our weaknesses strangely connect us in solidarity.

It is through self-expression that we discover our own identity and sexuality. Therefore, we found it fitting to end with this section because, through all the sleet and snow, it is a true accomplishment to find and improve upon yourself throughout life.

Elliot Ince

The Misunderstood Women in "Her Kind"

Meghan Burry

Western society has developed various social and behavioural norms for women, but Anne Sexton’s "Her Kind" discusses the way in which society views women that step outside these norms. Specifically, this poem addresses women who differ from these constructs, and allows readers to make note of the different roles that the women in the poem assume, and the struggles they withstand. “Her Kind” incorporates “three costumes in three verses—witch, housewife and adulteress”—that embody different forms of misunderstood women, who eventually “blur into one another.” ¹ The poem’s three stanzas explore the supernatural, traditional, and sinful attitudes of women who defy society’s conception of an “ideal” woman. In Anne Sexton’s “Her Kind,” the speaker explores what it means to be an unconventional woman in a society with rigid gender roles and societal constructs. Sexton’s speaker identifies with the problems that each of these women face as individuals; however, in the refrain, the speaker assumes the traits of each woman to represent the pain and suffering of all women who face mistreatment for disregarding societal conventions.

In the first stanza, the female speaker portrays a witch who defies societal norms by demonstrating supernatural abilities. Sexton uses her conception of a witch to represent a misunderstood or unnatural woman.

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who is mistreated within society. The poem begins by stating, “I have gone out, a possessed witch,”\(^2\) who
“articulat[es] the threat of the woman who steps outside of her accepted sphere.”\(^3\) Through this image of a witch,
it is apparent that the first stanza is a representation of a
woman who does not adhere to her society’s accepted
gender role. For example, the witch differs both
physically and mentally, as she is “twelve-fingered” and
“out of mind.”\(^4\) This stanza explores the powerful and
misunderstood woman; she appears to be threatening
because she is powerful, and challenges societal
constructs. The stanza concludes with: “a woman like
that is not a woman, quite.”\(^5\) The witch is not ‘quite’ a
woman, according to preconceived societal conventions.
Sexton demonstrates that despite the fact that this
woman is powerful and talented, her atypical attributes,
both physical and mental, are viewed as unnatural or
unlike those of a “normal” woman. The stanza concludes
with the speaker identifying with the figure of the
misunderstood witch.

The speaker explores an abnormal approach to
the traditional role of a housewife in the second stanza.
Although the woman acts somewhat like a “normal”
housewife, there are evident abnormalities, as “a trace
of the witch remains, tainting the scene.”\(^6\) Instead of a
traditional family home, the woman has “found the
warm caves in the woods”\(^7\); instead of fixing a dinner
for her husband and children, it is “for the worms and
elves.”\(^8\) Sexton takes actions and attitudes that would
fulfill traditional female gender roles and modifies them
to become atypical or abnormal by societal standards. In
particular, she explores the feminine stereotype of a
woman cleaning, and twists it to defy society’s standards
by describing it as “rearranging the disaligned.”\(^9\)
However, this stanza suggests that even a “normal”
woman, such as a housewife, can be viewed by society
as atypical. The end of the second stanza states that “a
woman like that is misunderstood.”\(^10\) Again, Sexton
reiterates that the speaker identifies with the housewife,
deceming that the figure is “misunderstood”.

The speaker begins the final stanza by
portraying an adulteress whose “sinful” actions fail to
conform to archetypal female behaviour. The adulteress
is a confident woman who feels no shame for “wav[ing]
[her] nude arms at villages going by,”\(^11\) even though
society vilifies a woman who is unashamed of her body,
femininity, and sexuality. It is in this stanza that Sexton
explores the strengths of a woman as she rebels against
her female gender roles, and any repercussions from this
fight. The speaker states that these women are
“survivor[s]”\(^12\) of society’s oppression, and the violence
that these ‘misunderstood’ women have faced
throughout history: “your flames still bite my thigh/ and
my ribs crack where your wheels wind.”\(^13\) The end of
the stanza suggests that these torturous acts are still
happening—that the anguish of misunderstood women
is ongoing. However, despite the threat of physical pain, a

\(^2\) Anne Sexton, “Her Kind,” Poets.org, accessed November 22,

\(^3\) Pollard, 4.

\(^4\) Sexton, 5.

\(^5\) Ibid, 6.

\(^6\) Pollard, 4.

\(^7\) Sexton, 8.

\(^8\) Ibid, 11.

\(^9\) Ibid, 12.

\(^10\) Ibid, 13.

\(^11\) Ibid, 16.

\(^12\) Ibid, 17.

\(^13\) Ibid, 18-19.
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misunderstood woman must stand her ground and “not [be] ashamed to die.” 14 The speaker concludes this stanza, as she does the others, with the refrain “I have been her kind,” 15 which blends all three women into one defiant woman that lives within a society with intransigent gender roles.

In “Her Kind,” Sexton combines the figures of three different misunderstood women—the witch, the housewife, and the adulteress—into a single character who defies the social norms of what a woman should be. Through exploring their supernatural, traditional, and sinful actions, readers come to understand that this woman not only defies societal conventions, but also potentially threatens them. The witch acts as a powerful and talented woman; the abnormal housewife acts like a caring and supportive woman; the adulteress acts like a confident and self-assured woman. Each of these characters explores what it means to be an unconventional woman, who opposes society’s standards. Western society has developed social and behavioral norms for women and when they defy its constructs, they intimidate society. Sexton explores the suffering of the “misunderstood” women who do not adhere to the ideals of what a woman should be. However, by showcasing these women as powerful and strong figures throughout the poem—despite having been mistreated by society—Sexton demonstrates that these women are not ashamed of their identity, or their role within society.

15 Ibid, 7, 14, 21.

The Misunderstood Women in "Her Kind"

Bibliography
Anne Sexton, "Her Kind," Poets.org, accessed November 22, 2014,