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You Grow This Way: An Analysis of Mother and Daughter Selves in Anne Sexton's Poem

“Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman

Kennerley Roper

Anne Sexton, as a woman poet, is up against long-standing literary and social traditions that dictate how women are to be portrayed in literature. However, her work reveals, rejects, then revises those traditions. Consider “The Abortion.” In the poem, Sexton’s speaker explicitly mentions a fairytale with undertones of abortionist imagery: “I met a little man, / not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . . “ (lines 17-18). The story of Rumpelstiltskin involves a woman promising her first-born child to a magical man named Rumpelstiltskin in exchange for spinning straw into gold. The reference to his name in the poem brings to mind the story, a story that aligns Rumpelstiltskin with the crime of separating mother and child. However, the speaker makes it clear that the man who performs the abortion, or the separation of mother and child, is not his fairytale counterpart. Though the acts they perform are essentially the same, the “little man” does not have the magic associated with the name. Rather, she implies that the magical element of life is removed with her unborn child, a notion similarly supported through other transformations within the poem. In this example, Sexton introduces and then retracts what tradition dictates; abortion is not from the realms of fantasy, but just the opposite. Abortion strips the world of magic.

Though she does not believe in magic, the maternal speaker in the poem “Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman” (see Appendix A for the full poem) speaks to her maturing daughter about the wonders of the female body by revising the literary tradition that already exists about the female body. What the speaker ultimately conveys to her daughter is the power the body has through the use of parallel body and earth imagery. However, the daughter is

distanced from this notion through a contrasting image: the string bean. The speaker uses that distance to show the mixed images of entanglement and separation of mother and daughter in order to expound wisdom to a daughter approaching her own womanhood.

In the very first lines of the poem, the speaker begins with “My daughter, at eleven / (almost twelve), is like a garden” immediately introducing the garden motif (lines 1-2). Images like “lemons as large as your desk-side globe” (lines 16), “the market stalls of mushrooms / and garlic buds all engorged” (lines 19-20), and “the apples . . . beginning to swell” (lines 23) are all linked by the imagery of enlargement. These images of round, full fruits are reminiscent of breasts developing in a young woman, when “summer” or puberty “has seized” her (line 14). The idea of a lemon the size of a small-globe seems absurd, but when imagined cut in half, the size and shape of the two hemispheres resemble developing breasts more so than the fruits themselves. The fruit, or the garden motif in general, also parallels a well-known literary garden, the Garden of Eden. With Eden comes the image of adult bodies in a state of childlike innocence. That is why swelling fruit is representative of breasts; the imagery is not supposed to be provocative, but rather to extend the state of innocence of Eden to the daughter.

Even though man is eventually cast out of the Garden of Eden in the original story, there is still an air of summer and growth within the poem. It is not a growth marred by the possibility of a desolate winter or outside intruder. Rather, the poem’s tone can be read as celebratory and even amazed to see things like lemons the size of globes, given the innocence implied in the imagery. In *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America*, Alicia Ostriker says that many woman poets use the image of earth as a way to revise poetry about women. “Women who identify their own bodies with earth,” Ostriker says, “tend not merely to celebrate the concept of fecundity but to link earth’s powers with a critical and subversive

intelligence, or with the creative imagination itself” (111). In other words, female poets use earth as a metaphor not just for a fertile female body, but also for women as creative imaginations. Sexton’s speaker supports this notion, especially emphasizing the creative imagination. Nancy Gerber in *Portrait of the Mother-Artist: Class and Creativity in Contemporary American Fiction* suggests, “mother-artists demonstrate an ability to create using ordinary, domestic materials” (7). Though Sexton does use domestic imagery, there is one image that stands outside of this idea. The speaker says, “If I could have watched you grow / as a magical mother might, / if I could have seen through my magical transparent belly, / there would have been such ripening within: / your embryo, / the seed taking on its own” (lines 60-65). In this image of a transparent, pregnant belly, Sexton goes beyond using ordinary, domestic materials. She uniquely reimagines what is already extraordinary by conceptualizing a developing embryo not as an abstract—or rather, unobservable—idea, but as an observable process. The alternating images of fecundity and a “creative imagination” show Sexton beginning to revise the woman-as-earth metaphor.

However satisfying this image of woman-as-earth may feel on the surface, Ostriker is careful to point out that woman-as-earth is a common motif, even in male-dominated literary traditions. That tradition tends to show “how the power of men’s fantasies depends consistently on a vision of nature and woman, as alive, fecund, and essentially mindless” (Ostriker 110). We have already seen how Sexton’s treatment of woman-as-earth is not just aware, but full of creative imagination, and therefore not “mindless.” Ostriker then warns that in the same way women have been subjected to male dominance, men have also controlled nature, despite its procreative power. It is an image that carries powerful implications. But Sexton seems to anticipate these implications of subversion and responds accordingly.

Subversion is an act between two agents, one whose will dominates the other's. Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb observes a pattern of power within women's literature, but she chooses to focus on how power is central in women writers "recasting" themselves into more powerful roles. She argues that "in doing so, [women writers] not only reverse traditional expectations of the passive, dependent mother, [but] they also succeed in reducing the importance of the father by effectively usurping the positions from which his authority is typically derived" (46). Father and mother is just one example of a traditional, subversive relationship, but it can be better understood when boiled down to man and woman. So in looking more closely at the woman-as-earth imagery, there is no mention of a third party, more specifically a male third party, who takes part in a "harvest" of images. Though men have a presence later in the poem, they are not associated with the woman-as-earth imagery. Sexton subtly yet cleverly uses this imagery to subvert and revise the trope of subversion itself. In focusing on the harvest of the female body, there is no instance where a male figure plants, plucks, or prunes any part of nature, or the female body by extension. The absence of a third agent further implies the deep, procreative power women possess, well outside of the realm of male involvement. In excluding men, the speaker is able to quietly but effectively recast women in a role of greater power, separate from men, and thereby usurps that position of power.

Though male involvement is excluded from the woman-as-earth imagery, there is one plant image that contrasts the others, an image associated with the daughter. In the very title, the speaker refers to her daughter as "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman" and later directly addresses her: "*Oh, little girl, / my stringbean, / how do you grow? / You grow this way. / You are too many to eat*" (lines 27-31). In comparing string beans to the swelling produce in the same stanza, what first stands out is the difference in shape; whereas lemons, mushrooms, and

apples are round—reminiscent of breasts and female bodies—the string bean is long and thin. Phallic imagery can be immediately ruled out because of the lack of third-party, male involvement in the poem. However, that still leaves an image that contrasts the others, which appear full with fertility. The image is especially confusing when the speaker adds, “And once, with out first backyard, / I remember I planted an acre of yellow beans / we couldn’t eat.” The inedible beans contrast the idea of her daughter being a fruitful garden, despite the first two lines of the poem. This contrast distinguishes the beans as something separate from the other fruits, and therefore, her daughter separate from the woman-as-earth imagery.

Like woman-as-earth metaphors, another common trend in women’s literature is mother-daughter entanglement. Joan Lidoff in her article “Tangled Vines: Mother and Daughters in Women’s Writing” identifies patterns of entanglement within women’s literature, which range from images of nesting dolls and tangled vines to journeys of self-definition of daughter through mother. This pattern has theoretical background in the research of feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*. There she defines the relationship between mother and daughter as “preoedipal,” essentially meaning that mothers and daughters have difficulty separating their own selves from the other, mostly because of their shared gender. This means that in women’s literature, there is often confusion between the mother’s self and her daughter’s self. Sexton summarizes this “preoedipal” or entangled relationship best in “Housewife”: “A woman *is* her mother. / That’s the main thing” (lines 9-10).

Sexton’s poem has both elements of entanglement and separation between mother and daughter. Looking at the moments of entanglement first will provide a basis to contrast the moments of separation, which can then be analyzed to determine a solution to the daughter-stringbean question. One instance of entanglement of selves can be found in pregnancy imagery.

According to Chodorow's theory, pregnancy is one of the prime examples of confusion of selves (96). Because of the very nature of pregnancy—a life growing within another life—the intimacy of the two selves contributes to the entanglement of those selves. Sexton reflects on the closeness of the speaker's self and the daughter's self. The speaker ponders, "If I could have watched you grow / as a magical mother might, / if I could have seen through my magical transparent belly, / there would have been such ripening within: / your embryo, / the seed taking on its own" (lines 60-65). The separate selves in this strange image are obvious, especially "the seed taking on its own," or the daughter's embryo becoming a separate self. There is an identifiable mother-self and daughter-self. However, this part of the poem is just speculation; the speaker is reflecting on the idea of being able to observe her daughter forming on her own. This moment of reflection implies that the speaker herself holds some confusion between her and her daughter. The idea of confusion of selves is also repeated in the question "*how do you grow?*" as the mother tries to discover if the daughter grows alongside or separate from the mother (line 29).

The confusion of mother and daughter selves is not a phenomenon unique to Sexton. In fact, mother-representation as an object is a pattern common to maternal writers like Sexton. In other words, "as long as [the mother] speaks as mother, she must always remain the object in her child's process of subject-formulation; she [herself] is never fully a subject" (Hirsch 12). And this logic makes sense; the selfless—in both senses of the word—nature of motherhood involves putting the needs of another above your own. However, on a general examination of the poem, the speaker manages to be a distinct, yet maternal subject. The most obvious example of this distinctness is the use of first person narration. There is also a distinct, second address, her daughter. The distinguishable "I"s and "you"s are evidence of those separate selves.

Another distinguishable characteristic of selves is experience. The speaker begins describing the start of sexual interaction with men (“someday they will come to you, / someday, men bare to the waist, / young Romans / at noon where they belong, / with ladders and hammers / while no one sleeps” [lines 45-49]). Though there is a lack of first person pronouns, there is an air of certainty. The speaker has experienced these Romans coming to her, and expounds that knowledge to another, less-experienced self. Another more concrete image of the two selves is when the speaker says, “I’m here, *that somebody else*, / an old tree in the background” (emphasis added, lines 91-92). Not only does the speaker distinguish herself as “that somebody else,” but she also uses the image of an old tree. The tree fits into the motif of Eden and woman’s procreative power, but in a slightly different way. A tree is still capable of creation, but the added adjective “old” helps differentiate the speaker from other “trees” as more experienced due to age.

So how is the daughter a stringbean? The answer lies in the entanglement of selves, and in readdressing the woman-as-earth motif. Sexton grounds the image of women’s bodies to garden plants like mushrooms and apples. On one hand, both string beans and the others plants have the capacity to create, which parallels the similar creative capacity mother and daughter possess. However, there is a separate identity shown by associating the daughter with beans that cannot be eaten.

The speaker, with her traces of entanglement of identities between mother and daughter essentially addresses that daughter. With puberty not only comes an emerging sexuality, but also a body capable of creation. The speaker uses this poem as advice to her daughter: “What I want to say, Linda, / is that women are born twice” (lines 58-59). These are the lines that precede the stanza about the transparent pregnant belly, which implies that pregnancy, or giving birth to a child, serves as a woman’s “second birth.” She seems to warn her daughter about the

entanglement of identities by exploring her own entanglement with the daughter. But she allows the daughter to see herself as something separate, something the speaker cannot quite understand (“*how do you grow?*”), something the speaker cannot eat. So she advises the daughter to “let [her] body in” (line 55) and to stand “sure of [her]self” (line 95). In doing this, the speaker assures her daughter, “you will strike fire, / that *new* thing!” (emphasis added, lines 97-98). And to the speaker, after patterns of revising literary tradition, the new is more preferable and celebratory to the old.

Appendix A

“Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman”
by Anne Sexton

My daughter, at eleven
(almost twelve), is like a garden.

Oh, darling! Born in that sweet birthday suit
and having owned it and known it for so long,
now you must watch high noon enter—
noon, that ghost hour.
Oh, funny little girl—this one under a blueberry sky,
this one! How can I say that I’ve known
just what you know and just where you are?

It’s not a strange place, this odd home
where your face sits in my hand
so full of distance,
so full of its immediate fever.
The summer has seized you,
as when, last month in Amalfi, I saw
lemons are large as you desk-side globe—
that miniature map of the world—
and I could mention, too,
the market stalls of mushrooms
and garlic buds all engorged.
Or I think even of the orchard next door,
where the berries are done
and the apples are beginning to swell.
And once, with out first backyard,
I remember I planted an acre of yellow beans
we couldn’t eat.

*Oh, little girl,
my stringbean,
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat.*

I hear
as in a dream
the conversation of the old wives
speaking of *womanhood*.
I remember that I heard nothing myself.
I was alone.

I waited like a target.

Let high noon enter—
 the hour of the ghosts.
 Once the Romans believed that noon was the ghost hour,
 and I can believe it, too,
 under that startling sun,
 and someday they will come to you,
 someday, men bare to the waist, young Romans
 at noon where they belong,
 with ladders and hammers
 while no one sleeps.

But before they enter
 I will have said
Your bones are lovely,
 and before their strange hands
 there was always this hand that formed.

Oh, darling, let your body in,
 let it tie you in,
 in comfort.
 What I want to say, Linda,
 is that women are born twice.

If I could have watched you grow
 as a magical mother might,
 if I could have seen through my magical transparent belly,
 there would have been such ripening within:
 your embryo,
 the seed taking on its own,
 life clapping the bedpost,
 bones from the pond,
 thumbs and two mysterious eyes,
 the awfully human head,
 the heart jumping like a puppy,
 the important lungs,
 the becoming—
 while it becomes!
 as it does now,
 a world of its own,
 a delicate place.

I say hello
 to such shakes and knockings and high jinks,
 such music, such sprouts,

such dancing-mad-bears of music,
such necessary sugar,
such goings-on!

*Oh, little girl,
my stringbean,
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat.*

What I want to say, Linda,
is that there is nothing in your body that lies.
All that is new is telling the truth.
I'm here, that somebody else,
an old tree in the background.

Darling,
stand still at your door,
sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone—
as exceptional as laughter
you will strike fire,
that new thing!

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