

## POETIC RETELLING OF FAIRY TALES IN ANNE SEXTON'S *TRANSFORMATIONS*

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### **Abstract:**

*Fairy tales are traditionally written for children and young adults, who are fascinated by the dream world. These tales culminate in the perfect happy ending. Most fairy tales end with a cliché expression “they lived happily ever after” Fairy tales generally have some sort of fantastic element, and might feature magic, imaginary creatures, and often a conflict between sides that are clearly good and evil. Legends and fairy tales are generally told to the children and youngsters of every generation, and hence have a profound impact on the deep rooted psyche of the people of every society. However, this kind of ideology presented in the fairy tales is challenged by many modern and post modern writers for being classicist, racist and most importantly sexist.*

*Anne Sexton, the well known American confessional poet, published her book *Transformations* in 1972 in which she retells seventeen fairy tales from Grimm Brothers in a poetic form. In this retelling of the very well known fairy tales, she strips the utopian and fantastic world of the conventional fantasy and replaces it with not only stark realism but also weaves into the tales her own personal confessions. In these poetic retellings there is a feminist objection to the patriarchal notions of female beauty, happiness and perfection. This paper analyses the poetic retelling of fairy tales by Anne Sexton in *Transformations* from various perspectives.*

**Key Words:** *fairy tales, confessions, feminism, patriarchal, realism, fantastic element.*

### **Introduction**

Anne Sexton is one of the prominent confessional poets of the 1960s, who wrote boldly about topics that were considered taboo during her time and some of them, are taboo even today. Confessional poetry that was started with the publication of *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell in 1959, influenced many contemporary poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg and W.D. Snodgrass.

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath had attended a workshop of Robert Lowell, which had influenced them immensely. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her book *Live or Die* (1966). Some of her well known works are *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, *All my Pretty Ones* (1962), *The Death Notebooks* (1974); and posthumously published volume *The Awful Rowing toward God* (1975). Among her best-known poems are 'Her Kind,' after which Sexton named the band with which she later performed; 'The Abortion'; 'Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound'; 'In Celebration of My Uterus'; and 'The Ambition Bird'. The themes of her poems were confessional in the true sense of the term.

### ***Transformations***

*Transformations* (1972), a series of retellings of Grimm's fairy tales is often described as her most feminist work. In this book she has produced seventeen long poems based on the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. These 'poem-stories' are a strange retelling of Grimm's fairy tales. The inspiration for these tales came to Anne sexton from her daughter Linda, who was fascinated by the fairy tales. Anne Sexton's daughter, Linda Gray Sexton in an interview said that her mother wrote down a list of the titles of Grimm tales with black felt pen on a paper napkin. The idea of transforming the tales perhaps germinated during that period, when Linda, as a little girl seemed to be deeply influenced by these tales. As a poet, a woman and a feminist, Anne Sexton was perturbed by the conventional portrayal of female characters and their

stereotyped role in society. She had an urge to turn around these tales to make them relevant to the modern role of woman, as well as transform the tales to make a relevant feminist statement. Concerning the background to this, Sexton commented in an interview that she only perceived -some unconscious message that she had something to say? while reading her daughter's original Grimm fairy tales. This suggests that what she wrote in *Transformations* may have been based on model stories that were selected at random and based solely on the impressions they had made on her daughter's psyche. In *Transformations* we find stark examinations of the dark side of life for females in a patriarchal society along with cynical comments on their helplessness.

The fairy tales are not addressed to children but to parents and guardians. It is parents and guardians who have classified fairy-stories as *Juvenilia* and aim to moralize and preach to the children by means of these stories. The didactic element in these fairy tales cannot be ignored. Anne Sexton questions the morals taught to children by means of these fairy tales and therefore in the retelling she tries to exhibit the falsification of these values. Beside the didactic element the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which offers a peculiar degree or mode, of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, all things of which children have, as a rule, less need than older people. So, it is the grown-ups that need to learn more from the fairy tales rather than the young ones. Anne Sexton felt that the impact of these tales was not positive; hence the fairy tales need to be retold. ||

### **Socio Cultural Implications**

The fairy tales were written from a male perspective in a patriarchal society. The female characters seem to be totally static, almost doll like - beautiful to look at, helpless and meek, surrendered to their fate, and eternally waiting for a prince charming to rescue them from their miserable fate. The root cause of this kind of portrayal is that though the tales were ascribed to the Grimm brothers, they did not author them. These tales existed in the oral tradition long before they were born in 1780s. As traditions changed and industrialization modified the way of life which supported oral tradition of storytelling, some scholars decided to preserve the tales by writing them down.

The Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, were German academics who together collected and published folklore during the 19th century. Grimms' folk tales have enjoyed enduring popularity. The tales were translated in more than 100 languages and have been adapted by filmmakers including Walt Disney. The brothers didn't actually write any of those stories in 1812, Jacob and Wilhelm published the stories as part of a collection titled *Nursery and Household Tales*, or what is now referred to as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Anne Sexton felt that since the tales have been passed down through the generations without any change, they seem outdated and irrelevant for the current generation. Socio cultural changes in the narrative were necessary to make them relevant to the changing times. Taking an example from the popular fairy tale "Cinderella", Marcia Lieberman claims that "Cinderella," as a product of male design, serves to acculturate women to an acceptable role in a patriarchal society, a transaction that perpetuates the narrow female role of wife and mother as the "Angel of the House." (Lieberman, 189).

The monotonous and stereotype fairy tales must have something new for the modern reader. The modern reader is addressed by Anne Sexton in "Cinderella" directly in the opening lines:

You always read about it:

the plumber with twelve children  
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.  
From toilets to riches.  
That story.

Social and cultural implications are bluntly weaved into the tale when she says:

Next came the ball, as you all know.  
It was a marriage market.

The prince was looking for a wife

Marriage, which is the definitive concluding part of almost every fairy tale, which leads to the happily ever after ending, is nothing more than a market place for buying the best available bride! The dream world of the fairy tale has been denuded of the entire dreamy utopian atmosphere, and infused with stark realism and satire.

Cinderella and the prince  
lived, they say, happily ever after,  
like two dolls in a museum case  
never bothered by diapers or dust,  
never arguing over the timing of an egg,  
never telling the same story twice,  
never getting a middle-aged spread,  
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.

### **Psychoanalytical Implications:**

Though *Transformations* is not overtly confessional and subjective, but the psychoanalytical implications of the tales are very unmistakable. Anne Sexton's narrator in her poems is a modern 'middle aged witch' who declares her collection of poems to be a book of "odd tales". Odd because, she keeps plots of the Grimm tales but tells them with a modern manner giving allusions that are contemporary and new. The result is a synthesis of myth and modernity which has a deep impact on the reader, prompting him to review and understand the fairy tales in a new light and question the utopian world portrayed in the conventional version. Sexton not only created some comic moments in the popular tales but also gave them a surprising conclusion which was totally different from the actual ones.

Freud's impact on her collection of poems "Transformations" is quite evident. Anne Sexton's relationship with her father was fraught with complications, as he died when she was very young. When Sexton's father died in 1959, she re-lived him in the form of husband, doctor, priest, and lover and he was finally reborn as the deity of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. Being in and out of psychiatric clinics and mental hospitals, she was very aware of the psychological dynamics of relationships. In the poems in *Transformations*, Sexton was apparently able to distance herself from her personal problems to some extent, but could not do away with her personal emotions completely. She portrayed her personal psychological conflicts using fairy-tale figures and situations. In fact, she retold the fairy tales with an idea to bring out the ugly truths of life. She conveys this message with a sadistic tone and modern language, while drawing upon the hardships of American culture

Anne Sexton often did public readings for an awe struck audience who were mesmerized by her soulful reading sessions, where she used pregnant pauses, husky whispers and pseudo shouts to make her poetry reading impressive. Even though she enjoyed her success and all the attention which she received but behind this successful garb, she was a cowed and a frightened girl, who always felt that she was an unwanted child of her parents and an unsuccessful individual. She found an outlet for her suppressed emotions through her confessional poetry, and *Transformations* is no different if we analyze the layers of meaning hidden behind the exterior mask of the fairy tales. The disturbed marital relationship she had with Ted Hughes had psychological impact on her personality. She could not cope with the demands that motherhood and marriage made on her. These psychological implications are found in the following lines of the fairy tale "Cinderella"

Cinderella and the Prince Lived,  
they say, happily ever after,  
like two dolls in a museum case

never bothered by diapers or dust,  
 never arguing over the taming of an egg,  
 never telling the same story twice,  
 never getting a middle-aged spread,  
 their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.

### **Feminist Implications**

*Transformations*, embodies the feminism in Anne Sexton's poetry. The tales are told by a "middle aged witch" which in fact is the alter ego of Anne Sexton herself.

According to a currently common feminist belief, many of the women accused of being witches in the past were actually pioneers of the feminist movement-women rebelling against the male-oriented society. As the influence of those "witches" grew, the patriarchal society so prevalent at the time came to fear them; the steps it took to negate their growing influences contributed to what might be considered virtual witch hunts. It is not certain whether or not Sexton had already been influenced by the feminist theory concerning witches when writing *Transformations*. But in consideration of the feminist discourse that started to spread throughout America in the Sixties, it is no wonder that the devil may-care attitude displayed by Sexton's "middle-aged witch" attracted such tremendous attention when the book was published. A "middle-aged witch" was just what many Americans-especially women readers-were both consciously and unconsciously seeking (Fukuda Shiho, 41).

In order to experiment with a new style of writing, Sexton made a transition from traditional to a somewhat feminist manner of writing which became a subject of criticism later. In fact, Anne Sexton viewed and studied her surroundings of her times and found that America then was under the influence of the patriarchal society on one end and under the feminist movement at the other. She was herself a rebel against patriarchy. Her take on virginity in society is revealed in the fairy tales. In a sarcastic tone, she says in her poem "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"

No matter what life you lead  
 the virgin is a lovely number:  
 She is unsoiled.  
 She is as white as a bonefish.

*Transformations* portray many aspects of being a woman, and in particular the tormented struggle with her own psychological demons that formed the script for Anne Sexton's life and the key to her death. The struggle is revealed in myriad forms in the fairy tales. Not idealizing the innocence, vulnerability and fragility of Snow-White, she says:

Snow White, the dumb bunny,  
 Opened the door  
 and she bit into a poison apple  
 and fell down for the final time.

### **Conclusion**

The book *Transformations* contains poetic adaptation of sixteen fairy tales compiled by Grimm Brothers. However, the sarcastic tone and metaphorical implications of the poems reveal to the readers social constraints, psychological turmoil and gender issues prevalent during Anne Sexton's time in the American society. The narrator, being a middle aged witch, is a mouthpiece of Anne Sexton herself, and the hidden messages of the tales are aimed not at the juvenile reader but the adult audience. Though not openly confessional in nature, the tales reveal Anne Sexton's personality, and bare her thoughts and emotions no

less than her confessional poems.

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