

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

# Representation of Feminist Ideology in Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton's Poetic Production

Autora

Paola Cristina Herrera Rivera

Directora

María Ferrández San Miguel

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

2022

## ABSTRACT

Confessional poetry was a literary movement that drastically changed the poetic scene due to the fact that it broke with prior conventions of the genre. It appeared amidst a politically, socially and culturally chaotic period marked by several activist campaigns, such as the second wave of feminism. This attempt to gain women's rights affected the literary production of authors like Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton, who are the subjects of analysis of this dissertation. The purpose is to elucidate the way in which these two writers portrayed their feminist ideas. In order to do so the analysis of three poems from each writer has been carried out ("Her Kind," "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Consorting with Angels" by Anne Sexton; "Autumn Equinox," "Snapshots of a Daughter in Law" and "The Cartographies of Silence"). It is contended that both writers managed to transmit through poetry their feminist beliefs by using personal experiences. However, Rich used a more bold and defiant tone while Sexton did it in a less vindictive way. Nonetheless, in the end both writers were able to put forward the forces that oppressed and limited women in the 1950s and 1960s US society.

**Keywords:** Confessional poetry, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Second Wave of Feminism.

## RESUMEN

La poesía confesional fue un movimiento literario que cambió drásticamente el panorama poético puesto que rompía con las antiguas convenciones del género. Apareció durante un período de caos político, social y cultural marcado por varias campañas activistas, como la segunda ola del movimiento feminista. Este intento por parte de las mujeres de conseguir la igualdad, tuvo un impacto en la producción literaria de autoras como Adrienne Rich y Anne Sexton, estas son el objeto de estudio del presente trabajo. Tiene como objetivo ilustrar la forma en la que estas dos escritoras plasmaban sus ideas feministas. Para ello se ha llevado a cabo un análisis de tres poemas de cada autora ("Her Kind," "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Consorting with Angels" escritos por Anne Sexton; "Autumn Equinox," "Snapshots of a Daughter in Law" and "The Cartographies of Silence" escritos por Adrienne Rich). Se argumenta que ambas autoras consiguieron transmitir su creencia feminista a través de su poesía con el uso de experiencias personales. Sin embargo, Rich utilizaba un tono más atrevido y desafiante mientras que Sexton lo hacía de forma menos reivindicativa. No obstante, ambas autoras fueron capaces de exponer las influencias que oprimían y limitaban a las mujeres en la sociedad estadounidense en los años 50 y 60.

**Palabras clave:** Poesía confesional, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, segunda ola del movimiento feminista.



# INDEX

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. CONTEXT	3
2.1. Confessional Poetry	3
2.2. Second Wave of Feminism	3
2.3. Adrienne Rich (1929-1912)	4
2.4. Anne Sexton (1928-1974)	6
3. ANALYSIS	8
3.1. Adrienne Rich's Poetry	8
3.2. Anne Sexton's Poetry	14
3.3. Discussion	19
4. CONCLUSION	21
5. WORKS CITED	22

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The 1950s and 1960s in the US was a period marked by social, cultural and political tensions. In this atmosphere a new group of poets appeared, such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, among others. They were referred to as confessional poets, they all had in common the rejection of the previous poetic tradition and for them the expression of personal experiences and feelings and the use of more open forms was fundamental. They also made use of the free verse that allowed them to deal with a great variety of themes, such as mental health, alcoholism, divorce, abortion or even the denunciation of political or social injustices. The confessional poets had a great impact on US society and were a great influence on future poets. Moreover, as it has been said before, the 50s and 60s were characterized for being a period of tension, conflict and the appearance or rebirth of activist movements, such as The Civil Rights Movement or the Feminist Movement, among others. The latter was an attempt to raise social awareness among women about the forces that oppressed them. This movement inevitably had an impact on the literary production of the time, especially in poetry. It can be reflected in the works of figures like Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich or Anne Sexton.

The aim of this dissertation is to compare two prolific North American writers: Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich. These poets were part of the confessional literary movement that emerged in the US in the 1960s. Sexton and Rich were both concerned with feminist matters, but they differed in the way of approaching those topics. Through the analysis of their literary production, this project wants to elucidate the way in which they portrayed their feminist beliefs on their poetry. In order to do so, the present project is structured as follows: the first section is dedicated to the a brief contextualisation on the literary movement to which Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton belonged, and also to a discussion of the feminist advances that were taking place at the time. Later on, both Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich are going to be introduced, and both their personal and professional lives are going to be discussed, due to the fact that understanding the authors' circumstances is fundamental to make sense of their confessional poetic production. Subsequently, there will be a section dedicated to the analysis of a series of three poems by Adrienne Rich: "Autumn Equinox," "Cartographies of Silence" and "Snapshots of a Daughter in Law," and three poems, by Anne Sexton: "Her Kind," "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Consorting with Angels." The analysis of

these poems will be used to exemplify Rich and Sexton's thematic and stylistic evolution, but most importantly the portrayal of their feminist ideas. The comparison of their poetic production will be included in this section as well, where the differences and the similarities between both writers are going to be discussed. Finally, this project will end with the conclusion reached after the analysis.

## **2. CONTEXT**

### **2.1. Confessional Poetry**

Confessional poetry, which is a branch of Modernist poetry, a literary movement that according to critics started to flourish in the 1950s until the 1960s (Beach 155), was a movement that appeared in an extremely chaotic atmosphere, and according to scholars like Christopher Beach it deeply transformed the way in which Americans perceived and related to poetic forms (154). Authors like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, among others, followed this literary trend. Confessional poets differed from their predecessors in the sense that the distance between the poetic speaker and the author was virtually nonexistent (Beach 155). The aforementioned poets that belonged to the group of confessional poets made use of the first person voice, and created poems that were, according to Christopher Beach, “highly emotional in tone, autobiographical in content, and narrative in structure” (155). Poets of this generation rejected the obscurity that characterized the poetry of their predecessors and were looking forwards to a more personal type of poetry. In a period of time marked by restraints and social prejudices, confessional poetry allowed poets to explore thoughts, feelings and emotions that were against what was socially acceptable at the time (Beach 155). The themes that were explored (such as, sex, psychological issues, marital problems, etc.) along with the fact that the poems seemed to be an intrusion into the author’s in some cases problematic lives, made the poems of this generation more appealing to readers, scholars and critics (Beach 155). Though it is argued that the confessionalist mode reached its peak in the mid 1960s, this movement continued to have a great influence in the poetry of the 1970s and 1980s (Beach 155).

### **2.2. Second Wave of Feminism**

In order to understand the aforementioned poetic movement as a whole, it is crucial to be familiar with the socio-cultural and political movements occurring at the time, due to the fact that they inevitably had an impact on the literary production of the period. One movement that is fundamental for the understanding of Anne Sexton and especially of Adrienne Rich’s poetry, is feminism. The flourishing of the “second wave” of feminism, that developed in the late 1960s and 1970s, facilitated the appearance as, Stephen Fredman claims, of a “female poetics” (86). For instance, Rich accommodated

traditional rules of poetry to portray women's perspective as well as her political stance. As for Sexton, as Stephen Fredman states, although her poetry displays a "her self-destructive energy" it is also meant to help other women with similar experiences (86).

The second wave of feminism emerged as a consequence of a series of events, and even though it "materialized" in the 60s, it was boiling time prior. During WWII women were fundamental, because they occupied jobs that were left vacant by the men that were fighting in the war, and according to scholars like William Chafe, women had an opportunity to leave the domestic realm (Le Gates 342). This opportunity had a strong impact on women and, as a result, many were able to experience a sense of pride and accomplishment which definitely widened women's perspective (Le Gates 342). LeGates explains, however, that right after the end of the war they were sent back to their previous position in society: the domestic realm (342). These contradicting ideas of what women wanted and what was expected of them was one of the sparks that led to the resurgence of the feminist movement (LeGates 342).

This women's movement appeared, as it has been stated, in the context of a series of radical movements like the Civil Rights Movement; the latter played a extremely important role because it helped those that later on will identify themselves as feminists to realize their lack of rights (Gill and Seller 123). In other words, this resurgence of the feminist movement took place at the same time and was influenced by other activist campaigns (Gill and Seller 123). Moreover, there were other factors that greatly contributed to the resurgence of this movement such as the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone Beauvoir and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (LeGates 356).

### **2.3. Adrienne Rich (1929-1912)**

Adrienne Cecile Rich was born in 1929 in Baltimore, Maryland, in a Jewish middle class family. From a very young age, she was encouraged by her father to read and write. She graduated from Radcliffe in 1951 and that same year published her first book, *A Change of World*. Two years later, Adrienne married Alfred H. Conrad, with whom she had three children, and they remained together until 1970, when she decided to leave him. In 1976 she published *Twenty-One Love Poems*, it was a sequence of sonnets



in which Rich identified herself as a lesbian. A year later, she started to share her life with a Jamaican writer named Michelle Cliff, and they stayed together until her death (Macgowan 142-144).

Rich is considered to be one of the most outstanding poets in the United States, who is not only well-known for her poems, but also for being a feminist thinker and an essayist (MacGowan 142). At the beginning of her career, she followed the canon established by male authors such as W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Frost, Stevens, among others (Macgowan 142). However, later on she would depart from that canon and establish her own. Rich's main aim was the creation of poetic forms that would suit and reflect female issues as well as allow her to express her feminist beliefs (Fredman 86).

Rich was a very prolific writer of poems, essays and prose. Among her early works, we can find *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955). In these two collections, Adrienne recounted experiences that were not necessarily her own and also some poems present themes that would be further developed in the future (MacGowan 142). In the 1960s Rich published *Snapshots of a Daughter in Law* (1963) and *Necessities of Life* (1966). The publication of these two collections drastically changed her life as well as her poetry production. Rich herself considered that they were important for her career because in them she explored themes that she had not explored before and also because she experimented with poetic forms as a whole (MacGowan 143). Rich was aiming to create a poetic expression that would serve to express women's issues and that came from the female body itself. That idea can be clearly seen in a poetry collection that was published in the 1970s, *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) (Kimmelman 421). She was also a prolific essayist, her more significant essays are compiled in *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1986), *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986), *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993), and *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (2001).

As the distinguished poet she was, she has been the recipient of a great number of honors and awards (MacGowan 145). Rich is considered to be one of the most significant poets of the twentieth century. However, she is also very famous for being an activist that advocated for the rights of women and gay people, fought also for reproductive rights, and last but not least, she fought against social injustices (Macgowan 144).

## **2.4. Anne Sexton (1928-1974)**

Anne Gray Harvey was born in Newton, Massachusetts, on November 9, 1928. She belonged to a prominent family, and was the daughter of an affluent wool merchant. With regard to her education, she attended a finishing school in Boston called Garland Junior College, and later on she enriched her formal education by attending poetry workshops. In 1948 Anne married Alfred Sexton, with whom she had two daughters (Macgowan 139).

Their first child was born in 1953. For Anne meeting the physical and psychological needs of the baby was a difficult task (MacGowan 139). It was then that she had her first mental breakdown, which led to her hospitalization due to anxiety and depression along with suicidal impulses (MacGowan 139). Two years later she gave birth to her second child, which also led to the appearance of another mental breakdown (Macgowan 139). She was later on diagnosed with postpartum depression and received psychological help (MacGowan 139). However, her condition worsened over the years, she even attempted suicide before her twenty-eighth birthday (Salvio 2). After this event, she experienced a few years of lethargy that were fundamentally marked by the socio-cultural limitations that were imposed on women in this period. This came to an end due to the success that psychoanalysis or the “talking cure” had on Sexton. Even though it is argued that this technique helped her to be the prolific and talented poet that has come to us, it was not enough to fully cure her mental illness (Salvio 2). Those that got to know her agree that she could be very cheerful and altruistic, she could also be dangerous and self-destructive. Sexton tended to interfere or meddle in the life of her close friends and especially in the life of her daughters. In some instance of her life, she was not even capable of taking care of her children, attempted suicide in several occasions and was afraid of leaving her house (Salvio 2). Lastly, despite her illness she managed to become a college professor and along her life was honored with various awards, such as the Pulitzer or Shelley prizes.

Sexton belonged to the confessional movement; Her poetry was distinguished from that of her contemporaries for being appealing to a great number of people, and also for the fact that, as Salvio explains, it “explored issues such as depression, addiction, suicide as well as the way in which a mother that has suicidal thoughts loves

her daughter” (1). Other themes that are recurrent in her poetry are female issues, such as women’s need to be perfect or at least seem it, and the fact that women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere. Sexton also tackled issues that were not considered appropriate, for instance those that were related to the female body (Smith 1). Her poems were fundamental to create a female collective consciousness because, as Virginia Smith explains, “if the personal is political, then the poem of a woman who writes about her hungers, for sex, success, personal identity and more are charged with an urgent social message” (1).

### 3. ANALYSIS

#### 3.1. Adrienne Rich's Poetry

"Autumn Equinox" from *Diamond Cutter and Other Poems*, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" from a book of the same title and "The Cartographies of Silence" from *Dream of a Common Language*, are the poems that will be analyzed to discuss Rich's thematic and stylistic evolution. Said evolution is reflected in the themes she deals with as well as in the way in which she tackles them. "Autumn Equinox" belongs to Rich's first period. "Snapshots" and "Cartographies" belong to Rich's second period. In terms of themes, the latter deal with topics that were already anticipated, but in a more subtle way, in "Autumn Equinox": "Snapshots" deals with female issues and portrays some women experiences, and "Cartographies" deals with the limitations of language.

The first poem that is going to be the subject of analysis is "Autumn Equinox," which serves as a great example to illustrate Rich's production during her first period. At this time she was still influenced by the male canon set by her predecessors. However, it is obvious that she is beginning to experiment with both form and content. This poem is composed of two stanzas; the first one has eight verses and the second six verses. The author did not follow any kind of metrical or rhyme pattern, which means that she decided to use free verse to portray the dialogue between the poetic speaker and her husband. The reader can witness the conversation that these two characters had in the middle of the night. Apparently, the poetic speaker cannot sleep well and her husband, preoccupied, wakes her up ("he leaned / Above to shake me. 'Are you ill, unhappy?'" ll. 3-4). The problem comes when she cannot word what she is feeling; she tries to communicate but she seems to doubt herself ("I'm Sick, I guess—," l. 4). However, she then utters the most striking words of the whole poem: "I thought life was different than it is" (l. 6). Clearly, there is something bothering the poetic speaker but she is only able to begin to communicate her discontent, for that reason she starts to feel ashamed and tries to diminish her issues to alleviate the "burden" of her husband. This can be seen in the following lines: "The lines of grievous love upon his face, / The love that gropes but cannot understand" (ll. 10-11). She seems to feel bad because she has a husband that genuinely loves her and is trying to understand, but she is unable to put into words what she feels. Even the poetic speaker seems to have problems trying to put into words what her issues are, so how could she explain something to someone when

she is not able to understand herself? In lines 12-13, the poetic speaker says “I must be crazy Lyman— or a dream / Has made me babble things I never thought.” These lines might be an allusion, especially the word “dream,” to Rich’s later themes: the need to create a common language that would guarantee open dialogue and communication (Strine 27). This poem does not end on a positive note; the woman seems to be resigned to not understand the origin of that feeling of uneasiness. All this can be related to that dissatisfaction women felt in the 1960s and 70s, due to the fact that they were supposed to be relegated to the domestic realm and felt guilty for wanting more than it was expected of them.

The thematic and stylistic evolution in Rich poetic production becomes extremely evident in “Snapshots of a Daughter in Law,” in particular the rejection of literary conventions established by the male canon in the use of free verse. Moreover, the poem shows a fragmentary form, as it is suggested by the title. The poem is composed of ten “Snapshots” that deal with women’s state of mind as well as female experiences. Thematically, the forces that oppressed women in the 1950s as well as female experiences are the connection between all the sections. In other words, Rich expresses her desire for women’s freedom and liberty, and it was this poetic production that established her as a feminist poet (Mukhere 214).

From this poem the first aspect that is worth mentioning is the title; it not only foreshadows the structure of the whole poem, but also the type of woman that is going to be found in it: a daughter in law. This is significant because it suggests that the woman that it is going to be described does not have an identity of her own, her status depends on her relation to a man. That “Daughter in Law” is present in the first section of the poem. The protagonist seems to be the mother in law, who is, in the first stanza, remembering her younger days, her beauty and a song she used to play. She played the piano, which is something that was traditionally expected of women to be suitable for marriage along with their physical appearance. In the second stanza, the mother in law observes how her daughter in law is being trapped and also adjusting herself to be suitable for marriage (“Your mind now, moldering like wedding cake,” l. 7). In the following lines, “Rich with suspicion, rumor” and “crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge / of mere fact” (ll. 8-10), the poetic speaker might be suggesting that the marriage is going to fall apart because the wife will discover that her husband is not loyal. It seems that the daughter in law will feel forced to stay in that marriage because

it was what it was expected of her. However, there is a spark of hope in the last two verses of the poem, “your daughter wipes the teaspoons, grows another way” (l. 13). The daughter, while carrying out an activity that is associated with the domestic realm, seems to have a better future ahead. In this sense, the first stanza can be read as a look into past traditions and society’s expectations of women, the second a look into what was expected of women in the 1950s but the last two verses are a reflection of what can come in the future.

The second section is characterized by the violent situations it depicts: the protagonist in this case is a woman who “hears the angels” (l. 15) that tell her to “Have no patience.” (l. 12), “Be insatiable” (l. 18) and “Save yourself, others you cannot save” (l. 19). These angels can be interpreted as a manifestation of her rebellious side. This woman, while carrying out her domestic chores, hurts herself (“she lets the tapstream scald her / a match burn to her thumbnail” (ll. 20-21). It might be because the dissatisfaction she feels with her life makes her feel numb, and hurting herself is the only way to make sure that she is still alive. In other words, domestic life is causing a lot of dissatisfaction and hurting her deeply emotionally and physically. This woman seems to be defeated and resigned, she seems to have decided to accept the life that was imposed on her and does not follow her rebellious nature. The next section is a reflection of what society thinks of a woman that dares to defy societal perception: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes” (ll. 26-27). As can be seen in these lines, a woman that defies her nature becomes her own enemy. Moreover, this section also denounces the lack of sorority among women (“Two handsome women, gripped in argument” (l. 33). There is also an allusion to a poem from Baudelaire that has been slightly altered, “ma semblable, ma soeur” (l. 39) instead of “ma semblable, ma frère”. This French verse means “like me, my sister”, which is again a call for sorority among feminists; instead of fighting each other and focusing on their differences they should concentrate on attacking the patriarchal system that oppress them. The image of the bird that appears in the first stanza of this section also appears in sections four and six. In the fourth section, we have an allusion to the poet Emily Dickinson (“ – A loaded Gun–” l. 45) as a symbol of the power of the imagination. In this section the poetic speaker talks about the talent that women had for writing and how this was perceived as something negative (“their gift no pure fruition, but a thorn” (l. 41). Then in the sixth section, Rich uses a verse from Thomas

Champion's poetry, "When to her lute Corinna sings" (l. 53). This along with the following line "neither words nor music are her own" (l. 54), are used to put forward the theme of this section, the fact that there was a lack of tradition of women writers. Due to the fact that the only aspect worth mentioning of women is their physical appearance ("only the long hair dipping / over her cheek, only the song / of silk against her knees" (ll. 55-57). However, as it is portrayed in the three verses of the fifth section this is an old fashioned belief (she shaves her legs until they gleam / like petrified mammoth-tusk," ll. 52-53). Going back to the sixth section, the poetic speaker puts forward how she struggles to find a voice of her own when she has only been taught about taking care of a household ("her household books to you," l. 67).

Then, section seven begins with a quotation from Mary Wollstonecraft, a proto-feminist writer that advocated the need to educate women. Said quotation is perfect to introduce the motif, because the second stanza deals with how society sees women that are outspoken and try to use their intelligence ("she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore," l. 76). The eighth section also begins with a quotation, but in this case by a male writer: "You all die at fifteen" (l. 77). Women do not literally die at the age of fifteen, but they "die" in the sense that it is at this age they start to be regarded as women and then start to carry the "burden" that comes with it. It is when the pressures from society start to play a role in the life of the new woman, who "turns part legend, and part convention" (l. 79) Before that, there are no gender differences. Moreover, when a girl becomes a woman she is expected to get married, which implies that she will then inevitably become a prisoner in the domestic realm. This can be clearly seen in the image shown in the following line: "behind closed windows blankening with steam" (l. 81).

Nevertheless, as discouraging and pessimistic as the images portrayed in these sections are, in the last section the poetic speaker expresses the need that women have to organize and fight together against gender discrimination. Since all along history women have been systematically discriminated against, it is time for them to gain the space that history refused to give them ("more merciless to herself than history," l. 112). This last section is very powerful, this is not only portrayed in the dramatic tone that Rich has used in the entire poem but in the fact that the structure of the section resembles a blade. The shape it has does not look like a coincidence because it is an image of violence that is repeated several times in the poem. The idea of violence, of

physical pain that we find in the previous sections and which in the last “Snapshot” becomes an actual blade gives way to a sense of hope. As Tuhina Mukhere suggests, there is a “progression from her feelings of restriction, helplessness and subdued rage toward a hope for change” (214). This spark of hope can be clearly seen in the last fragment of the poem (“poised, still coming, / her fine blades making the air wince / but her cargo / no promise then: / delivered / palpable / ours” ll. 118-124).

The next poem to be analyzed is “The Cartographies of Silence,” where Rich explores one her main obsessions: language and its limitations. She aimed to create a language that stemmed from the body and facilitated the expression of female issues, due to the fact that she wanted to avoid the failed attempt of communication that is depicted in “Autumn Equinox.” Moreover, Rich also sought to find her own voice in an industry that has discriminated and silenced women for centuries. This poem is divided into eight sections that are interrelated because they all deal with the intricacies and limitations of language. The title of the poem is extremely interesting: a cartography according to the Oxford Dictionary is “the science or practice of drawing maps.” With this metaphor, Rich seems to be associating silence, which is something immaterial, with something material, as if she is going to draw a “map” of the rules that govern silence. All verses, except two (“The blueprint to a life” (l. 33) and “How do I exist?” (l. 60)), are grouped in pairs, and just like the poems previously analyzed there is a lack of rhyme and metric pattern.

“Cartographies” is a poem that stems from the premise that “Language cannot do everything” (l. 66). Language, as it is portrayed in the first section, has its limitations; “a conversation begins / with a lie” (l. 1-2). This might be alluding to the fact that language does not allow human beings to fully express everything, and it is something that the “speakers of the so-called common language feels” (l. 3-4), but it is an obstacle impossible to overcome (“as if powerless, as if up against / a force of nature,” (l. 5-6). In this section, the poetic speaker is admitting language’s artificiality, and also that language is fed by its own artificiality (“recharges itself with its own / false energy,” l. 10-11). Moreover, the emphasis is on how this process keeps on repeating and, in the end, it only leads to isolation (“Inscribes with its unreturning stylus / the isolation it denies,” ll. 13-14). This sense of isolation is also present in the next section, which also deals with the effects of not being able to express oneself properly. The poetic speaker describes a tedious routine of repetitive activities (“playing hour upon hour,” l. 16,



“picking up / and again picking up the telephone,” ll. 17-18, and “the old script over and over again,” l. 20). This emphasizes this sense of dullness and monotony and sets the tone to the feeling of entrapment that the poetic speaker is feeling: “The loneliness of the liar / living in the formal network of the lie.” By following the said “script over and over,” the poetic speaker is able to “drown the terror / beneath the unsaid word” (ll. 23-24).

Sections 3, 4, 5 and 6 explore the nature of silence. In the third section, the poetic speaker describes silence as “not absence / of words or music or even / war sounds” (ll. 28-30). The fact that silence cannot be grasped because it is immaterial does not mean it does not have a presence, and as it can be seen in the following metaphor, “the blueprint to a life” (l. 33), silence is to life what the blueprint is to the engineer that wants to build a house: essential. In the fourth section the poetic speaker wonders if the “classical music” that was mentioned in the second section is there to quiet down the presence of silence, because she wishes that, as it is being stated in the fifth section, silence could be stretched out to reach the meaning behind it. Lastly in the sixth section two people want to communicate with each other (“This was the silence that I wanted to break in you” (l. 61), but just like in “Autumn Equinox,” they fail to do so. All this is due to the fact that as it is reflected in the following lines, the poetic speaker “had questions but you would not answer” / “had answers but you could not use them” (ll. 62-63). However, in this case the poetic speaker had an answer but could not be of use to the listener.

In the seventh section, the poetic speaker admits that she has always been aware of the fact that language is a restricted medium of communication: “Language cannot do everything.” However, the tone of the poem drastically changes in the last section. Until the eighth section, the poetic speaker has been pointing out the constraints that restrict language as a medium of communication and the negative aspects of it. In the last section, even though language is not flawless, the poetic speaker keeps the faith in its potential (Brown 6). In the following lines, “the pure enunciations to the eye / visio beatifica” (ll. 83-84) and “the Eleusinian hierophant” (l. 85), here it is clear that the poetic speaker sometimes is jealous of those that have access to all knowledge. However, as it can be seen in the last two verses, the poetic speaker would not trade “these words, these whispers, these conversations / from which time after time the truth

breaks moist and green” (ll. 90-91), because sometimes the truth reveals itself which is what makes language so beautiful.

As the analysis suggests, Rich as a poet advocated the need to create “an alternative model of community life whose foundations were mutual openness and dialogue” (Strine 27). For that purpose she had to deeply redefine the way in which she wrote poetry: by using open forms and committing more to her feminist stance, and portraying it in her work; by making use of her own experience and reflecting on it to portray a wide variety of issues that were extremely significant in women’s lives and that did not receive enough attention (Strine 28). As has been mentioned before, she decided to use open forms of expression that departed from the ones used by her predecessors, and less traditional aesthetic conventions granted her the freedom to dive into female issues and experiences that were difficult to tackle by using prior literary conventions.

### **3.2. Anne Sexton’s Poetry**

This section is going to be dedicated to the analysis of three poems that were written by Anne Sexton: “Her Kind” from *Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” from *Transformation* (1971), and “Consorting with Angels” from *The Complete Poems* (1999). The first one belongs to Sexton’s early period. At that time, her poetic production was characterized by following traditional poetic conventions. The other two are freer in both themes and structure, since they did not follow any kind of metrical pattern.

The first poem that is going to be subject of analysis is “Her Kind,” This poem is composed of three stanzas and has a consistent rhyme scheme (ABABCBC) in the first and last stanzas, but that pattern changes in the second one (ABABCAC). In this poem, the poetic speaker seems to be praising and at the same time identifying with three different types of women that do not seem to pay much attention to social conventions but live freely. In the first stanza, the protagonist is a witch who lives her life as she wants and is brave (“haunting the black air, braver at night; / dreaming evil, I have done my hitch,” ll. 2-3). However, the poetic speaker describes her as being “lonely” (l. 5) and “out of mind” (l. 5). Moreover, the following verse reflects how society perceives this type of woman: “A woman like that is not a woman quite” (l. 6). But in the end, the

poetic speaker admits that she is able to identify with that witch (“I have been her kind,” l. 7). Then the poem continues with a woman that decided to live alone in the woods (“found the warm caves in the woods,” l. 8). The poetic speaker describes the activities said woman carries out to feel comfortable in her new home (“filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves / closets, silks, innumerable goods,” ll. 9-10). She seems to be carrying out domestic activities and taking care of those around her (“fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves,” l.11), but the difference is that she is playing this role because she wants to and not because it was imposed on her, which is what is “disaligned” in society. Lastly, the third stanza presents a woman that, even though is being driven to her death, (“where your flames still bite my thigh / and my crack where your wheels wind” ll. 18-19), does not falter: “waved my nude arms at villages going by” (l. 16). In these verses the poetic speaker might suggest that this woman is not afraid to die because she has lived honoring her free will, and she will not let society restrain her. To sum up, none of these women conform to societal rules and it is for this reason that society undermines them (“not a woman quite,” l. 6), fail to understand them (“is misunderstood,” l. 13) or put an end to their existence (“my ribs crack where your wheels wind,” l. 19).

“Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” which is the next subject of analysis, is a poem that belongs to a poetry collection called *Transformations* in which Sexton revisited famous fairy tales like “Cinderella” and “Rapunzel,” among others. In the case of “Snow White,” even though the poem recounts a series of events that are similar to the story that we are all familiar with, the tone of the poem is extremely ironic. The poetic speaker seems to be criticizing the way in which society perceives women and what is expected of them and also the fact that these societal standards might turn women against each other. One aspect that is peculiar is the way in which Snow White is described in Sexton’s poem; the emphasis is placed on her physical appearance and the fact that apparently she seems virginal: (“No matter what life you lead / the virgin is a lovely number,” ll. 1-2). In these lines, the poem does not seem to be suggesting that the protagonist is a virgin, but rather that being a virgin is a quality that is valued. The cheeks of Snow White are “fragile as cigarette paper” (l. 3), her arms and legs are made of porcelain (“made of Limoges,” l. 4) and her lips are said to be as red as wine. This description emphasizes her whiteness, which is significant because this color is traditionally associated with purity, and the fact that she seems fragile like porcelain.

However, the most relevant line is the following: “rolling her China-blue eyes” (l. 6): the poetic speaker is not only saying that her eyes are of a specific shade of blue, she is also establishing a parallel between the protagonist and a doll. In the first six lines the main focus, as in the entire poem, has been her beauty, but the previous line also alludes to the idea that this woman, like a doll, lacks agency. Besides, Snow White rolling her eyes can be interpreted also as a sign of defiance, because socially rolling your eyes is considered to be rude. This comment of the poetic speaker can be seen as a way of telling the reader that Snow White is not as good and as innocent as society thinks. Other lines from this stanza that are worth mentioning are the following: “and shut of the thrust / of the unicorn” (ll. 10-11). Here Sexton might be alluding to the fact that Snow White has already been involved in sexual intercourse but since she shut her eyes when this happened, it is as if it never happened, or society maybe refuses to see it because they want to keep seeing her as this immaculate and innocent being who is “unsoiled” (l.12). Moreover, there is also the idea that if a woman has been involved in sexual activities she loses value because she then will become “soil.”

In the next stanza, the reader is introduced to the stepmother, and again her description only focuses on her beauty. However, in this case she is somehow criticized for aging: “beauty in her own right, / though eaten, of course, by age” (ll. 18-19), so the main message is that if you age beauty will disappear and, as a result, your value will decrease. In this stanza the poetic speaker foreshadows the ending by telling what can happen to someone that is only driven by a “simple passion” (l. 21) like beauty, and that is “dance the fire dance in iron shoes” (l. 23). However, the stepmother, unaware of her destiny, is still happy everytime she hears that she is “fairest.” The comment “Pride pumped in her like poison” (l. 33), on the part of the poetic speaker might be alluding to the fact that it may be this sense of pride that she loses when Snow White is said to be the prettiest, what makes her poison her stepdaughter. All this is due to the fact that depending on external validation might be very dangerous because one might go too far attempting to receive it. As it is well known, the stepmother decided to send someone to kill Snow White when she became beautiful. Until then the girl was insignificant (“no more important than a dust mouse under the bed,” ll. 38-39). It was her beauty that made her “visible” to the rest of the world.

Before Snow White reaches the house of the Seven Dwarfs, she has various encounters with other animals, but it is emphasized that they only wanted her for her

body or made lascivious comments to her: “a hungry wolf, / his tongue tolling out like a worm” (ll. 54-55), “birds called out lewdly” (l. 56) and “the snakes hung down in loops, / each a noose for her sweet neck” (ll. 58-59). Once the girl was in the Dwarfs’ house, she told them about the queen and they told her to be careful and not open the door to anyone. Once the Queen learns that her stepdaughter is still alive, she disguises herself and tries to poison Snow White. No matter how many times the Dwarfs tell Snow White to “Beware” of the Queen, she falls for her trap everytime: in the first attempt the Queen sells her poisoned lace, in the second a poisoned comb and the last a poisoned apple. In the first two attempts, the Dwarfs manage to save Snow White, but they fail to do so in the third one. The poem is telling the reader that women are extremely naive and innocent, because all three times the protagonist was tricked by the Queen. After all, in the poem the Queen attempts to kill her three times while in the original fairy tale this only happens once, with the famous apple.

As has been mentioned before, there is a constant repetition of references to Snow White’s beauty. First of all, when she faints the first time she was poisoned, the poetic speaker says “She lays on the floor, a plucked daisy” (l. 97). In this verse, we can see that she is associated with a white flower, also as a way of portraying her as delicate. However, the girl is extremely objectified when she eats the apple: the Dwarfs are unable to save her and decide to place her inside of a glass coffin and leave her in the open for everyone to see. All this is due to the fact that they thought that burying such a beautiful woman in the soil was unthinkable. In the eighth stanza, a prince seems to be delighted by her beauty and decides not to leave her side. The Dwarves, after seeing the despair in the man’s eyes, let him take the coffin to his castle, and as it was being carried “they stumbled and dropped it / and the chunk of apple flew out” (l.145).

In the ninth and last stanza, Snow White becomes a bride and the Queen is invited to the wedding. The poem ends with a traditional happy ending, to some extent, they end up happily ever after. However, Sexton decided to add more gruesome details that definitely changed the entire story. That can be seen in the following verses: “when she arrived there were / red-hot iron shoes, in the manner of red-hot roller skates, / clamped upon her feet” (ll. 149-153). The Queen finally dies, but it seems that the cycle does not end here. Due to the fact that while the Queen is dying Snow White is said to have “held court” (l. 161) and “referring to her mirror / as women do” (ll. 163-164), this might be suggesting that Snow White has become a woman and like all women, she is

going to be obsessed with her physical appearance and might end just like her stepmother did. Anne Sexton's take on the Grimm's story could be seen as a criticism of the importance that society gives to beauty on women and the fact that this external pressure might be harmful. Most importantly, thanks to these pressures other women are perceived as rivals.

The last poem to be analyzed is "Consorting with Angels," a poem that is composed of four stanzas that have no rhyme or metrical pattern, where Sexton seems to be denouncing gender roles. The poem begins with a very straightforward verse that introduces the main topic of the poem: "I was tired of being a woman" (l. 1). Then the poetic speaker lists three reasons why this is so: first, she is "tired of the spoons and the post" (l. 2), which can be a way of saying that she is tired of being the one that is supposed to carry the weight of dealing with domestic chores; "tired of my mouth and my breasts" (l. 3): maybe as a way of referring to maternity because the pressure mostly falls on women; and "tired of cosmetics and the silks" (l. 4) to refer to the pressure that society puts on women to look a certain way. The following lines ("There were still men who sat at my table," l. 5, and "I was tired of gender things," l. 10) show that the poetic speaker is denouncing, again, the fact that each gender is expected to play a certain role in society; in the case of women, that is taking care of those around them as well as following gender conventions.

In the next stanza the poetic speaker mentions a "dream" (l. 11), and said dream is supposed to be "the answer" (l. 12): She is going to "outlive my husband and my father" (l. 14). In that dream, the poetic speaker sees a city that is built where Joan of Arc was killed. This is significant because Joan of Arc is a figure that represents empowerment and, as the poem says, she was "put to death in man's clothes" (l. 16); that is, she died subverting gender conventions, which is what our poetic speaker seems to want. Said city was filled with "angels" (l. 17) and they were "people apart" (l. 23). This suggests that these celestial beings were difficult to describe and differed from anything the human eye could understand. For the poetic speaker these angels and city were the answer she was looking for, because there she was freed from the burden of carrying a gender ("I lost my common gender and my final aspect," l. 28). Later on, she mentions that "Adam was on the left of me / and Eve on the right of me, / both thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason" (ll. 29-31). This might suggest that, even though they still had a gender assigned they were unaware of societal pressures.

Since they are deprived of said pressure, they are able to live freely ("We wove our arms together / and rode under the sun," ll. 32-33).

In the poems that have been just analyzed, we can see Sexton's less vindictive way of dealing with the feminist ideology. In "Her Kind," she uses metric and rhyme patterns, and is able to deal with women's experience. However, the poem lacks the freedom of form and content that can be seen in "Consorting with Angels" or "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." In the first one she used poetry to imagine what her life would be like if she had no gender; and in the second one, the poetic speaker criticizes society through the use of a famous fairytale.

### **3.3. Discussion**

The aim of this project was the comparison of two confessional poets: Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich. As the analysis carried out in the previous sections suggests, these two prolific writers used their voice to raise awareness of the issues that affected women in US society in the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, they differ in the way to approach the portrayal of feminist ideas. On the one hand, there is Adrienne Rich, who undoubtedly was a political figure. She considered that her political identity could not be separated from her personal identity. This is something that is reflected in her poems, her tone is more bold and defiant. Since the political and the personal were for her inevitably intertwined, it is not easy to know where her own voice ends and the social denunciation begins. In "In Autumn Equinox," which was produced in her early period, she timidly begins to denounce one issue that will be further developed in future poems: women's inability to understand and even voice their struggles due to the limitations of language. This last idea is developed in depth in "The Cartographies of Silence." Moreover, as Fredman points out, "Rich used her poetry to analyze social and institutional structures shaping her experience and that of women of earlier times or other races and social classes" (87). This can be clearly seen in "Snapshots of a Daughter in Law," where Rich manages to portray the way in which society oppresses women. However, this poem ends on a positive note, as the previous section has shown, because it is a call for sorority and for women to organize themselves to change their situation. This contrasts with Sexton's literary production, which also voices feminist concerns, as we have seen, but she portrayed her political point of view in a more

personal, less vindictive way. Sexton relied on her personal experience, or rather made it seem like it was her own experience. While Rich denounces the forces that limit a woman and portrays the way in which these limitations might hinder someone's mental health, Sexton also does social criticism but in a more subtle way, for instance in her version of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." The reader can infer what her stance is thanks to the ironic comments on the part of the poetic speaker. Moreover, Sexton's poems, as Philippa Little explains "challenge because they demand: the feminine self takes central and demands her need to be recognized, even if they cannot be understood or acted upon" (118). This can be clearly seen in "Consorting with Angels" and "In Her Kind," where the female figure is the protagonist and the poetic speaker puts forward the issues that restrain her.

It is therefore undeniable that both writers were fundamental for the feminist cause in their own way; they helped other women to become aware of the social forces that oppressed them. However, they had more in common than that: regarding their evolution as poets, they both began their journey following the footsteps of their male predecessors. It is for this reason that in both authors two distinctive periods can be distinguished. In their first period even though they started dealing with new themes like womanhood or mental health, among others, the form of the poems was more conventional. Nonetheless, with the passing of time, they manage to discard traditional forms of writing thanks to the free verse. This form of expression allowed them to deal with the same issues but in their own way, there were no constraints. This can be seen clearly in "Snapshots of a Daughter in Law," "Consorting with Angels" and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," where both writers, thanks to the use of free verse, were able to adapt the form of the poem to the topics they were dealing with. What is meant by this is that, since they were not restricted to follow any kind of metrical or rhyme pattern the verses could be organized in the way they wanted. Besides, the use of striking imagery was another aspect that both poet had in common: they both were able to transport the reader to the scenario they were creating.



## 4. CONCLUSION

The social and political unrest that was taking place in the US in the 1950s and 60s deeply affected the literary production of the period leading to the appearance of confessional poetry. Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich were part of this literary movement, and just like other writers from the same movement, they started to deal with a great variety of themes such as social and political issues. The aims of this project were to compare the poetry of Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton, two key US poets that portrayed her feminist beliefs on their writing. In other words, the focus has been the way in which their feminist beliefs can be seen in their writing, so a series of poems have been analyzed. Since each of them are included in different poetry collections, the stylistic and thematic evolution could be mapped as well in the analysis. Regarding their evolution, two distinctive periods can be distinguished in both writers. In their early period, they both followed traditional conventions set by their predecessors, but gradually moved towards more open and free forms. This change is significant because thanks to these forms of expression they had the freedom to explore their feminist ideas. As the analysis carried out has shown, Sexton and Rich differed in the way in which they portrayed feminist ideas. However, as it has been stated they both managed to raise awareness of female issues: Rich by using a more political approach, and Sexton in a less vindictive way, focusing on her personal experience. Both writers, in their own way, managed to deliver the message they wanted: women all along history have been relegated to a secondary position. The idea that society has been oppressing women in several ways is recurrent in Sexton and Rich's literary production. Undoubtedly, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich were two of the most significant North American writers, who influenced the feminist cause as well as future poets.

## 5. WORKS CITED

- Beach, Christopher. *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Brown, Melissa S. *Cartographies of Silence: Mapping Concepts of Silence and their Content*. PhD Dissertation. 2012. University of Nottingham.
- Fredman, Stephen. *A Concise Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005.
- Kimmelman, Burt. *The Facts on File Companion to 20th-century American Poetry*. Facts on File, Inc., 2005.
- LeGates, Marlene. *In their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society*. Routledge, 2001.
- Little, Philippa Susan. *Images of Self: A Study of Feminine and Feminist Subjectivity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich, 1950-1980*. PhD Dissertation. Queen Mary and Westfield College, 1990.
- MacGowan, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Mukhere, Tuhina. "Feminist Consciousness in Adrienne Rich's *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962*." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, pp. 214-215.
- Plain, Gill and Susan Sellers, editors. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Salvio, Paula M. *Anne Sexton Teacher of Weird Abundance*. State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Smith, Virginia. *Finding the Feminist Poetics of Anne Sexton*. PhD Dissertation. Roskelly. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1990.
- Strine, Mary S. "The Politics of Asking Women's Questions: Voice and Value in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2009. pp. 24-41.