

## Sexton's Spiritual Journey in “The Awful Rowing Toward Good”

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### Abstract

Anne Sexton appeared on the scene of American mystic consciousness as a pioneering spirit. Sexton employed the rituals of psycho-analysis to create new mystic forms capable of coping with the spiritual tensions of a fast and discordant life. Combining various forms of the confessional mode, Sexton developed it into a mystical instrument of self expression, self-analysis, purgation and mental therapy that paved the way for mystical illumination and union. Sexton conceives of her life as religious search which takes the form of a journey. In The Awful Rowing Toward God Sexton's journey assumes its complete religious form when she ultimately finds in ‘rowing’ the central metaphor of her poetry as well as life.

**Key words:** mystic, psycho- analysis, confessional, purgation etc.

### Introduction

The American poetry of twentieth century embodies elements that are central to mystic consciousness. Anne Sexton unfolds her spiritual progress in the form of a journey which ends in The Awful Rowing Toward God. The Awful Rowing Toward God which embodies Sexton's experiences of her spiritual voyage, is a landmark of poetic mysticism. Its vivid descriptions of the progress of a mystic journey rendered in poems of bare form without the least interference of the artistic instinct and in images characteristic of religious mysticism make it a model for transcendent unitary experience. The entire book is in Sexton's own words, “God's poem perhaps or God's people's poem. The journey is launched with “Rowing” which according to Barnard Hall, “offers a sort of biographical summary..... in which sexton, from birth to the present time, becomes figurative boat-rower searching for an island called God.” Sexton's journey which has the semblance of an outward Journey is infact an inward journey- a search for God within.

The very title of the volume The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975) indicates that it is deeply mystical. The poems of this volume revolve round the personality of Jesus. The thirty nine poems of this posthumous volume announce the collapse of rationality and the emergence of staunch faith. Rowing Toward God incorporates Sexton's final lap of her religious journey. “The volume begins with a poem called “Rowing” and ends with “The Rowing Endeth” and the “untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha-ha” that is the triumph of the union of God and man.” The religious and the mystical characters of Sexton's quest have been attested by many scholars of Sexton. Caroline king Barnard Hall finds her search for “understanding” of God and for “figurative and perhaps actual rebirth.” The element of the spiritual quest contained in the poems is also emphasized by one of Sexton's letters in which she writes that:

"all the same poem.... it's God's poem perhaps or God's people's poem." A need for spiritual significance runs through Sexton's poetry from beginning to end, a need that is largely frustrated in the early work."

Rowing Toward God embodies Sexton's spontaneous overflow of powerful mystical feelings. The poems come direct from her experience in rapid succession in a bare form without any interference of the artistic instinct. All the poems were composed in a very short period "in two and a half weeks", the poems coming five, six, seven on whatever... a day." Her journey towards God is inaugurated by "Rowing" which "offers a sort of biographical summary ("A Story", a story!) in which Sexton from birth to the present time, becomes a figurative beat- rower searching for an island called God".

Although, Sexton started her search for God from the beginning of her life, she remained mostly ignorant of Him. Sexton mentions how she had been deprived of the parental affection, as she was the third child of her parents, obviously a neglected one. Even in the midst of family, she felt lonely:

Then there was Life  
with its cruel houses  
and people who seldom touched  
though touch is all-  
but I grew,  
like a pig in 'n trench coat I grew  
and then there were many strange apparitions,  
the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison  
and all of that, saws working through my heart,  
but I grew, I grew.

This deprivation and loneliness led her towards God. After childhood, her personality matures. With maturity, she began to feel the glory of God. Nevertheless, she was still ignorant that God was hidden in her own self:

and Good was there like an island I had not rowed to,  
still ignorant of Him, my arms and my legs worked  
and I grew, I grew.

In the beginning, Sexton's rowing towards God was unconscious but it was persistent and continuous despite obstructions and the impediments, produced by the physical and natural sources:

I am rowing, I am rowing  
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty  
and the sea blinks and rolls  
like a worried eye ball,  
but I am rowing, I am rowing.

She is confident enough to reach the abode of God and to write with Him. Sexton's attitude towards God has two aspects. The first aspect is concerned with the nature of God. The second aspect is concerned with Sexton's attitude towards her father. Throughout her life, Sexton was engaged in the

search of her lost father to recover her lost happiness. Thus, father was the central point of her search. However, gradually, she realized that the father can not be source of eternal relief. The lasting comfort and the eternal happiness can come only from God. Hence, her quest for father is transformed into the quest for Father of the Universe.

"Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost", reveals Sexton's worried psyche with intense longing for the union with the divine spirit. Just like a Christian mystic, she seeks the help of mother Mary. She prays her to remove all the obstacles in the way of her marriage with Jesus:

Oh, mother,  
marry me,  
before the gulls take me out the door

In "Frenzy", Sexton finds herself very close to the temple of God. She wants to convince angels of her sincerity and activity. She declares that she is not a lazy individual but an active person, engaged in the quest:

I am not lazy  
I am on the amphetamine of the soul  
I am, each day,  
typing out the God  
my typewriter believe in.

Sexton's sincerity has a touch of universality in it. Sexton's determination to achieve her final goal has the stamp of a true mystic. The spiritual element which was clouded by her confessional utterances, finally emerges with its dazzling brilliance.

Anne Sexton's spiritual agonies end in "The Rowing Endeth" Sexton in a few master strokes touches dizzy heights, rare even to mystics of great devotion. With the help of her unflinching faith and her sincere prayers, she overcomes enormous difficulties to reach the dock of the island:

I'm mooring my rowboat  
at the dock of the island called God.  
This dock is made in the shape of a fish  
and there are many boats moored  
at many different docks.

Of course, Sexton alone is not successful to reach the dock. She finds that there are also others whose boats are moored at many different docks. She feels that all her wounds are healed with the surge of confidence. She leaves the wooden boat to write herself with God. At last, the supreme moment of Sexton's life comes. She is welcomed by God:

"On with it!" He says and thus  
we squat on the rocks by the sea.

Sexton's joy knows no bounds as she is invited by God to play the game of poker. She accepts the offer with great pleasure. In the end, both of them emerge victorious. Sexton wins for holding "a

royal straight flush” and God for holding “five aces”. This fact has been stated by Anne Sexton in an interview with Gregory Fitzgerald only a few months before her end:

“Here he (God) is laughing: he is slumped over  
me laughing, and I and laughing. He didn't beat  
me; we both won!”

The poem ends with a laughter, a characteristic expression of the mystic joy, felt after the union with God. As the game ends, God and Sexton start laughing:

a game of poker.  
He calls me.  
I win because I hold a royal straight flush.  
He wins because He holds five aces.  
.....  
.....  
He starts to laugh,  
the laughter rolling like a hoop of His mouth  
and into mine,  
.....  
.....  
Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs.

The world which once was filled with darkness is enlightened now. It is suffused with victorious light. With Sexton, every object of nature laughs to partake her joy and happiness. She hears the resounding of:

that untamable, eternal, gut driven ha-ha.....

Sexton's imagery of "play" and cosmic "laughter" should be interpreted in the light of the experiences, described by the great mystics of the world. Laughter that is “cosmic laughter” has been interpreted as a symbol of God's spontaneous activity. The supreme joy "when Dante heard all the Paradise begin its song" of glory to the father, Son and Holy Spirit, it seemed to him “a laughter of the universe.”

Sexton's experience of 'play' and 'laughter' has all the ingredients of a mystic experience. Although, she was not a mystic in the traditional sense of the term, she has Strong mystic inclination of highest order. In her poetry, as we have seen, there are definite instances of the five steps of the Mystic Way: Awakening, Purgation, Illumination, the Dark Night of the soul and Union. The Awful Rowing Toward God should be regarded as an embodiment of the last step of the mystic journey, i.e; Union, union with God.

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