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## **The Celebration of Anne Sexton: Defining the Writers in Hollywood's Biopics**

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### ***Abstract***

Since the 1930's, the Hollywood film industry has produced biographical films (biopics) that characterize the most sensational and renowned writers and poets of literary history. Although the drama of the struggling poet might seem ripe for cinematic exploration, one must question whether illustrating a poet's life through the medium of film is an indeed felicitous avenue. For example, a plethora of Hollywood films have received brutal critiques due to their incorrect historical portrayal of the poets' biographies. Furthermore, continuing developments in psychology are recasting the lives and work of many famous poets as intertwined with serious mental disturbances, such as bipolar disorder. Thus, with the contradiction of writers as portrayed on the screen and the continued emerging of evidence of misdiagnosed mental illnesses, it might be valuable for critics to begin to question the problematic depictions of these famed artists. Specifically, this study examines the problematic patterns of the fiction biopic: *Sylvia* (Sylvia Plath). This leads to speculation about how Hollywood might best script and film an honest biopic that unveils the human condition; and finally applies these ideals to a possible film portraying the poet Anne Sexton.

Since the 1930's, the Hollywood film industry has produced biographical films (biopics) that characterize the most sensational and renowned writers and poets of literary history. Edgar Allen Poe (*The Raven*, 1943), Dorothy Parker (*Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*, 1994), T.S. Eliot, (*Tom & Viv*, 1994), William Shakespeare (*Shakespeare in Love*, 1998), Sylvia Plath (*Sylvia*, 2003), and Allen Ginsberg (*Kill the Darlings*, 2012) are just a few of the iconic writers whose stories have been chronicled on the silver screen ("Poetry in Movies: A Partial List"). It is evident that Hollywood possesses an ongoing attraction with the tumultuous lives of writers. According to Delia Cabe, writer for *The Boston Globe*, the film industry especially revels in opportunities to take up the lives of tortured poets and examine them on the screen: "Hollywood loves biopics about writers . . . . Poets' lives are no less fascinating . . . . They too have been marked by scandal, family struggles, substance abuse, political strife, writer's block, and other difficulties – all of which seem like perfect fodder for a biopic" (1). These seemingly charismatic and tormented lives of writers already provide the film industry with generous amounts of source material to use as entertaining storylines. Thus, it may be argued that biopics about poets are an extension of poetry through film. The genre's purpose is to not only reveal the poetry but also to unmask the poet. The debate lies in how this particular discourse genuinely illustrates the poet and his or her poetry. Due to continual productions of biopics, it appears that value still lies in capturing a poet's life and work through the avenue of film.

Although the drama of the struggling poet might seem ripe for cinematic exploration, one must question whether illustrating a poet's life through the medium of film is an indeed felicitous avenue. For example, a plethora of Hollywood films have received brutal critiques due to their incorrect historical portrayal of the poets' biographies. Furthermore, continuing developments in psychology are recasting the lives and work of many famous poets as intertwined with serious mental disturbances, such as bipolar disorder. Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison in *Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and The Artistic Temperament* asserts that a striking fifty percent of poets seem to exhibit behaviors corresponding to various mental illnesses (60). Dr. Arnold Ludwig performed another study that concluded the "highest rates of mania, psychosis, and

psychiatric hospitalizations were in poets” (Jamison 61). Thus, with the contradiction of writers as portrayed on the screen and the continued emerging of evidence of misdiagnosed mental illnesses, it might be valuable for critics to begin to question the problematic depictions of these famed artists. By examining how Hollywood thus far defines these writers, specifically poets, one may better understand how to write an honest biographical film that will achieve the artistic goal of unveiling the human condition while generating appreciative reviews and profits at the box office. Specifically, this study examines the problematic patterns of the fiction biopic: *Sylvia* (Sylvia Plath). This leads to speculation about how Hollywood might best script and film a biopic; and finally applies these ideals to a possible film portraying the poet Anne Sexton.

### **The Relationship Between Poetry and Film**

Biopics have been welcomed as well as lambasted by critics since the early years of film in the 1900s. This parlor conversation has endured throughout the twenty-first century. According to Professor of English and Cinema Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Timothy Corrigan, in his book *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, film and poetry have had an arduous relationship. He notes that there are three primary ways in which film and poetry may interact:

(1) How poets were influenced by or how they recreated the structures and figures of the movies in their poetry; (2) how a poetic sensibility or vision is shared by creators of both literature and cinema so that one identifies an imaginative or ‘poetic’ quality; and (3) how a film and poem construct metaphors, symbols, and other poetic idioms in different or similar ways.

(31)

Biopics regarding poets may share all three of these cinematic possibilities. Even so, there remains a lecherous relationship between the two mediums. Corrigan states:

Sometimes films have furnished poets with images or figures that have become symbols or metaphors for a particular idea or problem. Sometimes the cinema describes for poets an entire way of seeing or of constructing vision that works in conjunction with poetic language or that stands out in its difference. (30)

Thus, it may be argued that biopics about poets are an extension of poetry through film. The genre's purpose is to not only reveal the poetry but also to unmask the poet. The debate lies in how this particular discourse genuinely illustrates the poet and his or her poetry. It creates a dual-partnership that assists others in experiencing and understanding both the poet and the poetry through a different medium.

**Sylvia Path, *Sylvia* (2003)**

A famous and tragic female poet that Hollywood inevitably found alluring is Sylvia Plath. This literary icon, whose 1963 suicide remains mysterious to many, is today known as a “feminist martyr and [symbol] of poetic misery” (Scott 1). In a Focus Features’ production, screenwriter John Brownlow and director Christine Jeffs joined to reconstruct the horrific life of Sylvia Plath. The intention of this endeavor was to “artfully craft the mutually destructive relationship between the young American poet and British bard” (McCarthy 1). While the casting of Gwyneth Paltrow was an achievement, unfortunately, this 2003 biopic misrepresents Plath’s life through its melodramatic plot and lack of poetry.

One area of success for Focus Features was *Sylvia*’s casting. Gwyneth Paltrow became Plath, and Daniel Craig became her husband Ted Hughes. Paltrow received high praise for her appearance and overall performance of the poet, impersonating a “semi-Anglicized American preppy accent,” while, at the same time, possessing the “passionate” charisma of Plath (Scott 2). On the contrary, Craig’s portrayal of Hughes, who is the villain in the story, was judged to fail in appearance and performance. According to Plath, Hughes was “hulking...the strongest man in the world...[and had] a voice like the thunder of God” (McCarthy 2). Instead, the agency cast Craig who is thin, reserved, and possesses a frail voice. He is more of a “grumpy sourpuss” than a “magnetic artist” (McCarthy 2). Like 1994’s *Tom & Viv*, the adaptation of T.S. Eliot and Vivien Haigh-Wood, this miscasting of the main antagonist damaged the true portrayal of Plath and Hughes’ relationship.

Similar to T.S. Eliot’s *Tom & Viv*, the plot of *Sylvia* follows the meeting of the poetic couple, their marriage, infidelity, and finally the tragic death of Plath. The film circulates around the tangled relationship between Plath and Hughes. Brownlow and Jeffs were entranced by the seemingly “complicated, doom-laden love affair” and accepted the

challenge to discover the cause of her death (McCarthy 1). Jeffs placed the burden of responsibility on Hughes by highlighting his violent and abusive behavior to Plath during their marriage leading up to her death. Following the beliefs of Plath's fans, Hughes was written as a tormented man who "murdered" this mentally ill yet unbelievably "gifted" woman (Scott 2). To the audience, Plath's apparent resentment due to Hughes' infidelity intensifies the feelings that lead to Plath's suicide. The full-length feature hinges on Hughes' affair to Assia (Amira Casar), which hastens the return of Plath's dark and suicidal thoughts. Once she discovers Assia is pregnant, Plath turns on the gas in her kitchen and perishes, leaving her two children in their bedrooms (*Sylvia*). Unfortunately, casting Hughes as the villain downplays the seriousness of Plath's mental illness. The film fails to address her possible bipolar disease by placing all the blame on her husband. According to Jamison, Plath innately possessed a predisposition for manic-depression due to her family history, recurrent depression, and attempts at suicide (236). However, from the film's perspective, Hughes, not the disease, bears all the blame for her suicide, which fails to suggest how Plath was highly likely to take her own life regardless of the status of her marriage.

Historically, the film even omits the passion that those who knew the couple well regarded as being at the heart of the Plath-Hughes marriage. The opening scene of Plath biting Hughes' cheek is factual; however, the escalation of passion concludes there. The filmmakers even disregard the biographies composed about Plath that state she was happy in many parts of her marriage and loved motherhood (McCarthy 2). While the film claims Hughes destroyed Plath, historically, her husband actually encouraged and stimulated her poetry (McCarthy 2). These interesting historical facts could have contributed to the characterization and overall plot of *Sylvia*.

As for the work that secured her the place in the canon of modern poetry, Plath rarely recites her own poems in the film. The movie opens with a quote from Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus," which states, "Dying is an art." To conclude the film, Plath mumbles strings of words from her *Ariel* collection (*Sylvia*). The audience does not observe or hear any of Hughes's work, which is ironic since he was named British Poet Laureate in 1984 (Scott 1). One would believe that these bodies of work, the words from the poets themselves, would be considered the crux to analyzing these poets'

personalities. Mirroring the trend of the preceding biographical pictures, this film is surely not about Plath's poetry. Overall, the screenwriter and director fall short of utilizing more information from Plath's biography and poetry, leaving the audience with a skewed perception of the poet.

### **Anne Sexton Biopic**

Since the errors of Hollywood's representation of the poet in various iconic biographical films have been exposed and commented upon by many, it could serve a useful purpose to hypothesize as to how Hollywood might solve these issues by creating a new set of standards to best illustrate a biopic. A possible vehicle to try these might be the life story of the 1967 Pulitzer Prize poet, Anne Sexton. Sexton seems a perfect variable to test because she is one poet whose story has not been adapted to the big screen. The possible solutions to Hollywood's past errors in portraying a poet's life ought to 1.) take into account the poet's popularity today, 2.) adhere to the authority of biographies, 3.) incorporate the poet's published works, and 4.) offer an honest depiction of the poet's mental illness. Speculating and applying these proper adaptation techniques can potentially assist in establishing a true portrayal of Sexton's life.

### *Popularity Today*

To begin, one must investigate if Sexton's true-life story would appeal to a wide audience. Studies confirm that Hollywood's primary age range for films is eighteen to forty-five (*Sunset*). While Sexton became a published poet at the age of 32 (Middlebrook 166), she possesses a popular appeal in the twenty-first century. Today's pop culture responds rather heavily to female feminist poets. For instance, there are numerous websites dedicated to instructing women at how to dress like Sylvia Plath. From the embellished, flowery top to the "S" locket, any woman can mirror the "mad poet" for a simple cost of forty dollars (Wermick). Likewise, many women today are interested in the life of Anne Sexton. There are blogs, such as "Poetry365" and "F-Yeah Anne Sexton," where men and women respond to her powerful poetry or post photos of themselves dressed like the poet. Moreover, there is a girl band that began in 2007 inspired by Sexton. In *Anne Sexton Her Kind*, two young adult women perform simultaneously with Sexton's recorded voice reading her poetry. One of their hits is Sexton's "Music Swims Back to Me" ("Her Kind"). Evidently, thirty-eight years since

her dramatic suicide, Sexton still occupies a place of popularity among the young generation, meaning her film could be marketable to the masses.

*Authority of Biographies*

In addition to having a popular fan base to build upon, a sturdy biopic must adhere to the authority of poet's published biographies. Since film is a different medium than a biographical book, it does possess limitations as to how much information about someone's life can be told visually in an hour and a half. Chronicling a poet's nonfiction life is a far more delicate matter than adapting a fictional text. It can be rather taxing to delineate all of Sexton's forty-five years of struggles as daughter, wife, mother, lover, and poet in such a short amount of time. As noted previously in the review of *Sylvia* (Sylvia Plath), a correct portrayal of one's biography is to be desired rather than an exploitative dramatized adaptation.

Since their inception, films have encompassed three types of conflict: man versus man, man versus nature, and man versus self. To contemplate a potential screenplay showcasing Sexton's life, one must be well-informed of her multiple adversities. Sexton had conflicts with many people in her lifetime, including: her selfish mother (Mary Gray Harvey), abusive and alcoholic father (Ralph Harvey), second mother and mentally ill great aunt (Anna Ladd Dingley), dominate and abusive husband (Kayo Sexton), controlling mother-in-law (Billie Sexton), and shy daughters (Linda and Joy). She struggled with being a woman during the rise of the second wave of feminism in the 1960's who shared the burden of juggling various roles like daughter, wife, mother, and poet. Even under medication, she internally battled against her nature, being widely depressed and manic since childhood (Middlebrook 9). Her trances, suicide attempts, and hospitalization led her to psychotherapy with Dr. Martin Orne (41). Over a decade of a therapist-patient relationship, Dr. Orne and Anne both discovered numerous reasons for her mood disorder: a family history of mental illnesses, stresses of being a wife and mother, and engaging in problematic relationships (55). Most of Sexton's life was spent on the couch as a patient as she returned to her childhood memories, recalling painful feelings between her mother, father, great-aunt, and husband (3).

Although therapy alone brought a "rebirth" into Sexton's life (3), Dr. Orne encouraged Anne to write poetry. Sexton called this awakening a "rebirth at 29," and she



added, “When I’m writing I know I’m doing the thing I was born to do” (3). She began bringing poetry to her sessions. She said at one point that she thought her only talent might be prostitution because she could make men feel powerful (42). After psychotherapy, she discovered her true calling: confessional poetry (Sexton xx). Dr. Orne was the first person to encourage this 1960’s housewife to believe she had potential to become something more. This one man gave her the courage to actually “do something” with her life (Middlebrook 42). According to Dianne Wood Middlebrook, author of *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, “In Anne’s life, psychotherapy constructed a bridge between the girl’s creativity and the woman’s commitment to a vocation in art” (3). Following another suicide attempt, Orne said, “You can’t kill yourself, you have something to give. Why if people read your poems they would think, ‘There’s somebody else like me!’ They wouldn’t feel alone” (43). This gave her something that was completely hers. Poetry became her therapy (45). Throughout the years, her poems gave evidence of her improved psychological health (124). She divulged in an interview:

Writing is much more unconscious. Even though therapy itself should be, should have a whole lot of unconscious stuff, you’re aware of your thoughts – they become conscious. Not all my poems become conscious. Yet every book is an attempt – or every poem is an attempt – to master those things which aren’t quite mastered. (180)

Although Sexton wasn’t spiritual, she but saw sanctity through poetry. Even a priest told her that God was her typewriter (122). This caused Sexton to explore spiritual poems. She said, “The life of a poet is saving me (I hope), as some things are as bad as I’ve ever known. I am sometimes totally lost from the world. Maybe I am crazy and will never get really well. God knows I’ve been working at it long enough” (122).

Even though Sexton lost to her demons when she committed suicide on October 4, 1974 by carbon monoxide poisoning (397), her life story is still an anthem about redemption. Making the most of that theme, the screenplay for an Anne Sexton biopic could be about a woman coming of age and finding her calling through the muse of poetry when she was merely twenty-nine. It would take us through her daily battle with undiagnosed manic-depression and finding her soul through her typewriter. The film would be in accord with the biographies. Anne Sexton was and still is an inspiration to

women everywhere because she explored the definitions of what it means to be a female.

*Incorporating Published Works*

An additional and important element to a successful biopic about a poet is the incorporation of his or her famous poetic works. Using poetry will not only further the plot of the poet's life but also sculpt the characterization of the poet. Critic Stacey Harwood encourages the alliance of poetry and film in biopics. She extols the unsurpassable benefits of including poems into the genre:

Poems have been the means by which a filmmaker reveals a character's state of mind, animates a plot, or introduces a movie's overarching theme. The well-placed poem can intensify, illuminate, and complicate the dramatic arc of a story. ("The Well-Versed Movie")

Poetry can be incorporated into the story with visual text or verbalized in the dialogue. This technique utilizes the poet's words to "communicate non-verbal experiences such as grief, longing, and nostalgia without sentimentality" ("The Well-Versed Movie"). In addition, poetry can assist in establishing a mood or foreshadow events. To echo Donald Hall, "Poems make the unsayable said" ("The Well-Versed Movie"). Relating this technique to an Anne Sexton biopic, her poetry would serve to expose many facets of her personality and mental health. Some famous poems that correlate with events in Sexton's life are "Her Kind," "The Abortion," and "Live or Die." If a poem is placed early enough in the film, a particular metaphor for a poet's life given by the director can be established for the audience. Finally, poetry allows the audience to become educated by the deceased poet. Through the "pages" of film, his or her poetry can continue to be read for years to come.

*Honest Depiction of Mental Illnesses*

An additional aspect to an Anne Sexton biopic or any poet's is that the possibility of mental illness must be sensitively addressed. One problem with the adaptation of true lives is the false interpretations that can arise. As discussed earlier, Sylvia Plath's insanity in *Sylvia* seemed to be triggered more by her husband than by her genetic predisposition of manic-depression. Mental illness is a serious aspect of Sexton's biopic. A doctor did not diagnose her with bipolar disease, but Jamison believes it is evident that this was the illness she bore all along (340). Referring to the large quantities of published biographies,

readers discover that the brunette was birthed into a lineage of mental illness. Her grandfather Louis (Middlebrook 16), aunt Frances (5), great aunt nana (15-6), and father Ralph were all hospitalized for mental breakdowns (14). Aunt Frances and her Sister Jane committed suicide (7). Following her genetic path, Sexton was known for mood swings of mania and depression (9), impulsivity (245), anger (33), separation anxiety (7), trances (41), altered sleep and energy patterns (289), seasonal variations in mood (289), reckless spending (29), anorexia (334), alcoholism (14), hallucinations (12), and suicidal thoughts (16). Her extreme “attacks of mania and depression” caused her to be hospitalized throughout most of her life. This illness ultimately drove her to commit suicide (Jamison 12). As mentioned previously and suggested by her friend Maxine Kumin, poetry impacted Sexton’s life greatly, perhaps granting her eighteen more years of life (Sexton xxiii). It’s safe to say Sexton chose to utilize her pain for her work. As a result, viewers may identify with her various roles and mental illnesses (Middlebrook 273). By establishing a clearer view of Sexton’s mental illness, an audience will attain psychological knowledge to appreciate this poet along with her work.

#### *Hollywood’s Story and Casting*

To produce this Sexton biopic, a central plot must also be theorized. There are two particular ways that this poet’s life can be translated to the screen. Firstly, the film could follow the meeting and encounters of three female writers: Sexton, Plath, and Kumin. Their lives intertwined during a writing workshop in 1959 (Middlebrook 200). They sustained a close bond as they mailed and phone-called applicable revisions to their work (Sexton xxv). This lens would result in a unique plot because the genre lacks a female-driven storyline centering around the art of writing, revision, and friendship. Secondly, a biopic regarding Sexton’s life could alternatively focus on one of her primary relationships: mental illness and poetry. For Sexton, writing and therapy went hand in hand. In this plot Sexton’s trials and tribulations would be the focal point. This biopic could begin with Sexton putting on her jewelry and fur coat and entering her vehicle. At first, audience members would assume the structure of the biography would start at her suicide and proceed with flashbacks. However, this beginning is merely a tool to inform the viewers of what is to come: Sexton’s demise. This would be what filmmakers call a “plant,” placing an idea into the audience’s minds that will be returned to later. Instead,

Sexton drives to therapy to meet Dr. Orne. The middle-aged woman undergoes psychotherapy. Through psychoanalysis, Sexton could recall, in the form of flashbacks, past memories of her childhood, wifehood, motherhood, and being a poet. Having one present-day therapy session to return to in between flashbacks allows the audience and Sexton to learn about herself simultaneously. The film would conclude with the twenty-first century Maxine Kumin's voiceover reading Sexton's favorite poem "Her Kind" at a convention, while Sexton gets dressed and sits in a car to commit suicide in 1974. This plot could resonate with even more relevance because the feminists today are still struggling to obtain and/or relinquish these similar roles of society's constructs.

Successful films, of course, require celebrity actors to assist in selling the storyline. There are several ideal candidates that could portray Anne Sexton. One in particular that may assist in this breakout biopic is Winona Ryder. This American-bred actress is currently forty-one. Similar to Sexton returning to poetry post high school, Ryder is returning to acting. She has played a wide spectrum of roles, from *Edward Scissor Hands* (1990) to *Black Swan* (2011). Ryder has also embodied a writer in other films, like the Academy Awards Best Picture and Best Actress nominated adaption *Little Women* ("Winona Ryder"). Performing a character that develops from daughter to adulthood to wife and to writer is nothing new for this actress. Finally, one central rationale for Ryder to play Sexton, besides having stunningly physical resemblance to the late poet, is that she too has battled mental illnesses. There have been two incidents in which Ryder was involved in theft. In 2001, she was caught stealing jewelry from Saks Fifth Avenue, and in 2008 she stole \$124,000.00 worth of Bulgari jewels. She was convicted of shoplifting and sentenced with four hundred and eight hours of community service. Since the incident, Ryder has undergone hospitalization and counseling. She is overcoming these hardships by entering the acting realm once again (Miller). This biopic holds the potential to renew not only Sexton's life story but also Ryder's career.

In conclusion, it is evident that biographical films do possess a surplus of inaccuracies that hinder rather than contribute to the attempt to exemplify real-life writers. Through this examination, it appears that Hollywood's misrepresentation of writers, including mentally afflicted poets, can in fact be revised to accurately depict their authentic lives on the screen. By applying several solutions (one's popularity today,

adhering to the authority of biographies, incorporating the poet's published works, and an honest depiction of mental illness) and theorizing a new biopic starring Anne Sexton, an honest adaption can be glimpsed as a possibility. This proper portrayal will benefit the goals of not only Hollywood but also of the original author: to educate the masses through art about the human condition.

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