

The Electra Complex in Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton's Poems

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the theme of the Electra complex in the poems by two contemporaneous American female poets, Sylvia Plath (1932-63) and Anne Sexton (1928-74). The theme of the Electra complex is dealt with by these two poets through their own unique treatments: Plath represents the theme through surrealist expression, namely, an emphasis on the expression of the imagination as realized in dreams and presented ostensibly without conscious control. Sexton shows the theme through sexual imagery and parallelism. These two poets demonstrate the same theme in diverge ways, but they share an affinity: Escaping from the development of their Electra complex, they reconstruct themselves by way of taking a feminist stance against patriarchy. When their Electra complex disappears, their self-consciousness increases; consequently, they yearn for the independence to flee from their fathers. In this paper, I propose to use the theory of the Electra complex as presented in Sigmund Freud's *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* as a critical tool to analyze the uniqueness and similarities within their poems. The poems that will be discussed include Sylvia Plath's "Full Fathom Five," "Electra on Azalea Path," "The Beekeeper's Daughter," "The Colossus," and "Wintering;" Anne Sexton's "The Moss of His Skin," "All My Pretty Ones," "And One for My Dame," "The Papa and Mama Dance," and "Briar Rose." In my paper, I attempt to examine their description of their fathers and their ambivalent feelings towards their fathers. I argue that these two poets, through their creations, reconstruct the fact (the memory) of their traumatic past, fathers' images and themselves in particular.

Keywords: Electra complex, Oedipus complex, trauma

Introduction

The Electra complex is one of the recurrent themes in the confessional poetry¹ which was a prominent mode in the United States in the 1960s and early 70s, especially in the poems of the contemporaneous American female poets, Sylvia Plath (1932-63) and Anne Sexton (1928-74). In their poems, their Electra complex towards their fathers is associated with their ambivalent relationship and feelings towards their fathers.

This paper aims to explore the similarities and dissimilarities in these two female poets' treatment of the theme of the Electra complex. These poems that I discuss are as follows: Plath's "Full Fathom Five," "Electra on Azalea Path," "The Beekeeper's Daughter," "The Colossus" and "Wintering;" Sexton's "The Moss of His Skin," "All My Pretty Ones," "And One for My Dame," "The Papa and Mama Dance," and "Briar Rose." As far as the issue of women is concerned, many a scholar uses a feminist theory, such as Nancy J. Chodorow's *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (1994), to do researches. In addition to sexuality and psychology, Chodorow emphasizes gender. My paper is concerned with women's studies, but I do not apply feminist theories to my paper. Instead, I use Sigmund Freud's *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* as a critique, especially when examining the theme of the Electra complex in their poems. In my study, I also try to examine their creation of the father image along with their description of their ambivalent feelings towards their fathers.

The Father's Image

Inspired by their traumatic memories, by their traumatic childhood in particular, Plath and Sexton explore a variety of themes within their poems. In retrospect their infantile traumas mix with sweet childhood memories and, by virtue of slightly nostalgic tones, they represent different aspects of the relationship between the daughter and a father who occupies an important position in their traumatic childhood and has a profound influence on their present life owing to the intrusion of the father image in their realistic life. In reviewing their traumatic childhood, they reconstruct their fathers and unveil their privacy publicly in order to relieve their guilty conscience. Such an audacious exposure of traumatic events is one of the characteristics of confessional poetry which, as suggested by Robert Phillips, "gives the naked emotion direct" (1973: 8). According to Jo Gill in "Anne Sexton and

¹ Confessional poetry directly and vociferously opposes the "impersonality" argued by T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Often the particulars of a poet's life provide the basis for more general speculation, which constitutes the poem's bid for universality. Conversely, in confessional poetry such details can serve to deny universality by delineating the poet as apart and uniquely suffering. The "I" of the poem is meant as a direct representation of the flesh-and-blood poet. Through its enumeration of sins, the confessional poem emerges as a tragic self-portrait. A confessional poem consists of not only its subject matter such as family, sex, alcoholism, madness or the emphasis on self, but also the directness with which such things are handled. See David Rezzi, "Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty," *New Criterion* 16.10 (1998): 15.

Confessional Poetics," the confession is a ritual of discourse between the self and the partner to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile (2004a: 432). The confession may be considered a method to cure poets' trauma from a psychological perspective. In the confession, "the autobiographical I becomes a spokesperson for the poetic and personal authenticity of the confessional stance" (George, 1987: 101).

The subject matter of the confessional poetry contains a description of the father who appears vividly in memory. The father's image for a daughter would be either as a paragon or a terrible figure; therefore, the father's image would leave room for the imagination and contemplation. The fathers' images influence the daughters so profoundly and still haunt their memories persistently, even though the fathers died a long time ago. For the daughter poets Plath and Sexton, the father image became one of their creative sources. We wonder what their fathers' exact images are and how they impress these daughter poets and inspire them to create poems. A reference to the biographies of the two poets along with their creations of their fathers as revealed in their poems can respond to the above questions.

Plath's childhood can be perceived in Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987: 15-30) and in Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989: 1-14). According to these biographies, at the age of eight, the poet lost her father Emil Otto Plath, a professor of biology who was famous for cultivating bees and suffered from diabetes because of which his leg was amputated. Winthrop, a seaside suburb of Boston where Plath spent her childhood, is often taken as the setting related to her fragmental memories of her father. By virtue of this incomplete image, the poet represents her father as Poseidon, the God of the sea, in the poem "Full Fathom Five": "Old man, you surface seldom. / Then you come in with the tide's coming / When seas wash old, foam- / Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung, / A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves / Crest and trough. Miles long" (92).² Her father's early death causes Plath to feel an extreme longing for him; so deeply does she love him that she fails to accept the cruel reality. Consequently, she denies his death as if she still envisioned him as alive within her mind, and she even deifies him in her reversion of mythology. When her father died, Plath was forbidden to assist in her father's funeral, and such a prohibition becomes her infantile trauma. This infantile trauma strongly stimulates the adult Plath to visit her father's tomb in a cramped necropolis on a rainy day. Through the father's early death, the poet attempts to reconstruct her father's image in her poems either by idealization or by depreciation. As Marilyn Manner notes in "The Doxies of Daughterhood: Plath, Cixous, and the Father," Plath treats "the father's early death as a kind of primary trauma which is rewritten into the painful coming-of-age of the daughter as writer" (1996: 152). In "Electra on Azalea Path" as in "Full Fathom Five," Plath deifies her father as Poseidon: "Another kind of redness bothers me: / *The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath / The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth / My mother unrolled at your last homecoming*" (117). Besides the allusion to Poseidon, Plath makes a reference to Agamemnon's murder in connection with her father's funeral. Here the white image which changes into the red one, a bloody Agamemnon, hints at death. In "The Colossus," by spatial description from high to low, Plath subtly makes her father equivalent to the Colossus, which is an immense statue of Apollo built on a Greek hill: "A blue sky out of the Oresteia / Arches above us. O father, all by yourself / You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum. / I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress. / Your fluted bones and acanthine

² All subsequent quotations of Sylvia Plath derive from *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Boston, 1981).

hair are littered” (129-30). By virtue of imagination, Plath deifies the father. The father’s perfect image makes the poet feel isolated and efface herself. As Gayle Wurst (1999) in *Voice and Vision: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* argues, in “The Colossus” Plath expresses her alienation from her imagination in damning representations of herself and in interiorized negative images of muses as Medusas. On the other hand, she represents another profile of her father through his profession, namely, a professor who kept bees. Her father’s profession inspires Plath to write a series of bee poems in memory of her father, such as “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” and “Wintering.”

Like Plath, Sexton has almost become identified with the genre of confessional poetry (Lerner, 1987: 52). Like Plath, by virtue of her memories, Sexton creates her father’s image on the basis of his profession. According to Diane Wood Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1992: 4), Sexton’s father, Ralph Churchill Harvey, is a wool business man who used to take voyages as well as a drunkard who suffered from mental illness, tending to repeatedly do the same things. In “And One for My Dame,” exposing her privacy in public, Sexton portrays her father as a born salesman who sells wool to Fieldcrest, Woolrich and Faribo. Also, the father is painted as a born talker who is capable of selling one hundred wetted-down bales of that white stuff, clocking the miles and sales and making it pay. Her father’s habitual absence causes Sexton to germinate a sense of loneliness and isolation within her mind. Worst of all, as the youngest of three sisters, the poet never attracts her father’s attention; it is not Anne but Blanche who is the apple of her father’s eye. Such an unhappy childhood experience for her is an infantile trauma generating humiliation and an inferiority complex. For Sexton, confession is a “technique...for producing truth” (Foucault, 1984: 59). In order to reconstruct her confidence and dignity from her infantile trauma and to compensate for her loneliness and isolation, Sexton ideally identifies herself as a princess who is deeply loved and cherished by the king which, is an image suggesting her father. Sexton revises a fairy tale “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)”: She is swimming up like a salmon, struggling into her mother’s pocketbook, and she is a little doll child, sitting on the knee of the father. The father shows his love for the daughter with a kiss: “I have kisses for the back of your neck. / A penny for your thoughts, Princess. / I will hunt them like an emerald” (169).³ In this poem, through the stanza, we are conscious that the princess’s image is created by the king in accordance with his conception or projection. As Marie-Louise von Franz in *The Feminine in Fairy Tales* explicitly indicates: “the feminine figures in fairy tales might have been formed by a man, and therefore do not represent a woman’s idea of femininity but rather what Jung called the anima--that is, man’s femininity”⁴ (1993: 1-2).

The Electra Complex

Reviewing their infantile traumas in a nostalgic way, the two poets inevitably idealize their fathers through reconstructing the past, and in so doing, they audaciously expose their Electra complex. The

³ All subsequent quotations of Anne Sexton derive from *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, eds. Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

⁴ Man’s femininity is fully discussed by Jung in *Aspects of the Feminine* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982). According to Jung, man is not so entirely masculine as to have no femininity within him, but rather, a genuinely masculine man possesses, carefully guarded and hidden, a very soft emotional life, often incorrectly described as “feminine.”

Electra complex is germinated from Electra who was a daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in Greek mythology. On the way to Troy, the Greek army encountered a dead calm as a result of irritating the Goddess Artemis. Agamemnon inescapably had to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to appease Artemis. Conceiving a hatred for Agamemnon, Clytemnestra murdered him with the help of her lover Aegisthus when he returned home. After having buried her father, Electra planned revenge on his behalf and finally led her brother Orestes to kill their mother Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Therefore, Electra is the eponymous representative of a complex characterized by a love for the father and hatred of the mother. The Electra complex is defined in Freud's *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* as what the Oedipus complex is to the boy, so the Electra complex is to the girl. The Electra complex results from childhood repression or from frustrated experience. During childhood, the girl experiences a normal attitude characterized by the Electra complex in an unremarkable way and later starts to replace her father with a brother older than herself. She fails to remember any sexual traumas in early life, but she suffers far-reaching aftereffects from comparing her brother's genital organs with her own, which leaves a strong impression on her. During the pre-pubertal years at school she gradually becomes aware of the factors of sex, receiving this knowledge with mixed feelings of fascination and frightened aversion (1993: 131). The Oedipus complex, the apprehensions of castration, has less impact on the girl than on the boy, but the acceptance of the loss of a penis is endured with some attempt at compensation. Freud continually elaborates: "The girl passes over—by way of a symbolic analogy, one may say—from the penis to a child; her Oedipus-complex culminates in the desire, which is long cherished, to be given a child by her father as a present, to bear him a child" (1993: 171). The psychological consequences of penis-envy are various and far-reaching. After having become acquainted with the wound to her narcissism, a girl develops a sense of inferiority. Even after penis-envy has deserted its true object, it continues to exist: instead, it persists in the characteristic of jealousy. A third consequence of penis-envy seems to be a loosening of the girl's relation with her mother as a love-object. According to Freud, "With the female too the mother must be the first love object, for the primary conditions for object-choice are the same for all children. But at the end of the girl's development it is the man--the father" (1993: 187-88). Now the girl's libido slips into a new position by the equation of penis and child; consequently, the girl no longer pines for a penis but for a child. With this purpose in view she takes her father as a love-object; as a result, her mother unavoidably becomes the object of her jealousy. From the psychological perspective, the attachment to the father generates a positive respect, influencing a girl to choose her future husband in accordance with her father's image or personality.

The theme of the Electra complex is treated by Plath in a direct way to depict a sexual scene in "Full Fathom Five": "Your shelled bed I remember. / Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water" (93). The last stanza suggests that the narrator passionately desires to unite with her father by committing suicide. Similarly, the theme of the Electra complex is erotically represented in "Electra on Azalea Path": "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father--your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death" (117). These three lines imply that the narrator extremely aspires to die with her father for love's sake. The attempt to die with the father in pursuit of love is also strikingly exposed in "The Colossus." In the poem, the narrator strongly longs to die so as to unite with her father: "My hours are married to shadow. / No longer do I listen for the scape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing" (130). The theme of Electra complex is lecherously demonstrated in "The Beekeeper's Daughter" with a description of sexual

intercourse between flowers: “In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red / The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings / To father dynasties. The air is rich. / Here is a queen-ship no mother can contest--” (118). Since the narrator has an Electra complex towards her father, she naturally regards her mother as a love rival whom she fails to tolerate but must endeavor to eliminate. The narrator’s attachment to her father is evidently represented in the last three lines: “Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg / Under the coronal of sugar roses / The queen bee marries the winter of your year” (118). Here the narrator ideally and romantically identifies herself with the queen bee to associate with her father who won a nickname ‘king bee’ thanks to keeping bees. Plath’s manipulations of the Electra complex disinter the personal father—that memory of a father which becomes a fiction of the father—and simultaneously attempt to bury the father and his law (Manner, 1996: 152).

Most of Sexton’s poems are concerned with the theme of the Electra complex in a direct way. Like Plath, Sexton makes her narrator in “The Moss of His Skin” view her mother as a love rival: “as if we were silk, / to sink from the eyes of mother / and not to talk” (22). In the frame of an old Arabia story about a young girl buried alive next to her dead father, Sexton pornographically portrays the sexual relationship between the father and the daughter: “how I hold my daddy / like an old stone tree” (22). Sexton explicitly employs a simile, an old stone tree to symbolize a phallus that women lack but desire to possess, according to Freud. In order to win the father’s favor, undoubtedly, the daughter should eliminate her love rivals including not merely her mother but also other women. In “All My Pretty Ones,” Sexton’s narrator inevitably indulges herself in an abyss of grief and depression when her father decides to marry the pretty widow: “This year, solvent but sick, you meant / to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush. / But before you had that second chance, I cried / on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died” (44). By virtue of sexual imagery, Sexton directly exhibits the theme of the Electra complex: “Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive, / bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you” (44). The daughter forgives the father thanks to understanding his shortcomings, as Diana Hume George indicates: “[T]he daughter who discovers her deceased father’s flaws in reading her mother’s diary is able, by coming to terms them and with their duplications in her own life to reach some kind of catharsis of pity and fear” (1987: 22). At the funeral, the narrator’s kissing her father reveals her ambiguous feeling inherited from the past when her father was alive, without understanding her incestuous love for him. In “The Papa and Mama Dance,” Sexton subtly exposes the theme of the Electra complex by constructing a fantastic world where the narrator relates the triangle among father, mother and daughter in the form of a monologue. Addressing and inviting her imaginary brother Mr. Gunman to dance, the narrator thus fulfills her desire to unite with her father. By paralleling the two different times and spaces, Sexton implicitly overlaps the present and the past. Similarly, in “And One for My Dame,” Sexton creates a tension by the device of the complicated triangle among father, daughter and husband. The father is more important than the mother, since the father for the daughter acts as a guardian who is able to protect against the dangers of the external world that threaten from the darkness of her psyche, as Diana Hume George comments: “In her version of ‘Briar Rose,’ Sexton plays out the effects of such smothering and overprotective love on the part of fathers for the ‘purity’ and ‘safety’ of their daughters” (1987: 38). Therefore, the relationship between father and daughter becomes very ambiguous: the father’s love for the daughter is more like the passionate love between lovers than the affection between father and daughter. George continues by indicating: “Permanently infantilized by her earlier relationship to an idolatrously loving father and a long and symbolic sleep in which no other men could come near her, she is never quite a woman, always a daughter and a child”

(1987: 39). The prince's comportment of kissing the princess breaks the sleeping spell, but it fails to awake either her sexual self or her consciousness: "The briars parted as if for Moses / and the prince found the tableau intact, / He kissed Briar Rose / and she woke up crying: / Daddy! Daddy! / the fear of sleep" (171). After she awakes from her long and deep sleep, the first thing Briar Rose does is cry for her father. Such ambiguous behavior reveals that Briar Rose has a subconscious Electra complex towards her father, the king, so she lives in an uneasy tension, oscillating between incestuous fears and potential insanity. Even after her marriage to the prince, she cannot dissipate her apprehension of sleeping. Obviously, incest for her is in a sense an eternal nightmare. In "Briar Rose," Sexton demonstrates a dramatic world in a surrealistic way, overlapping two different times and spaces: one is fixed in a fairy tale, and the other, in a realistic life. Briar Rose in the fairy tale is transformed into Daddy's girl in reality. According to Middlebrook's *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, Sexton mentions that she has suffered from sexual harassment by her father, but her psychiatrist Doctor Martin comments that it is very difficult for many of his patients to distinguish fantasy from memory. In order to recompense herself for the loss of paternal love resulting from her father's habitual absence and negligence, Sexton takes a fairy tale as a frame to invent a fanciful world where she has a sexual relationship with her father. In reviewing her infantile trauma, the poet, because of and despite her idealization of her father, shows her need to imaginarily change her cognition of him to one of a man who has abused her. To some degree, through her changed cognition of the father, Sexton seems to be able to escape from the impotent and helpless situation that occurred repeatedly in her traumatic childhood.

As to the relation between father and daughter, Plath's "Electra on Azalea Path" depicts it with sexual imagery: "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father--your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death" (117). These lines suggest the erotic association between father and daughter as well as that between lovers: "The grave's a fine and private place," from Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," and they, we think, do there embrace. Similarly, Sexton's "The Moss of His Skin" portrays the relationship between father and daughter by an erotic action: "how I hold my daddy / like an old stone tree" (22). The two lines imply that the girl aspires to become a mature woman through asexual intercourse with her father, as Diana Hume George points out: "[D]aughters, dependent upon their fathers for sense of their womanhood, initiated into it by means of seducing and being seduced by their fathers, lie down to die with their fathers" (1987: 30). On the other hand, the simile implies that the daughter desires sexual intercourse with her father to give birth to a boy to compensate for her lack of a phallus. According to Freud's *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, a girl was just experiencing the reanimation of the infantile Oedipus-complex at puberty when she suffered an overwhelmingly serious disappointment: "She became keenly conscious of the wish to have a child, and a male one; that was her father's child and his image that she desired, her consciousness was not allowed to know" (1993: 134).

Ambivalent Feelings towards the Father

The two poets have mixed their infantile traumas in with the Electra complex towards their fathers, so they have ambivalent feelings towards their fathers. Through their creations, these poets seem to

have reconstructed themselves and the confidence to accept their traumatic past; in so doing, they ultimately come to forgive their fathers for their absences.

Nonetheless, Plath expresses ambivalent feelings towards her father in “Full Fathom Five,” where the poet manifests an Electra complex regarding her father but lacks the courage to face him. Plath shows similar feelings in “The Colossus,” as Jo Gill in *“The Colossus and Crossing the Water”* indicates: “‘The Colossus’” may be read as a study of the female subject’s struggle to reconcile herself with, and paradoxically to achieve mature independence from, the lost feared and desired father” (2006: 95). In “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” Plath tends to masochism: “My heart under your foot, sister of a stone” (118). The poet struggles with her ambivalent feelings towards her father, oscillating between her love and hatred for him. She hates him for two possible reasons: one is that his early death resulted in a deprivation of fatherly love, and the other is that her husband’s extramarital affair reminds her of her father’s betrayal, namely, his early death. Before Plath finds out her husband Ted Hughes’s liaison with Assia Wevill, her father’s image is as perfect as God, a model for her when choosing her future husband. In “Wintering,” associating her father with her husband, Plath becomes a man-hater and attempts to drive men away from her realm: “Into which, on warm days, / They can only carry their dead. / The bees are all women, / Maids and the long royal lady. / They have got rid of the men, / The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors” (218-19). For Plath, the beehive is a pivotal image thanks to its a variety of significances, as Christina Britzolakis comments: The beehive is a trope of industrious collectivity, a matriarchal society and authoritarian society, and it allows the poet to assume multiple and constantly changing points of identification—including those of beekeeper, queen and worker-drudge (2006: 119-20). By writing a number of poems, Plath seemingly tries to fight against patriarchal bias which tends to protect men involved in extra-marital affairs from punishment.

Through the parallelism between father and husband, between two spaces, and between two times, Sexton implicitly exposes her feelings towards her father in “And One for My Dame.” On account of his profession, her father often takes long business trips driving along the highways. Even when at home, the father stares at maps to study his itineraries as if his heart were still on the routes marked in red; therefore, the narrator has a deep sense of separation as if there was a long distance between her and her father. The daughter desires her father’s company, but her wish is never satisfied. So lonely and so bored is the daughter that she opens the map to study and experience her father’s travel, and in so doing, she seems to attach to him: “I sit at my desk / each night with no place to go, / opening the wrinkled maps of Milwaukee and Buffalo” (74). The image of the map plays an important role in connecting the father with the daughter as well as in associating business trips with battle itineraries. In *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief*, Philip McGowan indicates: “The once two-dimensional maps are fleshed out in her linguistic economics, becoming personifications of the father’s life traced through the ‘winkled,’ ‘veins’ and ‘loves’ that persist after his death ” (2004: 53). Furthermore, by virtue of simile, Sexton subtly internalizes routes as veins to identify the map with her father’s body: “the whole U.S., / its cemeteries, its arbitrary time zones, / through routes like small veins, capitals like small stones. / He died on the road, / his heart pushed from neck to back, / his white hanky signaling from the window of the Cadillac” (74).

In reality, Sexton’s father died of another stroke on 3 June 1959, his death permanently separating him from his daughter. The father’s image is indelible one embedded in the daughter’s mind, and the husband becomes a reminder of her father, thanks to a profession shared with her father. According to

Middlebrook's *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, Sexton's husband Alfred Muller Sexton II accepted his father-in-law's offer to work in the R. C. Harvey Company. Like her father, her husband frequently takes long business trips, so the narrator re-experiences the lonely life she led prior to marriage: "And when you drive off, my darling, / Yes, sir! Yes, sir! It's one for my dame, / your sample cases branded with my father's name, / your itinerary open, / its tolls ticking and greedy, / its highways built up like new lovers, raw and speedy" (74). Before marriage, the narrator seems to struggle with the highways for her father; after marriage, she still appears to contend with the highways for her husband. To a considerable degree, the highway is a symbol of her love rival, and the narrator is seemingly destined to be separated from her father and husband. Their distances are so remote and are represented on a map, open to their family, so loneliness and isolation, like an endless itinerary, expands in the narrator's mind. Although Sexton applies parallelism to her father and husband, she consciously depicts her father in twelve stanzas in contrast to her husband in four stanzas. Judging from her arrangement of structure, we can be sure that in the poet's mind, her father occupies a more important position than her husband does. The complicated triangle among the father, the daughter, and the husband recurs in "Briar Rose" where, taking a fairy tale as a frame, Sexton audaciously expresses her feelings towards her father. In the beginning, the narrator displays an Electra complex towards her father, and finally she awakes from her trance, then starts to become self-conscious. As far as we know, the traditional fairy tales convey a doctrine that dictates that in the process of searching for happiness, a woman is required to be passive, victimized, destroyed or asleep, whereas in her surrealist revision of the fairy tale "Briar Rose," Sexton not only combines imaginative time and space with realistic ones but also demonstrates a key feminist concept, self-consciousness. Marie-Louise von Franz in *The Feminine in Fairy Tales* declares: "It is the impulse from the unconscious that causes the neurotic disturbance in its attempts to get the child onto a higher level of consciousness, to build up a stronger ego complex" (1993: 20). In reality, Sexton is aware of how to reconstruct herself, namely, her subjectivity by creating poems, according to Middlebrook:

The magical transformation came in treatment by a psychiatrist who, something like the prince in the fairy tale, stumbled onto a remedy that woke her into a new life as a poet. Sexton called this awakening her 'rebirth at twenty-nine,' and added, 'when I'm writing, I know I'm doing the thing I was born to do. (3)

Conclusion

Although the two poets equally deal with the theme of the Electra complex, each one applies her own personal treatment: Sylvia Plath exposes the theme through sexual imagery in surrealist mode of expression. Anne Sexton shows the theme not only through sexual imagery, that is, a depiction of erotic scenes between father and daughter, but also through parallelism between past and present. The two poets demonstrate the same theme in individual ways, but they share an affinity: in retracing their infantile traumas, they seem to reconstruct their fathers' images and reconnect with society through their poems. With their development of the relationship between father and daughter, they reveal a key feminist aspiration—a yearning to escape the domination of their fathers. As their Electra

complex gradually grows latent, their self-consciousness is increasingly revealed. Through their exploration of the Electra complex, the two women poets courageously accept their traumatic past and frankly pardon their fathers. Furthermore, by retelling their infantile traumas through their poems, they attain to a catharsis. Most importantly, through the act of creation, they in reviewing their infantile traumas, reconstruct their past, their fathers' images and themselves in particular. As Jo Gill in "Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry" suggests, the speakers have constructed the daughters in the poems (textually) (2004b: 73).

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布拉斯與賽斯頓詩中的戀父情結

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摘 要

本文旨在探討美國當代女詩人布拉斯（1932-63），賽司頓（1928-74）詩中的戀父情結。兩者各有其方式處理戀父情結：布拉斯透過超現實，亦即強調夢中實現想像和表面上無意識掌控的表達方式；賽司頓透過性意象和平行法表現。兩者雖表達方式不同，卻有類似性：她們從戀父情結中逃脫出來，以女性主義為立足點對抗父權，重新建構自己。戀父情結消失時，自我意識增加，而渴望脫離父親。在此文中，我想用佛洛伊德的《性別與愛心理學》中的戀父情結理論，來分析她們詩中的異同。討論布拉斯與賽司頓各五首詩，以檢視詩人筆下的父親形象和自己對父親矛盾的情感，並想證明詩人透過創作重新建構創傷往事的事實，尤其是自己。

關鍵字：戀父情結、戀母情結、精神創傷

