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**CLOSE READING OF ANNE SEXTON'S *TRANSFORMATIONS*:  
FEMINIST ELEMENTS AND CULTURE OF THE 1960S-1970S**

**BA thesis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to analyse Anne Sexton's *Transformations* for feminist elements and the portrayal of the American culture of the 1960s-1970s. The main purpose is to find out how Sexton blends the realia of her time into her fairy tale retellings, which feminist elements are found in her retellings and how she creates context for her poetry.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two chapters and a conclusion. The chapters will give an overview of the feminist study of fairy tale retellings and the life and works of Anne Sexton. The empirical chapter uses the close reading technique on Anne Sexton's collection of fairy tale retellings and blends the discussion with what has been found previously by Sexton scholars when analysing this material. The results of the reading are presented in the conclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last two centuries children's literature has expanded to include many fairy tales. Before that fairy tales were part of an oral tradition meant for the adult audience. These stories were written down during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and modified to carry the value systems of the time when the stories were recorded in a written form. For example, the written versions of fairy tales lack sexuality and violence, as both were removed or changed to fit the literary tastes of the age. The Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault were far from being the last storytellers to rewrite fairy tales. Because of their popularity the fairy tales have been adapted throughout the ages. The retellings often change outdated value systems or bring to reader's attention the problematic elements of fairy tales, such as the portrayal of gender. This interest in men and women in fairy tale retellings has gained the interest of feminist study of literature.

Anne Sexton (1928-1947), a Pulitzer prize winning American author, has rewritten many of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales in her collection *Transformations*. Sexton is one of the most important writers in the school of confessional poetry. This means that her works draw inspiration from her life and experiences. The poet has been considered a feminist writer for her portrayals of female struggles. In *Transformations* Sexton narrates the tales as a bystander, the wise "middle-aged witch", and relates the problems seen in fairy tales to general society by the use of prologues and contemporary vernacular.

The present thesis will provide a literature review of feminist study of fairy tale retellings and provide a close reading of Anne Sexton's the collection *Transformations* and analyse its retellings of fairy tales. The specific interest is to see how Sexton blends realia from the 1960s-1970s into the fairy tale narrative and how this changes the reader's understanding of the stories.

# **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

## **1.1 The Importance of Fairy Tales and Their Feminist Study**

Fairy tales have a long history. They were first passed from generation to generation through oral tradition until the 17-19<sup>th</sup> century when fairy tales were collected by writers such as Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. However, not only did they collect the tales, they also changed them to suit the expectations of the audience of their time. Because of their far-reaching roots, fairy tales have been rewritten time and time again in order to reflect the values of the editor's era. It must be understood that fairy tales combine the ancient traditions of the original tales and the values and ideas of the time that the fairy tales were written in. The fairy tale collectors had to make changes in the tales for they had to be acceptable to the readers of the era.

This process continues to this day. For example, Walt Disney made many of the Brothers Grimm's stories fit for children of the 1920s to the 1960s, today writers keep on creating new versions of the ancient stories. Though the changes made in retellings often go unnoticed by the readers, the reshaped tales can be analysed for their portrayals of social values of the time of the rewriting and thus offer us the knowledge of how fairy tales have been altered to fit social norms.

Gender has been one of the most researched issues portrayed in fairy tales. Marcia Lieberman (1972:385) has argued that because of their popularity fairy tales have held the dreams, hopes and fantasies of thousands of girls throughout the ages. Generations of children have grown up reading tales of Snow White, Cinderella and the Sleeping Beauty and learned from them the gender roles, value systems and the outcomes of various ways of acting. The messages found in the most popular tales are often the same – if a woman is passive, sweet and beautiful she will find her dream prince, be she vain and envious instead, she will burn in iron shoes like the Evil Queen. Lieberman (1972:384) believes that fairy

tales can be seen as one of the contributors and reinforcers of the position of women in society. The political side of fairy tales is often overlooked because these stories are considered to be innocent tales for children. Thus, fairy tales become a means of silent socialisation, where children are taught to fill certain roles in society. This is why it is paramount to analyse the messages about gender that fairy tales carry. Feminist scholars, specifically, discuss the effects that tales can have on how people think of men and women and their roles in the world.

Feminist scholars' study of fairy tales critically analyses both the "original" tales and the rewritings. On the basis of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Amy Shuman (1993:80) has said that the original written or oral material affects the value systems of the new work. In other words, it is important for the feminist study to discern whether the new interpretations of fairy tales keep on reinforcing traditionalist gender roles.

As summarised by Haase (2004), feminist scholarship into fairy tales has above all studied three important topics. First, it has documented the effects of patriarchal values of the male editors on the representation of women. For example, it has been found that the Brothers Grimm removed many female characters, such as mothers, or gave their words to male characters. Second it has uncovered how these representations worked to create a model of female identity that was aligned with the values of the age. For instance, it was not acceptable for a woman to show her sexuality or admire her own looks, thus any lines with such an allusion were either removed or demonised, like in the case of Evil Queen in "Snow White". Finally, scholars have rediscovered the female voice in fairy tales by bringing attention to the female informants, who were used to collect the stories. The first step to bringing attention to women's role in preserving fairy tales was to find the original informants that the Brothers Grimm used and bring to light their contribution to preserving

fairy tales (Haase 2004:14) Feminist scholarship has shown that all three features have contributed to the removal of women in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm.

In the context of feminist study of fairy tale retellings Cristina Bachhilega (1997) has stated three important questions when considering the changes that retellings have made to the original story. These questions are: how are women portrayed in the story, how does the narrative support these portrayals and what ideologies are those portrayals based on. It has been found, for example, that retellings tend to challenge subjects that traditional fairy tales hold as normative (Haase, 2004:22-23).

Scholars have previously analysed modern retellings of various fairy tales as well. There has also been much interest in the tales of Angela Carter, who, just like Sexton, rewrote many fairy tales to include sexuality and violence previously erased from fairy tales (Paugus 2013). Contemporary authors that have been analysed include also Neil Gaiman and Margaret Atwood (Wilson 1993). Marilyn Paugus (2013) has studied sexuality and gender in four retellings of Snow White. She found two ways that fairy tales are rewritten by deconstructing traditional values. Firstly, the tale can be left largely intact while bringing attention to the problematic elements portrayed in the original tale. For instance, Angela Carter and Neil Gaiman add taboo topics to the story to make the reader notice and question the values of original fairy tales. Secondly, the tale can be changed to undermine the old value systems and create new endings to traditional stories. This is done, for example, by Emma Donoghue and Donald Barthelme, who make their characters start doubting the systems portrayed in the story to change the traditional narrative. Furthermore, Paugus (2013) finds that the retellings include the layer of sexuality noticeably left out in the tales of the Brothers Grimm, give voice to the silent female characters, blur the barrier between good and evil and generally reject the ideal of female beauty traditionally used to create

conflict between women. These three aspects are also of interest in the present thesis in the analysis of Sexton's fairy tale retellings.

## 1.2 Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetry

Anne Sexton (1928-1974) was a Pulitzer prize winning American author, who is best known for her works of poetry. Her collection of poems about mental illness, *Live or Die* (1966), received the prestigious Pulitzer prize for poetry but the most popular of her works are the collection of cynical love poems called *Love Poems* (1969) and *Transformations* (1972), a collection of fairy tale retellings (Wood Middlebrook & Hume George 1988: xi-xv).

Anne Sexton has written about a variety of topics, but above all she is known for her association with autobiographical writing. Her subjects are drawn from her life; however, her works do not only record her experiences, but rather touch topics that most authors prefer to keep private. For example, she writes about mental breakdowns and her hospitalisation in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), about her daughter and familial relations in *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), about religion and death in *The Book of Folly* (1972) and *The Awful Rowing Towards God* (1975). In addition, she has covered topics such as adultery and incest, drug addiction and abortion.

Sexton received various honours for her contributions to American poetry. In fact, in their introduction to Anne Sexton's poetry Middlebrook and George (1988:xi) call Sexton "a rare creature in American culture, a popular poet". Indeed, she had received various awards for her poetry even before receiving the Pulitzer prize in 1967. Her first books of poetry to be published, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), were nominated for the National Book Award. In 1969 Sexton was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for her play *Mercy Street* (1969) (Wood Middlebrook & Hume George 1988: xxiv-xxvi).

Sexton's popularity could be linked to the popularity of a new style in poetry that was called confessional poetry. Its beginnings lie in the American culture of the 1960s and 1970s that was fuelled in part by the politics of the Cold-War era. Confessional poetry was both celebrated and criticised for its use of taboo topics and for favouring content over form. The standard topics of this type of poetry were mental illness, problems in the family and the alienation of person in society (Waters 2015:380). The term "confessional" poetry was first used in a review of Robert Lowell's work to describe its subject of private life and seemingly apologetic attitude towards what was "confessed" in the writings, such as mental breakdowns and alcoholism. As Lowell's work was written in the first person, the critics thought it to reflect his own life (Sherwin 2011:23-24). After the term was coined to describe the works of Lowell, it was also used for the works of other authors who wrote about their private lives and sufferings. The most popular authors of confessional poetry were, in addition to Robert Lowell himself, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Both Sexton and Plath had been students of Lowell.

Due to its seemingly autobiographical source readers and critics often missed that while confessional poetry is a form of art where a character reveals intimate details of his or her life, it does not necessarily reflect the struggles of the author (Waters 2015:379). In fact, just as the other writers dubbed confessional poets, Sexton often claimed to dislike the name because of its reductive nature (Wood Middlebrook & Hume George 1988:xiii). Thought of as autobiographic, Sexton's work was seen as containing her private thoughts about self-destruction, mental illness, and family relationship, more specifically death, domestic violence, incest, alcoholism – topics that were believed to be too shameful for the public eye (Sherwin 2011:26). However, Sexton herself stated that confessional poetry should never be mistaken for truth and was often angered by her readers believing her works to be autobiographical (Sherwin 2011:34-35, Waters 2015:381). An example of the fallacy of this

type of thought exhibited by the readers is well illustrated by an interview between the critic Robert Mills and Sexton, where the critic talks about a dead brother memorialised in one of Sexton's poems, although Sexton had no brothers (Waters 2015: 379). Ultimately the confessional poets feared that their works would be reduced to meaningless chatter about their life.

What is more, the works of confessional poets are often considered and analysed alongside their lives, which reinforces the idea of confessional poets writing about their own private lives. This makes it easy to forget the poetics of these works. Miranda Sherwin (2011:28) has found that by only focusing on autobiography, it is easy to fail to see the intricacies of confessional poetry, for example its use of language to form patterns and create rhymes. This is something that Sexton herself has admitted to be looking for. The poet has said that clarity of form and style are the most important features of a poem for her. Even though the topics are inspired by her own life, Sexton will not stay true to them if the integrity of her works is in question (Sherwin 2011:28). Thus, she creates a world more poetic than what can be found in reality.

Although Sexton is lauded as a confessional poet, her collection *Transformations* differs greatly from her traditional topics. The book is a collection of fairy tales, which, while referencing to the life in the 1970s, does not dwell on the life of Sexton herself but society in general. Alicia Ostriker (1982:11) has gone as far as to call this the “brilliant fusion of public with private matters”. This collection of hers was a diversion from the imagery of pain so often found in her poetry. In fact, prior to the publication of *Transformations* the publishers were worried about its market success among the public looking for the quintessential Sexton (Wood Middlebrook & Hume George 1988:xvi). In this collection she spins her own version of the tales of the Brothers Grimm using contemporary vernacular

riddled with allusions to modern items, such as hot dogs, supermarkets and “Tonight” show (Howard Brown et al 1994:96-97, Wood Middlebrook & Hume George 1988:xvi).

Anne Sexton’s collection *Transformations* consists of 17 fairy tale retellings in poem form. All of the original stories have been collected by the Brothers Grimm. Sexton’s poems have been illustrated by Barbara Swan, thus helping to bring attention to the poem’s meaning and preparing the reader for the coming story. The introduction to *Transformations* has been written by the celebrated American author and satirist Kurt Vonnegut Jr, who believes the collection to be a form of art that cannot be described with words. The framing introduction by Vonnegut invites the interpretation of the collection through a social critical lens.

Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* has gathered much interest from feminist scholars. The collection has been studied by different authors who have looked at how she engages with her fairy tale material. Jeanne Marie Beaumont (2016) has analysed Sexton’s rewritings and found in them the intertextual references that the poet has used to make the old tales understandable to a contemporary reader. For instance, Beaumont (2016:226-227) has found that Sexton had a penchant for using medicine to build a metaphor, for example “a harebell more potent than penicillin”, “blue as a blood blister”, “eyes fiery/like blood in a wound”. Sexton’s works have also been of interest to Alicia Ostriker (1982) who writes that though Sexton’s poetry is to the point and seems to lack finesse, her lines have depth that is missing from many other authors. When considering the subject matter, Ostriker has said that though half of Sexton’s fairy tale retellings end in marriage, it is portrayed as something not to be desired. These and many other signs of modern culture and the female condition have made Sexton’s work a popular source of analysis. The present thesis will attempt to analyse the form of Sexton’s collection to identify the means she has used to retell fairy tales.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF ANNE SEXTON'S *TRANSFORMATIONS*

Anne Sexton starts all poems in the collection with a prologue. The function of this is to explain the story and place it in a larger context. These introductory lines talk about society, human condition, or Sexton's own life. In the words of Sexton herself, "The poems seem to grow out of the prologue, as it were, take root in them and come forth from them" (Beaumont 2016: 220-222). The poet's introductions to her rewritten tales are from six to seventy-eight lines long.

One of the most important poems in *Transformations* is "The Gold Key". It is the first poem in the collection and as such is used to introduce the readers to Sexton's fairy tale retellings. In the prologue of this poem, Sexton calls herself the tale teller and introduces the storyteller character through whose eyes we will see the poems in *Transformations*. What is important it that the narrator in this case is supposedly Sexton herself or a persona that is talking in the first-person point of view. In this prologue she asks the reader to remember the tales they were told and what dreams they had as young children.

The tale of "The Gold Key" talks of a boy who found a key and then opened a treasure. In this she draws a parallel to human curiosity, the need to have answers: "this boy /.../ He is each of us" (p. 2). In Sexton's poem this treasure is a book of tales, where the stories of the Brothers Grimm are transformed – this is *Transformations*. By evoking memories of readers' childhoods and their need for answers she beckons the reader to discover what lies behind the obvious in the tales we think to know well. In the original tale by the Brothers Grimm, the boy is forever opening the treasure. Perhaps Sexton is expecting to never give the reader the answers that they seek, that is, we as readers will be in the position of the boy and will be reopening fairy tales to find new meanings.

In *Transformations* there are prologues to poems where Sexton seems to talk of herself. “The White Snake” starts with the birds calling for “Dame Sexton” to throw them some seeds. However, in the same stanza Sexton writes about “the worms in my son’s fishing pail” but Sexton had no son, so the “Dame Sexton” is in this case the persona different from the author. Beaumont (2016:230), however, considers the writings of Anne Sexton’s biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook when analysing this prologue. Middlebrook believes that Sexton’s mental illness caused her to have auditory hallucinations of human voices in her head and in the poem Dame Sexton hears the talk of worms, birds, and a dog. It is possible, therefore, to see an autobiographical angle in the seemingly fantastical poem. However, it must be kept in mind that the confessional writers endeavour to create such an effect in their works.

There are many other instances, where it seems that Sexton is hinting at her own life when building the context for her fairy tales. In “Iron Hans” there is an “I” character proclaiming that “I am the mother of the insane / Let me give you my children” (p. 43). It is known that Sexton was admitted to mental hospitals on many occasions and that she had correspondence with other patients both in and outside of hospitals (Shawn 2011:41). Perhaps in a way she did consider herself to be their mother – guardian, helper and caretaker. This point of Sexton considering herself to be the mother of the insane is proven by an interview with the poet, where she said to have had two “These are my people” moments in her life – one of these being when she was admitted to mental hospital (Beaumont 2016:232). In the poem she proceeds to describe a few characters that one could find in a mental hospital: “a girl sitting in a chair / like a china doll /.../ She’s as still as furniture”, “man who is crying / over and over”, “a man full of suspicions/saying: Don’t touch this, /.../ I hear messages from God”, “boy on a bridge/one hundred feet up. About to jump” (p. 43-45).

These descriptions could have been based on what Sexton saw when visiting and staying at mental hospitals.

In “The Golden Key” Sexton warns that “it is not enough to read Hesse / and drink clam chowder / we must have the answers” (p. 2). *Transformations* is dedicated “to Linda, who reads Hesse and drinks clam chowder” so it could be said that next to the general readership, Sexton is also asking her daughter, Linda, to look for answers because what she was doing was not enough. When considering the allegations of sexual abuse that Linda Gray Sexton has admitted to receiving from her mother (Shawn 2011:32, 49), the poem “Rapunzel” can also be given a very personal meaning. In this poem’s prologue Sexton repeats that “A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young” (p. 35, 39). What this prologue also talks about is the sexual relationship between a young woman or a girl and an older mentor or an aunt. In Sexton’s life there was another woman with whom she had an incestuous relationship – her great aunt Nana – who is also considered to be represented in “Rapunzel” (Beaumont 2016:221).

What is more, Sexton describes incestuous relationships further in “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)” where the titular character is abused by her father. The prologue to the poem describes a séance with a hypnotist, where the woman is constantly being transported back to when she was a little child. Sexton writes that the woman is “struggling into her mother’s pocketbook”, however, her father calls her “Sit on my knee / I have kisses for the back of your neck” (p. 107). Considering that hypnosis is used in order to recall suppressed memories and unconscious fears, the story can be read as revealing previously suppressed memories of childhood. This is a traumatic event that Sexton writes from a child’s perspective in the prologue and then expands in the poem from a young adult’s perspective.

Feminist scholars have also shown how, in her interpretation of Briar Rose, Sexton has retold the tale of Sleeping Beauty to reveal the incestuous feelings and actions of a father

towards his daughter. The female persona speaks as a survivor of sexual assault. Sexton draws attention to this act and its effect on the female character. What is more, while the Grimms' tale makes a female fairy into the villain of the story, Sexton shows the reader that it is perhaps the actions of the king that cause the eternal sleep of her daughter (Skorczewski 1996:309-311). Thus, in her rewriting Sexton portrays the fairy tale character as a victim. This decision is supported by the wider narrative where the other women have fallen prey to the king, that is, Sexton places her poem within broader gendered power dynamics and makes the text an example of social critique.

After the introduction Sexton starts her poems with a technique that is common in fairy tales – transporting the reader to a time long ago. For example, in “Snow White and The Seven Dwarves” the story starts with the lines “Once there was a lovely virgin/ called Snow White” (p. 3), in the poem “The White Snake” the fairy tale retelling begins with “In an old time” (p. 11). Further beginnings that allude to the mythical origin of her fairy tales that Sexton uses include “There once was” (p. 18, 39, 45), “Long ago” (p. 26, 76) and the traditional “Once upon a time” (p. 61). By using such lines, Sexton raises questions about the reliability of the stories that her poems tell, yet she never says that what is written is not true. This way she also emphasises the fairy tale origins of her poems. What is more, Beaumont (2016:223) points out that the titles used in this collection are plain and promptly tell the reader what fairy tale to expect. The effect of this is to relate the retellings closely to the original tales.

Besides the traditional beginning to fairy tales, Sexton also used other common fairy tale tropes in her retellings. She makes fun of the way that princesses and women are constantly locked away by the people who claim to wish to protect them. In “Rapunzel” an aunt locks the girl away in the study “to keep the boys away” (p. 35), Snow White is told to never open the door while the dwarves are away (p. 7) and the twelve dancing princesses

slept behind a locked and bolted door for no reason given (p. 89). This way Sexton shows the limitations placed on the female characters by barring them from experiencing the world outside their homes, because it is considered dangerous by men or other authority figures in the lives of women characters.

However, the real reason for those acts of protection are written between the lines. For example, “Rapunzel” is locked high in tower, treasured above all by Mother Gothel, who thinks that “None but I will ever see her or touch her”. She seeks to keep the young girl for herself and to make her play with her in a way that is alluded to be sexual when we consider the lines “They would play rummy / or lie on the couch / and touch and touch. Old breast against young breast...” and “They play mother-me-do / all day” (p. 35, 40). Much in the same way Snow White is locked away for selfish reasons by the dwarves, who ask her to “stay and keep the house” (p. 6). The tale of “Rumpelstiltskin” seemingly gives the reader a different the case – the main female character is locked away three times to spin straw into gold and threatened with death if she does not do so (p. 18-19). This is explicitly done not for the sake of her own protection but for selfish reasons akin to those of the seven dwarves and Mother Gothel.

Sexton’s fairy tale retellings have many reoccurring motifs and metaphors. One of the most frequently repeated ones is the use of food to describe appearance. The images, however, are not conventional but invite the readers to make unexpected comparisons. For instance, in *Transformations* a woman can be “Poor grape /.../ Luscious and round and sleek” (p. 18), a baby “as ugly as an artichoke” (p. 20), people “bruised like an apple” (p. 47), “cheeks wet as a trout” (p. 62) and “neck as smooth / as a hard-boiled egg” (p. 101). Sexton uses animals in the same manner. “Come, my fox / heal me” calls the woman to her lover, “I am your lizard, / you sly thing” answer the men (p. 25-26). There the things are “worth no more / than a dead fly” (p. 26-27), breasts purr like a cat (p. 33), people swim like

minnows (p. 41), look like and are no more dangerous than birds (p. 47-48). Her metaphors objectify and satirise her characters. Indeed, it is hard to take a dwarf seriously when it is described to be like a little hot dog (p. 6). The images are creative and often grotesque, creating humorous effects in the texts. It is certain that the poet had fun while doing so, take for instance these lines:

with carrots growing like little fish,  
with many tomatoes rich as frogs,  
onions as ingrown as hearts,  
the squash singing like a dolphin (p. 39)

Beaumont (2016:225) has called this feature of Sexton's Disney-like and that Sexton's similes give her poetry life, a kind of animation, where the images "shrink, protrude, stretch, and sag". However, she adds that the images and stories that Anne Sexton creates are not for children.

Equally important, though less frequently used, are sexual references. Besides describing the events that the educated reader might see as being drawn from Sexton's own life, the author also makes use of many other allusions to sexuality. For example, "Once there was a lovely virgin / called Snow White" writes Sexton, possibly pointing to the colour white as a symbol of sexual purity (p. 3). There is no use of the common simile of lips as red as blood, skin as white as snow and hair dark like ebony that is connected to the tale of Snow White. Instead Sexton chooses to point out her virginity and base on that the "white" of Snow White. The prologue of the poem she furthermore objectifies Snow White: the narrator tells us that the virgin is like a porcelain doll with their "cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper / arms and legs made out of Limoges / lips like Vin Du Rhone / rolling her china-blue doll eyes /.../ She is as white as a bonefish" (p. 3).

To illustrate her poems and to increase their appeal to her contemporary readership, Sexton used many allusions to the things particular to her time in her fairy tale retellings. For example, in "Rumpelstiltskin" the titular character is described to have a normal sized

“but the rest of him wasn’t Sanforized” (p. 17). Sanforized fabric is a type of cloth that will not shrink in the wash, thus, Rumpelstiltskin has a shrunken body – a reference that Sexton’s contemporaries would understand and perhaps find surprising in the context of the fairy tale narrative. Besides a body “tiny as an earphone” Rumpelstiltskin also has “Truman’s asexual voice” that calls to the listener (p. 17) and to the queen, who was “as persistent / as a Jehovah’s Witness” (p. 20). Here Sexton gives the reader a vivid image of a creature that is very small indeed and uses the voice of the 33<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States. It can be seen as a relevant fact that Truman was the president during the bombing of Japan and intervention in Korean War (McGowan 2004:78). The reader can only imagine what the meanings behind the words of Rumpelstiltskin are. The poet also writes that a bodice can be “as tight as an Ace bandage” and upon the removal of it Snow White is “as full of life as soda pop” (p. 7) with “her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie” (p. 8), the character from American comic, whose eyes are drawn as two white oval circles.

In Sexton’s tale rampion, also known as the Rapunzel plant grows “as rapt and fluid as Isadora Duncan” (p. 39), a celebrated American dancer. Seeing as this Rapunzel plant grows akin to movements of a dancer, it can be guessed that this is the way that the character Rapunzel grew up as well. In “One-eye, two-eyes, three-eyes” there is a child so talented as to “have been a candidate / for the International Bach Society” with parents who are described to be “as strong as a telephone pole.” However, this child was one of the Thalidomide babies (p. 60-61). Here Sexton is describing parents trying to cope with having a deformed child. Thalidomide was a drug sold at the end of 50s that supposedly cured morning sickness in pregnant women, however, this medication had adverse effects on the fetuses and created serious birth defects. By illustrating the fairy tale retellings with the problems of her age, Sexton gives a new meaning to old tales.

Just as many other fairy tale retellings, for example by Neil Gaiman or Angela Carter, the female characters are given a voice and their experiences are related from a sympathetic viewpoint. For example, the tale of “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” is originally written to show that a poor man can marry a princess, if he is cunning enough. In Sexton’s “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” are portrayed as oppressed girls, whom their father has locked away in the castle for all nights. But they have found a way to sneak away from the castle and go to parties where there were “Cruets of champagne and cups full of rubies” and there the princesses “danced until morning” and left for their castle “naked and angry” (p. 91). The soldier stalked the girls and found out where they go and was thus allowed to choose a bride. Sexton is sympathetic to the plight of the princesses, who had lost their freedom of movement, and she writes:

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance  
no more. The princesses were torn from  
their night life like a baby from its pacifier.  
Because he was old he picked the eldest.  
At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes  
and sagged like old sweatshirts. (p. 92)

In her poetry Sexton successfully blends the ages old tales and her contemporary era by introducing new items to the fairy tales. What is more, by using her own experiences she opens new interesting layers in the stories that do not focus on elaboration and explaining the causes as much as to continuing the story. Thus, when Sexton adds background to the fairy tales they become more real and relatable. The poet successfully uses various metaphors and similes to animate her retellings and make them pop alive on the pages.

## CONCLUSION

This paper analysed Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, a collection of fairy tale retellings from the 1970s. All the poems are based on the writings of the Brothers Grimm. However, Sexton transformed the poems by relating them to general context through her opening prologues and gave them a modern twist through using elements of the American culture of her time.

When considering the findings of Merilyn Paugus (2013), the poems can be analysed for how they change the tales written by the Brothers Grimm. Of the two ways that writers have deconstructed traditional values in fairy tales, Sexton uses the one where the plot is left intact, however, the problematic elements are highlighted. This thesis found that Sexton points out the female suffering, for example in the "Twelve Dancing Princesses", where girls are subjugated to loss of freedom by their father and a husband-to-be of one of the princesses. In "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" and "Rapunzel" Sexton shows the reader the sexual abuse that female characters receive from people who have raised them. In *Transformations* Sexton shows how the will and wish of female characters is overlooked.

The hidden layer of sexuality that has been removed from the Grimm tales is also present in Sexton's. For example, she makes clear allusions to sexuality in both of the aforementioned tales of sexual abuse. Sexuality is also clearly seen in the tale "The Little Peasant", where a boy finds out about the adulterous relationship of a parson and a miller's wife. In the Grimms' tale there were no sexual allusions.

In her analysis Paugus (2013) notes also the concept of ideal beauty propagated by the Brothers Grimm that is missing from the newer retellings. There are no noticeable changes to the importance of physical beauty in Sexton's tales. It still plays an important role in the lives of women characters as it did in Grimms' tales. For example, the queen in "Snow White and The Seven Dwarves" still lusts after beauty, and when she is dead, the girl

herself turns to look at the mirror as her step-mother did. Sexton writes in “Rapunzel” that woman who loves another woman is forever young, which could be seen as an allusion to the wish to keep the young figure and looks – certainly an ideal thought to be important even in this age.

Thus, based on the findings of Paugus (2013) Sexton’s fairy tales can clearly be seen to adapt the old value systems. However, these changes are not as complete as in the works of contemporary authors, such as Neil Gaiman, whose work was analysed by Paugus. What is more, it is these changes that feminist scholars have considered to show that Anne Sexton’s poetry is feminist in its nature.

In Sexton’s retellings her prologues put the poems into a larger context. This need not make her writings relatable to her readers today, but the tales themselves have plenty of elements from contemporary culture. This serves to give modern background to old stories. For example, in her tale of maiden without hands, Sexton draws a striking parallel between the female protagonist and the children born with disformed bodies at the end of 1950s because of a drug advertised to pregnant women.

Thus, Sexton creates her own versions of popular fairy tales that are socially critical in taking to account the experiences of women in fairy tales but also bringing to the reader’s attention that these problems are not a thing of the past but something to be also considered in the present. The poetry of Sexton may use outdated references to culture, but the social issues pointed out in the tales remain relevant to this day.

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# RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Helena Õunapuu**

**Close reading of Anne Sexton's *Transformations*: feminist elements and culture of the 1960s-1970s**

**Anne Sextoni luulekogu *Transformations* lähilugemine: feministlikud elemendid ja 1960-1970ndate kultuur**

**Bakalaureusetöö**

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Annotatsioon:

Töö eesmärgiks oli uurida ameerika luuletaja Anne Sextoni kogumikku "Transformations" ning leida Sextoni teostest feministlikke ja 1960. ja 1970. aastate Ameerika kultuuri elemente. Töö eesmärgiks on näidata, kuidas Anne Sexton sulandab muinasjuttude ümberjutustustesse oma kaasaegseid kultuurielemente, kuidas ta kasutab oma ümbertöötlustes feministlikke mõtteid ning milliste vahenditega ta loob muinasjuttude ümber laiemat konteksti.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatausest, kahest peatükist ja kokkuvõttest. Sisupeatükid näitavad, mis on feministlik muinasjuttude analüüs, mida on varem seal uuritud ning kirjeldab Sextoni elu ja loomingut. Töö empiirilises osas analüüsitakse Anne Sextoni luulekogu *Transformations* ning selgitatakse, mida on varasemalt teost uurides leitud.

Analüüs leidis, et Sextoni töö on võrreldav kaasaegsete kirjanike muinasjuttude ümberjutustustega, kus esinevad mitmed feministlikud elemendid, nagu näiteks naistegelaste kannatuste avamine. Samuti kasutab Sexton luuletustes sissejuhatusi, mis loovad juttude ümber laiemat konteksti, mis suhestub Sextoni-aegse Ameerika kultuuriga.

Märksõnad: ameerika kirjandus, Anne Sexton, muinasjuttuuringud, feminism

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