

Word Use in the Poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath

Student ID Number: 26940

Course: AP Research

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Date Submitted: April 20, 2017

Final Word Count: 5,025

Introduction

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, depression and isolation are among the many warning signs of suicide. Poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath are examples of poets who suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts (Pennebaker 517).

Using a computer text analysis software to compare the poems of 9 suicidal poets and 9 non-suicidal poets, University of Texas psychologists Shannon Wiltsey Stirman and James W. Pennebaker discovered that suicidal poets used pronouns differently than non-suicidal poets in that they used words such as “I” significantly more often than non-suicidal poets (Pennebaker 518). They used less plural pronouns than non-suicidal poets and often didn’t write about interacting with other people in their poems (Pennebaker 517). Pennebaker directly states that social isolation is “pushing the probability of suicide” (Marano 43).

This study discusses whether or not suicidal thoughts are a contributing factor to referencing certain words in one’s poetry more often by focusing on the word use of two suicidal poets, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath both wrote confessional poetry and at one point even corresponded with one another, influencing each other’s work (Keenan 109). According to Katherine Rose Keenan, whose article was published in the *Plath Profiles*, Plath and Sexton’s correspondence was significant as Plath’s poetry can be seen to develop alongside Sexton’s poetry when they met (Keenan 110). The goal of this study was to determine if those similarities could also be found using statistical methods. The results of this study look into whether or not mental state can be determined through word count analysis.

Plath and Sexton were included in a group analysis of suicidal poets in a study conducted by Dr. James W. Pennebaker in “Word Use in the Poetry of Suicidal and Nonsuicidal Poets” but

their word use has yet to be studied in great depth as individuals (Pennebaker 519). The results of my study argue that two people who have similar mental hardships should not necessarily be grouped together as suicidal. Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath were both suicidal but according to my data, they are very different in terms of word use. The results of this study warn against the mislabelling of people that are mentally ill as being suicidal simply because they show certain warning signs. People that are mentally ill must be treated as individuals with individual rights.

Literature Review

Subjective Methods

The vast majority of researchers in this field have taken a more subjective approach when analyzing the language of suicidal poets. Subjective research refers to research that does not involve statistics and objective research refers to research that does involve statistics. Many of these researchers are not as well known in the academic community as the two most critically acclaimed psychologists in the field, Dr. James W. Pennebaker and Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison. “When Ariel met Mercy Street” by Katherine Rose Keenan was published in a small journal that focused exclusively on the life and career of the late American poet Sylvia Plath. Keenan was one of the first poets to take an interest in the potential that lies in studying the correspondence of Sylvia Plath and fellow poet Anne Sexton. Due to their many similarities, many researchers have also chosen to focus on Plath and Sexton when analyzing the life and careers of suicidal poets.

In Keenan’s research, she concluded that researchers in the field of analyzing the linguistics of suicidal and nonsuicidal poets, who have closely examined the life and work of both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, do not know the number of times they met nor do they know the exact nature of their correspondence (Keenan 110). Researchers generally agree that Sexton

and Plath did write to one another and met outside of school at least once (Keenan 109). Both poets committed suicide and had a variety of other similarities to one another such as gender and marital status (Keenan 110). Multiple researchers agree that the correspondence between Sexton and Plath is significant in some way due to how they supposedly met and discussed their mental health and writing together (Keenan 109). Most researchers agree on a few fundamental things regarding the two suicidal poets which have shaped how researchers conduct their studies (Keenan 110).

For example, experts in the field agree that Sexton was delusional, meaning simply that she had strict, unrealistic beliefs about both herself and the world around her (Keenan 109). Dr. Herbert Hendin, acclaimed researcher on mental illness and suicide and author of “The Suicide of Anne Sexton” writes that according to the accounts of Martin Orne, Anne Sexton’s psychologist, Anne Sexton was so lacking in self-esteem at 28 that he searched for something for her to do that would make her life worthwhile (Hendin 270). Orne discovered that Sexton promoted the idea that she was a “fragile genius” to her friends and that she was often reckless and promiscuous. (Hendin 270). The late Diane Middlebrook, once a professor at Stanford and author of critically acclaimed biographies on both Sexton and Plath, also concluded that some of the stories Sexton told Dr. Orne during her therapy sessions were fabricated and believed that Sexton was very impulsive and unstable (Hendin 274). Dr. Hendin and Dr. Middlebrook reached these conclusions by analyzing Sexton’s therapy tapes. Part of the reason that many researchers choose to avoid analyzing Sexton’s therapy tapes is due to how Sexton may have elaborated some of her stories. Another reason researchers choose to avoid analyzing those tapes is due to controversies regarding whether or not that would be considered ethical research.

Dr. Pennebaker, D.S Berry and J.M Richards collaborated on a paper titled “Lying Words: Predicting Deception from Linguistic Styles”. In the study the paper details, researchers found that liars referenced themselves less and possessed less complex perceptual skills when compared to honest people. Liars also were shown to reference negative emotion more often than honest people (Pennebaker 310).

Many researchers believe that there is a hidden phenomenon in the lives and ultimate deaths of Sexton and Plath, they’ve called this phenomenon by many different names, the most popular being “The Sylvia Plath Effect” coined by psychologist James C. Kaufman in 2001. The “Sylvia Plath Effect” argues that poets are at greater risk of developing a mental illness and committing suicide (Kaufman 106). Other researchers have coined the terms the “Mad Genius Phenomenon” or the “Anne Sexton Effect” or “The Electra Complex” as a way of discussing what exactly may have been behind the suicide of Plath and Sexton. The “Mad Genius Phenomenon” is one of the most popular terms and simply means that creative artists in general are more likely to become mentally ill (Jamison 200). The term and its meaning was coined by critically acclaimed psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison but has also been disputed.

Judith Schlesinger, a researcher from Learning Research Institute in San Bernardino, California, wrote a paper called “Creative mythconceptions: A closer look at the evidence for the "mad genius" hypothesis” and was one of the first to critique Jamison’s work. One of the biggest problems that she found is the lack of an unchanging set of variables used to measure creativity and mental illness (Schlesinger 105). She found that there are also no large scale statistics that directly support Jamison’s claim that people of one profession are more likely to have a mental illness than other people (Schlesinger 106). To further her point, she stated in her paper that The

National Institute of Mental Health conducted a large scale study on Bipolar Disorder but they did not find possible correlation between creativity and mental illness (Schlesinger 106). Dr. R.A. Lewis wrote a paper titled “A Unquiet Mind: A memoir of moods and madness” and concluded from his research into Jamison’s life that she has a tendency to beautify her inner demons and disorder (Lewis 205). She refused to take lithium for her disorder which caused her mood fluctuations to become increasingly erratic (Lewis 206).

Other researchers did not necessarily disagree with Jamison’s idea of the “Mad Genius Phenomenon” but had slightly different takes on the idea of there being a possible trend among suicidal poets. Kaufman, who coined the term “Sylvia Plath effect”, also heavily discusses the term the “Anne Sexton Effect” in his research. His research on creative writing and mental illness has found that writers are more likely to become mentally ill than artists. In the writers group, poets are at greater risk than everyone else while female poets are at greater risk of developing a mental illness than male poets (Kaufman 107). The reasons behind these findings are not as well established (Kaufman 107). The “Anne Sexton Effect” is discussed by multiple researchers and alludes to the idea that Anne Sexton’s influence on Plath during the beginning of their careers, which most researchers agree was significant to her development as a young poet, was also significant to the development of her mental illness (Kaufman 106).

Meanwhile, the “Electra Complex” was discussed by Shu-hua Chung of Tung-Fung Institute of Technology in her article “The Electra Complex in Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s Poems “ and heavily references the work of both Plath and Sexton. Chung concluded that the difficult relationship both authors had with their fathers contributed to their worsening mental illness and ultimate suicide (Chung 102). In summary, the idea that there exists a connection

between mental illness and the creative genius of poets has been heavily disputed and discussed in the psychology community (Chung 102). Researchers have not been able to reach a consensus using subjective methods of research (Chung 103). Most of the researchers I have mentioned thus far analyzed pieces of literature manually and did not use mathematics in any way to draw their conclusions.

Objective Methods

Dr. James W. Pennebaker is the leader in research on suicidal poets and mental illness from an objective standpoint. He used the computer software Language Style Matching (LSM) to calculate some of the few statistics that revolve around the specific word choices of suicidal poets. The specific study, published in “Word Use of Suicidal and Nonsuicidal Poets”, has not yet been replicated. The results of the experiment were consistent over the course of the careers of multiple poets so becoming more well known was not a major factor (Pennebaker 517).

Dr. Pennebaker also confirmed the popular theory that suicidal poets used personal pronouns more often than nonsuicidal poets. The statistics aspect of his research suggest that suicidal poets used words like “I” and “me” s on average 4% of the time at the start of their careers compared to nonsuicidal poets who used pronouns pertaining to themselves only 2.5% of the time (Pennebaker 518). Dr. Pennebaker acknowledged that his research is not conclusive due to the small sample size and the apparent conclusions that have yet to be explained by researchers and psychologists in the field. He has not been able to definitively conclude what the patterns of word choices made by both suicidal poets and nonsuicidal poets imply. He did however, make it clear that the chances that his findings occurred purely by chance was less than .01% ($p < 01\%$) (Pennebaker 518).

Dr. Pennebaker was able to use statistics to support and also at times conclude against some of the most common findings made by other researchers over the course of multiple experiments. Another source that many researchers in the field referenced is titled “Linguistic Styles: Language Use as an Individual Difference” by James W. Pennebaker and Laura A. King showed how a person’s writing can reflect a lot about their personality. Pennebaker and King discovered that a person that had simpler writing was less open and influenced Stirman and Pennebaker in further trying to discover whether there really was that strong of a connection between a person’s emotional state and the way they write (Pennebaker 125).

Dr. Pennebaker had used LSM in “Secret life of pronouns” and was met with great success. A few years earlier in 1997, Dr. Pennebaker had conducted a study where unaware judges were selected to rate the writings of people that wrote about both subjective and emotional topics. The problem with this study was that the judges had trouble reaching an agreement and the results garnered from the study were not consistent from study to study (Pennebaker 142). Compared to that, the results garnered from using LSM were consistent from study to study (Pennebaker 143).

The majority of Dr. Pennebaker’s statistics created using LSM imply the same idea that many other researchers have concluded using subjective methods of research. The idea that suicidal poets are more self-centered and isolated has been suggested by many researchers in the field, including Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison and lesser known researchers In “Words of Wisdom: Language Use Over the Lifespan” by Dr. Pennebaker, Dr. Pennebaker uses LSM to analyze work written in the beginning, middle and end of an author’s career as a way of further exploring the potential of the software and he succeeded in disproving many misconceptions about suicidal poets (Pennebaker 98). One of which was that suicidal poets are often negative and reference

death frequently in their work (Pennebaker 99).

Using a computer text analysis software to compare the poems of 9 suicidal poets and 9 non-suicidal poets, University of Texas psychologists Shannon Wiltsey Stirman and James W. Pennebaker discovered that suicidal poets used pronouns differently than non suicidal poets in that they used words such as “I” significantly more often than non-suicidal poets. They used less plural pronouns than non-suicidal poets and often didn’t write about interacting with other people in their poems (Pennebaker 517). These findings in particular support the idea that social isolation (leading to depression) can increase the chances of a person committing suicide (Pennebaker 519). In “Word use of suicidal and nonsuicidal poets”, Dr. Pennebaker heavily referenced “Touched with fire: manic-depressive illness and the artistic temperament” by Kay Redfield Jamison. Pennebaker and co-author Shannon Wiltsey Stirman, both professors at University of Austin Texas and Stanford respectively, built upon the work of Jamison by analyzing her research and tried to be even more precise than Jamison with a detailed criteria for collecting samples from a large number of poets (over 100) in order to ensure their carefully collected data could sufficiently back up their findings. Stirman and Pennebaker noted how Jamison could at times be generalizing and made the point that most of the poets used in Jamison’s research did not actually commit suicide despite having a mental illness (Pennebaker 519). They built upon Jamison’s research by making sure that they selected multiple works from well known poets that were written either a long time before, in the middle, or close to the time they committed suicide in order to show correlation (Pennebaker 519). It is interesting to note that not all the poets Jamison sampled in her research met such detailed criteria (Pennebaker 519).

Stirman and Pennebaker discovered that even though the poet that eventually committed suicide did use more first person singular words, they did not necessarily use less communication words which is what the researchers originally thought the data would also show. However the two researchers did find that, similar to the results found by Dr. Pennebaker in another study he did, suicidal poets did not talk negatively about death anymore than poets that were not suicidal which is a common misconception (Pennebaker 519). Overall throughout their lives, the suicidal poets did refer to themselves more often in their work than the nonsuicidal poets but they did not necessarily increasingly do so towards the end of their lives (Pennebaker 519). However it is interesting to note that suicidal poets did refer to other people more using plural pronouns more often during the middle of their lives than nonsuicidal poets (Pennebaker 519). Once the suicidal poets were closed to reaching their lives, this number dropped significantly below that of the nonsuicidal poets (Pennebaker 519). Throughout their lives, the suicidal poets over all used more sexual words than the nonsuicidal group (Pennebaker 520). This was an interesting observation that was not expected and has yet to be explored in depth (Pennebaker 520). The study's results supported the idea that suicidal individuals aren't as attached to others as normal people and that they are mainly focused on themselves (Pennebaker 520). The study showed that suicidal poets were not necessarily isolated for their entire lives and that they did not necessarily have a negative view of death (Pennebaker 519). Results also suggested that analyzing a person's writing can bring to light signs of suicidal thoughts (Pennebaker 520).

Many other researchers have chosen to follow Dr. Pennebaker's lead and have analyzed an author's work throughout their life. Dr. Mark A. Runco, author of "Suicide and Creativity: The Case of Sylvia Plath", analyzes Plath's life and work throughout her life in great detail from

the perspective of a psychologist instead of a researcher or literary critique. He concluded in his research that we cannot predict suicides using objective data (Runco 105). He believes we can neither fully understand Plath's creativity or suicide from an objective standpoint (Runco 107). Runco found that there were certain qualities that are often mislabeled to be indicators of suicide that are at times simply unique to the individual (Runco 108). In reference to Jamison's popular "Mad Genius Phenomenon" theory, Runco argues that even though Plath was clearly a creative individual, many aspects of her life go against that (Runco 110). She was a first born child for starters and first born children are not often creative (Runco 110).

A minority of researchers believe that poetry was therapeutic to Plath and Sexton. According to T. Gupta, author of "Confessional Poetry In The Light Of Psychoanalytic Theory with Special Reference to Sylvia Plath", confessional poetry erases the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious which means that the act of writing this poetry allows the writer to confront problems and feelings they might not even be completely aware of. She points to how Robert Lowell, a poet himself, had Plath and Sexton as bright, promising students but he himself did not commit suicide despite having severe depression (Gupta 111). To further support her point, Gupta discusses the relationship between Plath and Sexton in a more optimistic manner than most researchers. She believes in the idea that the poetry that Plath wrote after meeting Sexton was much more vivid and open (Gupta 113). She was able to depict her feelings about her father Otto clearly in her poetry thanks to the influence of the already very openly emotional poet Anne Sexton (Gupta 117). It is interesting to note that Sexton also had an unhealthy relationship with her father (Gupta 115). The two bonded over this and their mutual distaste of the traditional role of a woman in their writings of letters which is a fact that most

researchers do agree with (Gupta 115). In support of Gupta, H. Cam, author of "Daddy": Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton" notes how there are uncanny similarities between the poems "Daddy" and "My Friend, My Friend" by Plath and Sexton respectively (Cam 205).

Methods

Intended Use of Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not suicidal poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton share any similarities in terms of word use. The categories of words analyzed are as follows: I (me, my), We (us, our), Positive Emotions, Sexual Emotions and Death Words. The intended use was to align with the Pennebaker study titled "Word Use in the Poetry of Suicidal and Nonsuicidal Poets". Due to inability to access Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a comparative study was conducted without using that specific word count software.

Mechanical Observation

The comparative study gathered quantitative and categorical data comparing the word use of confessional poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Both Plath and Sexton appeared in the Pennebaker study as part of a larger group of suicidal poets.

The website TagCrowd was used to visualize word frequency for each poem.

aching (1) agony (1) aside (1) blue (1) breathlessly (1) brush (1) careless (1)
crystal (2) darkness (1) destroy (1) dull (1) **either** (2) felt (1)
 filled (1) firmament (1) **fragile** (2) **frail** (2) gold (1) gray (1)
 green (1) gulls (1) **hands** (2) happiness (1) **heart** (2) hold (1)
human (2) **hurt** (2) immune (1) impervious (1)
instrument (2) **joy** (3) loving (1) mental (1) overhead (1)
pain (2) **pulse** (2) reached (1) ring (1) roof (1) ruins (1) sharp (1)
shining (2) silver (1) **sing** (2) sky (1) soared (1) soul (1)
 spangled (1) spirit (1) stopped (1) suddenly (1) suffering (1) sun (1) surely (1) sweet (1)
 swooping (1) tattered (1) **thought** (4)
throbbing (2) **trembling** (2) turned (1) void (1)
 warm (1) web (1) **weep** (2) wept (1) whirl (1) wings (1) wiped (1)
 wonderment (1) **world** (2)

TagCrowd counted the tense variations of a word as one word (ex: happy and happier).

In order to further align with the Pennebaker study, percent means were calculated using Excel for each category of words. An example of the counts for a poem and how the data is organized into a table is shown below.

Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	Negative Emotions	% Negative Emotions	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	0 ●	0.00%	16
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	13 ●	6.60%	197
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	1 ●	0.91%	110
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	7 ●	4.86%	144
The Road Back (1960)	2 ●	0.98%	204
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	9 ●	5.08%	177
Love Song (1963)	7 ●	6.31%	111
A to a SP (1974)	8 ●	4.30%	186
In Excelsis (1974)	6 ●	8.33%	72
Uses (1974)	4 ●	2.41%	166
As It Was Written (1974)	2 ●	1.52%	132
LLWIABB (1974)	1 ●	0.88%	114

The red marker represents the highest values for that category of words (example: negative emotions). The pink marker represents the second highest values. The grey marker represents the third highest values. The black marker represents the lowest values found.

Categorization of Words

All collected data was organized into predictable categories in order to further align with the Pennebaker study. The categories are as follows:

Personal pronouns- example: I, me, my

Personal plural pronouns- example: we, us, our

Positive emotions- example: blessing, loving, warm

Negative emotions- example: assault, dangerous, explode

Sexual words- example: adulteries, lovers, fornications

Death words- example: suicide, smoldered, fatal

Poem Selection Procedure

In order to further align with Pennebaker's study, I divided the careers of each poet into three time periods and randomly selected poems from each category. Poems chosen to represent the early period must have been written within two to three years of the poet's first poems. Plath and Sexton both published few poems during the beginning of their careers so only two poems were selected. Poems to represent the middle period of a poet's career were selected based on the criteria that they were written at the very most five years before or after the middle of the poet's career. Poems selected to represent the later period of a poet's career were selected based on the criteria that they were written two to three years before the poet's suicide. The very last poems a poet wrote before their suicide are also included in this category.

The list of poems selected for this study are listed below.

Sylvia Plath

First Poems- 1941 and 1946

1941, First poem available to public

- 1941, Poem (Age 8)

Hear the crickets chirping
In the dewy grass.
Bright little fireflies
Twinkle as they pass

- 1946, I thought that I could not be hurt (Age 14)

Middle Poems- 1949 to 1959

1954, Middle of her 17 year career

- Song for a Summer's Day (1956)
- Two Sisters of Persephone (1956)
- The Eye-mote (1959)
- Suicide off Egg Rock (1959)
- Goatsucker (1959)

Last poems- 1962 and 1963

1963, Balloons and Edge (Last Poems)

- The Other (1962)
- Sheep in Fog (1963)
- The Munich Mannequins (1963)
- Balloons (1963)
- Edge (1963)



Anne Sexton

First Poems- 1948 and 1949 and 1950

1948, First poem available to public

- 1948, Scrapbook poem 1 (Age 19)
- 1948, Scrapbook poem 2 (Age 19)

Middle Poems- 1956 to 1966

1961, Middle of her 26 year career

- A Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston (1960)
- The Lost Ingredient (1960)
- The Road Back (1960)
- Old Dwarf Heart (1962)
- Love Song (1963)



Last poems- 1974

1974, Love Letter Written in a Burning Building (Last Poem)

- Admonitions to a Special Person
- In Excelsis
- Uses
- As It Was Written
- Love Letter Written in a Burning Building (LLWIBB)

Methodology- Dr. James W. Pennebaker and Dr. Shannon W. Stirman

Findings

Reference Data (Pennebaker)

TABLE 1. Means for LIWC Categories

	Suicide Group			Control Group			Effects
	Early	Middle	Later	Early	Middle	Late	
Disengagement theory							
I (me, my)	4.0	3.4	4.0	2.5	1.6	2.5	S
We (us, our)	.73	1.3	.85	.69	.40	1.1	S,p**
Communication (talk, share)	1.2	1.1	1.0	.89	1.1	1.3	—
Hopelessness theory							
Negative emotion (hate, worthless)	2.2	1.8	1.7	2.3	2.1	1.7	—
Positive emotion (happy, love)	3.3	3.1	3.9	2.9	2.9	2.5	—
Death (dead, grave)	.52	.47	.69	.34	.43	.41	S**
Other findings							
Sexual words (lust, breast)	.60	.84	.47	.36	.36	.31	S

Note: Means reflect percentage of total words used in each poem within the relevant category. Effects refer to: S = suicide vs. nonsuicide main effect, P = phase of career main effect. All effects are significant $p \leq .05$, except ** $p \leq .08$.

New Data

Suicide Group (Sexton and Plath)













	Early	Middle	Late
I (me, my)	5.34%	2.56%	3.44%
We (us, our)	0.00%	0.73%	0.48%
Positive Words	9.89%	2.46%	2.82%
Negative Words	2.81%	4.81%	3.41%
Sexual Words	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Death Words	0.00%	0.63%	0.86%

Anne Sexton

For Anne Sexton, there was a particularly high number of words depicting negative emotions in poetry she wrote during the middle of her career. Four out of the five poems selected to account for that time period had counts of words depicting negative emotions ranging from 4% to 9%. Using Dr. Pennebaker's data as a reference, these numbers are considered very high. Dr. Pennebaker found that suicidal poets only referenced negative emotion in their poetry an average 1.8% of the time during the middle of their careers.

























Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	Negative Emotions	% Negative Emotions	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	0	0.00%	16
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	13	6.60%	197
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	1	0.91%	110
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	7	4.86%	144
The Road Back (1960)	2	0.98%	204
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	9	5.08%	177
Love Song (1963)	7	6.31%	111
A to a SP (1974)	8	4.30%	186
In Excelsis (1974)	6	8.33%	72
Uses (1974)	4	2.41%	166
As It Was Written (1974)	2	1.52%	132
LLWIABB (1974)	1	0.88%	114

The two poems written in the 1960s with the particularly high number of words depicting negative emotions also had a high number of personal pronouns ranging between 4% and 5% that imply Sexton was referring to herself. According to Dr. Pennebaker's data, this is not unusual as suicidal poets use personal pronouns an average of 3.4% of the time during the middle of their careers.













Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	I (me, my)	% I (me, my)	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	4	 12.12%	16
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	1	 1.61%	197
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	17	 5.67%	110
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	8	 3.92%	144
The Road Back (1960)	0	 0.00%	204
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	9	 4.43%	177
Love Song (1963)	1	 0.44%	111
A to a SP (1974)	6	 1.80%	186
In Excelsis (1974)	19	 6.23%	72
Uses (1974)	14	 6.97%	166
As It Was Written (1974)	5	 3.65%	132
LLWIABB (1974)	16	 4.65%	114

The last poem selected for this time period was written in 1963 and had an equal number number of words implying negative emotions and words implying positive emotions (around 2%) as well as a personal pronoun count of less than 1%. According to Dr. Pennebaker's data, suicidal poets reference positive emotions 3.1% of the time while they reference negative emotions 1.8% of the time. Looking at Dr. Pennebaker's data as a whole, suicidal poets reference positive emotion more than they do negative emotions throughout their entire careers. Comparatively, Sexton and Plath reference positive emotions less often than they do negative emotions except during the early period of their careers.

Sexton used a large number of personal pronouns in the last poems she wrote before her suicide. Three of the five poems selected to represent 1974 (the year she died) contained a personal pronoun count of over 4%. The final poem that she wrote contained a personal pronoun count of 4.65% (I, me or my) and also contained a lot of positive emotions (3.49%). Using Dr. Pennebaker's data as a reference, these numbers are not considered unusual.

Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	I (me, my)	% I (me, my)	Positive Emotions	% Positive Emotions	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	4 	12.12%	5 	15.15%	33
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	1 	1.61%	1 	1.61%	62
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	17 	5.67%	13 	4.33%	300
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	8 	3.92%	8 	3.92%	204
The Road Back (1960)	0 	0.00%	1 	0.85%	117
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	9 	4.43%	8 	3.94%	203
Love Song (1963)	1 	0.44%	6 	2.62%	229
A to a SP (1974)	6 	1.80%	19 	5.69%	334
In Excelsis (1974)	19 	6.23%	4 	1.31%	305
Uses (1974)	14 	6.97%	3 	1.49%	201
As It Was Written (1974)	5 	3.65%	0 	0.00%	137
LLWIABB (1974)	16 	4.65%	12 	3.49%	344

Sexton used words that referred to her as being part of a group (we, us, our) during the middle period of her life than she did during any other time. Whether or not this has to do with her meeting Plath during 1958 is unknown.

Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	We (us, our)	% We (us, our)	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	0 	0.00%	33
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	0 	0.00%	62
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	2 	0.67%	300
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	2 	0.98%	204
The Road Back (1960)	4 	3.42%	117
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	1 	0.49%	203
Love Song (1963)	2 	0.87%	229
A to a SP (1974)	0 	0.00%	334
In Excelsis (1974)	6 	1.97%	305
Uses (1974)	0 	0.00%	201
As It Was Written (1974)	0 	0.00%	137
LLWIABB (1974)	4 	1.16%	344

Sylvia Plath

According to my data, Plath expressed a great amount of negative emotion in her poetry between 1959 and 1963. During this time many significant events occurred that heavily impacted her life. In 1961, her husband Ted Hughes began an affair with Assia Wevill (Keenan 111). The novel “The Bell Jar” that she published during this time is additional evidence supporting the idea that she was very unhappy during this time.

Sylvia Plath 1932-1963 (Suicidal)	Negative Emotions	% Negative Emotions	Length of Poem (words)
Poem (1941)	0 ●	0.00%	16
I thought that I could not be hurt (1946)	13 ●	6.60%	197
Song for a Summer's Day (1956)	1 ●	0.91%	110
Two Sisters of Persephone (1956)	7 ●	4.86%	144
The Eye-mote (1959)	2 ●	0.98%	204
Suicide off Egg Rock (1959)	9 ●	5.08%	177
Goatsucker (1959)	7 ●	6.31%	111
The Other (1962)	8 ●	4.30%	186
Sheep in Fog (1963)	6 ●	8.33%	72
The Munich Mannequins (1963)	4 ●	2.41%	166
Balloons (1963)	2 ●	1.52%	132
Edge (1963)	1 ●	0.88%	114

Similarities between Plath and Sexton

According to my data, Plath only referred to herself as part of group in the poem Song for a Summer's Day (1956) and her last poems, Balloons (1963) and Edge (1963). Sexton also refers to herself as being a part of a group in her last poem Love Letter Written in a Burning Building (1974). The implications of this are unknown and more research needs to be done in order to determine who they are referring to.

According to the new data, Sexton consistently used personal plural pronouns (we, us, our) during the time that she knew Plath before her suicide. It's a possibility she could be referring to other people in her life such as her romantic love interests or maybe even Plath herself.

Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	We (us, our)	% We (us, our)	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	0 ●	0.00%	33
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	0 ●	0.00%	62
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	2 ●	0.67%	300
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	2 ●	0.98%	204
The Road Back (1960)	4 ●	3.42%	117
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	1 ●	0.49%	203
Love Song (1963)	2 ●	0.87%	229
A to a SP (1974)	0 ●	0.00%	334
In Excelsis (1974)	6 ●	1.97%	305
Uses (1974)	0 ●	0.00%	201
As It Was Written (1974)	0 ●	0.00%	137
LLWIABB (1974)	4 ●	1.16%	344
Sylvia Plath 1932-1963 (Suicidal)	We (us, our)	% We (us, our)	Length of Poem (words)
Poem (1941)	0 ●	0.00%	16
I thought that I could not be hurt (1946)	0 ●	0.00%	197
Song for a Summer's Day (1956)	1 ●	0.91%	110
Two Sisters of Persephone (1956)	0 ●	0.00%	144
The Eye-mote (1959)	0 ●	0.00%	204
Suicide off Egg Rock (1959)	0 ●	0.00%	177
Goatsucker (1959)	0 ●	0.00%	111
The Other (1962)	0 ●	0.00%	186
Sheep in Fog (1963)	0 ●	0.00%	72
The Munich Mannequins (1963)	0 ●	0.00%	166
Balloons (1963)	1 ●	0.76%	132
Edge (1963)	1 ●	0.88%	114

James F. Hoyle and Mikhail Ann Long, whose articles were published in the Journal of Literature and Psychology, agree that both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath had inconsistent attitudes towards death throughout their lives. V.S. Chawdhry, author of “Dying Is an Art: Sylvia Plath’s Fascination with Death”, concluded from his research on Plath’s life that her obsession with death was a result of her alienation, agony and lastly anxiety. Plath wrote about death in two different ways, one realistic and on surreal (Chawdhry 31). She blamed herself for her father’s death even though she believed, according to Chawdhry, that her father had betrayed her (Chawdhry 33). Plath’s inability to face her guilt and feelings towards death leads up to her suicide in which she succumbs to all of her emotions (Chawdhry 34). Chawdhry points to how in her later work, she does not necessarily view death as a negative thing, she views it as permanent relief. According to my data, the last poem Plath wrote contained words implying both positive

and negative emotion. The last poem Sexton wrote contained words implying both positive and negative emotion as well. Upon a closer look at Dr. Pennebaker's data, suicidal poets were actually happiest towards the end of their lives.

Although they did reference death more frequently towards the end of their lives, Pennebaker also found that suicidal poets actually referenced negative emotion more in the beginning of their careers than they did at the end. According to my study, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath did reference positive emotion in their work towards the end of their lives but not as often as they did during the start of their careers.

Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	Positive Emotions	% Positive Emotions	Negative Emotions	% Negative Emotions	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	5	15.15%	1	3.03%	33
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	1	1.61%	1	1.61%	62
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	13	4.33%	16	5.33%	300
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	8	3.92%	9	4.41%	204
The Road Back (1960)	1	0.85%	9	7.69%	117
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	8	3.94%	20	9.85%	203
Love Song (1963)	6	2.62%	6	2.62%	229
A to a SP (1974)	19	5.69%	7	2.10%	334
In Excelsis (1974)	4	1.31%	9	2.95%	305
Uses (1974)	3	1.49%	9	4.48%	201
As It Was Written (1974)	0	0.00%	7	5.11%	137
LLWIABB (1974)	12	3.49%	7	2.03%	344
Sylvia Plath 1932-1963 (Suicidal)	Positive Emotions	% Positive Emotions	Negative Emotions	% Negative Emotions	Length of Poem (words)
Poem (1941)	3	18.75%	0	0.00%	16
I thought that I could not be hurt (1946)	8	4.06%	13	6.60%	197
Song for a Summer's Day (1956)	8	7.27%	1	0.91%	110
Two Sisters of Persephone (1956)	1	0.69%	7	4.86%	144
The Eye-mote (1959)	2	0.98%	2	0.98%	204
Suicide off Egg Rock (1959)	0	0.00%	9	5.08%	177
Goatsucker (1959)	0	0.00%	7	6.31%	111
The Other (1962)	5	2.69%	8	4.30%	186
Sheep in Fog (1963)	1	1.39%	6	8.33%	72
The Munich Mannequins (1963)	8	4.82%	4	2.41%	166
Balloons (1963)	5	3.79%	2	1.52%	132
Edge (1963)	4	3.51%	1	0.88%	114

Neither Plath or Sexton referenced death in their first poems but Plath began to reference death consistently in her poetry in 1959 while Sexton began to do so in 1960. The poets met in 1958 and the nature of their relationship is unknown (Keenan 111).

Anne Sexton 1928-1974 (Suicidal)	Death words	% Death words	Length of Poem (words)
Scrapbook Poem One (1948)	0 ●	0.00%	33
Scrapbook Poem Two (1948)	0 ●	0.00%	62
ASFROTMFTB (1960)	3 ●	1.00%	300
The Lost Ingredient (1960)	0 ●	0.00%	204
The Road Back (1960)	1 ●	0.85%	117
Old Dwarf Heart (1962)	0 ●	0.00%	203
Love Song (1963)	3 ●	1.31%	229
A to a SP (1974)	3 ●	0.90%	334
In Excelsis (1974)	0 ●	0.00%	305
Uses (1974)	4 ●	1.99%	201
As It Was Written (1974)	2 ●	1.46%	137
LLWIABB (1974)	2 ●	0.58%	344
Sylvia Plath 1932-1963 (Suicidal)	Death words	% Death words	Length of Poem (words)
Poem (1941)	0 ●	0.00%	16
I thought that I could not be hurt (1946)	0 ●	0.00%	197
Song for a Summer's Day (1956)	0 ●	0.00%	110
Two Sisters of Persephone (1956)	0 ●	0.00%	144
The Eye-mote (1959)	0 ●	0.00%	204
Suicide off Egg Rock (1959)	4 ●	2.26%	177
Goatsucker (1959)	1 ●	0.90%	111
The Other (1962)	1 ●	0.54%	186
Sheep in Fog (1963)	0 ●	0.00%	72
The Munich Mannequins (1963)	1 ●	0.60%	166
Balloons (1963)	1 ●	0.76%	132
Edge (1963)	2 ●	1.75%	114

Conclusion

LIWC could not be accessed due to lack of resources. However, the function of LIWC was imitated using TagCrowd. If a word fit into multiple categories, it was only counted once. In order to further align with the Pennebaker study, all words were placed in categories based on dictionary definitions and not on context or metaphorical meanings. This is due to the fact that context and meaning of words in poetry is subjective to the reader. Due to lack of time and resources, communication were not analyzed during the course of this experiment.

It is important to note that this method does not consider a person's use of sarcasm or the context of their words. Nonetheless, the results of this study support the idea that suicidal poets are unique in terms of word use despite this limitation. Sexton and Plath are both examples of suicidal poets who did not view death as something negative or positive. The new data supports

this idea and shows how suicidal poets are not necessarily always unhappy. The original goal of this study was to explore why suicidal poets reference lust so often in their work. According to my counts, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath referenced lust fewer than 1% of the time in each period of their careers. Due to the inability to access Pennebaker's list of words that imply lust, my counts for lust can be perceived as inaccurate. As a result, this paper focuses on analyzing the overall word use of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. My data supports the idea that Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath are unique in terms of word use because they are individuals. However, my data also shows that Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath share many similarities with the suicidal poets analyzed in the Pennebaker study. This pilot study highlights those specific factors that are worthy of further research. These patterns include referencing negative emotions consistently and referencing positive emotions sparsely. According to my data, Sexton and Plath both had periods that spanned years where they consistently referenced negative emotions. These numbers ranged from 1% to 10% but consistently appear throughout the writing of both Sexton and Plath. According to my data, there are noticeable gaps of time where both Plath and Sexton experienced a decrease in positive emotion and reference positive emotion below 2% of the time. Further research in this field could lead to researchers being able to confirm patterns of word usage that are warning signs for suicide. The ability for a third party to analyze a person's word usage for suicide could save lives. This technique of word count analysis could also help the mentally ill receive the right type of treatment by allowing researchers to better understand what disorder a person has. Mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder share many similarities but are also very different from one another in terms of treatment. If further research were to be done analyzing patterns in the word usage of the mentally ill, then the use of objective word count

analysis in addition to subjective analysis of a person's mental state could help differentiate between similar disorders and in turn help prevent the misdiagnosis of mental illnesses.

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