

# CONFESSIONAL ECHOES AND ‘BAD MOTHERS’: THE INFLUENCE OF ANNE SEXTON AND SYLVIA PLATH ON CONTEMPORARY SPANISH POETS PILAR ADÓN AND LUNA MIGUEL

*ECOS CONFESIONALES Y ‘MALAS MADRES’: LA INFLUENCIA  
DE ANNE SEXTON Y SYLVIA PLATH EN LAS POETAS  
ESPAÑOLAS CONTEMPORÁNEAS PILAR ADÓN Y LUNA MIGUEL*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of confessional poetry by Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath on contemporary Spanish poets Pilar Adón and Luna Miguel. Focusing on the period 2000–2025, the study explores how themes such as motherhood, female sexual taboos, and family relationships, addressed openly by Sexton and Plath, have been reclaimed and redefined by Adón and Miguel within the current Spanish context. The article highlights the significance of breaking taboos and affirming the female poetic self, as well as the adaptation of Anglo-American models to Spanish reality. It concludes with an analysis of motherhood and the figure of the “bad mother” as central, contested issues, arguing that the confessional voice has enabled contemporary Spanish poets to engage in dialogue with their predecessors and to challenge social and familial constraints.

**Keywords:** confessional poetry, motherhood, female taboos, Spanish contemporary women poets, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la influencia de la poesía confesional de Anne Sexton y Sylvia Plath en las poetas españolas contemporáneas Pilar Adón y Luna Miguel. Centrado en el periodo 2000–2025, el estudio explora cómo temas como la maternidad, los tabúes sexuales femeninos y las relaciones familiares, abordados abiertamente por Sexton y Plath, han sido recuperados y

redefinidos por poetas como Adón y Miguel en el contexto español actual. El artículo destaca la importancia de la ruptura de tabúes y la afirmación del yo poético femenino, así como la adaptación de modelos angloamericanos a la realidad española. Concluye con un análisis de la maternidad y la figura de la “mala madre” como cuestiones centrales y todavía debatidas, argumentando que la voz confesional ha permitido a un buen número de poetas españolas contemporáneas dialogar con sus predecesoras y reflexionar acerca de las imposiciones sociales y familiares.

**Palabras clave:** poesía confesional, maternidad, tabúes femeninos, poetas españolas contemporáneas, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath.

## 1. Introduction: Shifting Spaces and Confessional Influences in Contemporary Spanish Poetry

*It is June, I am tired of being brave*

Anne Sexton

In the 21st century, the spaces in which Spanish poetry develops have shifted significantly compared to those of the 20th century. For this new form of poetry in Spain, spanning 2000–2025, a key reference point has been the confessional poetry that emerged in the United States in the mid-20th century, particularly within the female poetic landscape. While other influences have existed in Spain, these did not attract the attention of the majority of the new generation of women poets who have emerged in recent years.

If we look back to May 1968 and the subsequent rise of the feminist movement (Amorós and de Miguel 29-30), we can begin to understand how women, increasingly making their way in literature, have turned their gaze toward the groundbreaking American poets Anne Sexton (1928-1974) and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), figures who, until recent decades, had scarcely been studied in Spain. Both authors, along with other confessional poets, contributed significantly to the evolution of contemporary feminist consciousness and to the development of new women writers. Ultimately, the fact that today women are striving with determination to fracture and reconstruct the systems in which they live demonstrates that the emergence of confessional themes, particularly those related to female sexuality and motherhood, has exerted a powerful influence on younger poets due to the force and originality of their poetic voice and the dramatic quality of their confessional poetry (Miller 4). It should also be added that understanding the high and still-growing interest among Spanish writers such as Pilar Adón (1971) and Luna Miguel (1990) in confessional themes also requires, simultaneously, considering the widespread determination of women to expand and consolidate their rights and freedoms, as well as to break imposed taboos (Amorós and de Miguel 76-81).

In the following pages, the aim is to elucidate the influence exerted by the first pair of poets, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, on the second, comprised of Pilar Adón and Luna Miguel. The analysis will focus specifically on their treatment of motherhood, particularly the figure of the “bad mother,” in their writings, a theme shared by all four poets, which, together with others, such as female sexual taboos (masturbation, menstruation) allows us to discern to what extent and in what ways, much like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, the Spanish poets Pilar Adón and Luna Miguel address these issues through an unflinching literary approach that seeks to diverge from the path dictated by social and familial constraints.

## 2. Confessional Poetry: Origins, Definitions, and Key Figures

The 20th century, with its advances in scientific and philosophical fields and its cultural and artistic changes, marked the beginning of modernity, ushering in a new era not only in cultural terms, but in a broader sense as well. At the same time, as Guerrero Almagro explains, this period was characterized by a pronounced intellectualism in literary works, with the writer not only expressing their emotions but also having to (re)create them in the reader (para. 1). In this context, in the mid-century United States, a form of poetry known as “confessional” emerged.

The term “confessional” is typically attributed to M. L. Rosenthal, who wrote that “[it] came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959” (Rosenthal 25). Rosenthal proclaimed himself the only spiritual father of the confessional family (Farouk 1). According to critics, the confessional family was composed of a specific group of poets: Robert Lowell (1917-1977), Theodore Roethke (1908-1963), John Berryman (1914-1972), W.D. Snodgrass (1926-2009), Philip Larkin (1922-1985), and the two authors on whom this study is based, Anne Sexton (1928-1974) and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). The writings of this group generally reflected a need to explain their most intimate feelings, their most unpleasant experiences, and to honestly recreate their strange dreams, as well as their suicidal fantasies, in order to share them with their readers. In this vein, Lowell argued that this kind of poetry had always existed, even if it had not been named until that moment (Farouk 1-2). The emergence of these poets led to the consolidation of this mode of writing as a legitimate movement, with its own specific traits and characteristics. As its very name suggests, the confessional mode displayed a declaration of dependence; writing a poem was an ego-centered act, not an egocentric one (Farouk 2-5). That is, it was an act focused on the poet’s self as an attempt at therapy or, in religious terms, a form of purgation, rather than an “egocentric” act as the term is understood today, as an exaggerated exaltation of one’s own personality. The need for confession was a voluntary act and was performed as an offering to someone

in whom trust was placed. Therefore, there had to be a reader to receive the message, upon whom the writer depended. By entrusting their writings to this reader, the writer gives them authority, treating them as capable of granting absolution (Farouk 2). In connection with this attempt at absolution for the poet's sins, a sense of guilt was implicit, as was the conviction that relief would be attained once the confession had been made.

## 2.1. Breaking the Mold: Biographical Trajectories of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath

Historically, as Joanna Russ notes in her comprehensive study *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), women writers have often been discredited for their style and language—deemed either too feminine and puritanical or too masculine, exaggerated—or for their subject matter, considered feminine if focused on home and family, or masculine if centered on sex, politics, or adultery. Despite these persistent biases, the consolidation of the confessional “family” as a solid movement led, exceptionally, to Sexton and Plath's success as poets in the literary world.

Both writers, confronting criticism that marginalized those classified within the strictly feminine group—authors whose works were judged as “craft,” “testimony,” “conversation,” but also “genre literature” (Pérez Fontdevila 43)—as well as those belonging to a more masculine group, to which exceptional (and rare) women writers were admitted, broke with established models. Sexton, more than Plath,<sup>1</sup> established an exceptional model which, although it received negative criticism for being “too confessional” (Caballero 4), managed to profit from her success during her lifetime, becoming one of the most prominent poets in the United States of her time. However, the ongoing contradiction that both authors had to endure—confined, on the one hand, to the daily model of the “angel in the house,” and, on the other, to breaking it in their writings, which fed contemporary narratives of their “madness.” These poets ultimately died by suicide, Sexton at the age of forty-five and Plath, at thirty-one. If we briefly revisit their biographies, focusing on the marital and maternal aspects that would later be reflected in their poems, we can perhaps gain a broader and more comprehensive perspective on the attraction and influence they exerted, mainly through their poetic voices, on Spanish women poets (Miller 4). The childhoods of the two writers were completely different, and yet both developed a sharp, perfectionist, and demanding personality, which, combined with the manic-depressive disorders they exhibited from a young age, may have led to their classification as “bad mothers.” Delving individually into each of these poets, Plath projected the image of a brilliant woman in her studies, shaped by a strict upbringing. She exhibited symptoms of severe depression even before entering university (Sánchez Seoane para. 5). According

to descriptions in her own diary, it is now presumed that she suffered from an undiagnosed bipolar disorder. Despite never abandoning writing—her main passion since childhood—upon marrying fellow poet Ted Hughes, with whom she had a son, Nicholas, and a daughter, Frieda, she still attempted to fulfill her obligations as a mother, wife, and ideal woman. Writing thus became her only means of escape from the role of womanhood that constrained her daily life.

Sexton, in contrast, endured a childhood marked by sexual abuse by her own parents, which would result in lifelong psychiatric problems. She did not attend university but was self-taught. Due to her brilliance, she ultimately became a professor at Boston University, among other institutions. In addition, she received prestigious awards during her lifetime, among them, the Pulitzer Prize. Like her contemporary Plath, after entering an abusive marriage with Alfred Muller Sexton, and having two daughters, Linda and Joyce, she turned to poetry as a form of therapy following the recommendation of her psychiatrist. Sexton's suicide at the age of forty-five became a ritualized act following an argument with Muller Sexton, by then her ex-husband. Months later, after her suicide, her eldest daughter, Linda, found a prophetic letter in a trunk, alongside a lock of hair Sexton had cut on Mother's Day in 1963, about her death that Sexton had written five years earlier, addressed to Linda at age forty (L. Sexton 21). In it, she apologized for one of her arguments with her ex-husband, expressed gratitude for the time spent with her daughter, and offered the following advice (L. Sexton 23-24):

Life [...] It is terribly lonely. I know. And now you know too. [...] I have lived to the fullest. You do it too, Linda, live to the FULLEST! To exhaustion. I love you, forty-year-old Linda, and I love what you do, what you feel, what you are. Be the owner of your life. [...]. I lied, Linda: I did love my mother, and she loved me too.

La vida [...] Es terriblemente solitaria. Lo sé. Y ahora tú también lo sabes. [...] he vivido al máximo. Hazlo tú también, Linda, ¡vive al MÁXIMO! Hasta la extenuación. Te quiero, Linda de cuarenta años, y amo lo que haces, lo que sientes, lo que eres. Sé la dueña de tu vida. [...]. Mentí, Linda: sí que quise a mi madre y ella también me quiso<sup>2</sup>.

Years later, the release of the recordings of Sexton's therapy sessions revealed the depth of the poet's personal turmoil. In them, Sexton admitted to having sexually abused her daughter, Linda, an experience that would profoundly mark her firstborn. In 1994, Linda Sexton published *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton*, where she recounts discovering the letter and publicly discloses the abuse, while also articulating, in a complex and ambivalent gesture, some form of understanding and partial forgiveness toward her mother, framing the narrative as an attempt to survive and come to terms not only with the lasting consequences of the abuse but also with the emotional dependence her mother placed upon her.

In Plath's case, her suicide at the age of thirty-one followed a convergence of personal and emotional pressures, including her inability to begin a new life in Paris. By then, she was seeking a divorce from Ted Hughes, who was living with his lover, Assia Wevill. When Hughes discovered Plath's intention to leave the house, a violent argument followed, and three days later Plath took her own life. Her suicide reveals the depth to which the ideal of the "angel in the house" has been internalized: before placing her head in the oven and turning on the gas, she prepared breakfast for her two children (Sánchez Seoane para. 14), a final gesture that can be read both as an act of care and love and as a sign of exhaustion with a domestic role she could no longer endure. Years later, Assia Wevill's death would stand as another example of the crushing pressures imposed on women by this same domestic ideal, adding to the tragic pattern surrounding Hughes's relationships without further elaboration.

## **2.2. The Allure of Confession: Universal Themes and Psychoanalytic Resonances in Confessional Poetry**

The act of reading and connecting with the poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath is due, in large part, to the themes they explored and expressed, such as personal failure—in marriage, in love, in career, and even in survival itself (Farouk 6). As a working hypothesis, these themes could be considered universal due to their close connection with the lives and feelings of any individual, and their treatment was notably influenced by Surrealism and Psychoanalysis. Setting aside the surrealist intention, the influence of Psychoanalysis in general, and of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in particular, may appear more evident and significant—either because of the authors' clear psychiatric issues and their feelings of guilt taken to the point of exaggeration, or because of existing evidence regarding their familiarity with the works of these thinkers. In addition to the immense popularity these psychoanalysts enjoyed at the time, it can be assumed that both Sexton and Plath read them to clarify or find some explanation for their own struggles (Farouk 9–10). Specifically, it is the Freudian hypothesis regarding the three components of the human psyche that is faithfully reflected in some of their writings.

However, Carl Jung's theoretical contribution should not be overlooked, particularly his concept of the collective unconscious and the archetypes. Unlike Freud, whose theories have been largely critiqued and dismissed by feminist scholarship in recent decades, Jung's ideas continue to hold relevance as a psychoanalytic consideration. Notably, Jung's "mother archetype," in which he describes the "mother complex" (84–86), is interpreted as a pathology of the mother–daughter relationship where love can transform into domination or dependence, giving rise to rivalry between women. Jung identifies three principal forms of

this complex: the “hypertrophy of the maternal,” the “hypertrophy of eros,” and “identification with the mother.” In the first, the mother lives solely for procreation and maintains attachments that impede her children’s autonomy; in the second, the daughter’s relationship with the mother is mediated by a symbolic fixation on the father, generating jealousy and the impulse to replace the mother; and in the third, the daughter’s excessive identification with her mother stunts her own development, eventually making her “tyrant of her own mother” (Jung 84–86). Applying this typology, Anne Sexton embodies both the hypertrophy of the maternal and identification with the mother, manifesting in her excessive desire to protect her daughters while remaining entangled in her own filial trauma. This dynamic was revealed publicly, when recordings of her sessions with her psychiatrist surfaced, in which she admitted to having abused her firstborn, Linda. Sylvia Plath, by contrast, primarily exemplifies the hypertrophy of eros, seen in poems such as the previously discussed “Daddy,” where maternal instinct and her relationship with her mother (in “Mirror”) are displaced onto a fixation with the absent father.

The integration of Psychoanalysis into the rhetoric of confessional poetry stems from the poets’ exploration of the self with a clear aim: to overcome their own barriers of self-censorship or repression by exposing their inner worlds. Thus, strategically and without the need for a mask as a barrier, these confessional poets ceased to prioritize the use of paradox, ellipsis, or ambiguity, since they could produce an effect on the reader simply by presenting their personal drama directly (Farouk 13). Through this approach, the themes of both poets vividly mirrored their unhappy lives, making use—in the words of Charles Molensworth (cited in Farouk 7)—of poetry itself as “a first-person loudspeaker without tone” that represented their inner lives in terms of “strange figures” and “ironic parables,” which were nothing more than carefully selected and appropriately distributed poetic variations crafted within the imagery of archetypes.

In this way, Sexton’s work sought to address themes such as life and death, daughterhood, madness, motherhood, and love (Miller 4). As a confessional poet writing in an autobiographical register, she attempted to overcome the feelings of guilt, loss, inadequacy, and suicidal exasperation that haunted her, addressing the reader as if they were a daughter, wife, lover, mother, or psychiatric patient (Caballero para. 3). The poetic program with which Sexton began her first volume can be considered to possess a literary quality comparable to that of John Keats or Ezra Pound, as the poet Alicia Ostriker (Caballero para. 5) has acknowledged. Similarly, the commitment to an erotic vision of both art and life, present in these works (Caballero para. 3), together with their literary merit, was likely another factor that contributed to the revival of her poetry.

As for Plath's poems and compositions, which are also abstract and connected to surrealist and psychoanalytic imagery, the objectification of women by the patriarchal system emerges as a recurring theme. The female figure is often compared to a weary and enraged doll. This objectification, rooted in her marriage to Hughes, simultaneously broke with another taboo or stereotype that both poets sought to challenge in the mid-20th century: the concept of the woman as a mother (Gallardo Saborido para. 14). This imagery triggered a critical view of the notion of woman as merely a "child-bearer," casting doubt on her capacity to subsequently fulfill the role of mother.

In summary, it can be stated that the universalization of themes addressed by both authors—such as childhood guilt, motherhood, or sexuality—may be attributed to the fact that all of these represent human experiences that had typically been silenced. Consequently, within this universality, we can trace the influence and transmission of these themes across transoceanic boundaries to 21st-century women writers, focusing specifically on the Spanish context. Contemporary Spanish writers (2000–2025) naturally absorbed the influence of the North American confessional poets Sexton and Plath, and numerous factors led some of them, namely, Pilar Adón and Luna Miguel, to reclaim and reinterpret their legacy in productive ways. This also demonstrates the enduring presence of the Jungian mother archetypes and, consequently, their complexes, which will be evident in the poems analyzed. In the case of Adón, these tend more toward the second type, and in the case of Luna Miguel, they are more oriented toward the first and third types—maternal hypertrophy and identification with the mother.

### **3. Reclaiming the Poetic Self: Gendered Confessionals in Contemporary Spanish Poetry**

The term *postpoesía* has been adopted to describe the new poetic landscape in Spain at the beginning of the 21st century. This "poetry after poetry," or "postpoetic poetry," was theorized by Agustín Fernández Mallo in 2003, who argued for the necessity of replacing a critical modernity with a postmodern model. One that could not renounce the commercial grandeur of cultural products, the revolution brought about by new technologies such as the Internet, or the proliferation of concepts and artistic and literary traditions inherited from previous generations (Bagué Quílez 51). The return of confessionalism in recent Spanish lyric poetry can be traced back to the late 1950s, gaining greater visibility and consolidation during the democratic transition, as a pendular reaction against the aesthetics of the "novísimos." By the 1980s, "poetry of experience" had become the dominant trend, superseding other aesthetics such as symbolism, surrealism, and dirty realism (52).

However, from 1994 onwards, these previously marginalized tendencies began to be recovered and made visible again, thereby broadening the lyrical panorama. The transformation that occurred through the use of experiential poetry as a hinge to reopen other currents was institutionalized in 2007 by Araceli Iravedra in her book *Poesía de la experiencia*. Here, Iravedra asserts that, despite the controversies surrounding this poetic mode in the 1980s and 1990s and in an effort to avoid reductionism, “poetry of experience” has, by the end of the 20th century, become a legitimate trend with its own rules. The most significant contribution in Spain was to decentralize poetry, shifting from the individuality of a single poetic subject to a collective one, and thereby reviving currents that had rapidly declined in previous decades, such as dirty realism. According to some critics, this transformation served to highlight social injustices from which poetry had distanced itself, and succeeded in promoting a renewed sense of social and civil engagement (Bagué Quílez 69). In contrast, other critics have argued that, although this may have been the intention, the fragmentation of the experiential current ultimately favored a perspective more aligned with aestheticism and metaphysical poetry than with genuine social commitment. For these critics, the poetic and existential situation of the early 21st century was one of “inverted millenarianism,” which had become nihilistic in every respect (51).

All of these observations regarding the bifurcations between poetry of experience and other currents are inevitably connected to the emergence of the Internet, which has had a significant impact on both writing practices and the writers themselves in a globalized world. The proliferation of numerous online initiatives became a key factor in the development of contemporary poets and poetry. In the early 2000s, coinciding with the tentative emergence of the so-called “poets of 2000,” various digital reading journals and magazines, such as *El coloquio de los perros* (“*The Colloquy of the Dogs*”), were already gaining prominence online (Bagué Quílez 51). Nineteen years later, the poet Luna Miguel would reclaim this title for her feminist essay *El coloquio de las perras* (literally, “*The Colloquy of the Bitches*”).

The divergences that have emerged within the Spanish poetic and literary landscape, particularly in poetry written by women, are, for the most part, directly linked to this experiential or confessional line, as well as to the demand for the reclamation of legitimacy denied by literary criticism and its androcentric readings that have distorted their work (Arkininstall 171). The growing interest in constructing new models of authorship appears to favor a discourse centered on women writers as references, often from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, notably focusing on those who were exceptions, mad, hysterical, suicidal, in order to build much of their own poetic and experiential selves, assimilating and reappropriating these unconventional models. Thus, it can be summarized that the rise observed since approximately the year 2000

is less due to the emergence of entirely new proposals than to the way poets have embraced, combined, and reinterpreted some of the trends from previous decades. By merging these tendencies with new technologies, poets have reached a much broader audience than would have been imaginable in earlier years, resulting in a plurality of voices that even today is considered uncontainable. To a large extent, this recovery and expansion of the poetic self among new generations can be seen in the case of Luna Miguel, who skillfully utilized virtual spaces beyond the confines of print to publish her work and gain recognition (Rosal 184). Similarly, Pilar Adón has affirmed the convergence of other currents, such as symbolism or metaphysical poetry, within her own poetic practice.

### 3.1. Crossing the Water: The Cases of Pilar Adón and Luna Miguel

The context of the Spanish poetic landscape, marked by its diverse trends at the beginning of the 21st century, proved ideal for the influence of experiential poetry from countries where it had already become firmly established by the mid-20th century, such as the United States. First, the open-mindedness in Spain that allowed poetry of experience to resonate with certain poets can be attributed to the rise of trends like the “new symbolism” theorized by Luis Muñoz in 1998 and which sought to move beyond the endless debate between metaphysical and realist poetry. This trend—comparable to the form of American surrealism in the mid-20th century—interacted with the poetry of experience developed by 21st-century Spanish poets such as Adón and Miguel, enriching their poetry through imaginative construction and the use of analogous symbols and images (Muñoz 18-21). However, unlike the surrealist themes developed by some North American poets which necessarily sought autobiographical support, in the case of some Spanish poets, profound experientiality was intertwined with biographical independence. In line with this, the Spanish poets’ drive for introspection ultimately combined with a landscape full of mystery, metaphysical in nature, where both images and symbols came to occupy a space between consciousness and unconsciousness, a liminal territory that resonates closely with Jung’s conception of the collective unconscious and the symbolic function of archetypes.

The work of authors like Adón offers clear examples of a union between emotional intensity and symbolic depth, as seen in her early collections, *La hija del cazador* (*The Hunter’s Daughter*) (2010) and *Mente animal* (*Animal Mind*) (2014), which also incorporate elements of metaphysical poetry. The blending of two or more currents in Adón’s work stands as a clear example of the poetic evolution undergone by some women writers since 2000. As Adón herself noted in a 2020 interview, her literary evolution began with elusive early themes and highly literary landscapes, characterized

by an artificial use of language—particularly adjectives—and gradually shifted toward a more confessional literature starting with her third book, *Las órdenes* (*The Orders*) (2018), which became more centered on family relationships and the construction of oneself as a woman. This turn toward confessionalism, according to the author, ultimately led her to engage with the thematic concerns of poets such as Plath and Sexton (Morante Thomas 2020). Adón explores family dynamics and the decision not to become a mother in poems where the rawness of the language and certain experiential parallels evoke Sexton. This confessional impulse continues in her fourth collection, *Da dolor* (*It Hurts*) (2020), where she even makes a direct reference to Plath and the confessional theme becomes overwhelming. Themes involving family relationships and the emotional experience of motherhood were also explored by Miguel in her poetry collections. Examples of these include *La tumba del marinero* (*The Sailor's Tomb*) (2013), a collection in which she addresses her mother's cancer, and *El arrecife de las sirenas* (*The Sirens' Reef*) (2017), where she explores motherhood as an animal instinct that comes to her suddenly after her mother's death.

The path of social commitment, another recurrent motif at the beginning of the 21st century in Spain, can be seen only in subtle traces in these authors, through their attempts to recover a lost identity, the mask, and the reconstruction of the “self,” which they transferred to the “woman-self” as a form of social assertion (Bagué Quílez 56-59). These themes are, in turn, closely tied to the aforementioned influence of dirty realism. Another significant influence on younger writers such as Miguel has been the interplay between personal experience and cultural experience in literature. In this sense, Miguel writes from the premise that identity is not constructed solely through individual situations, but is also shaped by the cultural environment one chooses.

Nevertheless, some critics perceived a simplistic association between contemporary poetry and intimate anecdote (Bagué Quílez 65-66). In contrast, others argue that this is not the case for Miguel, mainly due to her strong personality and powerful use of language. The frequent use of self-expression through alterity—the fictionalization of discourse—should also be considered key within the personal-cultural experience trend. Adón and Miguel contributed to this as a form of expressive liberation within the tensions between two or more personalities dialoguing with an absent interlocutor (66-67). At times, these authors employed alterity as homage, openly referencing writers they admired. Clear examples can be found in Miguel's works, where she alludes to Charles Bukowski, Sylvia Plath, or Ted Hughes, or reworks themes as in *El coloquio de las perras*. In a more subtle manner, this occurs in Adón, who seems reluctant to clarify for the reader where fictionalization and homage begin and end. One of the least veiled examples is her homage to Plath, addressing her directly in the poem that closes her latest book, *Da dolor*. As Bagué Quílez states (68), these poets

thus achieved an avant-garde approach that, rather than being disruptive, integrated the currents of the '68 movement without losing the personality or virtuosity that must accommodate itself to everyday life.

#### 4. Poems of Good/Bad Mothers: An Analysis

Within the thematic framework concerning the poets' attitudes toward motherhood, it is important to clarify that the sense of guilt associated with being a "bad mother" experienced by the American poets stems, to some extent, from their psychiatric struggles, whereas for the Spanish poets it derives from a personal incident or from not having ever felt called toward motherhood. In both cases, however, the cultural imprint of the maternal archetype and its corresponding complex permeates their writing as a shared affective framework, internalized by women as female subjects through centuries of social and symbolic transmission. In relation to this, Sexton's poems dedicated to her eldest daughter, Linda Gray such as "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" (A. Sexton 145) and "Mother and Daughter" (305) depict her daughter's growth.

The first poem arises on her daughter's eleventh birthday: "My daughter, at eleven (almost twelve), is like a garden" (A. Sexton 145). and centers on Sexton's guilt over not having been able to witness her daughter's growth as a magical mother (147). The second poem functions as a farewell when, as a young adult, her daughter leaves for college. As Linda reflects in *Searching for Mercy Street*, the underlying reality of their mother-daughter relationship during those years is one of anxious attachment. In a letter, Sexton writes: "Linda, tienes casi doce años. Dame un año más para que madure y me haga a la idea de dejarte ir más tiempo" ("Linda, you are almost twelve. Give me one more year to mature and to come to terms with letting you go for longer") (180). Years later, her daughter reflects on this and writes that Sexton was a "wonderful friend," but that she would never understand that she could not establish boundaries and be a mother: "una guía, una profesora, una adulta cariñosa que podía mantener cierta distancia para que yo pudiese vivir y pensar por mí misma" ("a guide, a teacher, a loving adult who could maintain enough distance so that I could live and think for myself") (L. Sexton 178). Despite this, her daughter also affirms that those years marked a positive deepening of their relationship:

Hablábamos, ella bebía té y yo comía una sopa vegetal de lata; reíamos. Estos son algunos de los recuerdos más felices que tengo con mi madre. ... Podía hablar con ella sobre cualquier tema sin vergüenza y tenía la garantía de que me daría una respuesta comprensiva ... Cuando por fin me bajó [la regla] fue mi madre la que, desde el otro lado de la puerta, me explicó cómo ponerme un tampón (177-178).

(We talked, she drank tea, and I ate canned vegetable soup; we laughed. These are some of the happiest memories I have with my mother. ... I could talk to her about any subject without shame and was assured of a sympathetic response ... When I finally got it [my period], it was my mother who, from the other side of the door, explained how to use a tampon).

Sexton's feelings toward her second daughter, Joyce, differ from those expressed regarding Linda. While the mother-daughter relationship with her eldest was one of dependency and love-hate, with Joyce "la mariposa más sociable de la familia" ("the most sociable butterfly of the family") (A. Sexton 177).it was purely one of love. A clear example is the extensive poem "The Double Image" (A. Sexton 35), dedicated to Joyce, which, besides noting her age in the second line.as Sexton had done in poems dedicated to her other daughter focuses tenderly on explaining the meaning behind her name. However, it is not until the last stanza that the difference between Sexton's ambivalence and rivalry with her eldest daughter and the devotion-based relationship with Joyce becomes apparent. As the poet confesses in the final lines, having a second daughter proved to be her salvation, since she "needed" a girl rather than a boy who would serve as a photocopied image of herself through which she could remember her own childhood.

On the other hand, Plath also maintained an ambivalent relationship with her son and daughter. While writing the delicate poem "You're" (Plath 48), dedicated to her daughter Frieda, whom she describes carefully. "Clownlike, happiest on your hands, / ... / O high-riser, my little loaf. / ... / Right, like a well-done sum. / A clear state, with your own face on." (48).we also encounter, in contrast, opposing feelings in "Morning Song" (54), where she names her daughter "moth" and, instead of focusing on the child's beautiful attributes, highlights her own imperfection as a "good mother"; she describes herself as tired when she has to respond to the baby's morning cries:

I am no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind's hand.  
All night your moth-breath  
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:  
A far sea moves in my ear.  
One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral  
In my Victorian nightgown (54).

Concerning the Spanish poets Miguel and Adón, we observed in their treatment of motherhood a clear reference by Miguel to the poet of "Morning Song." When addressing the theme, Miguel uses the same nickname, "moth," in poems such as "Hana" (Miguel 61) to name the baby she is expecting<sup>3</sup> in a metaphorical play: "una polilla gris chocó contra mi muslo y en ese pequeño y preciso instante tú nacías" ("a gray moth struck my thigh and in that small, precise instant you were born"). At the

same time, she uses this term to introduce the third part of the book *El arrecife de las sirenas*, titled “La Muerte de la polilla” (“The Death of the Moth”), tracing a genealogy between the death of her own mother and the connection with the new life she awaits, which will make her mother herself:

desde entonces empecé a medir el tiempo  
 no según las horas que hacía desde que  
 ana murió sino según las horas que quedaban  
 para que hana comenzara a llorar  
 en la pantalla de la ecografía tus manos (Miguel 61).  
 (from then on I began to measure time  
 not by the hours since  
 Ana died but by the hours remaining  
 until Hana would begin to cry  
 on the ultrasound screen your hands).

When it comes to the figure of “bad mothers,” Miguel seems to expand the concept to include “fathers,” that is, both mother and father who could be “mad” a fact largely attributed to the change in era and the greater involvement of the husband, as the author hints at throughout her work. This expansion reflects the socio-cultural shifts of the 21st century, where co-parenting has become more prevalent than in the 20th century, and women are no longer expected to bear the full weight of parenting responsibilities alone. In this context, guilt, anxiety, and failures traditionally associated with motherhood can now be shared, or critically examined, within a framework that includes both parental figures. This is reflected in one of her poems titled “Los buenos padres” (“The Good Parents”). In it, she critiques this concept, as despite adoring her baby, she is a first-time mother and, while watching the child lying on the bed, the baby falls due to a moment’s inattention:

Salvo cuando en un despiste adulto  
 cae de la cama e impacta  
 piel contra mosaico  
 cabeza contra suelo hidráulico  
 qué ironía  
 quizás los buenos padres que ha[n] dejado caer a  
 su bebé  
 tampoco deberían llamarse buenos padres (76-77).  
 (Except when, in an adult’s distraction,  
 the baby falls from the bed and lands  
 skin against tile,  
 head against hydraulic floor  
 —what irony,  
 perhaps the good parents who have let their baby  
 fall  
 should not be called good parents either).

With this sentiment, the writer also recalls Sexton when the American poet considers herself a “bad mother” because, despite adoring her daughters, she cannot overcome her past traumas nor fulfill the role as she was taught. For example, in “For God While Sleeping” (A. Sexton 63), the poet addresses God to express her despair over her clumsiness and prolonged exhaustion, caused by a persistent fever that prevents her from acting as a “good mother” and wife.

In contrast, although Adón also refers to children and describes them in some of her early poems, such as “XV” (Adón, *Mente animal* 27), her relationship to motherhood is precisely one of not wanting to become a mother, as she herself affirms in a 2020 interview and in the explicit poem “No queremos ser madres” (“We do not want to be mothers”) (*Las órdenes* 30). In this poem, the author expresses her intention to go against the expectations associated with being both a daughter and a mother. expectations imposed on her as a woman (30). The poem also features motifs that recur in Sexton’s work, such as birthdays and celebration in poems dedicated to her daughters, or the existential exhaustion and dichotomy between the maternal instinct and a dedication to reading or writing. While these motifs are distributed across several of Sexton’s poems and intermingle in others, in Adón they appear concentrated in a single poem from *Las órdenes*, “¿Quién me va a cuidar cuando sea vieja?” (“Who will take care of me when I am old?”):

Vencida por los razonamientos  
sobre aquello de recoger lo que se ha sembrado.  
Celebraciones, cumpleaños y fiestas  
en perspectiva de una soledad redonda.  
¿Quién va a venir a verme  
los fines de semana?  
Si no soy madre (36-37).  
(Defeated by the arguments  
about reaping what one has sown.  
Celebration, birthdays, and parties  
viewed from the perspective of utter solitude.  
Who will come to see me  
on weekends?  
If I am not a mother).

In these lines, we see an accumulated exhaustion resulting from the “sermons” she receives, which lead her to yield in her attempts to reason with those who defend the continuation of the so-called natural cycle of womanhood. We also find the Western imaginary regarding what motherhood *should* mean for women: innate instinct, reaping what one has sown, and the ideology of having biological children.

The persistence of this Western imaginary is reflected in the idea of “photocopy children,” which inevitably recalls the poem Sexton dedicates to Joyce. Ultimately, despite the tone of weariness present in the Spanish poet’s poem, the key issue lies

in the vulnerability expressed in the “Who will take care of me when I am old?”, since beneath this question lies the fear of failing as a woman and the terror of future isolation and loneliness as a result of not having become a mother. Nevertheless, like the other three poets, Adón also displays a duality of thought and stance regarding (non-)motherhood. In her latest collection, *Da dolor*, under the title “Tener una hija” (“Having a Daughter”) (Adón 25), the author discusses the prospect of motherhood from a different perspective, seemingly moving beyond the preconceived notion of the woman as a child-bearer. Adón articulates the dangers of imagining having a daughter as an abstract idea, as opposed to the reality of actually having one: “tener una hija es una idea y no una realidad” (“having a daughter is an idea and not a reality”). She returns to her own childhood, evoking “la cría de diez años” (“the ten-year-old girl”) she once was, who did not play and already thought “en términos de pérdidas y ganancias” (“in terms of losses and gains”), pondering questions like “cuando se mueran todos, ¿de quién será la casa?” (“when everyone dies, whose will the house be?”) (25). In this way, Adón reverses the lens and concludes, with skeptical firmness, that the imposition of “being a mother” was, in her case, always just that: an archetypal imposition, not a desire or a duty. For the author, the sublimation of the model of woman as mother is today even more exalted than that of being a daughter:

Tener una hija no es mejor que soñarlo  
 Ni preferible a serlo.  
 Pocas palabras quedan tan sublimadas.  
 Puede que madre, tal vez (25).  
 (Having a daughter is not better than dreaming it  
 Nor preferable to being one.  
 Few words remain so sublimated.  
 Perhaps mother, maybe).

Finally, with “Oceanus,” the poem that closes *Da dolor* and is dedicated to Sylvia Plath, Adón makes a direct reference to Plath’s poem “Mirror” (Plath 78). The Spanish poet’s text opens with a description of Plath’s death as if it were the fictionalized death of Adón herself:

Me miro y me anulo  
 Medusa mujer-hongo  
 que sabe de las intenciones del héroe  
 y se decapita a sí misma  
 antes de que él aparezca  
 en sus sandalias aladas (Adón 69).  
 (I look at myself and I cancel myself out  
 Medusa mushroom-woman  
 who knows the hero’s intentions  
 And beheads herself  
 before he appears  
 in his winged sandals).

By distancing herself from motherhood, Adón deliberately chooses to engage in a dialogue with her Anglo-American predecessor, Plath. The poems converse with each other to question the status of woman as subject. Plath describes how she goes to the mirror daily to discover “what she really is,” while Adón addresses her own with the lines: “Espejito, espejito” (“Mirror, mirror”). Both texts conclude with verses that, in one way or another, synthesize the poets’ childhoods as a place of no return and the approach of old age. Thoughts that prevent them from enjoying the present as women, relegating them to the eternal contemplation of time’s passage before the mirror. To illustrate this point, Plath’s lines declare, “In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish” (Plath 78), while Adón’s reads, “[sentirse] niña en el metro ... envuelta en cenizas” (“[feeling] like a girl on the subway ... wrapped in ashes”) (Adón 69). The final reference from the Spanish poet is the line “Sylvia dejó de hablar con Dios” (“Sylvia stopped talking to God”) (69), inevitably recalling the well-known diary entry by Sylvia Plath: “I think I would like to call myself ‘the girl who wanted to be God.’” In essence, Adón’s poem functions as a multifaceted mirror with numerous reflective faces. It not only reflects the writer herself before her mirror, but also the empathy she feels for Plath as she contemplates her death. In an attempt at dialogue or transfusion with the American poet, the Spanish poet ultimately comes to feel her pain.

## 5. A Timeless Conversation: Conclusions

This study has explored the influence of American confessional poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath on contemporary Spanish poets Pilar Adón and Luna Miguel, based on the hypothesis that there is a need to articulate a divergence from, and rejection of, the path imposed by society and family through direct, unapologetic writing. The analysis focused on the taboo theme of motherhood, being or not being “good/bad mothers,” first expressed by the American poets and later reclaimed by Spanish poets in order to normalize these feelings. The historical, social, and cultural developments in Spain, together with the awakening of feminist consciousness, are among the main reasons for the emergence of experiential poetry in the country. The growing interest in this trend since 2000 enabled women writers to find key references across the Atlantic.

Some of these themes have become even more prominent in the work of younger poets such as Luna Miguel, who demands their visibility and resolution, as references to children and motherhood are a constant motif in her poetry. The transgressive stance of American poets regarding the female subject is also linked to the questioning of imposed motherhood and the notion of being “good/bad mothers,” as well as to the self-definition of woman as subject. The theme of motherhood, compared to others,

appears to be more widely understood by Spanish women poets, though it remains a subject of debate, as it was in the mid-20th century. The ongoing relevance of this theme for new generations is due, once again, to the increasing questioning by many women. In Adón's case, as she states in an interview (2020), reading the treatment of motherhood by authors such as Sexton and Plath allowed her to stop feeling pressured for not wanting to be a mother and to feel understood by her courageous predecessors. Miguel, on the other hand, argues that motherhood should be reclaimed as a universal theme, and, notably, she even uses the same word as Plath to refer to her baby and questions the notions of "good mothers" and "good fathers." Similarly, Adón, in her latest collection, directly engages in a dialogue with Plath, questioning whether the woman she sees in the mirror is herself and what this implies, provoking a timeless conversation motivated not only by the implicit guilt of not meeting the ideal of woman, but also by the need for dialogue between authors from different eras, who are recognized as references.

To conclude, the theme of motherhood, treated viscerally by poets such as Sexton and Plath to deviate from the imposed path, awakened the interest of new generations of women poets like Adón and Miguel. Much like their American counterparts, the Spanish poets chose an unfiltered language to express this and other feminine demands, asserting their disregard for imposed roles. In doing so, they have also sought to recover the voices of their predecessors, a fact evident in the recent Spanish translations of their literary and biographical works, some produced by Luna Miguel herself. Such interest and demand continue to grow, perhaps because questions such as being or not being a "good mother" remain unresolved, and because recent years have marked a moment of rupture that has opened the door to the broader articulation and normalization of these issues in society.

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## Notes

- 1 With the exception of the poetry collection *The Colossus* (1960) and the novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas," the rest of Sylvia Plath's work was published posthumously. Although she did not receive the recognition she deserved during her lifetime, her work has been edited, translated, and acclaimed by critics in recent decades. Notably, Spain has recently begun reissuing and newly editing these works, renewing attention to Plath's literary legacy. However, records from the Archivo General de la Administración (AGA) show that several publishers attempted to introduce Plath's original works into Spain during the late Francoist dictatorship, but these efforts were ultimately censored.
- 2 I am using the Spanish translation of *Searching of Mercy Street* based on the original 1994 edition, specifically the 2018 version. All translations of excerpts from this work, as well as all translations of poems and book titles by Spanish poets included in the text, are my own.
- 3 "Hana" is the symbolic name the poet imagines for the baby she is expecting and establishes a direct play with "Ana," the name of her deceased mother (the editor Ana Santos Payán [1972-2014]). In the poem, this phonetic closeness allows birth to be read as a form of vital continuity, in which the life that ends with the mother seems to be extended in the child to come.