Anne Sexton: Creativity and Mental Illness

Alina Kido-Matzner, ‘19, EEB
Harvard, Schlesinger Library
Funded by CHW Health Grand Challenges Program

Introduction
Anne Sexton was a Pulitzer Prize winning poet of the 1960s
She had mental illness
This summer I listened to her therapy tapes to better understand her mental illness and to learn how mental illness affects others.

Objective of the Study
What do Anne Sexton’s therapy tapes about her mental illness and her creativity?

Results
For bipolar disorder, Anne Sexton fits many of the criteria for mania and speaks about having suicidal thoughts and depression with her psychiatrist
Her poems “The Sun” and “Sylvia’s Death” touch on her experiences with mental illness.
Many of her ideas for poems were thought up in therapy

Methods
Listened to therapy tapes each day
Conducted interviews with experts
Visited and documented the archives of Anne Sexton’s biographer, Diane Middlebrook

Discussion
There is evidence that though Anne Sexton was only diagnosed with hysteria at the time, she may have had bipolar disorder
There is thought to be a significant link between mental illness and creativity. Anne Sexton seems to fall under this pattern.

Questions
Where there any other times when Anne Sexton was formulating ideas for her poems in therapy?

Conclusion
Anne Sexton’s mental illness and therapy allowed her to make great art.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Professor Tamita, Professor Skorczewski, Dr. Bauer, and Dr. McInnis and the library staff at Harvard and Brown. This summer would not be possible without generous funding from CHW Health Grand Challenge Program, STRF, and EEB funds.