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Pivotal Transformations:
The Changing Voice in Anne Sexton's Poetry

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Abstract

Critics such as Ralph Mills, Suzanne Juhasz, and Jane McCabe have generally focused on the confessional or feminist aspects of Anne Sexton's poetry, most especially in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), *Live or Die* (1966), and *Love Poems* (1969). Those who have examined *Transformations* (1971)—and its fairy-tale world—have also paid particular attention either to its feminist approach or its confessional connections. These critics suggest that Sexton exists in her poetry as a confessional poet striving to move beyond parental restrictions and childhood experiences or they reveal Sexton as either “Madonna or Witch.” These and other critics, however, fail to discern that Sexton existed as both a confessional and a feminist poet throughout her career because she did not abandon either poetic root; she merely displayed a change in her poetic voice. Consequently, *Transformations* exists as a pivotal marker between the dissatisfied life that fed her 1960s confessional career and her post-transformation, angry and God-seeking stage wherein she attempted to take control and to accept life as mortal and imperfect. The poetry within *Transformations* pinpoints the shift of her poetic voice where Sexton no longer exists as a young victim of outside forces but as a sage witch-woman advising the upcoming generations. This experienced voice absorbs life's wisdom and finally understands it. Thereby she attempts to transfer this knowledge to the naïve and youthful through her protective, cautionary voice manifested in the collection of seemingly unthreatening fairy tales.

In this study Sexton's voice is divided into three major stages. Chapter One details the emergence of her poetic voice in both *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones*. Here, this voice is dependent because it remains “other-defined,”

vacillating between madness and loss. Similarly, Chapter Two describes Sexton as having made some steps in her poetic development, but again she fluctuates, this time between melancholy and passion, her voice and work remaining parochial and stunted. Both chapters analyze how Sexton's voice reflects her themes as well as gender and societal roles.

Chapter Three, conversely, not only examines the expansion of Sexton's voice in *Transformations* and its influence on themes, gender and societal roles but also explains the pivotal role it played in Sexton's poetic development. In Sexton's first four collections she utilizes a voice determined by biographical and social circumstances and incapable of self-definition; here in the fifth collection, however, she does not exist as powerless and malleable but as authoritative and steadfast. *Transformations*, moreover, anticipates and predetermines the new characteristics of her subsequent collections.

Chapter Four discusses *The Book of Folly* (1972), *The Death Notebooks* (1974), and *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), volumes which inevitably provide an unapologetic, accusatory voice, criticizing her therapist, her father, and her self—all this while Sexton finds herself again alone, once more courting and, finally, embracing death. This concluding section reveals a post-transformational voice with its themes and roles. The Epilogue specifies areas to be critically explored in order to understand more fully the development of Sexton's poetic voice.

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Introduction

Critics view Anne Sexton primarily as a confessional poet and secondarily as a feminist poet. Initially having detested both titles, she altered her stance, however, shortly before the publication of *Transformations* (1970). In a letter dated 23 December 1970, she told Stanley Kunitz, "At one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, but mea culpa. Now I say that I'm the *only* confessional poet" (Sexton and Ames 372). Sexton's initial poetry, first published in the late 1950s, exhibited some of the most provocatively detailed accounts of mainly female experiences and vantages—illegitimate birth, abortion, and masturbation—as well as events considered either "dirty" or family secrets—mental instability (then known as nerves or hysteria), depression, incarceration in mental wards, drug abuse and alcoholism, suicide attempts, marital dissatisfaction, and illicit affairs. The former episodes display what Betty Friedan labeled in 1963 "the feminine mystique" and, sometimes, led to the gamut of "dirty" secrets described in Sexton's poetry. This term, Friedan suggested, denotes the general dissatisfaction and loss of identity women experienced as they, for the most part, were housewives and mothers, without careers to call their own, who failed to find reward and a sense of accomplishment. In essence, the women of Friedan's argument, like Sexton, felt overwhelmed by a lack of identity and ennui, thereby feeling like failures to their husbands, families, and, ultimately, themselves. Frequently, these sentiments further alienated the woman from her family, cycling her into deeper isolation, "hysteria," and depression.

Unknown to Sexton when she began publishing, her poetry represented those women who felt most alone and misunderstood. In Jane McCabe's "A Woman Who Writes," she asserts that female poets, such as Sexton, "have to some extent created a

new audience—people who did not read poetry as a habit but who began to understand that they were being addressed” (224). In this manner, Sexton unknowingly made her poetry empathetic and a feminist symbol with whom these masses of women could identify and feel less alone. This poetry also became a type of double-blind communication between the poet and her audience: the poet wrote to purge herself of overpowering emotions and the audience read to identify with someone else and to feel understood,¹⁷ a catharsis for both sides without either necessarily knowing the other’s benefit. This process thereby linked Sexton to her audience and made her its Pied Piper, the poetry itself becoming her instrument, the song her voice with its intonations changing along the way.

Of note, this poetic voice and Sexton are not separable entities; they are one and the same. For the first four collections—*To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), *Live or Die* (1966), and *Love Poems* (1969)—and the last three—*The Book of Folly* (1972), *The Death Notebooks* (1974), and *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975)—she draws primarily upon her biographical experiences, translating her emotions into words and images. Because of this, Sexton’s biographical history is not only relevant but also of utmost pertinence in order to understand the poet, her poetry, and the evolution of her poetic voice, with *Transformations* becoming the collection that serves as a pivoting point for her voice.

Before Anne Sexton became either a Sexton or a poet, she was the child Anne Gray Harvey who, early on, lived a life of rank and privilege as a granddaughter of Louis Harvey, president of the Wellesley National Bank. On her mother’s side, she was the granddaughter of Arthur Gray Staples, son of the founder of the *Lewiston Evening*

Journal and its current publisher and editor, whose family lineage included Maine politicians and journalists. Both the Harvey and the Staples families owned vacation homes at Squirrel Island, Maine. Until she was ten, Anne and her sisters took regular summer vacations with their mother at one of the two expansive Staples' homes on the island.

These summers not only provided Anne time with the Harvey and Staples families but also encouraged the children's imaginations and likely exposed her to Arthur Gray Staples's earnest writing. While the children produced and presented plays within the home's theatre—complete with stage, curtain, and lights—Arthur Gray busied himself with his own creative endeavors—typing items for the *Journal*, which he consequently took to the mainland. The aunt of Anne's mother and Anne's namesake, Anna Ladd Dingley, had been a journalist as well, working for her own father's newspaper. While the Staples family appeared not only intricately knit together but also supportive of creative and writing processes, the Harvey side of the family held a knack for money and business between banking ties and wool industry successes.

Business successes and creative processes remained the brighter side of both the Harvey and Staples families, each side of Anne Sexton's background also holding darker histories. Grandfather Louis Harvey had a "mental collapse," after establishing a bank in Puerto Rico, and again later when Anne was fifteen. Frances, Louis's daughter and Anne's aunt, had attempted suicide in her twenties—only a few years before Anne's birth. Moreover, by the time Anne was thirteen, her father, Ralph Churchill, had begun traveling less with his wool trade and had begun drinking more heavily—though the latter may have caused the former. Indeed, if her father drank too much, so did her

mother Mary Gray. As Sexton herself later recalled, “My mother drank two drinks every noon and three drinks every night come hell or high water. Once my father stopped drinking she [Anne’s mother] would stand at the sink with a glass and—slosh—pour the whiskey right down” (Middlebrook 13). The combined cocktail of these family legacies constituted Anne’s first exposure to the business world, professional writing, as well as the root of her struggle with depression, alcoholism, and suicidal tendencies.

Furthermore, her ^Uinclination later in life toward attention-seeking and histrionics becomes more understandable, yet not necessarily more sympathetic, in light of her background.

Though it remains clearly impossible to distinguish whether her families’ creative ventures and drive for achievement or their psychological shortcomings led to the success of Anne’s poetic urge, both Anne Sexton, herself, and Diane Wood Middlebrook, her biographer, directly correlate the latter—psychological deficits—as at least the catalyst to her poetry. Anne first courted the notion of suicide nearly a year after the birth of her second daughter in the summer of 1956 and then actually attempted suicide a few months later, in November, by taking Nembutal. Luckily, Sexton had been seeing a psychiatrist for nearly a year—since the birth of her second daughter. This established professional relationship became a link not only to her hospitalization but also as a means to seek further psychological help and continued support. The therapy, however, comprised only partial assistance. One evening, nearly a month after her suicide attempt, she happened to turn on a public television program airing a Harvard professor lecturing about sonnets. Thinking this she *could* do (more tangibly and successfully than her mothering, housekeeping, and wife-ing had proven), she took notes and began her first attempts at

poetry. Looking for approval, Anne took her poetry to her therapy sessions for her therapist, Dr. Martin Orne, to read. Sexton associated his positive reinforcement with her continued exploration of poetry: “‘He said they were wonderful. [. . .] I kept writing because he was approving’” (Middlebrook 42). After Anne’s second suicide attempt, she received similarly warm encouragement from her mother whose earlier tinkering with poetry led her to be considered that Harvey-generation’s “writer.” Through this sanctioning of the poetry, both Dr. Orne and Anne’s mother established an outlet for her to vent emotions as well as receive much-needed esteem within the family and, eventually, recognition by the public. Dr. Orne may have been consciously aware of the poetry’s therapeutic effects and of its possible positive outcomes; no one, however, could have predicted either the public’s reception of Anne’s poetry or her subsequent poetry career and its success.

While encouragement came immediately from her mother regarding the December 1957 sheaf of poetry, success—in the form of single-poem publications—only began in April 1958. Anne appeared surprisingly undaunted, however, by the countless rejections accompanying the scant acceptances during the first few years. Nonetheless, these slow beginnings appear as an avalanche of success when—within less than a decade-and-a-half—this same woman would publish eight books of poetry, earn the 1966 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and receive honorary Doctor of Letters degrees from Tufts and Fairfield Universities as well as Regis College. However, the culmination of Sexton’s career and poetic clout occurred within the authoritative voice of her fifth collection, *Transformations*, rather than her seventh or eighth collections where, in fact, her poetic voice faltered as it reflected changes in her personal and emotional life. First focusing on

her fears but finding her footing in *Transformations*, she pivoted from an “other-defined” self before the collection to an undefined self after it, discovering herself ultimately alone.

In her first two collections, Sexton’s poetic identity reflects a desperate and lost woman who fears loneliness to the point of madness, not because she remains isolated, but because she derives her own definition of self through her roles with others. Still wavering with melancholic emotions and continuing to be identified through her personal relationships, Sexton portrays, in her third and fourth collections, a woman who first begins to welcome optimism and, finally, embraces passion. The fifth collection, culminating with the tone of a self-assured scholar, presents a “wise witch” who finds power from her wisdom and who wishes to pass it on to her audience. Suffering from a decline in self-control and identity, however, a petulant, caustic “bitch-witch” emerges in the last three works, alienating herself and obsessing with vengeance and God.

Chapter One

Of Madness and Loss:

To Bedlam and Part Way Back and All My Pretty Ones

In a 1968 interview with Barbara Kelves, Anne Sexton noted that *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones* similarly maintain tight forms and rhyme schemes and stated that, when viewed together, these volumes evolve from “the *experience* of madness” to “the *causes* of madness” [my emphasis] (13). Sexton thereby suggested that the subjects of each collection differ. While she may have said these collections revolve around separate subjects, the fact remains, however, that indeed they do not. Loss remains the singular subject of both volumes, a lack of identity feeding upon itself and thereby contributing to the mental instability of the poetic persona. This persona—most particularly the poetic *voice*—determines the themes (the author’s attitude toward loss and madness), exhibits Sexton’s gender and societal roles, and governs the relationship with her audience. Even considering the themes, roles, and audience relationship, however, Sexton’s evolution within these first two collections remains limited as both Sexton herself and her poetic voice attempt to surface from madness to sanity, desperately crying for assistance or at least acknowledgement—or both—in her personal and newly professional realms.

This loss-expressing voice first bore out of Sexton’s panicky reactions during her husband’s, Kayo’s, oversea military absence. As Diane Middlebrook declares, this panic resulted in her “having an affair with anyone” and resurfaced again after the birth of each of her daughters, Linda and Joy, with what Sexton herself called ““terrible spells of depression”” (Middlebrook 27, 31). These bouts of terror suggest Sexton’s extreme dependence upon her socially-determined roles as established by the juxtaposition of her self in relation to others: Mary Gray’s daughter, Kayo’s wife, Linda’s mother, Joy’s mother. She appeared only to view herself through the eyes of those around her and to

need a stabilizing relationship in order to maintain mental balance, initially relying most closely upon Kayo, while also vacillating between Mary Gray and her mother-in-law Billie, and later upon Dr. Martin Orne as well as female friends, such as Maxine Kumin and Lois Ames. Sexton's personal life, and seemingly her poetic career, emerged from her fear of losing other people—through geographical distance or waning relationships—first attempting to quell these fears of loss by seeking affections from any source (her many affairs) and then finally resorting to attempting suicide. While attempting suicide in an effort to avoid loss seems illogical, it is in essence a way to be at least the one in control, the one who leaves rather than be left.

Of its thirty-three poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* contains only four poems that distinctly link to madness and only five that more loosely refer to it. These nine poems largely constitute the more critically discussed of Sexton's collection. "You, Doctor Martin," "Music Swims Back to Me," "Ringing the Bells," and "Lullaby" fall into the former category. *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* begins "You, Dr. Martin, walk // I speed through the antiseptic tunnel // [. . .] We stand in broken / lines [. . .]" (Sexton 1, 3, 8, 9). This melancholic voice in "You, Dr. Martin" does not portray herself as a stereotypical, babbling, straight-jacketed and head-knocking insane woman. Rather she depicts a more subdued image: an incapacitated, powerless patient and victim, part of a polarized world, appointing the outsider Dr. Martin as the "oracular / eye in our [the patients'] nest," (Sexton 32, 33) deifying him and thereby denigrating herself. The poem describes the humility of living on a locked ward, feeling lost, and finding one's self "waiting on the silent shelf" (Sexton 42) for either a cure or a pardon. Similarly, the other three poems directly set the speaker, who forgets the details of her history, repeats

herself, or “floats” away from herself on “evening pills” (“Lullaby” 16, 11), at either a private institution, a mental house, or Bedlam. This voice remains detached from the world and, therefore, not a valued part of it, asking, “Wait Mister, Which way is home?” (“Music” 1), questioning both where her home might be and whether as a “mad woman” she truly fits into the world as it is. On the other hand, “Said the Poet to the Analyst,” “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn,” “Elegy in the Classroom,” “For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further,” and “The Double Image” merely utilize the title, a word, or a brief phrase to imply madness and, even then, only remotely connect to it while loss remains the keystone theme.

Therefore, twenty-four of the thirty-three poems within *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* clearly do not convey madness either explicitly or implicitly. Nearly all remaining twenty-four poems, however, contain among their varied concerns the continued focus: loss. In “Some Foreign Letters,” for example, the voice is one of regret and sadness over Sexton’s Aunt Nana’s lost lover, lost opportunity, lost country, and lost youth while Sexton transfers her own desires and sadness into this poem. It serves as both an elegy to Nana and an apology for all Sexton believes Nana had to surrender for the sake of her career and her family as a young woman. Furthermore, Sexton compares her aunt’s lost love to her eventual lost hearing and sanity as an old woman, even attributing the latter to the former: “[. . .] I tell you, you will come / here, to the suburbs of Boston [. . .] / [. . .] letting your spectacles fall / and your hair net tangle as you stop passers-by / to mumble your guilty love while your ears die” (71-72, 78-80). “The Exorcists” repeats the subject of a lost lover and an affair given up by both heart and memory during a vanished summer. Now, however, the loss is personally Sexton’s rather than her aunt’s, again recalling a

room, bed, memories, and the illicit lover who had to be forgotten. By utilizing only the first person pronouns I, us, and we, Sexton portrays the woman and the voice in “The Exorcists” as her own, thus personalizing and intensifying the loss (as compared to the contrite voice within “Some Foreign Letters”); poems that follow “The Exorcists” are similarly personalized. Recognizing lost possibilities and dreams she once had and examining the bitter loneliness that follows a forfeited life, the persona in “The Farmer’s Wife” surrenders herself to a mundane marriage of “slow braille touch[es]” while “years [are] bungling past” (14, 28). Her only recourse remains to fantasize the demise of her husband, the man who stole her life: “[. . .] wishes him cripple, or poet, / or even lonely, or sometimes, / better, my lover, dead” (30-32). At this point in her career, even while she fervently worked on her art, Sexton linked life as a poet with loneliness, misery, or death. Similar to the two aforementioned poems, “The Expatriates” contains a speaker and a lover who grieve their former home, the dying woods, and their own lives that time etches away. In this poem Sexton—either consciously or unconsciously—implies that life and all things within it are borrowed, suggesting an urgency—for loss is inevitable:

My dear, it was a time,
 butchered from time,
 that we must tell of quickly
 before we lost the sound of our own
 mouths calling mine, mine, mine. (“Expatriates” 30-34)

“Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward” progresses from the previous poems’ loss—that of her aunt’s lover and youth to her personal loss of a lover, youth, and life—to the portrayal of a more painful and difficult loss: the willing decision of a mother to rescind a piece of

her self and her self-identity upon giving up her child. This girl sadly notes she loses more than merely her child as she also loses herself: “[. . .] I am a shore / rocking you off. You break from me. I choose / your only way, my small inheritor / and hand you off, trembling the selves we lose” (51-54). Expanding upon the theme of loss, the persona in “The Division of Parts” experiences the numbness of her parents’ deaths while sorting through their possessions, “fumbl[ing her] lost childhood” (87). She concurrently attempts to discover a way to move forward both as a daughter without parents and as a mother of daughters.

Unlike the several remote allusions to madness in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, *All My Pretty Ones* remains devoid of either direct or indirect references to insanity. Yet, like *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, it too recognizes the various types of loss that lead the persona to an examination of and a struggle with her self-identity, her past, and sometimes her God. Indeed, poems from *All My Pretty Ones*, such as “Young,” “Love Song for K. Owyne,” “Housewife,” “The Abortion,” and “Letter Written During a January Northeaster,” directly suggest that Sexton repeats her subjects, re-exercising the theme of loss and thereby providing reason for the downtrodden voice she exhibits. More particularly, Sexton appears to model these poems from her first collection, imitating “Some Foreign Letters,” “The Exorcists,” “The Farmer’s Wife,” “Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward,” and “The Division of Parts,” respectively.

For instance, “Young”—like “Some Foreign Letters”—reminisces time past:

A thousand doors ago
when I was a lonely kid

I lay on the lawn at night,
 clover wrinkling under me,
 the wise stars bedding over me,
 my mother's window a funnel
 of yellow heat running out,
 my father's window, half shut,
 an eye where sleepers pass,

* * * * *

and I, in my brand new body,
 which was not a woman's yet
 told the stars questions. (1-2, 6-12, 18-20)

Recalling her former innocence, the speaker pulls herself back “a thousand doors ago,” before the world felt larger and less secure. Her mother’s “funnel-light” represented a beacon—a safe, stationary presence—calling her home while her father remained the half-opened, watchful eye from above. This speaker idealizes her life just as the persona from “Some Foreign Letters” recalls and romanticizes her aunt’s past travels in Europe and relations with the Count.

Moreover, like the lover from “The Exorcists” who catalogs details—the room, the bed, the cove, the lobsterman-shack—from the summer affair in order to forget, the lover in “Love Song for K. Owyne” recalls details of the affair that worked against the couple and their relationship. Unlike the persona and her lover in “The Exorcists” who are perceived as a real, contemporary couple, Sexton bases “Love Song for K. Owyne” on a Scottish ballad in which an evil stepmother turns a young woman into a terrible sea

monster, driving the youth away from her home and her love. The young woman's only recourse is to receive three kisses from Kemp Owyne. While it would seem logical that Sexton would place a modern spin on the medieval ballad, she actually transfers her own lost love affairs into this poem, almost entirely losing the essence of the ballad's tale. Sexton depicts the forces that have worked against the lovers in "Love Song," including their present geographic distance, and their incompatibility, and nature itself. While the lover has moved away to Ohio, the poem's narrator remembers

how the waves came running up the stairs
for me

What luxury we first checked into,
to growl like lawyers until I threw
my diamonds and cash upon the floor. (13-14, 21-23)

While geographical distance now severs the two, the voice suggests that during the time of the affair, nature was set against them, and the disparity of money (and with it, social class) impeded them.

Similar to the manner in which "Love Song" and "Young" shadow their first-volume predecessors, "Housewife" imitates the sad, lost voice and persona of "The Farmer's Wife," who blames her husband for her bland, habitual, lonely life. However, the persona within "Housewife" attributes not the husband for her mundane existence, but the home that seems to imprison her: "Some women marry houses. / It's another kind of skin; it has a heart, / a mouth, a liver and bowel movements," as though it were yet another being forcing her into isolation and loneliness for the care of its functions

("Housewife" 1-3). Even the brevity of "Housewife" in its ten small lines ("The Farmer's Wife" exceeds the length of "Housewife" more than threefold) suggests her resignation to a lost and detained life.

Also like its counterparts from *All My Pretty Ones*, "The Abortion" parallels "Unknown Girl on a Maternity Ward" as the only other solution to an unwanted pregnancy. In both poems, the voices exhibit sadness and solitude for their loss. Contrasting "Unknown Girl on a Maternity Ward," Sexton uses imagery to support the tone of the voice in "The Abortion" in order to reflect the state of the persona:

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,
each bud puffing out from its knot,
I changed my shoes, and then drove south
Up past the Blue Mountains, where
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly. (3-7)

Sexton then parallels her persona's guilt-ridden intentions with the landscape:

"[. . .] the ground cracks evilly, / a dark socket from which the coal has poured" (10-11).

Finally, on the homeward ride she notes that there is nothing left: "The road was flat as a sheet of tin," and offers one final reprimand for herself: "[. . .] say what you meant, / you coward . . . this baby that I bleed" (22, 26-27). This child, too, has broken from her. Again it was of her doing. Formerly naming the child her "sin" in "Unknown Girl on a Maternity Ward," she now names herself a "coward" as there is no one else to name.

"Letter Written During a January Northeaster" in *All My Pretty Ones*, like "The Division of Parts" in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, splits the poem into sections as it, too, concludes its respective collection. Interestingly, this poem begins as though

addressing a loved one, "Dearest," noting, "It is snowing, grotesquely snowing, / upon the small faces of the dead. / Those two loudmouths, gone for over a year, / buried side by side" ("Northeaster" 2-6). In so doing Sexton seemingly remembers those parents whose deaths and possessions were catalogued in "The Division of Parts." She then proceeds sadly, blandly, Monday by Monday, to index activities—or lack thereof—that occur during the blizzard, trapped by more than the weather: essentially, mentally and emotionally flailing in her failed attempt to transcend loneliness, time, and death. She notes her multi-faceted entrapment:

The snow has quietness in it; no songs,
no smells, no shouts or traffic.
When I speak
my own voice shocks me.

Tuesday

I have invented a lie.
There is no other day but Monday.
It seemed reasonable to pretend
that I could change the day
like a pair of socks.

Monday

It must be Friday by now.

I admit I have been lying.

Monday

Dearest,

where are your letters?

The mailman is an imposter.

He is actually my grandfather.

Like all the dead

he picks up his disguise

shakes it off and slowly pulls down the shade

fading out like an old movie.

Now he is gone

as you are gone. (16-19, 20-25, 60-62, 74-78, 83-88)

Here, in this last poem of the collection, Sexton—in both the melancholic tone and cynical persona—enlarges her persona who still struggles unsuccessfully to find her self, know her self, and exist contentedly without depending upon other people. This voice and persona still fundamentally portray a lost woman, floundering in her environments.

No longer does Sexton thread references of insanity or institutions in *All My Pretty Ones*. Rather, her poetic voice rings of resignation to her condition as a woman and a human who exists inherently alone in the world. Sexton rendered the poetic voice within *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones* as lost and afraid of loneliness, reflecting herself, both as a woman and a poet, as lost and insecure, and

without a stable sense of being either within her physical environment or within her own psyche. She neither felt a part of conventional society, nor did she truly belong either permanently or temporarily within the walls of a psychiatric institution. Moreover, she did not find complete contentment as a poet. However, poetry at least opened an avenue to a place where she had found acceptance, success, and a means of communication. Whether audiences received Sexton out of sympathy or empathy will never be fully known. Either reason remains moot, however, as Sexton, the poet, performed not only as artist but also, unknowingly, as a women's sociological barometer of the late 1950s and the early 1960s. She emphasized the ennui and the dissatisfaction within the dichotomously gratifying and unfulfilling lives in which women found themselves as lovers, wives, mothers, housewives—all roles defined by other people or society's standards. By this method, audiences seem to have forgiven the extremes of Sexton's poetry that hinted of institutions and insanity. Suzanne Juhasz states that Sexton's poetry is most powerful because "The poet is *in* the poem because she has directly confronted and written out of her own experience of the world" (138). Furthermore, Juhasz says, "A quality that emerges [. . .] from most of the poetry of Sexton is a sense of the writer herself as a person who communicates with and touches other people (readers, listeners) because she involves herself in her poetry. She uses poetry as a means, a way to contact other people" (141). Because Sexton's experiences as a woman left her uncomfortable with herself or her roles, she was unable to cope, eventually in a therapist's office, and later in a psychiatric unit. After the two initial collections came publication of *To Live or Die* (1966) and *Love Poems* (1969), the former promising little growth beyond Bedlam

and her initial portrayal of a persona victimized by circumstance while the latter constructing a larger persona but one still unable to find a self-identity.

Collectively, Sexton's first two books suggest her overpowering fear of loss, resulting in her attraction to death and a courtship with suicide as she groped for a resolution. Relaying unabashed accounts of her institutional visits, this resulting poetic voice rang with uncontrolled tones of weariness and despondency yet contradicted itself with highly regulated poetic words, lines, and, sometimes, rhyme schemes. From these early stages, Sexton begins shifting her subject from the intangibility of loss to the conflicting emotions of melancholy and passion.

Chapter Two

Of Melancholy and Passion:

Live or Die and Love Poems

Sexton created *Live or Die* as an unstructured collection, placing together a seemingly disconnected series of poems in order of original publication rather than arranging them thematically. The collection did, however, posit Sexton ambivalently juxtaposed between two of life's facets—melancholy and optimism. Sexton, herself, seemed to recognize this fact when, in the author's note, she unapologetically stated, "that [the poems] read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy" (94). Attempting to justify further her chronological arrangement, she added a quotation from André Gide's journal that supported her preference for maintaining the collection's disconnected feel: "Despite every resolution of optimism, melancholy occasionally wins out: man has decidedly botched up the planet" (94). In doing so, Sexton thereby leaves herself broadly open to interpretation: either she has floundered against her optimistic wishes, where melancholy has prevailed within her, or she has thrown her hands up in despair, awaiting whatever good, bad, or indifferent circumstances may occur as she remains victim to all outside forces. Either way, *Live or Die* reverberates with Sexton's continuing battle between two worlds. While Sexton's earlier collections purportedly fought between madness and sanity, she hints within the author's note that this collection's persona struggles between melancholy and optimism. Although the poems indeed render a persona trapped between the two, melancholy appears to be the name used when resigning to death and optimism the term when choosing life. And the former appears to be portrayed more frequently than the latter. According to Jane McCabe, "We want poetry rich in ambiguity . . ." [my emphasis] (223) as it creates tension and avoids the simplicity of appearing of one-dimensional and flat. That being so, Sexton maintains this bi-polar tension in the *Live or Die* world—focusing mainly on what might be called

pessimistic melancholy—specifically within “Flee on Your Donkey,” “Imitations of Drowning,” “Man and Wife,” “Wanting to Die,” and—finally, turning to optimism—“Live.” Throughout, this tension between the two choices and Sexton’s continued inability to choose again reflect her more general inability to cope with loss, for in opting *either* to live *or* to die, she limits herself to one resolution and surrenders the possibilities to choose.

Occurring as the third and most lengthy narrative poem of thirty-four in Sexton’s third collection, “Flee on Your Donkey” earmarks how the life and death hungers compete with one another. This poem’s namesake even suggests Sexton’s slow, tedious struggle to pull away from her history as well as her laborious journey to a new, and hopefully more positive, place. Similar to Sexton’s references to madness in her previous collections, this poem’s persona reveals that she has just re-entered a mental institution but only “Because there was no other place / to flee to” (1-2). During this new visit—the latest of several over the previous six years—the persona weaves the depiction of her current state with memories from the past: her mother’s illness, her father’s affairs, the time lost when she “could have gone around the world twice” (57) rather than remain locked up in an institution, and then, finally, her mother and father’s deaths. Her memories adhere solely to failures and losses, yet she sporadically alters the tone by emphatically interjecting hope: “O my hunger! My hunger!” (123), suggesting Sexton wants more from life than a mental institution or even the disease and death that prematurely stole her parents’ lives. She wants life itself in its fullest sense, defined by more than breathing and thinking; she desires to be free from the physical and mental diseases from which her family seems to have continually suffered. As she remains

incapable of sustaining this mastery of health on her own, she continues to rely upon her therapist, Dr. Orne, "[. . .] my doctor, my enthusiast, / [. . .] better than Christ," (84-85) whom, two years earlier, she had already deified in "You, Dr. Martin."

Sexton's portrayal of a persona who continues to rely upon another person, without a doubt, confesses her own interdependence with others, whom she believes to be more powerful or more important, or at least, simply put, someone who makes her feel like liking or loving herself. Her drive to discover a positive identity through another's vantage clearly caused her to fear being alone, expressly stated in "Imitations of Drowning":

Fear
of drowning,
fear of being that alone

.....

This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying
went on and on in water as white and clear
as the gin I drink each day [. . .]. (1-3, 9-11)

This isolation connotes the loss or absence of identity, the state of being as translucent and dead as the water and the gin in which she drowns in both her dreams and reality. Sexton, however, does not leave either the reader or herself without hope, without her standard vacillation between possibilities:

Breathe!
And you'll know
an ant in a pot of chocolate,

it boils
 and surrounds you.
 There is no news in fear
 but in the end it's fear
 that drowns you. (49-56)

Sexton's persona recognizes that she is her own worst enemy but only as advice to the invisible "you," the reader. This recognition, however, is at least larger than the self-defeatist attitude in "Flee on Your Donkey," where Sexton ends the poem in two small lines recognizing the damage melancholy has done without offering any solution: "Those I loved best died of it— / the fool's disease" (238-239). Naming her "melancholy monster" appears easy; however, exorcising or changing the lamenting voice that feeds upon her is a task that Sexton cannot yet manage.

Sexton frequently portrays a persona aware of either her own shortcomings or the failures within herself. One such character is the woman in "Man and Wife" who, as Jane McCabe states in her critical essay "A Woman Who Writes" "describes her marriage—[. . .] mainly as a trap" (229), an image strikingly similar to that in both "The Farmer's Wife" and "Housewife." However, within her first two collections, Sexton had not been juxtaposing melancholy and optimism. Yet "Man and Wife" diverges from "Flee on Your Donkey" and "Fear of Drowning" as it remains devoid of *any* optimism. In fact, it basks deeply in melancholy: "We are not lovers / We do not even know each other. / We look alike / but we have nothing to say" (3-6). She begins this poem with the wife speaking of herself and her husband in first person, "We." Yet at the end of the second stanza, after she says, "We are pigeons . . . ," she then alters point of view to third

person, addressing herself and her husband as “they,” transforming the couple into the pigeons:

They are exiles
soiled by the same sweat and the drunkard’s dream.

.....
They are two asthmatics
whose breath sobs in and out
through a small fuzzy pipe. (27-28, 35-37)

Consequently, she removes herself from the couple as though she remains their onlooker, a witness to the sterility and the petrification of their relationship. For to view it as an outsider is her only means of escaping from it. Finally, however, she re-associates herself as a half of the “them” by addressing her husband with a term of endearment:

Oh darling,
we gasp in unison beside our window pane,
drunk on the drunkard’s dream.
Like them
we can only hang on. (40-44)

Leaving the poem with this tender address to the husband, Sexton hints at optimism while maintaining, even emphasizing, the dismal state of the couple’s relationship.

In a subsequent poem “Wanting to Die,” Sexton delves more deeply into melancholy, calling her attraction to it (and, hence, death) “the almost unnameable lust” (3). Outrightly naming the topic, suicide, within the title, this poem equally confronts Sexton’s attraction to suicide:

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know *which* tools.
They never ask *why* build.

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have taken on his craft, his magic. (7-12)

To declare such clear convictions and resolve regarding killing herself, "Wanting to Die" leads the reader to believe that Sexton reveals no optimism, no attraction to life. Or does she? In fact, Sexton speaks of suicide as a passion and an entity, a rather female one, and something she feels drawn to as a type of life itself: "To thrust all that life under your tongue!— / that, all by itself, becomes a passion. / Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say, / and yet she waits for me, year after year" (22-25). Her failure, however, to fall completely into its spell and complete the task in itself speaks of a sort of optimism. She ends the last stanza fantasizing—but not actually completing—the seductive moments just prior to a suicide, "leaving the page of the book carelessly open, / something unsaid, the phone off the hook / and the love, whatever it was, an infection" (31-33). The optimism remains implied and, even more so, slight, falling away from the positiveness of the earlier poems of "Flee" and "Imitations."

Between "Wanting to Die" and the end of the collection lie two handfuls of poems that address Sexton's daughters multiple times and nod again at her attraction—even her addiction—to suicide. No poems, however, address the reader with a particularly upbeat tone or impress the reader as hopeful; on the contrary, they each

remain rather dreary in their own right. None, that is, appear optimistic until the last poem of the collection: "Live." Only this poem in *Live or Die* competes in length with "Flee on Your Donkey" and in optimism with "Fear of Drowning." That is not to say that "Live" does not begin well beyond melancholy with a graphically gory image of the death that has haunted her and that has become part of her daily ritual as a

[. . .] baby on a platter,
 cooked but still human,
 cooked also with little maggots,
 sewn onto it maybe by somebody's mother,
 that damn bitch! (15-19)

Certainly, Sexton interjects this image for shock value, emphasizing the repugnance she feels for her attraction to death and suicide. She acknowledges the disgust others feel toward her obsession. However, as this poem is named "Live" and ultimately declares that that is what she chooses to do, hope simultaneously rises from the ashes of the first stanza. Sexton says,

Today life opened inside me like an egg
 and there inside
 after considerable digging
 I found the answer.
 What a bargain!
 There was the sun,
 her yolk moving feverishly,
 tumbling her prize—

and you realize that she does this daily!

I'd known she was a purifier

but I hadn't thought

she was solid,

hadn't know she was an answer. (46-58)

Indeed, Sexton here finally realizes, quite literally, that hope, optimism, and, most crucially, life have indeed lived daily within her. She finally discovers herself as the solution: "Here, / all along, / thinking I was a killer, // But no. / I'm an empress / I wear an apron" (71-73, 76-78). This moment of optimism, no matter how frail or impermanent, at least resounds of an affirmative, positive voice that has broken away from the preceding poems of distress and defeat. Sexton's last lines assert her embrace with optimism: "I say *Live, Live* because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable gift" (115-116). Here Sexton's dream and gift exist as the possibility of a tomorrow in the form of a commitment to herself, her family, and her poetry.

To live fully, Sexton had to extend beyond merely acknowledging that the capability was within her all along. She had to discover a greater awareness of self and a heightened sense of being. And, in accordance with the upbeat tone of "Live," Sexton's subsequent collection, *Love Poems*, celebrates her body and her sexuality, and continues her positive tone as she fully embraces life; this newly found voice sings with awakened senses in "The Kiss," "Us," and "Mr. Mine." Yet she converts her passion for pleasure to that of anger in "Again and Again and Again" and then reverts back to a tone of seriousness, sadness, and moroseness within the lengthy "Eighteen Days Without You."

As the second poem within *Love Poems* and one of six that literally uses a body part or bodily sensation as the subject, Sexton's new voice rejoices both her life and the wondrousness of her physical being in "The Kiss." She declares: "Before today my body was useless. / / and see—Now it's shot full of these electric bolts. / Zing! A resurrection!" (6, 9-10). Intimacy becomes a means for her to discover she is alive and to sustain her euphoria. Exclamation points and word choice note a new voice that bellows with enthusiasm. Further supporting her new "aliveness," Sexton follows her exclamations with a description of her previously rigid, cold, and even death-like state: "Once it [her body] was a boat, quite wooden / and with no business, no salt water under it / and in need of some paint [. . .]" (11-13). She states that she merely, but imperfectly, existed but without a purpose or a direction. Jane McCabe claims that Sexton's men often created her aliveness, even her body, for her (228). In other words, she may be "zinging" alive, resurrecting from the living dead, but she cannot complete this metamorphosis without a lover, a person with whom to identify herself—much like the Sexton of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* who continually defines herself in accordance to the roles she holds with other people (daughter, wife, mother, patient). Now, however, Sexton has merely added a new role, that of lover, and found herself, quite surprisingly, alive. McCabe adds, "for all the ostensible glamor and sexual confidence in Sexton's poetry, there is an increasingly clear sense that her body is only hers and admirable when it is given to men" (228).

Nonetheless, Sexton's reverent voice for her newfound life and body continues within both "Us" and "Mr. Mine." Continuing to be defined by her lover, the voice within "Us" says, "you placed me in gold light / and then you crowned me" (4-5),

elevating herself to queen only because he is her king, the one who dictates her importance. Still, Sexton promotes her lover even further: “and at first I rubbed your / feet dry with a towel / because I was your slave / and then you called me princess. / Princess!” (15-19). As Sexton makes herself Mary Magdalene, the lover becomes more than her king as he now evolves into her savior.

Likewise, as “Mr. Mine” counts the veins and freckles upon her breast, he traverses her body. Sexton declares that he not only charts it, but that “He is building a city, a city of flesh. / He’s an industrialist. [. . .] // Now he constructs me. He is consumed by the city” (4-5, 9). The lover again is her discoverer, her creator, and the definer of her being. And by this she finds herself whole—as whole as a city with boards, concrete, street signs, a museum, an overpass, an airport, and traffic lights. She now contains elements of foundation, culture and education, as well as transportation. He has expanded meaning beyond daughter, wife, mother, patient, and lover; she is Gaea of a man-made world, *their* world.

As long as the lover defined her with his presence and created her through his construction, she existed. Subsequently, in his absence, as in “Again and Again and Again,” Sexton devolves, altering her voice from the passion of resurrection and sanguinity to the fervor of anger and vindictiveness. Even Sexton recognizes that the tide of angst comes as easily as that of devotion when she begins addressing her former lover: “*You said the anger would come back / just as the love did*” (1-2). She does not hide her misery; indeed, she emphasizes it, calling it her “black look,” “a mask I try on” (3-4). Her somber, bitter tone declares:

Oh the blackness is murderous

.....

and I will kiss you when
I cut up one dozen new men
and you will die somewhat,
again and again. (17, 20-23)

Without him, she and her world have been cataclysmically destroyed, and she has become miserable. Hence, she not only wishes him the same sorrow and pain, but she also intends to deliver it to him as she takes on countless new lovers.

Similar to "Again and Again and Again," "Eighteen Days Without You" sustains a somber tone throughout the lengthy poem as it catalogues the relationship from beginning to end and the days following its cessation. Sexton maintains this tone as she relays the entire poem through first person. The first day, of the eighteen, notes the lover's departure from the woman: "As we kissed good-bye / you made a little frown. / Now Christ's lights are / twinkling all over town" (2-5). Unlike "Us," Christ references now no longer speak of the lover; they merely note the setting (winter and December) and emphasize the woman's aloneness at a time of year when most people are coming together. In this, the last of the *Love Poems*, the woman makes known not merely the sad moments of their separation but also her resulting depression. Instead, the voice re-tells, and thereby revisits and re-lives, the four-year affair from its beginning, "the day Jack Kennedy was dying," (82) to many of the mid-way days such as Groundhog Day and the mid-July Dog Days of summer, to his being drafted to Viet Nam and her work at the State School. While cataloguing the relationship shows its continued importance to her, it also serves another purpose: she must survive beyond this death of the relationship and

the self she has lost with it. This woman, indeed, survives and moves beyond the loss—without talk of suicide or death—by making plans, though small and short-term, for the future:

Today I bought a Scotch Pine—

.....

With my box from the Five and Dime

I hung bells and balls and silver floss

.....

Today I bought a sprig of mistletoe,

all warts and leaves and fruit

and stem — the angel of the kiss — . (406, 413-414, 430)

Though the woman may be overly optimistic—or even overly reminiscent—she creates some microcosm of power in this optimism, allaying melancholy.

Finally, however, we must consider the progress of Sexton's voice from *Live or Die* to *Love Poems* and acknowledge that she has not yet ceased her tendency to vacillate. As Sexton remains tugged to and fro between melancholy and optimism through situations cast upon her by seen and unseen forces, the tone of Sexton's *Live or Die* voice exudes fear, anxiety, and despondency, occasionally speckled with minute optimism. That is, until, at the end of the collection *Live or Die* and the final line of its last poem, Sexton adamantly declares her choice: optimism and life. Similar to the external influences over the *Live or Die* Sexton, the lover becomes her outside force in the collection *Love Poems*. While she speaks euphorically, decidedly, and pleasurably regarding her lover and their relationship, at first without vacillation, this newly found

voice remains positive and steady only as the relationship remains intact and sustains her. However, even though the voice may alter to anger and vindictiveness as the relationship ends, Sexton finally at least finds the beginnings of power within herself that allow her to remember the relationship and to lash out at the lover rather than herself. Previously, Sexton's roles always defined her self-identity, stealing from her the ability to define herself and be an individual. As Jane McCabe affirms, "self-denial [. . .] is a particularly feminine trait" (230). Through this self-denial and failure to self-define, Sexton's themes have continued to parallel the era's "feminine mystique": lacking identity; wanting to flee from her circumstances; mourning her ideal marriage and trying to cope with its banality; finally celebrating her sexuality; and recognizing her desire to live as an individual. As not *all* experiences are universal to all women (some women do not take on an illicit lover and discover their sexuality), at least most women identified with Sexton's general themes of fear and isolation. Consequently, her popularity continued. Audiences, primarily female, empathized with her poetry. Whether Sexton found the seed of power within herself to gain an identity or whether she had a following as a woman poet who truly confessed all will never be completely discernable. However, as McCabe notes, "Until *Transformations*, Sexton was concerned with herself mainly as a regular woman" (225). And then came *Transformations* where Sexton altered her voice, her self-identity, and thereby changed her relationship with the audience.

Chapter Three

Of Witches and Wisdom:

Transformations

Though her first four collections leave few private stones unturned, the shift into the 1970s marked a new decade for the calendar as well as for Sexton—her forties. This transition also accompanied a change in Sexton's poetic voice. No longer was that voice dependent, fearful, or victim to circumstances. Conversely, she now moved capably beyond her previous roles. Rather than defining herself through her relationships with others, as daughter, wife, mother, patient, and lover as she had done previously, she now created and sustained her own self. Consequently, Sexton rang with a new voice that emulated a latter-life sage possessed with wisdom to pass on to the younger generation, releasing her indulgence in self-pity and her reliance upon others. For the first time ever, Sexton transforms herself and thereby transcends her sadness of waiting to be defined and her mourning of a non-existent life. Instead, this new poetic voice resounds of a woman possessing knowledge, wisdom, and power, a woman thereby revered by those who choose to listen—or read.

Sexton exhibits her new, wise voice in *Transformations* and wields it to educate her audience, suggesting that there are three stages of development within life: an innocent youth; an apprentice adolescence wherein we choose to absorb knowledge or not; and then, finally, a graduation to the latter-life in which we become wise, productive sages or ignorant, vengeful figures, both of whom Sexton frequently refers to as witches but with obviously different characteristics. The obstructed minds, by Sexton's definition, become stunted "dumb bunnies," mentally imprisoned "dolls in a museum case" ("Snow White" 117; "Cinderella" 102). Like any elder attempting to pass wisdom to the younger generation, Sexton hopes to extend this knowledge seamlessly to succeeding

generations so that the final state of adult wisdom will be discovered via a shorter, less painful and traumatic course than the one she has taken.

However, experiences cannot be ingested like a three-course dinner as bodies cannot absorb knowledge osmotically. Therefore, Sexton utilizes the fairy-tale genre to teach behavior, values, and morals, especially to children, within a basic story. With humorous modern references and wise, cynical tone, Sexton updates the tales and addresses both adolescents as well adults. The fairy tales, either re-told by the Grimm brothers or by Sexton, focus primarily on the contrast between the apprentice adolescent and the wise or vengeful elders and fall into one of two types: in one, the character encounters lessons and either learns, becoming morally responsible herself, or in the other, flounders, developing into a character about whom Sexton warns us here.

Sexton's references to the youthfully innocent phase exist only as flashbacks, a briefly mentioned precursory stage to the apprentice adolescent, and only in "Briar Rose." This poem solely utilizes such hindsight and becomes Sexton's most shocking tale. Already fifteen, Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty) interjects tidbits, through regression, from her two-year-old innocence, enabling the reader to learn of the bizarre and unhealthy father-daughter relationship that plagues her and her papa, the king:

She is stuck in the time machine,
suddenly two years old sucking her thumb,

Little doll child,
come here to Papa.
Sit on my knee.

* * * * *

Come be my snooky
and I will give you a root.
That kind of voyage,
rank as honeysuckle. (7-8, 15-17, 20-24)

Sextons insinuates this sexual history as a prologue to the princess's well-known tale, explaining how Briar Rose ends up a narcoleptic, implying that the fault rests upon her father, a molester, more than the curse of the thirteenth fairy. Indeed, the fairy dooms Briar Rose to one day prick herself on the spinning wheel, but Sexton argues that this curse created a perfect excuse for the father to sequester his princess and keep her for himself. However, once the preordained sleep begins and the prince finally rescues the princess, she appears free from her father's sexual clutch by marrying her rescuer. It seems logical that the princess's crisis should be finished; however, her problems have only begun: "Briar Rose / was an insomniac . . ." (101-102), an ironic twist for someone named Sleeping Beauty. She fears sleep, comparing it with old age and death. She either needs drugs to slumber, or "sleep must take [her] unawares" (109). Nevertheless, the princess's problems remain: once asleep she cannot awake unless with a kiss: "her eyes would spring open / and she'd call out: 'Daddy! Daddy!'" (136-137), thus beginning the cycle again. Sexton suggests that Briar Rose, an apprentice adolescent, is not only physically but mentally ruined by her father and, even after the one-hundred-year nap, unable to overcome it. Therefore, as Sexton's sage, sardonic voice indicates, some traumatic occurrences cannot be either learned from (for those who experience it firsthand) or forgotten "as [Briar Rose] eats betrayal like a slice of meat" (118). The

lesson told here is not for the tormented Briar Rose and those like her but for other apprentices, warning that ignorant, selfish men like the king exist.

Subsequently, Sexton places her main characters into the apprentice stage for the collection's remaining poems. Cinderella, one of Sexton's innocent apprentices, lives enslaved by the vengefulness of her stepmother, stepsisters, and her weak, ineffectual father. This girl's saving grace, however, comes from the magical dove, acting as her reincarnated mother, who delivers her the gown, the slippers, and the prince. Yet her stepsisters betray her again, trying to fool the prince into believing the slipper belongs to each of them. Cinderella disregards her family's betrayals, but the dove dispenses justice for her: "At the wedding ceremony / the two sisters came to curry favor / and the white dove pecked their eyes out" (95-97), thereby allowing the reader to presume either that naive Cinderella could not herself carry out justice against her sisters or that she failed to translate her experiences into knowledge. Sexton, however, resolves this unknown by finishing, "Cinderella and the prince / lived, they say, happily ever after, / like two dolls in a museum case / / their darling smiles pasted on for eternity" (100-103, 108). Thus, in spite of Cinderella's marry-the-prince fairy-tale-ending, Sexton's ironic and skeptical tone insinuates that retribution and happy conclusions may not guarantee more than an eternal life of ennui. She seems to parallel Cinderella's marriage with those of "The Farmer's Wife," "The Housewife," and "Man and Wife," reiterating the message to be wary because marriage is a trap and happiness maintained only if it is "pasted on."

However, Sexton does suggest that some marital satisfaction may be found *if* a girl absorbs knowledge and uses it properly. Hence, the girl in "Rumpelstiltskin" has a chance at such an accomplishment. Her father is a greedy and boastful miller, who lies to

the king, stating that his daughter can turn straw into gold. The king, equally greedy, declares he will marry the daughter if she can turn three succeeding larger rooms of straw into gold. Of course, only the magical figure Rumpelstiltskin can accomplish this chore; however, only for the price of the girl's necklace and ring, and, finally, her first-born child, will he secretly complete the tasks. Desperate to avoid imprisonment or death at the hand of the king, the girl agrees. Here, Sexton attempts to save girls from greedy men, such as these three, who take advantage of the innocent; so she begins this tale, too, with a precursory warning:

Inside many of us
is a small old man
who wants to get out.

.....

He is a monster of despair.
He is all decay.

.....

It is your Doppelgänger
trying to get out.

Beware . . . Beware (1-3, 9-10, 22-24)

Sexton asserts that most people have this greedy little monster within them and that they will lie and prey upon the naive. However, through the experiences of first being betrayed by her father, then enslaved by the king, and, finally, forced into a promise with Rumpelstiltskin, the ingenuous girl—now queen—pays attention and becomes wise. Consequently, rather than letting the dwarf devil collect the payment of her child, she

fortifies a deal and is given three days to discover his name, sending messengers to ascertain his name for her. Upon her revealing it, the little man,

[. . .] he tore himself in two.

Somewhat like a split broiler.

He laid his two sides down on the floor,

one part soft as a woman,

one part a barbed hook,

one part papa,

one part Doppelgänger. (147-153)

Sexton utilizes a humorous tone to suggest that this “soft woman” is the formerly naive, presently wise, and yet un-hardened queen; the barbed hook becomes the king (and the promise that simultaneously saves the girl, damns her, and makes her queen); the papa, obviously, is her disloyal, greedy father; and, finally, the Doppelgänger is both the evil dwarf and the hidden, evil side of many people. Hence, the wickedness, Sexton tells us, can be both external and apparent—as in the case of the dwarf—and internal and less perceptible—as in the cases of the father and the king. Even so, Sexton here asserts that young girls can overcome these outside forces by merely taking heed and absorbing the lessons at hand; moreover, those who are cautious can ward off predators and may reap the rewards of an upwardly mobile marriage.

On the other hand, Snow White begins as Sexton’s sole, archetypically innocent virgin: “rolling her china-blue doll eyes / open and shut // She is unsoiled. / She is white as a bonefish” (6-7, 12-13). Unlike Briar Rose, who begins tainted, and Cinderella and the queen in “Rumpelstiltskin,” who have satisfactory endings, Snow White begins pure, yet

she becomes, in essence, contaminated by her inability to grow from experiences. Snow White's purity contrasts with the stepmother's narcissism and her plans to beguile her stepdaughter four times: with the hunter, the cinch, the comb, and, finally, the apple. Though she is amply and multitudinously warned by her dwarf men to avoid strangers, the young girl continually fails to absorb the lessons presented her, ending up in the poisoned-apple-induced coma, thereby intoxicating the prince with her preserved beauty:

A prince came one June day
and would not budge.

He stayed so long his hair turned green
and still he would not leave.

The dwarfs took pity upon him
and gave him the glass Snow White. (135-140)

Consequently, Sexton insinuates that this prince does not necessarily love Snow White, for she is presently unknowable. On the contrary, he is entranced, even obsessed, with her beauty. Meanwhile, Snow White awakens and they marry; the stepmother appears at the wedding feast where she is literally bound to her punishment: "red-hot iron shoes, / in the manner of red-hot roller skates, / [were] clamped upon her feet / / And so she danced until she was dead" (150-152, 157). Fairy tales, by nature, have bizarre and atypical punishments. In this manner, the prince and new princess burn the stepmother, ultimately destroying the wicked queen's beauty by punishing her first with disfigurement and then death. Thereby, Snow White's position as most beautiful woman in the kingdom is guaranteed. Once the stepmother dies, Snow White continues as though nothing has

happened—much like her previous behavior in-between assaults by the disguised stepmother:

Meanwhile Snow White held court,
 rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
 and sometimes referring to her mirror
 as women do. (161-164)

Here, Sexton suggests that, virgin or not, Snow White's aversion to mental growth parallels the stepmother's disdain for physical change. After all, they are, essentially, corresponding parts of the same process: aging. Furthermore, Sexton advises that Snow White's ambition was not to transcend or forget her past, like Briar Rose; to find happiness, like Cinderella; or to acquire knowledge and survival, like the queen in Rumpelstiltskin. Nor was her objective necessarily marriage—as this story speaks of the obsession over physical looks, not love. Snow White wished only to preserve herself, remaining eternally youthful, physically and mentally.

Hansel and Gretel exist as the only male-female duo to observe and to attempt digesting life's unraveling lessons. Like the four previously mentioned tales, storyteller Sexton provides Hansel and Gretel a prologue. This one, however, differs as it intermingles the physical hungers for food and sex:

Little plum,
 said the mother to her son,
 I want to bite,
 I want to chew,
 I will eat you up.

.....

soft cheeks, my pears,
let me buzz you on the neck
and take a bite.

.....

Oh succulent one,
it is but one turn in the road
and I would be a cannibal! (1-5, 14-16, 23-25)

Through this technique, Sexton suggests that the drives for food and sex can be so severe that they take on the exotic extremes: cannibalism and incest. At the start, the “Hansel and Gretel” tale revolves around food as the family starves: “They had cooked the dog / and served him up like lamb chops. // The final solution // was to lose the children in the forest” (29-30, 32, 34). Lucky Hansel, however, hears his parents’ plan and devises his own strategy, trailing first bread and then pebbles to save himself and his sister from becoming lost and dying in the woods. This action initially makes Hansel appear wiser than his sister. Of course, both tactics fail, and the pair wanders twenty days until coming “upon a rococo house / made all of food from its windows / to its chocolate chimneys” (58-60). Sexton, playing upon the excessive, scrolling rococo style, emphasizes the home’s lavishly wasteful, edible adornments as well as the word’s similarity to coco—coconut—and cocoa—chocolate, highlighting the children’s famine and desperation. Certainly, feeding a starving belly comes with a price: the house’s occupant is a cannibalistic witch. The witch, who apparently has no taste for candies, gorges Hansel on goose liver, hoping to fatten him for her ultimate feast, “better than mutton”

(83). Gretel, aware of her brother's fate, then becomes the witch's fixation, hors d'oeuvres, and the witch asks Gretel to try the oven on for size. Accordingly, Sexton now identifies Gretel as the wiser, more clever sibling by twice placing her name singularly on a line. Gretel has prescience beyond her years with her reply to the witch: "Ja, Fräulein, show me how it can be done" (103). Subsequent to the siblings' roasting the witch and their escape home, they find their father alone, the mother dead. Afterwards, Sexton's revolting and macabre tone ends the tale: "Only at suppertime / while eating a chicken leg / did our children remember the woe of the oven / the smell of the cooking witch, a little like mutton" (124-129), leaving the audience to question whether the father ate the mother, and whether Hansel and Gretel, due to their experience with the witch, actually realize the crime their father has committed. Sexton proposes here that not only can it be fatal not to pay attention, but she also suggests that it is better to be the predator, or the wisest, than the prey.

Similarly, Sexton tells of a rapacious character in "Red Riding Hood," suggesting the contradiction that frequently exists between appearance and reality. For this foreword, however, she digresses with five anecdotes of duplicity and then she begins the tale: "Long ago / there was a strange deception: / a wolf dressed in frills, / a kind of transvestite. / But I get ahead of my story" (79-83), casually using shock and humor to note that she has an account to tell us but that she does not want to give away either the ending or the moral lesson too soon. Nonetheless, Red Riding Hood enters into the woods and addresses the wolf as if she knows him: "Good day, Mr. Wolf, she said, / thinking him no more dangerous / than a streetcar or a panhandler" (106-107), and then tells him the destination, her grandmother's house. At the same time, the wolf appears to

vacillate between his sexual and dining urges: "with the mushrooms pulsing inside the moss / he planned how to eat them [Red Riding Hood and the grandmother] both" (111-112). The wolf first distracts Red: "He bade her to look at the bloodroot" (116), evoking images of its red sap and tubular shape, leaving the audience to question whether there may be sexual undertones in their brief encounter. He then proceeds to the grandmother, eating her before the girl's arrival. However, Red Riding Hood's trust has begun to waver, and it does not go without note as "Grandmother looked strange, / a dark and hairy disease it seemed" (129-130). Of course, the wolf eats the girl, too, so that "He appeared to be in his ninth month / and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother / rode like two Jonahs up and down with / his every breath [. . .]" (136-139). Here, the wolf snores in a deep sleep, equally implying the large meal and a previously sexual woodland rendezvous between the wolf and the girl. Nonetheless, a passing hunter saves the duo with a knife by "[. . .] cutting open / the sleeping wolf, a kind of caesarian section" (151-152), an abortion of sorts. This trio then "filled his belly, / with large stones and sewed him up. / / he fell over dead. Killed by his own weight. / Many a deception ends on such a note" (159-160, 163-164). In sum, Sexton warns apprentices against debauchery, noting that Red Riding Hood, though lucky to survive, should be wary against encounters with strangers. And, for those who are the corruptor, there will be retribution.

While "Twelve Dancing Princesses" does not speak of reprisal, it does portray the king's daughters, who upon escaping for their secret midnight meetings, endanger their reputations and squander their formative years. Sexton's message, therefore, does not warn against strangers or debauchery, but comments on wasted youth and the usefulness of old age. The King's daughters have proceeded to trick many a prince who wanted to

learn of their clandestine nightly encounters; as a consequence, the men too have lost their heads for not finding the answer. Until, that is, a penniless soldier finds luck: "On his way to the castle / he met an old old woman. / Age, for a change, was of some use. / She wasn't stuffed in a nursing home" (83-86); consequently, she gives him an invisible cloak and tells him to refrain from drinking the wine. While the magical garment is nice, Sexton emphasizes, in her informative and tutorial tone, that this old woman's true "use," of course, is her wisdom as she contrasts the woman with the giddy, merrymaking sisters:

The princesses danced like taxi girls at Roseland

.....

They were painted in kisses with their secret hair

and though the soldier drank from their cups

they drank down their youth with nary a thought. (125, 127-129)

Marked by their dancing, their kissing, and their sharing cups with strange men, Sexton tells us that these girls are so naive, they fail to recognize the gaucheness of their deeds. Their father and their invisible follower, the destitute prince, therefore, save the girls from themselves. But the girls neither want to be saved nor to behave well: "Now the runaways would run no more and never / again would their hair be tangled into diamonds, / never again their shoes worn down to a laugh" (148-150). These girls, like the vain Snow White, wish to be left alone in their adolescence, to avoid putting away both their dancing shoes and their youth and embracing wisdom.

Sexton similarly celebrates old age and associates it with wisdom in "The Gold Key," allowing it to serve as a forward to the other fairy tales as well as to exhibit her new, wise and productive, sagely "middle-aged witch" voice (2). Sexton introduces us to

her nameless apprentice adolescent: "He is sixteen and wants some answers. / He is each of us. / I mean you. / I mean me" (26-29), personalizing his quest for all, including herself. She says, "The boy has found a gold key / and he is looking for what it will open" (33-34), and nudges us to discover the question to each answer. Moreover, both the key and "what it will open" are wisdom. Sexton declares that when "He turns the key. / Presto! / It opens this book of odd tales" (44-46), opening our minds to an assemblage of tales, shocking and prodding us into new experiences and further inquiry, elevating the storyteller to a witch, a mythmaker, and an omnipotent woman of wisdom.

Finally, Sexton's voice, now authoritative and steadfast, exudes authority. She shows, by example, that women *can* create themselves anew; they *can* create their *own* identities—just as she now has. Now, with her new role, Sexton becomes the model and the heroine to her audiences. She emulates strength and shows herself having risen above her personal history. However, as *Transformations* is Sexton's pivotal work, marking the alteration of her voice from a woman without a self-determined identity, a victim, indecisively vacillating between life and death, to a wise, productive, self-assured, teaching witch, it also indicates a crossroads. For Sexton's voice remains decisive, completely self-assured, and educative only in this one collection. After this collection, Sexton shifts the voice within her subsequent work, *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks*, and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*—still leaving behind the indecisive, needy woman who preceded this collection—and continues to a new path by moving away from the wise witch story-teller who defines *Transformations*.

Chapter Four

Of Alienation and Obsession:

The Book of Folly, The Death Notebooks, and The Awful Rowing Toward God

After *Transformations*, Sexton assumed yet another voice for *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks*, and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, at once determined and angry, accusatory and critical. Not surprisingly, this tone paralleled events in her personal life: “[she] was beginning to get more independent, less drugged, a little bit angrier [. . .]” (Middlebrook 371). Responding to these feelings of independence and anger, she told Kayo they should divorce. As a consequence, in an almost manic flurry, Sexton simultaneously juggled compiling evidence against Kayo for their divorce with the writing of her last collections. This frenzied activity undoubtedly lends to Sexton’s tendency to borrow from her successful earlier themes and phrases, giving these collections a hackneyed sameness, and presenting simplistic and repetitive subjects that make her work appear that of a novice. Moreover, within these three works, Sexton does more than consider and invite death; she embraces it—first timidly and without certainty, but then with a welcoming wholeheartedness.

In fact, Sexton’s new antagonistic voice, that of a “bitch-witch,” originates in *The Book of Folly* and marks the beginning of her obsession with religion. Though she divides the book into two sections, divided and titled “Thirty Poems” and “The Jesus Papers,” Sexton actually creates *three* sections within the collection. The first group of poems lies in Sexton’s first segment and consists of “freestanding” poems—that do not exist as a part of a group—such as “The Ambition Bird,” “The Doctor of the Heart,” and “The Other.” The second group is positioned in the latter portion of her initial segment, comprised of two catalogue poems (named “The Death of Fathers” and “Angels of the Love Affair”) that itinerate relationships. The last group, “The Jesus Papers,” consists of what might be termed “series” poems in that they focus on different (and somewhat

unusual) aspects of Jesus' life. Some of these, for example, are "Jesus Suckles," "Jesus Awake," "Jesus Asleep," and "Jesus Unborn."

The first of these three groups establishes Sexton's heated tone, leaving behind the long-ago dependent individual, and which attempts to recapture the success of her first four collections but without her previous emotional vacillations. The first poem, "The Ambition Bird," for example, speaks from the first person, as do all the poems in this book, referring to her "immortality box" and "coffin" (13, 15) and suggesting her renewed obsession with death. She calls her heart the ambition bird, insinuating it to be her soul, and says, "He wants to light a kitchen match / and immolate himself. / / He wants to be pressed out like a key / so he can unlock the Magi" (21-22, 29-30). Hereby, she suggests her rekindled wish to die, a kind of self-reinvention. And she refers back to "The Key" from *Transformations*, suggesting a continued quest for answers as well as a grapple for similar success as the wise witch. But for this, she recognizes, she would, indeed, have to become someone new, a reincarnation: "I must get a new bird / and a new immortality box. / There is folly enough inside this one" (38-40), for Sexton believes her history has damaged her beyond repaired. So, recognizing that her past is impassable and inescapable, her frustration and anger grow.

However, here Sexton does not lash out at herself as she had done previously. For the first time, she ridicules rather than idolizes her doctor: "Take away your knowledge, Doktor. / It doesn't butter me up. / / Give me the Phi Beta key you always twirl / and I will make a gold crown for my molar" (1-2, 11-12), using a voice of ridicule and suggesting that his knowledge and accouterments no longer seduce her and showing that she now sees him as a man, not a god. She even values herself as having power: "I

have only a gimmick called magic fingers” (25-26); she nods at the strength of her sexuality but underscores her clout as a writer. To accentuate his lack of power over her, she declares, “I’ll no longer die / to spite you [. . .]” (34-35), thus wielding even more the power of her magic fingers and her bitterness.

The second section in *The Book of Folly* consists of catalogue poems—“The Death of the Fathers” and “Angels of the Love Affair.” In the former group, Sexton recalls her father through a series of poems that gradually and systematically denigrate him. Sexton notes moments with her father, but none of them are attractive. In the first, “1. Oysters,” she relates a time when she was fifteen and they ate at Union Oyster House, making their gluttonizing oysters appear as an encounter of incestuous oral sex:

It was a soft medicine
that came from the sea into my mouth,
moist and plump.

I swallowed.

It went down like a large pudding.

.
and the child was defeated.

The woman had won. (9-13, 22-23)

Again, she throws more barbs at her father and his lack of sexual control in the subsequent poem, “2. How We Danced”: “You danced with me never saying a word. / Instead the serpent spoke and you held me close. / The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me” (24-26), thereby making a monster of her father like the one in *Briar Rose*. Sexton elevates the damnation of her father in “5. Friends,” questioning, “who was

he, Father? // His ears stuck out like teacups / and his tongue, my God, his tongue, / like a red worm and when he kissed / it crawled right in" (20, 25-28), an image which suggests that not only did her father molest her, but that he prostituted her as well. Finally, in "6. Begat," she questions whether the man who raised her was her father at all when a stranger appears to claim her as his own. She calls her father "Rumpelstiltskin," doppelgänger and two-faced, but recognizes her own duplicity, similar to his: "Father, we are two birds on fire" (104-105), and that it will, eventually, damn each of them.

"Angels of the Love Affair" is another group of catalogue poems, addressing her mother and Sexton's own lost time, racking herself with guilt over a wasted life in the mental wards and a lost youth. Both sets of poems within "Death" and "Angels" resound in acerbic, disgruntled tones, not as though Sexton bemoans her parents or her life's wrongs but as though she wants her calculating tirade simply to be heard. As these parents are dead and cannot listen, we the readers are left to listen for them.

The final section of *The Book of Folly*, "The Jesus Papers," consists of nine poems. In the first, Sexton poses as a first person, omniscient narrator, Jesus, telling us the story and suckling on Mary's breast, deifying and infantilizing herself simultaneously. Moreover, Sexton mixes her idolization of Jesus with an angry, sacrilegious tone of irreverence for him. For example, she examines his sexuality: "his penis like a chisel" (10), while noting his incestuous dreams of Mary. Also, she includes Jesus's impatience with the crowd gathered to watch his death: "I am busy with My dying" (6), suggesting human impatience rather than God-like detachment.

Sexton's tone in *The Book of Folly*, which begins as angry verbal challenges to her therapist, progresses to malicious accusations of her father and exhibits her wicked

self-view. As it then escalates to shocking heresy, commenting on Jesus's physical sexuality and incestuous fantasies, it amounts to an outward show of her newfound strength. Positioning herself as the first-person narrator gives Sexton the collection's singular voice; it also portrays her as a megalomaniac, feeding on her own ego. Clearly, Sexton had, for the first time, taken charge of her personal life and found strength from doing so. While no one can argue which came first with any degree of certainty, her new attitudes and self-confidence seem to assert themselves beyond acceptable social boundaries. For this reason, Sexton's self-empowerment actually became her pitfall. Her newly disgruntled, challenging, even caustic, voice at first seemed to signify her long-awaited initiation into adulthood; however, it also began to alienate her from family and friends. Kayo was gone, hurt and bewildered by her betrayal; her therapist, no longer able to manage her, left her service. Unable to cope with her mother, Linda Sexton sequestered herself at Harvard, with Joy, soon afterward, doing the same at her boarding school in Maine. Diane Middlebrook adds, "Worse, her gift was deserting her. Sexton wasn't writing poems anymore; she was writing anguished appeals for attention" (380).

Nonetheless, the poetry she did write continued to increase in both anger and religious zeal, posing Sexton now as alone, yes, but helplessly so, and groping for a direction and an answer. In *The Death Notebooks*, Sexton acknowledges her alienation from family and friends; she thus speaks of herself in the first poem "Gods": "Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods. She began looking in the sky — / expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch. / No one" (1-3). Here she recognizes her feelings that there is no earthly person left to understand her and re-emphasizes her new obsession with religion and her ultimate resignation to death. This poem specifically and the group

of poems titled "The Furies" generally are both representative of Sexton's embittered voice that searches for a savior and reminisces about her past. Comprised of fifteen poems, "The Furies" signifies Sexton's unrestrained and passionate anger as well as her obsession with personal power. Because the mythical furies are Gaea's divine daughters who punish crimes, Sexton becomes their fierce, even violent, and powerful mother, their authorial creator. Therefore, Sexton positions herself, within these poems, to punish ferociously those people (and things) who have crossed her: her former lover, her failing eyesight, men's genitals, abandonment, sunsets, and sunrises. The commonality of these "things" lies not so much within their themes and subject matter but within Sexton's personal resentment of things gone or lost and the overall tone with which she presents them. For instance, within "The Fury of Beautiful Bones" she demands, "Am I in your ear still singing songs in the rain, / me of the death rattle, me of the magnolias" (18-19), and tauntingly, like a siren, seduces her lover to remember her songs and then terrorizes him, making the songs resonate of her impending death. In the same way, Sexton cries out in "The Fury of Abandonment," "I've been abandoned out here / / and I've called Rescue Inc. — / that old-fashioned hot line — / no voice" (21, 24-26), leaving her with a seemingly deaf audience and no voice of her own. The remaining poems in "The Furies" assert a similarly desperate and cynical tone, leaving us to imagine Sexton pounding her fists and stamping her feet, with her mouth agape, yet making no sound.

While Sexton figuratively continued to hammer her fists and feet harder and to scream more angrily and vehemently, she also began to recognize her own desperation and ridiculousness; she had become the ignorant and vengeful witch about whom she had once, in more lucid times, warned her audience. She recognized, either consciously or

unconsciously, her need for change. Within a matter of fifteen days between January 10 and January 30, 1973—"with two days out for despair, and three days out in a mental hospital" (Sexton and Ames 390)—she composed the thirty-nine poems that comprise *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. Written in a torrential flurry, these poems bear only a narrow theme, that of Sexton embracing her God. Yet, with her voice resounding of desperation and adulation, she attempts to justify what she will inevitably do. For the collection's beginning, "Rowing," she wishes to comfort her reader: "and God was there like an island I had not rowed to, / still ignorant of Him, my arms and my legs worked, /and I grew, I grew" (24-26), a depiction suggesting that through this growth, she awakened from her apprenticeship to find her answer: God. Sexton's single determination—God, available only through death—became her new obsession, permitting her to abandon her frustration, anger, and even her desire for power, allowing her a personal peace. Each of the poems within *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, such as "Riding the Elevator into the Sky," "The God Monger," and "The Rowing Endeth," rings of Sexton's new fixation. Amid the seemingly uncontrollable chaos of her life, this obsession began a new goal for Sexton, what Linda Grey Sexton and Lois Ames call being "prepared for her death" (epilogue). As much as Anne Sexton herself embraced death and had even courted it for more than a decade, this preparation seemed undertaken not as much for Anne as it did for those around her, making them aware of the peace she found within her final decision.

Arguably, *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks*, and *The Awful Rowing Toward God* portray Anne Sexton's most painstakingly difficult collections for the reader. Their subject matter and word choice are straightforward and easily

understandable; the poems themselves are, for the most part, not lengthy, thematically or linguistically complicated and, therefore, easily accessible. However, as Sexton's tone first resonates with immeasurable anger and antagonism, much of her audience distances itself; furthermore, as her obsession with religion then replaces the waning rage, the audience continues to depart, leaving Anne Sexton, ultimately, alone.

Epilogue

Poetry, for Anne Sexton, was her life. Her four earliest collections reflected her fears and rang with her passions, making her particularly human and accessible to her readers, and served as her therapy and training ground both for her as a woman *and* a poet. Moreover, poetry helped Sexton blossom into adulthood while providing her with an outlet for her angst. If, as Ralph J. Mills says, “loneliness always has been one of the poet’s occupational hazards” (235), no one sprang forth from it or delved as deeply into it as she did. That noted, critics have preferred to observe the glowing pinnacles of Sexton’s work, from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* through *Transformations*, rather than the dark clefts that followed.

As a consequence, few scholars have ventured there. *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks*, and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, as well as Sexton’s posthumously published works, leave quarries of critical stones yet to be overturned. In particular, Linda Grey Sexton, her eldest daughter, notes that the posthumously published work reverts back to Sexton’s earlier style, “often return[ing] to the stricter form, rhyme, and meter” (Sexton and Ames 560). Her statement suggests the need to compare this last work with her first as well as to investigate Sexton’s entire evolution—including subjects, themes, voice, and tone.

Moreover, no critic has yet compared Anne Sexton’s poetry with Betty Friedan’s theory of the “feminine mystique,” though they had met in 1963 at the Radcliff Institute and Sexton, upon reading Friedan’s book, clearly identified with her ideas. Yet another missing comparison is the correlation between Sexton’s biographical relationships, her affairs with James Wright and her therapist as well as her marriage, and her changing poetic voice of the same period.

Until these issues are critically explored, no complete understanding of the changing voice within Sexton's poetry is possible. Her poetry grew as she herself grew: that is, she utilized who she was in order to become who she would ultimately be. Suggesting an awareness of a poet's loneliness as well as the necessity to destroy any former voice to create herself anew, Anne Sexton remissly noted in her posthumously published poem "Uses" the state of the writer: "I, alone, came through, / starved but making it by eating / a body or two" (8-10).

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