

“THE AX FOR THE FROZEN SEA WITHIN US”:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF MADNESS  
IN THE WRITINGS OF ANNE SEXTON

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## SIGNED STATEMENT

This thesis is the result of my own independent investigation and all authorities and sources which have been consulted are acknowledged in the bibliography.

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E, who loves unconditionally.

And K, who is patient.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how Anne Sexton wrote about and represented madness in her poetry and prose as well as in her public persona. Although Sexton began writing as a therapeutic exercise after a mental breakdown, and although she became a successful writer because of her brand of “asylum poetry,” it is my assertion that her writing and public persona were symbolic representations through which she explored the concept of madness. Much effort has been put here on not reading the writings as evidence of Sexton’s psychopathology, but instead focusing on madness as one of many themes in her writing, her personal experiences a springboard from which she explored what she felt were universal issues. Sexton represented madness in her poetry first through the use of fixed verse forms as she learnt and mastered the craft of writing, but later in her career varied the style to use free verse and other experimental forms to explore madness in different ways. The mad poet was one of the first and major personae that she assumed in her writings, but there were other personae. Sexton invented and assumed the masks of other characters, such as family members, the witch/crone, characters in exile, and inanimate objects to explore what she referred to as greater “poetic truths.” She also examined the problematic task of communication, especially the limitations of language in the conveyance of meaning. This is especially evident, I show, in the poems about her psychiatrist or where her personae address doctors. In addition to employing Sexton’s published writings and the work of other scholars and critics, this dissertation analyses Sexton’s archived materials at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and includes insights drawn from her unpublished writings, off-Broadway play, unpublished letters and lecture notes.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: REPRESENTING MADNESS

It can be said that all writers, to some extent, write to make sense of their lives. Anne Sexton, however, had an exceptionally chaotic life as she struggled with mental illness (most likely that of manic depression, or bipolar disorder as it is currently known in psychiatric terms), which pitched her moods between extremes of highs and lows, from which she struggled from the age of twenty-eight to her death at forty-six. However, it is not my concern in this thesis to diagnose the mental illness from which she suffered, as my interest is in her writings, and I am not trained in psychiatry or psychology. Neither is it my intention to use her writings as evidence of her psychopathology. Rather, in this thesis, I intend to examine the ways in which Anne Sexton represented madness in her writings, as well as how she used the personae in her writings to do so. She was a very public personality at the height of her success – a poetic celebrity – and it is my assertion that her focus on her career and her use of madness as subject material led her to develop and maintain the public persona of “mad poet” in order to further her success as a writer.

Yet the mad poet was not her only persona. It is my assertion that the writing of her madness enabled her to “enquire further” on universal issues, as she proposed in a seminal poem, “For John, Who Begg Me to Enquire Further” (BP). Many critics and readers view her poetry to be confessional, and thus truthful, but a closer study of some of the other personae in Sexton’s poetry reveals that she was tremendously adept at the adoption and wearing of masks. She was a masterful performer, in her poetry as well as in the many readings and lectures that she gave. However, of all her personae, “mad poet” was the most successful one, and an in-depth study of this persona reveals that language and communication were primary concerns in Sexton’s representations of madness. The various formal structures of her poetry and her changing writing style also played a part in how Sexton conveyed her poetic philosophy through her writings. As her career progressed, she viewed poetry less as therapy and her mental condition less as something from which she sought to recover. Instead, she revelled in her madness, since identifying with madness was a successful element in her poetic career.

In this study, I draw not only from what has been published and is available in the public domain. The title of The Complete Poems is a misnomer, since there is no

way to *completely* collect all of an artist's works. I draw also in great part from Sexton's archived materials to which I was privileged to gain access during my research trip to the Harry Ransom Centre (HRC) at the University of Texas at Austin, a trip which was made possible by a grant from the Central Research Fund of the University of London. However, even if Sexton were alive, and I had managed to interview her, or even if I had complete access to all of Sexton's manuscripts, worksheets, personal papers, video recordings and psychiatric tapes/notes, it would be impossible for me or any critic to be able to fully understand the motivations behind why and how she wrote. I have, however, had access to Sexton's HRC material, which is more than the average postgraduate Sexton scholar has had. I have had the opportunity to view Sexton's unpublished lectures notes from the Crawshaw series of lectures that she delivered to Colgate University while she was professor there in 1972. As these lectures were delivered in the later part of her career, she had by then the opportunity to look back at how her career had developed, and to better understand her own writing philosophy. Mercy Street, her 1969 off-Broadway play, has never been published in its final form, but I was able to read versions of its drafts. I was also able to study many unpublished poems, prose works, notes and letters, as well as earlier drafts of published poems. These have given me a unique insight into Sexton as a poet and person that many other Sexton scholars have not. I thus have a greater access to the persona(e) that the poet was trying to present. In attempting to understand the ways in the ways in which Sexton wrote about her mental state, I will be studying these personae; Sexton presented to her reading audience a "mad poet" who went "to Bedlam" but only made it "part way back," as suggested by the title of her first collection of poetry. She was a poet who was unashamed, even flamboyant, about her madness. It is with this understanding of Sexton and her relationship with madness that I study the representations of madness in Sexton's writings, and in her career.

### **The poetic persona**

In The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks explains the importance of identity:

We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative – whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a "narrative," and that this narrative is us, our

identities. [...] Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. [...] A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self. (116-17)<sup>1</sup>

Whether one has a psychological disorder of excess or deficit, or even if one is considered psychiatrically “normal,” a recurrent theme in Sacks’ collection of case files is how his patients strive for a unity and completeness of narrative. Where this completeness is lacking, the human mind inexplicably struggles to construct it. Where there is disturbance, the psyche struggles to make objective sense out of it. Some of Sacks’ patients, when faced with psychic difficulties, turned to music, drama, or art in order to make a fractured world more logical. Sexton, it can be said, made sense of the world through her writings, especially her poetry. She was not just a psychiatric patient, but she also *played at* being mad. In her writings, she explored the notion of madness by assuming the persona of mad poet, posing it, examining it from numerous angles, as well as creating variations of that persona. In Sacks’ words, “it is this narrative or symbolic power which gives *a sense of the world* – a concrete reality in the imaginative form of symbols and story – when abstract thought can give nothing at all” (193, italics in the original). It is my opinion that the mad poet Sexton presented to the world was a symbolic representation through which she explored the concept of madness.

I also argue that Sexton developed this persona of mad poet partly as a political move, using the same language that devalued her condition as shameful and unspeakable to give it a voice through her poetry, making of it what Foucault would call a “reverse discourse.” Western society in Sexton’s time, and even now, tended to devalue the mentally ill individual, especially if the individual were female. The term “reverse discourse” was by Foucault in The History of Sexuality in the context of homosexuality:

[...] homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (101)

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<sup>1</sup> I punctuate gaps in the text as ellipses with square brackets to differentiate from Sexton’s use of ellipses, which appear frequently in her writings.

Homosexuality was considered by the American Psychiatric Association to be a form of mental illness until it was removed from the second version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II) in 1973. The fact that what had been previously considered a mental illness could, in one fell swoop, be voted into legitimacy speaks volumes about the arbitrary definition of madness. In Power/Knowledge, Foucault writes, “Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power” (131). To claim to have the truth is to claim power, and Sexton reclaimed the power that had been taken away from her when she was socially disqualified by being diagnosed as mentally ill. Reverse discourse involves taking an originally pejorative word or phrase and turning it into one with positive connotations instead. Foucault was a writer who was particularly interested in how authoritative discourses, for example, medical or legal discourses, produce certain kinds of subjectivity, and the way in which language can elevate or subjugate practices or people depending on the discourses used by those with powerful positions, what he calls “the authorised vocabulary” (History of Sexuality 17). The word “authorised” is an interesting one in the context of Sexton and her writing: it can refer to “authority,” i.e. those in power, and the vocabulary that they sanction or censor; it can also refer to “author,” i.e. the one who writes, or who originates an idea. Sexton gave herself authority by being an author, by representing and performing the persona of madness, making her writing of madness a positive and purposeful act.

Through this empowering act, Sexton can be seen as following the lead of some of the most influential published poets of her day, such as those described by Philip McGowan and others as the “Middle Generation” poets. The lives of Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz and Sylvia Plath are discussed in Adam Kirsch’s The Wounded Surgeon, in which Kirsch considers these confessional poets to have written about their personal suffering “in order to make effective works of art” (x). These poets, most of whom were precursors of Sexton’s, lived lives of turmoil and turned their emotional suffering into subjects for their writing. Kirsch’s metaphor of the “wounded surgeon” calls to mind one who is injured, but in this impaired state, is still able and willing to help others who are similarly wounded. The confessional poet, as defined by Elizabeth Gregory and others, tends to draw on her autobiographical experiences and write in the first person, dwelling

on experiences generally prohibited expression by social convention: mental illness, intra-familial conflicts and resentments, childhood traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one's bodies are frequent concerns. The transgression in naming the forbidden gives rise to the term "confession," which, via its religious, psychoanalytic and legal associations, sums up the ideas of sin, mental breakdown and criminality. (34)

While Sexton, to a large extent, fulfils the criteria for belonging in the "confessional" genre, she also wrote beyond her personal experiences to get at what she called "poetic truth." Her personal experiences are the starting point but not the destination; they are a springboard from which she explored shared experiences, or even experiences beyond what she had personally encountered. Although as a female mental patient, she was doubly subordinated, she explored various truths in order to seek power for herself. In an unpublished letter to Helmut Winter, dated 30 March 1971, Sexton wrote: "At one time I disagreed with the label 'confessional poetry' as there is more to my work than just confession. Then I had a change of heart and decided I was the only confessional poet. But those are all stances" (HRC). The "confessional" persona, I argue, is only one stance that Sexton adopted, and is one of many personae that she donned and explored, like a costume, in order to seek out poetic truths.

I am thus not reading Sexton's writing as straightforward autobiography, pure confession, or as evidence of her psychopathology. Instead, I intend to study madness as one of many themes in Sexton's writing, rather than as a cause of it. Sexton began writing in great part as a therapeutic exercise, and as such many critics have tended to examine her writings purely as those of a confessional writer. Emma Marras, in Anne Sexton (subtitled: "Her Confessional Self"), believes that Sexton's poetry "shows confessional characteristics to the extreme and shows most clearly how the writing of a confessional poem originates in a moment of personal crisis and suffering in the poet's life" (5). Later in the book, Marras reiterates:

The role which Sexton's confessional text assigns to the reader is ultimately that of therapist/confessor authorised to hear and to witness the poet disclosing intimate and personal life details that stand as deliberate transgressions of the order of the social community. (23)

Caroline King Barnard Hall, in her book also entitled Anne Sexton, sets lines from Sexton's poetry next to actual events in her life, using them as biographical evidence or as part of her commentary on Sexton's life, alongside quotes from people and letters. She defends her biographical reading of Sexton's poetry:

In considering the work of Anne Sexton, then, whose poems so often allude to and evoke personal experiences to weave their meaning, one naturally turns to the events of her life. Readers of Sexton's poetry find themselves naming Sexton herself as the speaker of many poems and find it [*sic*] difficult to discuss subject and theme without referring to her biographical data. (1)

Her interpretations of many of Sexton's poems are thus literal. For example, Hall's interpretation of "The Operation" (PQ) reads biographical details as explanations for the poem. "Since Sexton's mother died in March 1959, the daughter [in the poem] was freed the following summer from the pain of her own mother's dying but was unaware during that same summer of her own approaching pain" (37). Hall directly and chronologically equates the plot of this narrative poem with the events in Sexton's own life, seemingly without considering that the speaker of this poem may not be Sexton herself, but a persona that she adopts for the poem, and this seems to be a practice that continues throughout her book. Suzanne Juhasz reads "The Division of Parts" (BP) as a litany to Sexton's dead mother (119) and "The Double Image" (BP) as a poem "which moves in anguish back and forth between the partial, inadequate relationship with the poet and her dead mother" (120). These critics' confusion between Sexton's poetic persona and her personal life is understandable because of the effectiveness with which Sexton donned the skin of her poem's speakers, even though her personae adopted many different voices, not just that of the poems that may have resembled her own life, as I will discuss in chapters two and three. What I try to do instead with Sexton's writings is to enlarge their "emotional truth," for example to consider the profound and complicated aspects of interpersonal relationships. And although I may not always agree with the views of some of Sexton's critics who might have inadvertently, in Walter Kalaidjian's words, "[reduced] the poetry to a biographical referent" (170), these critical views may be useful in providing possible interpretations of Sexton's work.

As I bring up and discuss throughout this study, it is difficult to negotiate the fine line between Sexton's poetry and the biographical aspects of her writing. That

Sexton used much of her own life and experiences as a springboard from which she chose what to write about is undeniable, as is the close and complicated relationship between her personal life and her poetic success. It is not my goal, in this study, to resolve the complexity of this relationship – I doubt if Sexton herself fully understood it – but it is a relationship I intend to explore in detail throughout the course of this thesis.

The research of Jo Gill, who is currently the foremost Sexton scholar, puts forward that Sexton’s style of truthfulness “seems to speak of personal and traumatic experience and to invite readerly identification on that basis” (Women’s Poetry 15). Gill has also written several journal articles as well as a book on what she calls Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics, published in 2007, which brings “a nuanced and critical eye to the questions of truth, authenticity, subjectivity, and reference which have so dominated orthodox readings of confessional writing in general and Sexton’s work in particular” (4). Her research has thus been extremely useful to my work, and her comprehensive exploration at the HRC has also pointed me towards the importance of Sexton’s extensive lecture notes and previously undervalued prose work to the understanding of her writing philosophy. Indeed, there is a large gap in the chronology of criticism of Sexton’s work, with the most critical interest having occurred while she was alive, and a resurgence following the publication of Diane Wood Middlebrook’s controversial biography.<sup>2</sup> Critical interest has decreased significantly as of today, but with the access that Gill, Paula M. Salvio and myself have had to Sexton’s manuscripts at the HRC, there have been new insights which were unavailable to those who were only able to refer to her published work. Dawn Skorczewski obtained the even more limited access to some of Sexton’s therapy tapes, recorded during her sessions with her psychiatrist Martin Orne, and while listening on to a poet’s private sessions with her doctor may be considered unethical to some, Skorczewski handles her exploration of these recordings with delicacy and sensitivity. A greater understanding of the writer’s psyche is undoubtedly beneficial to our understanding of the writing philosophy of someone whose mental state was so intertwined with her writing life.

I thus attempt to manage the fine balance between reading the form utilised in Sexton’s work, how she represented madness, and the personae she adopted while

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<sup>2</sup> For simplicity, I refer to Middlebrook’s biography of Anne Sexton as Biography throughout this thesis.

doing so. It is my intention not to see Sexton as a victim of her emotional disturbances, but as interrogating various versions of the truth in order to retain mastery over them. This thesis is structured as such: in the next chapter, I begin my study about how Sexton wrote about madness by examining some of the formal structures of the poetry. I subtitle this chapter “Methods to the Madness,” because while Sexton was often viewed as a poet who wrote very much in free verse, a closer look at her work reveals a keen attention to form. While she began her career writing in strict verse forms and drafted each poem numerous times, she later turned more to free verse and experimented with alternative poetic schemes. Rather than viewing her as having become less disciplined about her writing, as many a critic has disparaged her for, it is my opinion that these alternative verse forms reflect a deliberate move on her part to explore themes such as madness in different ways.

Chapter three goes on to examine how Sexton’s poetic persona was shaped, both by her external circumstances and by her responses to them. Although the biographical legend of her breakdown and subsequent discovery of her writing career is well-known, it is important to our understanding of how Sexton came into the business of words. I put forward that although Sexton began writing in great part as a therapeutic exercise, and discovered her gift quite by accident, her personal history is crucial to our understanding of why she continued to revisit the theme of madness throughout the course of her career. However, I endeavour not to read Sexton’s work as biographical documents. Madness is one of the metaphors through which she understood herself, and writing about it one of the ways of mastering that experience. As Sexton became more successful in her writing career, she made the professional decision to focus on the persona of mad poet, since she realised that it was necessary for a successful poet to write what publishers wanted to publish and what the reading public wanted to read. This chapter also examines some of the performance aspects of Sexton’s literary career, as much of the success of her career (and her income) was due to her celebrity status and her public performances.

Even though Sexton often wrote from the first-person point of view, and adopted the persona of the mad poet, she also exhibited great artistry in the invention and wearing of the masks of her many poetic personae. My fourth chapter examines some of the more prominent genres of the “costumes” that she “dressed up” with, and the important role the adoption of personae plays in her writings. Early in her poetry Sexton metaphorically dressed up as and played at being other people, such as her

mother and great-aunt, and other family members, as well as other fictitious characters. Through such play-acting, she interrogated some of the issues that were important to her, such as the troubling notion of heredity, madness, interpersonal relationships, her concern with words/language, while showcasing her keen storytelling skills.

Chapter five returns full circle to focus on one of Sexton's primary personae, that of the mad poet, in greater detail. Sexton underwent psychotherapy for most of her adult life, and it remained an important theme for her during the course of her career. Here I examine the difficulties the poet encountered in attempting to translate the experience and language of madness into the language of sanity and that of poetry. An experience of such an attempt at translation occurs each time on the analyst's couch, in the patient's effort to convey the experience of her mental turmoil to her therapist during talk therapy. The persona of mad poet as patient thus appeared often in Sexton's oeuvre, especially in her early writings, and as such the difficulties that arise at meaningful communication is an important issue. This chapter also looks at what I loosely call Sexton's "doctor" poems, as well as the conversations between Doctor Alex and Daisy in Mercy Street. The "patient" persona is discussed in terms of the relationship, and the power struggle, between doctor and patient, since while the patient needs the doctor to heal her, the doctor too needs the patient in order to fully serve his purpose. Sexton frequently challenged her subservience as patient, student, woman or daughter, but she did so in terms of language. With the hindsight provided of available critical literature, the additional postmodern insights of current critics, along with the extended panorama of unpublished manuscripts, it is my intention to examine Sexton's representations of madness tempered with a knowledge of her psychology, while resisting psychopathologising her. As her speaker warns in a posthumously-published poem, "Watch out for games, the actor's part, / the speech planned, known, given, / for they will give you away" ("Admonitions to a Special Person" [CP]). The poetic persona is a well-crafted image, and part of it does originate from and "give away" the poet's person, but it is just one of many versions.

## CHAPTER 2

### “A CERTAIN SENSE OF ORDER”: METHODS TO THE MADNESS

Upon first reading, it appears that Anne Sexton’s earlier collections display a stronger usage of fixed forms than her later work. Her later collections appear to feature more free verse, as well as more experimental and unconventional poetry. This is not a surprising conclusion of most readers since it is known that most of her earlier poems emerged from her “workshopping” in John Holmes’ poetry class, where she first learnt her craft, as well as in Robert Lowell’s class slightly later on. Her close friend and fellow writer, Maxine Kumin, who also attended Lowell’s class, recalls, “Anne and I both regarded Holmes as an academic father” (xxiv). We should note here the use of the word “academic,” which can mean the use of set rules and an adherence to tradition, as well as that rhyme schemes and fixed stanza forms were strong elements in her earlier poetry.

In this chapter, I propose that on while at first glance it might appear that Sexton began with tighter, more structured poems in the earlier part of her career, she seemed to gradually loosen her form as her career progressed. Sexton herself noted that tight form was important in her early writing:

I take a kind of pleasure, even now, but especially in Bedlam, in forming a stanza, a verse, making it an entity, then coming to a little conclusion at the end of it, of a little shock, a little double rhyme shock. In my second book, All My Pretty Ones, I loosened up and in the last section didn’t use any form at all. I found myself to be surprisingly free without the form which had worked as a superego for me. The third book I used less form. In Love Poems, I had one long poem, eighteen sections [i.e. “Eighteen Days Without You”] that is in form and I enjoyed doing it that way. With the exception of this and a few other poems, all of the book is in free verse, and I feel at this point comfortable to use either, depending on what the poem requires. (NES 94)

The interview in which she said this was in 1968, a year after she had won the Pulitzer Prize for her third collection, Live or Die, and a year before her fourth book, Love Poems, was published. By then Sexton had become a very accomplished poet and had amassed a loyal readership. It is my opinion that Sexton asserted an important

change in the philosophy behind her writing, that she felt “comfortable to use either” free verse or structured forms, “depending on what the poem requires.” Rather than viewing her writing philosophy as a linear movement away from structured verse forms towards free verse and other more experimental forms, it would be more accurate to surmise that as she became a more experienced and accomplished writer, that she was more able to use the verse form she felt was appropriate to what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it.

However, many critics disapprove of what they felt was her being less disciplined over time, especially from Love Poems onwards. They complain that as her form became looser and her verses freer, that her poetry lost the tightness and compactness of the earlier work that showed what they felt was more effort in their crafting. Robert Lowell felt that she was the victim of her own success, riding on the brand name that Anne Sexton was by then. He complains, “For a book or two, she grew more powerful. Then writing was too easy or too hard for her. She grew meagre and exaggerated” (71). Hayden Carruth writes, of Sexton’s 1966 Live or Die, that “some of the poems wander a little; they are unstructured, they start up, flag, then start again, or slip into references too private for us to understand” (130). Arthur Oberg bemoans the “unevenness” he finds in the poems in The Book of Folly, and “the overuse of apostrophe and appositive to conceal some terrible failures of language and imagination, feeling, and thought; recurrent metaphor and simile that are either too banal or not outrageous enough to work” (154). I must confess that before embarking on this chapter’s study of formal structures in Sexton’s poetry, that I agreed to an extent with her critics. As Lowell does, I too was less impressed with what I saw as the looseness and sometimes vagueness of her later poems as compared to her earlier, more formally tight poems, and that Sexton was depending on her acquired fame to sell her later books, rather than carefully crafting and pruning her poems like she had done earlier in her career, when she was still attending classes and this work was demanded of her by mentors. But it now my conclusion that once she had found her own poetic voice and accumulated more experience, that her style of writing developed according to what she had to say and how she wanted to say it was adjusted to accommodate her voice.

In this study of form in Sexton’s writing, one must remember that Sexton was not academically trained in English literature, “untrammelled by a traditional education in Donne, Milton, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound,” in the words of Maxine Kumin.

“Anne was able to strike it out alone, like Conrad’s secret sharer, for a new destiny” (xxvii). Sexton spoke of form somewhat vaguely as the shape and structure of the poem, rather than as the conventional forms of sonnet (which she sometimes used), heroic quatrains or ballads, to name a few poetic forms. She said, in the same interview referenced earlier, “I don’t set the rules. I don’t sit down and say, ‘I’m going to have *a b c d e* and fourteen syllables.’ I work and work for the first stanza, and if it looks and feels right, then I cement it. [...] Take out the rules and leave the instant” (NES 80-81). With regards to form, Sexton thought “of all these things quite magically, and not in some academic way, because I don’t really know what my form is” (NES 81). In the words of Patricia Marx, who conducted this particular interview, form to Sexton was most likely “the physical shape of the poem and how it sounds” (NES 81). To Sexton, “all form is a trick in order to get at the truth” (NES 80). She may have started off intending to write a poem in a certain way, but as the writing progressed, the attempt to get at the truth would sometimes cause the form of the poem to go another way to accommodate that truth.

In this chapter I will study Sexton’s notion of form as “cage,” which was her description in the Marx interview:

[...] if you used form it was like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage, and you could let some extraordinary animals out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form. (NES 80)

By using formal structure in her earlier poetry, Sexton seemed to have felt more freedom to examine even taboo subjects such as madness and mental illness. Form was her “superego” (NES 94), and it was formal structures with which she had been taught to work in her early training as a poet. Sexton may have felt free to write about what she wanted to, as long as she conformed to a certain set of rules of poetic behaviour by “caging” her writing with formal structures. It was a method with which to control her explorations of madness.

What some may perceive to be the slack indiscipline of her later poetry, I will explore and discuss in terms of how her poetic persona evolved from one who was attempting to understand and control her madness to one who took on madness as an identity, and even revelled in it. Perhaps she no longer felt that poetic structures were a necessary superego for her madness as what she was attempting to palliate had become an important part of her poetic persona and no longer required regulation.

Thus what may have been perceived as a lack of form was an increase in the intentional use of free verse and other less structured forms, as well as experimentations with other poetic tools.

This chapter will be thus logically divided into two parts: first, I examine the “certain sense of order” that is found in poems that are obviously more regular in form, especially those in her first two collections. I postulate that the tightness of form and the regular structure of poems was an attempt create a method to the emotional turmoil and chaos that Sexton was experiencing in her early days as a poet, since she began writing in great part as a therapeutic attempt. Later in this chapter, I examine the characteristics of some of her later poetry, such as that of her experimental poetry and alternative forms. I theorise that because she was already accomplished as a poet, and had already amassed a following, that she was able to move away from how she had been taught to write, and had to freedom to experiment in her writing, using whichever form she felt was the most suitable.

### **Form in Sexton’s early poetry**

The idea of “order” is one explored many times in Sexton’s writing, especially in her earlier work. The persona in the second stanza of “Her Kind” (BP) finds her purpose in “rearranging the disaligned.” “For John” (BP) describes the “certain sense of order” in the “narrow diary” of the mind of one who has been through the chaotic experience of having been depressed, suicidal and has been in an asylum, as possessing the virtue of having “something worth learning.” The act of writing in “The Black Art” (PO) produces “too much food and no one left over / to eat up all the weird abundance,” an unruliness and imbalance in the writing household. The asylum, where the mad “Anne” takes refuge in “Flee on Your Donkey” (LD), is the home of madness and the “scene of disordered senses”; madness is “disorder,” but it is the “trick” and “innocence” behind the writing of poetry. Even the chaotic world of addiction possesses purposeful, almost religious rituals:

I’m a little buttercup in my yellow nightie  
 eating my eight loaves in a row  
 and in a certain order as in  
 the laying on of hands  
 or the black sacrament. (“The Addict,” LD)

Sexton had a poetic preoccupation with ritual (an ordered series of actions to fulfil a certain purpose, most often in a religious sense) as Paul Lacey points out, in her usage of words such as “sacrament,” “ceremony,” “rites,” “ritual,” “magic,” “exorcise,” and “communion” (223). But order is also manifested in secular ways; in “The Break” (LP), where a fall is a metaphor for the loss of sanity, the speaker says:

So I fell apart. So I came all undone.  
 Yes. I was like a box of dog bones.  
 But now they’ve wrapped me in like a nun.  
 Burst like firecrackers! Held like stones!

Madness in this poem a box of bones that has been dropped, scattered in the hallway like an explosion. Dog bones could refer to spare bones that the butcher provides as a cheap treat for dogs, which would cause chaos in a household with dogs if they were scattered across the floor. Alternatively, the speaker may be referring to a dog skeleton, which is an intricate assembly of more than 300 bones, and which makes no sense when the bones are broken and scattered.

Sanity, on the other hand, as the psychiatrist repeatedly demands in “June 6, 1960” (WDY), is evidenced by the presence of order: “*And where is the order?*” In “February 3<sup>rd</sup>” of the “Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems” sequence (WDY), the speaker laments that her ideas “are a curse” because “they spring from a radical discontent / with the awful order of things.” Order presents as an ambivalent force in Sexton’s poetry, sometimes providing positive control, but other times negative restraint.

Sexton seemed to have a similar dilemma towards formal ordered poetry as she did towards the idea of order. Holmes taught Sexton how to write, as Middlebrook describes, in “smooth complex stanzas”:

early poems were modelled on magazine verse of the kind regularly published by the Saturday Evening Post. They are short, often humorously self-deprecating, and frequently sentimental; rhythm and rhyme are vehicles for the delivery of messages” (Biography 51).

End rhymes figure prominently in the poems in her first collection, as do internal rhymes and echoes of consonant sounds of words within lines with words and the end of lines. Sexton herself referred to such intricate rhyme schemes as “tricks,” and an example of such a trick can be found in “Kind Sir: These Woods,” from her first collection:

Kind Sir: This is an old game  
 that we played when we were eight and ten.  
 Sometimes on The Island, in down Maine,  
 in late August, when the cold fog blew in  
 off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell  
 and grandfather's cottage grew white and strange.

The games-Maine rhyme is fairly obvious, but the less obvious long “a” sounds appear also in “played,” “eight,” “late” and “strange.” These “surprising internal rhymes,” as Salvio calls them (Sexton 56), and tight rhyme schemes were techniques her first teacher, Holmes, had taught her “in the task of speaking through a mask and valuing an air of distance and careful formal effects” (Biography 82). In Richard Howard’s view, “the ingenuity of shape” of these early, meticulously-crafted poems, “has something of the basket-weaver’s patience about it, it is the work of a *patient*” (444). “In the early years of apprenticeship and reputation building,” opines Neff, Sexton responds “by imposing upon the stuff of her experience the boundary and counterpoint of intense poetic control” (274-75). It has been my view that Sexton intended to impose “a certain sense of order” upon her chaotic experience of madness by putting it into writing, and the strict formal structures that Holmes first taught her to use were part of this therapeutic exercise.

Her early poems were most often in regular stanza forms. “You, Doctor Martin” (BP) is an excellent example of how, as Sexton mentioned in the interview quoted earlier, she would work on a stanza form for the first stanza, “and if it looks and feels right, then I cement it.” The visual form of “You, Doctor Martin,” as Neff assesses, is “tidy and symmetrical” (275). The rhyme scheme of the first stanza is *a b c a b c a*, and for the rest of the verses the last line rhymes with the second and fifth verses instead (*d e f d e f e*). Sexton also carefully used internal rhymes, sometimes so subtle that they may not be noticed unless the poem is read aloud. Kumin remembers that “for years we conducted our own mini-workshops by phone, a working method that does much to train the ear to hear line breaks, internal rhymes, intentional or unwanted musical devices, and so forth” (xxv). Read aloud in their draft forms, Sexton’s poems existed for her first audience, Kumin, in audio form before they did in print. Though sometimes subtle, and at other times more obvious, these internal rhymes knit the poem together at a deeper level than end rhymes alone do: the “ock”

sound in “doctor” resonates with “god of our block”, “foxes,” “boxes” and “foxy children.” Neff summarises:

Near to the end of the poem, the “block”/“smock” sound softens to “frost”/“lost,” but we find “talking,” “forgotten,” and “moccasins” reflecting and repeating earlier terms. It is a painful sound, repeated over and over, sometimes sharp and sometimes muffled, cut off even as it begins – an appropriate feeling for the speech and the feeling of Bedlam. (276)

This sharp sound emphasises the feeling of stasis, while the verbs’ present continuous tense (“-ing”) draw out the contrasting opposite of movement. The poem was carefully written to juxtapose the differences between “you” (the doctor) and “I/we” (the patients), of movement and stasis, of the alive and the dead. The experience of madness, though chaotic, becomes more sensible and organised in a poem with formal structures such as this one.

The tight two-line rhyme scheme that figured so prominently in her earlier poems give the poems a sense of wholeness and completion. “The Truth the Dead Know” (PO) is an excellent example of Sexton’s use of a traditional stanza form, in this case best described as a ballad stanza with a more or less iambic meter (with an irregular number of syllables per line). “All My Pretty Ones” (PO) has an *a b a b c d c d e e* rhyme scheme, and Michael Burns reminds us that

no traditional ten-line stanza in English verse exists, so what Sexton is done is to create a hybrid. Borrowing from the ottava rima stanza as it is used by Yeats and from the conventional Elizabethan sonnet, Sexton develops her material through the quatrain and punctuates it with the closing couplet. (133)

Sexton used traditional stanza forms when it was convenient for her to do so, for example in her famous Icarus poem, “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come To Triumph” (PO), which is an obvious sonnet. “Somewhere in Africa” (LD), her elegy to Holmes comprises four-line stanzas with an *a b a b* rhyme scheme, possibly as tribute and perhaps concession to his teaching of formal, emotionally-mediated poetry. However, even when Sexton moved away from structured stanzas and towards a greater preference for free verse, she occasionally returned to rhymes and couplets. In “Cripples and Other Stories” (LD) her short stanzas, deliberately simple vocabulary and iambic trimeter give the poem a nursery-rhyme quality. This poem

has been said to resonate with Plath's "Daddy," as explored by Heather Cam in her essay about Plath's poem, and an early draft of Sexton's poem in the HRC is titled "My Doctor, the Father." However, Hall conversely is of the opinion that "the hard-edged power of Plath's 'Daddy' is missing here, and Sexton appears not to dare Plath's insolence" (65). An undated, unpublished poem in the HRC archives is titled "There Was,"

a shallow man  
 who loved a shallow life.  
 He found a wealthy girl.  
 He thought he bought a wife.

That certain shallow man  
 had nothing for his wife  
 except his Nazi-snap-ons  
 and the use of his big knife.

The poem has a cadence similar to the nursery rhyme, "There Was a Crooked Man." This poem, too, can be compared in form to "Cripples and Other Stories." The Nazi-torturer-husband figure makes the poem similar in form and theme to Plath's "Daddy," but since the poem is undated, it is unclear whether Sexton influenced Plath or vice-versa in this case.

A majority of the poems in the "Eighteen Days Without You" sequence in Love Poems were written in some sort of rhyme scheme with regular verse lengths; the rhyming quatrains of "December 4th" are possibly some of the most lovely lines that Sexton has written:

And we both wrote poems we couldn't write  
 and cried together that whole long night  
 and fell in love with a delicate breath  
 on the eve that great men call for death.

The love between the speaker and the addressee is celebrated against the backdrop of the Kennedy assassination; love and death are juxtaposed within formal rhyming couplets and regular quatrains. "Sexton is the contemporary professor," remarks Burns. "She uses that part of ritual necessary to give formality to her colloquial diction, but she adapts the tradition to meet her needs" (133). In "Unknown Girl" (BP), for example, the *a b a b a b a b a b a* rhyme is disrupted by that odd eleventh

line that offsets the balance created by the rhyming couplets, as well as by the uncomfortable enjambments and caesuras, all which suggest the impending interruption of the relationship between the unknown girl and her baby. It is through this study of Sexton's artistry that I respectfully disagree with some of the critics' scathing views on what they feel to be the lack of Sexton's artistry. While Sexton's early rhyme schemes may, at first glance, appear traditional and simple enough, it is on closer examination that one realises she often uses and disrupts these traditional forms to suit her own ends.

Sexton explained the importance of form in her poems about madness her seventh Colgate University lecture:

You are inhibited because of the form and therefore your unconscious can have its way. Nothing inhibits it, and it is allowed to have free rein to tell its story. I once said that form was a cage, and if you had a good strong cage, you could let some really wild animals in it. Thus, the wild animals are the content and the cage is the form. (HRC)

In the words of "For John," the speaker is thus free to "rage in [her] own bowl," to deal with a great deal of emotion but within confines. When asked by her interviewer if there was any particular subject she would rather deal with in form than in free verse, Sexton replied:

Probably madness. I've noticed that Robert Lowell felt freer to write about madness in free verse, whereas it was the opposite for me. Only after I had set up large structures that were almost impossible to deal with did I think I was free to allow myself to express what really happened. (NES 95)

I discuss the ambitious acrostic she used as the starting point of "For God While Sleeping" (PO) in chapter three, which originated from a game George Starbuck's name, and this poem is an example of the "tricks" that she relied on occasion to find what she called the "truth." Kumin saw that in her early writing, Sexton

worked quite strictly in traditional forms, believing in the value of their rigour as a forcing agent, believing that the hardest truths would come to light if they were made to fit a stanzaic pattern, a rhyme scheme, a prevailing meter. She strove to use rhyme unexpectedly but always aptly. (xxv)

Kumin remembers that “Sexton had an almost mystical faith in the ‘found’ word image, as well as in metaphor by mistake, by typo, or by misapprehension. She would fight hard to keep any image, a line, a word usage [...]. [T]here was no shaking her.” (xxvii). The “found” word image was one of the tricks that Sexton used to decide on the form that the poem would take, along with acrostics, rhymes (internal and external), word play, palindromes (“rats” to “star”), iambic meters, and refrains. “Kind Sir” is prefaced by a quote from Henry David Thoreau’s Walden: “For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in the world to be lost.... Not til we are lost... do we begin to find ourselves” (ellipses in the quote). This poem’s persona is lost in the words, and recalls a childhood game she played that “was a trick / to turn around once and know you were lost.” However, being lost, she is able “to look – this inward look that society scorns – / Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse / than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.” It is through these “tricks” of form and games that she is able to become lost through the exploration of a topic, and it is through this exploration that she is able to find herself. Karl Malkoff says of “For John”: “Sexton did not write the poem in search of truth, which she already had, but in search of form, which the truth lacked” (323). The “truth” of her mental illness was what she wanted to explore, and in her early poetry she found it necessary to give it form.

The tightness of these forms allowed her to discuss the chaotic experience of madness from a controlled distance, much like the structured activity of making moccasins serves as therapy for the mad in Bedlam. This emotional remoteness from as personal a subject as madness was something that Sexton attempted as Holmes’ student, since the sentiment of the time, in the words of Alice Ryerson (an interviewer from Radcliffe), was that the best compliment a female poet could receive in 1962 was “she writes like a man” (Biography 173). “A woman who writes feels too much!” laments Sexton’s speaker in “The Black Art” (PO). A woman who writes “feels,” but a man who writes “knows.” A woman who writes uses “trances and portents” rather than logic, and is guided by “cycles and children and islands,” “mourners and gossips / and vegetables.” A male writer is guided instead by his libido, and “congresses and products,” “machines and galleons / and wars.” The moccasin-making emotional distance was thus what Sexton was aiming to achieve with her use of formal structures. With “used furniture,” that which had been lived in and experienced, she hoped to “make a tree,” a solid, life-giving, sheltering, ubiquitous form.

Her early verse forms and subject matter certainly appear to be a therapeutic attempt to domesticate her madness. However, Holmes the mentor protested vehemently against Sexton's choice of subject. He was so adamantly opposed to her writing about madness that he even warned Kumin against being "involved with Anne," as if convinced that her relationship with a writer like Sexton would contaminate her work (Kumin xxiv). He wrote to Kumin: "I said way back that she was going to have a hard time to change subject matter, after the book, and it's true.... Not only that she has two subjects, mental illness and sex, but that she writes so absolutely selfishly, of herself, to bare and shock and confess" (Biography 143). Sexton was, in her own words, making "a new reality" for herself and becoming whole (Biography 64), but for Holmes, it was "a spectacle of someone experiencing release. [...] Don't publish it in a book. You'll certainly outgrow it, and become another person, and this record will haunt and hurt you. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now" (Biography 98). Ironically, Sexton was attempting to create a mediated distance from her personal subject matter through the use of formal structures, yet her former mentor did not believe that such a subject should be handled at all. She was aware of his disapproval – "John did not approve of my work one bit," she shared with her students in her ninth Colgate University lecture – and in typical maverick Sexton style, she began to strike out on her own, moving away from Holmes' style of carefully structured form towards the use of free verse and other less regulating forms, experimenting with various methods of storytelling. While in earlier days, she felt more comfortable writing about madness in formal structures, she discovered that "in Live or Die, I wrote 'Flee on Your Donkey' without that form and found that I could do it just as easily in free verse. That's perhaps something to do with my development as a human being and understanding of myself, besides as a poet" (NES 95). She began to gradually use free verse more often.

The refrain (i.e. a phrase or line that is repeated at regular intervals in a poem, usually at the end of the stanza) was a technique used in several times in her early poems. "June 6, 1960" in the "Letters to Dr. Y." sequence (which, according to the dates on her drafts, was written in 1958, around the time she was writing her Bedlam poems, even though it was only published posthumously in Letters to Dr. Y.), "Elizabeth Gone" (BP), her signature poem "Her Kind," "Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall" (BP), "The Abortion" (PO), "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" (LP), but this form grew scarcer in her later poems, finding its last

appearance in “Gods” of The Death Notebooks, when Sexton was nearing the end of her career. The refrain is a very old and traditional poetic structure, and serves to reiterate a particular thought or issue that the poet is discussing, but in my opinion Sexton’s usage of this form can come across as somewhat forced and not as effective as her other verse poems. Sexton also attempted one-sentence poems, where the whole poem is a long sentence, giving the effect of the personae’s long deep breath and sense of urgency. “The Farmer’s Wife” (BP), her first attempt at this technique, was perhaps the most successful: it brings together the setting of the poem (a farm in Illinois), the mundanity which has set into the sex life of the farmer and his wife after their ten years together, all the conflicting emotions the wife feels when he asks her to his bed in his usual fashion (“honey bunch let’s go”) and the deep subdued loathing she feels for him as “her young years bungle past” (“she wishes him cripple, or poet, / or even lonely, or sometimes, / better, my lover, dead”) into one long, breathless stream of consciousness. The mention of “my lover” suggests that the poem’s persona may actually be the farmer’s wife, who is speaking to a lover she has taken because of her boredom and the resentment she feels against her farmer husband, and how she wants her husband dead. This heady rush of mixed emotions is all conveyed within the vehicle of a single sentence, as if the persona has had a brilliant idea and is excited to explain it to the listener. In All My Pretty Ones, she attempted this again, but with less success: in “Young,” the persona is a pubescent girl (“I, in my brand new body, / which was not a woman’s yet”), lying alone and lonely on the lawn outside her mansion (“a big house with four / garages”) isolated even from her parents (who are further isolated from each other as they sleep in different rooms), and talking to the stars and God. A few poems later in the same collection, this technique was once again attempted in “I Remember,” where the speaker breathlessly recalls the thrill of a new love affair. Perhaps realising that the novelty of such a form had worn off, Sexton did not try it again till 1972’s “Yellow,” published posthumously, but it is possible that she did not release it for publication within her lifetime because she realised the limitations of repeatedly using such a form. That refrains and one-sentence poems found their way less often into her body of work suggests that Sexton was experimenting with other forms, such as free verse, or the colloquial sardonic storyteller persona in Transformations, or the structure of religious poems in the “O Ye Tongues” sequence.

### Free verse and experimental poetry

In my opinion, free verse and looser structures were a deliberate variation on Sexton's part, and not a decrease in her poetic discipline. She still relied on formal structures for many poems in her later work, as seen in many of the poems I have referred to earlier in this chapter as examples of some of the poetic structures commonly used by Sexton. Her variation from structured poetry indicates that she had found a voice away from what she learned through Holmes' instruction. Neff notes that "nearly all the pieces [in *Bedlam*] exhibit a similar use of set, visually repetitive stanza forms with varying sorts of contrapuntal, expressive sound activity" (276). In other words, in her earliest collection may be described as having a more constrained use of poetic structures; as Sexton's career matured, she discovered more ways in which to write and dared to experiment more. Also, as her career progressed, she may have found that her reading audience were receptive to her frank portrayals of madness – even though her mentors and critics may have begged to differ – and she may have attempted less to control her madness through the tight structures of her poetry. Burns believes that "Sexton should be forgiven for setting aside her craft in the terrible quest for a language that would save her. The 'tricks' she mentions in her interview with William Packard in 1970 no longer kept her calm, no longer functioned to make the poem whole" (130).

Biographical evidence indicates that around 1958, Sexton discovered "Heart's Needle," a long emotional poem written by W. D. Snodgrass about the breakdown of his marriage and his forced separation from his three-year-old daughter (*Biography* 76). She began an intense correspondence with Snodgrass and began working on "The Double Image." Shortly after, Sexton began working with Robert Lowell, who had a greater belief in the power of free verse than Holmes did: "the cooked, marvellously expert and remote, seems constructed as a sort of mechanical catnip mouse for graduate seminars; the raw, jerry-built and forensically deadly, seems often like an unscored libretto by some bearded but vegetarian Castro," he is famously quoted as saying (Hamilton 279). The workshop in which Lowell taught Sexton was also attended by Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck, who both went on to become accomplished poets as well.<sup>1</sup> In 1957, Lowell wrote to William Carlos Williams, "it's

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<sup>1</sup> The workshop and the after-class drinks Sexton had with Plath and Starbuck are memorialised in Sexton's memoir of Plath, "The Bar Fly Ought to Sing," and Sexton's elegy to Plath, "Sylvia's Death" (*Live or Die*).

great to have no hurdle of rhyme and scansion between yourself and what you want to say most forcibly” (Mariani 180); it seemed that for Lowell, free verse was an option that freed him from what he saw were the limitations of formal structures in poetry. “Cooked” was “his way of referring to poetry of high seriousness and tight, formal effects that he abandoned in writing Life Studies” (Middlebrook, “Sexton and Lowell” 13), which he was preparing for publication when Sexton began to audit his Boston University class in 1958. (Life Studies was published the following year.) In Middlebrook’s opinion,

Lowell may not have influenced the style of Sexton’s poems that fall and winter, but he certainly validated the direction her work was taking: and this included “writing as a woman.” It was in Lowell’s class that Sexton began scheming early drafts of “The Double Image,” trying to achieve the effect of a spontaneous-sounding first-person voice within the constraints of a complicated rhyming stanza which slowly and surely built up a dramatic narrative. (“Sexton and Lowell” 11)

For Ezra Pound, however, free verse was an option of form like any other; as James Longenbach notes:

Ezra Pound proclaimed, late in his life, that “to break the pentameter, that was the first heave.” But when we read his early career in detail, it’s clear that Pound turned to free verse not as an alternative to formal verse (this distinction would have seemed bizarre to Pound) but as one more rhetorical possibility among the multitude of metrical and rhythmic experiments he was conducting. (13)

Pound’s use of free verse was deliberate and self-conscious, a sign of a maturing poetic career. Sexton’s move away from structured poetry, in my opinion, was a choice more congruent with Pound’s poetic philosophy than to Lowell’s.

Sexton definitely knew of Allen Ginsberg’s writing and had most likely read “Howl,” since the Biography records that James Wright had introduced Sexton to Ginsberg’s work and that she wanted to meet him at Poetry International Festival in London in 1967 (279). “Howl” is the extreme of the “raw” poetry that Lowell had spoken about and Sexton, a voracious reader and autodidact, was most likely acquainted with the writers of the Beat Generation and their non-conformist mode of

writing. Sexton was also likely aware of Lowell's struggles with his emotional lability, which Middlebrook notes:

his life was punctuated by breakdowns, which were often followed by rich period of creativity. During his convalescence from a breakdown in 1956, he had rapidly produced much of Life Studies; following another serious breakdown in early 1958, he had finished it.

(Biography 109)

It was perhaps under Lowell's tutelage that Sexton began to realise that it was not necessary to control one's mental instability to become a productive writer. Lowell had broken taboos with the publication of Life Studies, paving the way for his apprentices such as Plath and Sexton to do the same, which they both successfully did.

There might have also been a physiological reason why Sexton began to write less and less frequently in a rhyme scheme. In 1964, when she was hospitalised, she was prescribed the drug Thorazine for her mood disorder. She joked to her psychiatrist friend, Anne Wilder, that "Thorazine, they say, is supposed to make the rhymer go away" (Biography 226), because it had the common side effect of quelling mania, during which Sexton was often productive in her writing. In a letter to Tillie Olsen, she lamented the numbing effects of Thorazine on her creativity:

The g.d. tranquilizers I started to take at M.G.H. [i.e. Massachusetts General Hospital] this summer have completely stoppered any original idea. I haven't had one since the first madness of the play took over (and that was before M. G. H. ... have I been, unwittingly, lobotomized?) (Biography 231-32, ellipsis in the original)

Like Icarus, the Ovidian mythic character to whom she often paralleled herself, she preferred to soar riskily, often dangerously, in the name of creativity.

[Icarus] glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling  
into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea?  
See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down  
while his sensible daddy goes straight into town. ("To a Friend Whose  
Work Has Come to Triumph")

Thorazine also made her skin sensitive to the sun which she loved, but "just a spot of sun on my arm as I drive along and it is like bees stinging me," she told her students in her sixth Colgate University lecture (HRC). She sometimes went off her

medication so that she could enjoy the sun during vacations, and also so that she could be creative again (“I am not going to take anymore thiorazine [*sic*]. I want to write poems!” she said in a letter to Anne Wilder [Letters 259]). She wanted to soar like Icarus, even if it meant being less cautious about her medical state and less compliant with her medication. While going off her medication might seem a reckless act to some, in my opinion she could hardly be faulted for wanting to reclaim her ability to write and enjoy such simple pleasures in life like sun-bathing, especially since she was someone who identified as a writer and who found meaning in her creative abilities.

Sexton’s increasing dependency on alcohol may also have been a possible reason why her style of writing began to change. In Salvio’s opinion, Sexton’s “addiction to alcohol eventually ruined her keen ear, compromising her capacity to hear the subtle sounds necessary to craft the dazzling internal rhyme schemes she was, at one time, so skilled at executing” (Sexton 7). Middlebrook is equally disappointed with Sexton’s alcoholism, and believes that alcohol “deprived her of ‘the little critic’ in her head that she had formerly summoned to the task of cut, cut, cut, expand, expand, expand, cut, cut, cut. She had the drunk’s fluency but not the artist’s cunning” (Biography 380). It is clear that both see Sexton’s gradual change in writing style as a shortcoming rather than a conscious choice.

Elizabeth Gregory points out that

confessional work puts into play a *reality trope* – the blurring of the border between reality and fiction such that it seems as though poet and speaker are one. This trope is a variation on the sincerity claims that poets have long employed to convince readers that their work deserves attention. Inevitably both tropes involve much artful manoeuvring within the framework of speech presentations with which readers are familiar and comfortable. (35-6, italics in the original)

While Sexton sometimes shied away from the label of “confessional,” there are other times that she embraced and even exploited her readers’ assumptions about the “truth” of her work, as I will explore in later chapters. While she admitted to committing “truth crimes,” and to playing tricks on her audience with regards to what the truth really was, part of the appeal of her work was the *appearance* of truth with which her readers could identify. What Sexton was fond of saying – “truth is a lie is a truth” – is for Gregory “a fine synopsis of the reality trope” (39). Even the selection of

her letters, which her daughter and literary executor collected and published with the subtitle “A Self-Portrait in Letters” is, it seems, intended to be autobiographical in nature, yet the discerning reader needs to be aware that one cannot and does not portray oneself uniformly to different people, different types of readers (family members, friends, editors, fans), over different periods of time. A “self-portrait” also reveals how the artist sees herself, as well as how she wants the audience to see of her, and is by no means a truthful portrayal. It can be coloured by one’s experiences, one’s target audience, or even how one views oneself on that particular day. “Whose heart is the real one?” the speaker questions in “The Earthworm” (“Bestiary U.S.A.” sequence, 45MS). For a person who struggled with moods as Sexton did, one could have differing levels of self-esteem depending on one’s mood. The problematic notion of the “truth” in poetry is one that will be explored from different angles in this thesis.

Many critics have perhaps failed to take into account that the poet, and as a result, the poetry, are changing and evolving entities. Helen Carr gives us the timely reminder that

We are constantly changing, unstable, contradictory; form, deformed, reformed by our personal histories, our social and ethnic histories, our class and gender positions, our bodies, our hormones, our conscious beliefs and our unconscious drives. We are born into a maze of language through whose contradictions and ambiguities we come to what sense we can of ourselves and our world. [...] [H]ow we recognise who or what we are or might be can be deeply problematic. Yet we are also at a moment of new possibilities. We are far more able than ever before to act as agents in our own destinies. (82)

While Carr is writing about women in the western world and how we are able to engage with the expectations and possibilities this world has given us, the same can be said about writing, and specifically about Sexton’s writing. Those who criticise the change in the form of her poetry were, in Middlebrook’s words, likely “not privy to the artistic goals that guided the change” (Biography 273), nor privy to the influencing changes in her personal life. As Carr points out, “poems do not reach a rational stasis: they move, in both senses, through symbolic patterning. They do not necessarily resolve or unify, but they are productive processes” (92). Likewise, the poet and the poetic career do not develop in a linear manner, or reach a rational stasis.

One should not expect a poet who sought to overturn the rationality of language to herself have a “rational” evolution. At Sexton’s Harvard reading in 1974, she joked that she was reading from her “posthumous work,” referring to the poems from The Death Notebooks, which was then newly published, and The Awful Rowing, on which she was still working. As Middlebrook puts it, “this was in a way true, for the person who wrote those poems existed no more; the poet had been survived by the performer” (391). The earlier poet, the amateur, the one who wrote to please her publishers and her mentors, no longer existed; the poet was always an evolving and changing entity, as was the poetry.

The idea that the letters or the writing can provide a “self-portrait” is debunked by Carolyn Steedman in her study of the archive, Dust. Echoing the sentiment I felt when I researched Sexton’s papers at the HRC, Steedman too realises that there is no way to complete reading everything that the writer has written. “You know *you will not finish*, there will be something left unread, unnoted, untranscribed” (18, emphasis in the original). No archive, no matter how meticulously the writer’s estate has collected her work, will be able to house everything that the writer has written in her lifetime. There are always difficult choices to be made in the archival process, between what is considered to be relevant and important (for example, drafts of writing or letters) and what is expendable (for example, doodles or scribbles on napkins and scrap paper). Of the poem “Suicide Note,” Sexton told her Colgate students in her tenth lecture that “this poem was started on a paper napkin. It was quickly transferred to the typewriter and went through about ten drafts” (HRC). I did not, however, encounter this said napkin at the HRC, even though it was an initial draft, as it may have been disposed of by Sexton herself or somehow did not make its way to the archive. Sexton’s work is not stored in the order that it was written, which is only one possible order imposed on the mass of papers that she kept. Whether the organisation of an archive is based on chronology, or genre, or by alphabetical arrangement, is the decision of the curator. Even the actions of the visitors to the archive may affect it; the drafts for each poem are placed in folders within folder boxes, and although I replaced the drafts in the order I had found them, other visitors may not have. Steedman writes: “the Archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and just ended up there” (68). Linda Sexton made the decision to archive some of her mother’s therapy tapes and notebooks. Sexton had

herself loaned some of her papers at Boston University, which Linda Sexton had chosen to re-house at the HRC (Linda Sexton, Searching 225-26). Some correspondence between Sexton and James Wright had vanished, and Linda Sexton was disappointed as she felt “the correspondence between the two poets would have been a cornerstone of Mother’s archive” (227). There are always gaps in the archive, and the reader has to construct her own narrative of the writer’s life with what she has access to.

It can be said that it was in Love Poems that it became more obvious that Sexton was beginning to take greater liberties with form in her writing. Middlebrook notes that “Love Poems was the first of her books produced into the atmosphere of celebrity, and ‘Sexton’ was now an established brand name. Certain formal effects were trademarks of the product” (Biography 293). One of these effects was the frequent use of similes and metaphors (especially “like...”). Sexton explained her preference for metaphors in her seventh Colgate University lecture:

In metaphor two things that are not quite alike are likened. Therefore they take on a new color and a new brightness. They take on a new character. [...] Of course the only difference between metaphor and simile is that in a simile the comparison is stated... it’s linked together with like. As or as though or as if. In metaphor the connective tissue is cut, it’s dropped and there is a kind of ellipsis, a jumping over space you have to make for yourself, you have to make the leap as the reader, as the thinker. (HRC)

Even Alicia Ostriker, who is normally critical of what she otherwise views as Sexton’s “coarse” use of formal structures generously praises Sexton’s metaphors to be “as breathtaking as ski jumps” (“That Story” 253). The emphasis on poetic order has shifted to the poet relinquishing the control over her subject matter, requiring instead the participation of the reading audience to make meaning for themselves.

From Transformations onwards, Sexton began to retell and rework existing stories and structures. The Transformations poems are very different from what she had written previously: they are poems with almost no rhyme or regular verse structures, and are based on the Grimm fairy tales that her daughter, Linda, was enamoured with. The poems re-told stories with which the reading public were familiar, but they were contemporised and reworked Sexton-style. Later, Sexton also began to rely more on word repetitions, for example, in her “O Ye Tongues”

sequence, which is modelled after eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno." (Smart was a poet who was considered somewhat insane and who was hospitalised for long periods). The poem consists of a series of statements mostly beginning with the words "for" and "let" in alternate sections called psalms. This sequence, along with other long poetic sequences such as "Angels of the Love Affair" and "The Jesus Papers," as well as the group of poems titled "The Furies," marked Sexton's foray into religious poetry, which form a large part of The Book of Folly and The Death Notebooks. The deconstruction and reworkings of known writings also extended to her rethinking of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," a line from which served as the title of and inspiration for a long poem ("Hurry Up Please It's Time"). In the posthumously-published 45 Mercy Street, the poet thematically groups the poems rather than structuring each poem formally, into different subjects such as the animal poems in "Bestiary U. S. A." and "The Divorce Papers." (This is different from the poetic sequences, in which each poem is part of a long poem such as "The Death of Fathers," and "The Death Baby," as evidenced by the numbering of parts in the long poetic sequences and the lack of such numbering in the groups of similarly-themed poems.)

Jon Stallworthy of Oxford University Press, who was her publisher in England, initially admired Sexton's work enough to approach her and saw her addition to OUP's stable as credible enough to challenge Faber and Faber as a major poetry publisher in England. However, over time, he became less enamoured with her work, reluctantly accepting Love Poems for publication. "I liked her poems less and less," he said,

they weren't as carefully worked out as before. She had learnt to write, with Robert Lowell, with such fluency and in a compact metrical structure; now the poetry began to get looser and more inflammatory, and I found it harder and harder to hear any sort of musical structure. We were still and always remained on good terms, she was a good friend, but she couldn't have been pleased by my diminishing enthusiasm for her books. (Biography 301).

Another critic, William Phillips, felt that "it seems clear that Lowell was superior, not only because of the greater magic of his language, but also because of his stricter control of the medium" (342). In Longenbach's discussion of American poetry after modernism, he debunks the idea of the "breakthrough" narrative and sees it as being

oversimplified, for example in the careers of Bishop, Richard Wilbur, or John Ashbery (8). The same can be said for Sexton, even though she was not included in Longenbach's discussion of poets. While as editor Stallworthy is entitled to his opinion about Sexton's writing, he was perhaps mistaken in his evaluation of her mastery over her work.

Another possible explanation behind the change of the nature of her poetry was also the rise of Sexton the performer. As I will discuss in chapter five, the introduction of the performative dimension of her poetic career caused her aims as a poet and her relationship with her audience to change over time, as such so did her poetry. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the collection of poems titled "Bestiary U. S. A." in *45 Mercy Street*. It is epigraphed: "I look at the strangeness in them and the naturalness they / cannot help, in order to find some virtue in the beast / in me." This group of poems can roughly be described as an unknown speaker addressing various animals, and the speaker often finds similarities and parallels between each beast and herself. The animals Sexton chose to be the subjects of these poems were of a great variety, from mammal (bat, hog, porcupine, etc.) to insect (hornet, which along with bees make several appearances in her poetry, as well as cockroach and June bug), to mollusc (snail), to crustacean (lobster), to reptile (snake). The speaker highlights her kindredness to the various animals in different ways: in "Bat," the speaker says, "I flew at night, too." In "Hog," she describes the hog in the first stanza, then herself in the second stanza. In some of the other "Bestiary" poems, the speaker asks rhetorical questions of the various animals, such as of the porcupine, the star-nosed mole, the snake, the raccoon, and the whale. By addressing the animals directly, then writing herself into the poem through a first-person narrative, the you-I juxtaposition is the form through which she "find[s] some virtue for the beast in me." The organisational arrangement that holds the group of poems together does so not through formal structures, but through a similar theme that is given different treatments across the poems.

Although "Bestiary U. S. A." was written, according to Sexton's carefully-dated drafts, between May 30 and June 17 1972 (she notes on the draft of "Horse," "6 poems in one day of pain and sickness"), during a much shorter length of time as compared to some of the earlier poems, it can clearly be seen that she decided, for these poems, to move away from structured forms towards alternative organisational frameworks for her poems. Although she chose to use poetic structures as a "cage"

earlier in her career, her ideal poem was no longer one which used “tricks” and was worked out with such meticulousness, but is instead a more spontaneous and rapid outpouring.

### CHAPTER 3

#### “HER KIND”: BECOMING ANNE SEXTON

Sexton developed a formal ritual when she became an established poet: she began each of her readings with her “signature poem,” “Her Kind” (BP). She would preface her reading with this disclaimer: “I’ll read you this poem, and then you’ll know just what kind of a poet I am, just what kind of a woman I am. And then if anyone wishes to leave, they may do so.”<sup>1</sup> Sexton’s performances at her readings could thus be said to have been a (re-)presentation of the “kind of poet” and the “kind of woman” she wanted the public to view her as.

This chapter will show that Anne Sexton was a poet who was very aware of her audience, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Sexton’s friends and family sometimes accused her of acting out the metaphors of madness that she presented in her poetry, or perhaps it was the reverse: that she aggravated the symptoms of her madness so that she could write about them in her poetry. In tracing the development of her writing career, I will attempt to understand how her writing shaped her life and vice versa, and how, as poetry-writing developed from therapy to hobby to vocation, the idea of poetic personality and the reality trope became entangled with her own personality, which caused her audience and her critics to find it extremely difficult to distinguish one from the other.

#### **The journey from housewife to poet**

Middlebrook’s biography of Anne Sexton is the only biography that has been written about her, and it ties the genesis of Sexton’s writing career to the depressive breakdown Sexton had after the birth of her second daughter, Joyce, and her subsequent psychiatric treatment. According to Middlebrook, about a month after a suicide attempt in 1956, Sexton watched Harvard Professor I. A. Richards on television while he was lecturing on the sonnet. Recognising that writing a sonnet was

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<sup>1</sup> The source for this remark comes from lecture five of the Colgate University series of lectures. The full quote from her lecture notes reads:

The first poem I’d like to consider is my standard introductory poem. I have never given a reading without reading “Her Kind” first off. I always say “I’ll read you this poem, and then you’ll know just what kind of a poet I am, just what kind of a woman I am. And then if anyone wishes to leave, they may do so.” The first time I made this statement and read the poem – and this was at Harvard – the wife of the head of the English Department rose solemnly from her front row seat and walked out. So much for first times. So much for silly statements. It never happened again. (HRC)

something that she could perhaps do, Sexton wrote a few, and gave them to her psychiatrist at the time, Martin Orne. “He said they were wonderful,” Sexton later recalled in an interview. “I kept writing and writing and giving them all to him – just from transference; I kept writing because he was approving” (Biography 42).

Sexton suffered from a severe lack of self-esteem, as do many others with depression, but hers was in great part due to a lack of formal education. She had only finished high school, and was unable to find personal fulfilment as a housewife and mother. “Anne had no resources she could recognise,” explained Orne. “My task was to help her develop any resources within her which allowed her to be a person, and allowed her to form relationships on a healthier basis than before” (Biography 43). That writing can give one a sense of worth is a common sentiment; Deborah Philips, author of Writing Well: Creative Writing and Mental Health points out that writing is “one of the easiest means of allowing people to recognise that they have the abilities and the means to produce interesting and creative work within themselves” (13-14). Sexton’s personal myth, which she often repeated in interviews, was about her post-depression creative awakening: “Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn’t know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn’t know I had any creative depths” (NES 84). Writing poetry was initially a therapeutic exercise because it was an activity for which she possessed a hitherto undiscovered talent, and it was a skill she showed remarkable motivation in attempting to improve. At the HRC I saw that many of her earlier poems underwent numerous drafts. Middlebrook records that

with an astonishing sense of purpose given her emotional state, Sexton threw herself into writing. [...] Between January and December of 1957 she brought Orne over sixty poems. These were not diary entries or drafts but finished works, carefully typed on white erasable bond paper and usually dated. (Biography 45)

And, according to Orne, “once Anne was assured that she was really able to write poetry, she almost could not stop. Writing poetry thus became the driving force” (Biography xiv). Kumin remembers that Sexton sometimes put a poem through twenty or more drafts (xxv). In Sexton’s words, “I had found something to *do* with

my life” (NES 85).<sup>2</sup> For someone who believed her academic background to have appeared “anaemic and without interest” (as she herself described in her application to the Radcliffe Institute in 1961, even after she had become a published poet [Biography 145]), and whose self-esteem had suffered the crushing effects of clinical depression, discovering her talent in poetry must have bolstered her self-confidence; it was no wonder then that she poured all her efforts into this particular activity.<sup>3</sup>

Orne encouraged Sexton to further pursue her education, but without family support for a university degree, she instead enrolled a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education that was taught by John Holmes. In retrospect, this workshop was probably a better launch pad for her writing career than a formal college course in literature might have been, and it was fortunate for Sexton that her first poetry teacher was “a kind man and an experienced, dedicated teacher” as Holmes was (Biography 50). And it is also the opinion of Kumin, that as Sexton was “untrammelled by a traditional [literary] education,” she did not attempt to emulate the writing of others, but instead was able to form “her own independent, quirky, and incisive judgements” (xxviii), arriving at a writing style that was uniquely her own. Attending Holmes’s class not only helped her to hone her writing skills, but also gave her a community with which she could identify. As she told an interviewer:

The most important aspect of the class was that I felt I belonged somewhere. When I first got sick and became a displaced person, I thought I was quite alone, but when I went into the mental hospital, I found I wasn’t, that there were other people like me. It made me feel better – more real, sane. I felt, “These are my people.” Well, at the John Holmes workshop that I attended for two years, I found I belonged to the poets, that I was *real* there, and I had another, “These are my people.” (NES 87, emphasis in the original)

Having previously been alienated from her family and friends due to her mental breakdowns, Sexton identified with the mentally-ill she met at the mental hospital, as well as with the poets she met at the workshop. This sense of belonging to a community, along with her having received positive feedback for her writing from a

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<sup>2</sup> This quote is taken from the interview with Barbara Kevles (NES 83-111); the emphasis appears in the transcript.

<sup>3</sup> Sexton had first dabbled in poetry-writing when she was in high school, but stopped writing when her mother accused her of plagiarizing Sara Teasdale, and wrote no poetry for the next ten years (Biography 21).

professional writer and teacher, as well as the work she did with a diligent psychiatrist, aided her in putting together her injured psyche.

Because her early attempts at writing were tied to her psychiatric treatment, and because she viewed herself as a “fugitive from the analyst’s couch” (Biography 51), her 1957 poems were mostly about her therapy, as the titles of some of these unpublished poems indicate: “Appointment Hour”; “The End of the Illusion”; “One Patient Released Today”; “Some Hope”; “The Poems I Gave You”; “A Foggy Adjustment” (Biography 52). And it was from this subject matter that most of the poems in her first published collection emerged, which was titled To Bedlam and Part Way Back. Several of the poems eventually published in Bedlam were also asylum- and therapy-themed, for example, “You, Doctor Martin,” “Kind Sir, These Woods,” “Music Swims Back to Me,” “Said the Poet to the Analyst,” just to name a few. While “Bedlam” is a general term for “uproar and confusion” (COED), the word colloquially used also refers to the mental asylum, as it is specifically derived from the name of the world’s first and oldest institution of care for the mentally ill, Bethlam Hospital (first located in London [originally as St. Mary of Bethlehem Hospital], but is now in Kent). While the title of the collection suggests a journey to madness that the poet-speaker has not quite returned from, Sexton seemed to have derived a palliation from writing that she wanted to share with others who were similarly emotionally troubled; Orne recalls that “soon after [Sexton’s] poetry began to be published, she found that many troubled individuals sought her guidance and counsel. Indeed, she took great pride in being able to help others with similar pain” (Biography xvi). Writing was, for Sexton, not only a source of personal pride and achievement, but also an activity through which she felt she could contribute to society, to help especially those who suffered from mental turmoil like she herself did. In fact, in 1968, after she had established herself in the poetry community by winning several awards including the Pulitzer Prize, Sexton conducted weekly workshops for patients at McLean Hospital, a mental institution she had once been hospitalised at, in the belief that poetry might have therapeutic value for them just as it had for her. Phoebe Pettingell notes: “Her psychiatrist was right: She did possess the ability to show others how universal private emotions might be” (18). For Sexton, the activity of writing poetry was closely tied to her experience and understanding of mental illness.

Early in her therapy with Dr. Orne, Sexton committed what she called “truth crimes,” making up stories about being molested by a family friend as well as about an alternate personality named Elizabeth (Biography 62-63). “I am acting the part of a nice case history,” she later confessed to her psychiatrist. Orne encouraged her to channel her creativity into the more productive act of poetry-writing, and it is her biographer’s opinion that through her therapy,

she came to understand that the symptoms of her mental illness were like metaphors, encoding meanings rich with personal history. In pursuit of such meanings during therapy sessions, she learned techniques of rapid association that later proved valuable at her desk, and later still in the classroom. (Biography 64).

Madness was one of the metaphors through which she understood herself; she even admitted that some of her suicide attempts via overdose were a “*substitute*: it’s the same symbolic act, but there’s a difference between taking something that will kill you and something that will kill you momentarily” (Biography 165, Sexton’s emphasis). In another letter to her psychiatrist, she reiterates the symbolic quality of death in her writings: “Writing about it [i.e. death] is my way of mastering experience” (Linda Sexton, Searching 190). And it was through the poetic representation of emotional pain that Sexton discovered the writer in herself and worked out a new self, attempting to sort through her emotional turmoil to re-create an identity. When her work began to be published in various magazines, she invented a new identity, submitting her poems under the name of “Anne Sexton” (her maiden name was Anne Gray Harvey) rather than “Mrs. A. M. Sexton” (which she had used initially), a gesture of independence from being her parents’ daughter, as well as her husband’s wife.<sup>4</sup> In 1960, the year that Bedlam was published by Houghton Mifflin, Sexton wrote “poet” under the “occupation” column of her income tax statement for the first time (Letters 31), which clearly indicated that she saw her activity of poetry-writing as a vocation or a career, a new purpose in her life, rather than merely a pastime. “In the field I have chosen, to be halfway is to be nothing,” wrote Sexton, in notes to her doctor. “There is no point in being half a poet. [... My] poetry has got to be so good that people who shrug will read and not forget the feeling of their shrug”

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<sup>4</sup> It was a common practice for many married women in Sexton’s time to be formally referred to by their husband’s names rather than their own.

(Biography 65). She wrote to her husband in 1957, explaining to him why she felt compelled to write:

I think I am beginning, and I do mean just beginning, to find myself – you realise that I MUST find my own self and be something or someone, not necessarily in any concrete manner, but in a personal manner – However, I am growing and I am doing it alone [...]. (Letters 24, Sexton’s emphasis)

Familiar with the symptoms of madness, and identifying with those around her who also suffered from various manifestations of madness, Sexton used the metaphors of madness to express herself when she began writing poetry.

### **Writing as therapy**

It can be argued that poetry-writing and psychotherapy share some similar characteristics: psychoanalysis, a branch of psychotherapy, is also known as the “talking cure” (a term coined by one of Sigmund Freud’s patients, pseudonymously named “Anna O.”) in which a patient tells and re-tells their chaotic or traumatic experience to a psychoanalyst and, over time, works that into a personal myth that she can accept. In her poetry-writing, Sexton also attempted to work out the complicated and multifaceted experience of her breakdowns into one that made sense; she herself drew the parallel between psychotherapy in her ninth Colgate University lecture:

It is the split self, it seems to me, that is the mad woman. When writing you make a new reality and become whole. It is as if I were operating on myself and suturing on the arms and legs, placing the heart, settling the intestines. Much of my poetry is the poetry of a cripple, yet the act of creation cures for a time. [...] It is like lying on an analyst’s couch, re-enacting a private terror, and the creative mind is the analyst who gives pattern and meaning to what the persona sees as only incoherent experience. (HRC)

In Sexton’s words, “one must make a logic out of suffering or one is mad. All writing of poems is sanity, because one makes a reality, a sane world, out of insane happenings” (HRC). One way to impose order onto experience is, as elaborated on in chapter two, by controlling the structure in which one writes about it. Another is through the act of poetry-writing which, similar to the way one is able to in psychotherapy, one formulates a narrative of one’s suffering. The experience worked

out in the “talking cure” need not necessarily be something factual, and may instead be (an) alternative version(s) to what had actually happened; i.e. a “new reality.” The historical accuracy of what had happened to her was less important than her being able to arrive at a version of her past (and subsequently, of the self that she had become) that she was able to accept. For Sexton, the version of her becoming a poet was the one she had related to Kevles in the interview mentioned earlier, which is similar to this account in another interview with Patricia Marx:

[It] was actually a personal experience, because I had had a nervous breakdown, and as I was recovering I started to write, and I got more and more serious about it, and I started out writing almost a poem a day. It was kind of a rebirth at twenty-nine. (NES 70)

There were those who did not agree or approve of this exaggerated, sensational persona that Sexton adopted. Kumin had said that when she first met Sexton, she “was put off by Sexton’s self-dramatizing references to the mental hospital” (*Biography* 69); Holmes, instead of being proud of his student’s *Bedlam* manuscript, wrote to her: “It bothers me that you use poetry this way” (*Biography* 98). While Sexton found her poetry therapeutic, insisting that through her writing she was reborn, both her best friend and her mentor, as well as some other critics, were of the opinion that through her poetry, she was dramatising the part of the mad poet *ad nauseam*. Instead of using poetry as therapy to recover from her mental illness, she maintained her public persona as that of a mad poet as it was this persona which made her poetry well-received by the reading public as well as by editors.

Someone who has been institutionalised – because he is has been labelled as a mental patient, and because he has been treated as such by his doctor, those in his immediate social circle, his caregivers in the hospital, as well as by other patients in the institution – can begin to adopt the mantle of one who is “mentally ill.” This label extends to how the person thinks of themselves, from their actions to their entire identity. Perhaps this was what Sexton meant when she called those in Holmes’ workshop who were also “fugitives from the analysts’ couch” her people, and also perhaps she why adopted the identity of the mad poet. There was ample readership for asylum poetry, as evidenced by the critical and popular success of W. D. Snodgrass’ “Heart’s Needle.” This extended poem about the poet’s personal life and struggle with mental illness was published in his first book of the same name in 1959 and earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1960. Poetry is, as Sexton puts it, “the business of words”; in

order to become a successful poet, it is not merely enough for one to write good poetry. To her agent, Cindy Degener, Sexton wrote: “I am in love with money, so don’t be mistaken, but first I want to write good poems. After that I am as anxious as hell to make money and fame and bring all the stars down” (Letters 287-88). She marketed her image so well that “by the end of her life she was among the best-paid poetry performers in America” (Biography 272). As Linda Sexton recalls, “my mother was a dramatic woman, an actress, a publicity hound and wise in the way of business” (Linda Sexton, Searching 20). Sexton was a savvy businesswoman; thus when she realised that her asylum poetry was well-received by the reading public, it made sense to her career for her to continue writing such poetry, despite her family and friends’ protests.

### **The making of a poetic persona**

In the earlier part of Sexton’s career, she still appeared to believe that writing held therapeutic value for her. In her interview with Patricia Marx, published in 1966, she said:

the act of writing actually puts things back in place. I mean, things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into order again, and the world is again a little more sensible, and real. I’m more in touch with things. (NES 72-73)

Shakespeare implores us, in Macbeth, to “give sorrow words” (4.3.209), but the description “talking cure” that is often given to psychoanalysis can be somewhat misleading, as enunciating one’s trauma cannot permanently cure “madness.” Middlebrook has quoted, both in her writings on Sexton as well as in Sexton’s biography Sexton’s assertion that “poetry led me by the hand out of madness. I am hoping I can show others that route” (Biography 309). In the preface to her biography of Sexton, Middlebrook opines: “Sexton’s life ended in suicide that was the act of a lonely and despairing alcoholic, but might have ended much earlier if she had not, almost miraculously, found something else profoundly important to do with it” (Biography xx-xxi). Yet in 1968, after years of psychotherapy and poetry-writing, Sexton herself opposed the notion of the curative powers of poetry: “I am still poking at this dry page and trying to write this poem that will exorcise my feeling, fumbling for a childhood, catching at love [...]. [Writing] certainly did not create mental health” (NES 61, 71). She said elsewhere: “There’s a big change after you write a

poem. It's a marvellous feeling, and there's a big change in the psyche, [...] a small miracle, which lasts for a couple of days. Then on to the next" (NES 82). In Gill's words, "any unity is sporadic and temporary" (Confessional 98). As Sexton said in her ninth Colgate University lecture, "the act of creation cures for a time" (HRC), but not permanently.

Since the persona of mad poet made her writing popular and made her famous, she may have felt compelled to continue portraying herself as such due to the demand from her reading audience. A poet is a vocation like any other, and market forces play a great part in determining how successful a poet's career is. Yet by playing the part of the mad poet that she felt her readers wanted, Sexton "cast herself as a rigid caricature – the sexy, crazy poetess – from which she could ultimately not break free" (11), as Barbara S. Lewin observes. It is Middlebrook's opinion that "like many people, Sexton feared that psychotherapy, in making her well, would rob her of her unconscious" ("Method" 14). Sexton admitted in an interview:

About three or four years ago my analyst asked me what I thought of my parents having intercourse when I was young. I couldn't talk. I knew there was suddenly a poem there, and I selfishly guarded it from him. Two days later, I had a poem [...]. (NES 85-86)

It is possible that she might have resisted the ameliorative effects of psychotherapy because she feared it would clear her murky unconscious, or because through psychotherapy she had discovered particular insights which might have better served her in poetry-writing. Bronfen's opinion is that "in a sense all of Anne Sexton's poetry is driven by a desire to tear open again the seams meant to heal narcissistic wounds, not simply to accept psychic scars" (313). Middlebrook records that Sexton periodically went off her medication (Thorazine<sup>5</sup>) because it impeded her writing, and increased her skin's sensitivity to the sun which she loved, despite being aware that when she was unmedicated she would risk suffering from bouts of mania. When Sexton discovered that her identity and livelihood lay in poetry-writing, which found its genesis in her mental illness, might she have resisted being "cured"? A cure might make her lose her madness and as a result, much of her subject matter, and possibly her identity as well. Rather than lead her "by the hand out of madness," her

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<sup>5</sup> The generic name for Thorazine is chlorpromazine.

determination to succeed as a poet may have kept her there. She thus might not have viewed sanity as an ideal state, as her *raison d'être* was her poetry.

It may be tempting to read Sexton's poetry as a direct account of her madness, but a discerning reader needs to approach the poems with the awareness that Sexton transformed the events of her life for poetic purposes. Her poetry was not just a biographical account of her life and suffering, which would be an extremely solipsistic reading of it. If one found it absolutely necessary to classify her writing under a particular label, then "Middle Generation" would probably be a better one than "confessionalism," because the latter term misleads readers to the tendency of reading poems such as those in Bedlam as autobiographical accounts of Sexton's mental illness. The term "confessional" has become a pejorative one over time, as Alan Williamson laments (in 2001): "confessional poetry – almost from the moment that unfortunate term was coined – has been the whipping boy of half a dozen newer schools, New Surrealism, New Formalism, Language poetry" (51). Sexton herself soon tired of being called a confessional poet, but decided to take matters into her own hands by proclaiming, "at one time I hate being called confessional and denied it, *mea culpa*. Now I say that I'm the *only* confessional poet" (Letters 372, emphasis Sexton's), indicating perhaps that she viewed what she did in her poetry as a unique transformation of her own life and its events. It has been colloquially said that "you write what you know," which is what Sexton and the other Middle Generation writers (as well as the Beat writers) often do.

In this study of Sexton's poetry, I choose to read her poetry as an exploration of shared experiences, or the projection of her experience onto that of imagined speakers. Thus when Sexton's personae speak of mental illness, they are not just talking about Sexton's experience with mental illness, but rather that shared experience of what we perceive madness to be. In an interview, Sexton said:

Many of my poems are true, line by line, altering a few facts to get the story at its heart. [...] But then, poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical. It is the truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life. I don't adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed. (NES 103)

Sexton's writings explore different notions of madness from different points of view through the voices of adopted personae, rather than remain static and examine madness from one perspective, that of "Anne Sexton." She said:

it's a difficult label, "confessional," because I'll often confess to things that never happened. As I once said to someone, if I did all the things I confess to, there would be no time to write a poem. So, you know, I mean I'll often assume the first person and it's someone else's story. It's just very amenable to me to kind of climb into that persona and tell their story. (NES 133-34)

In another interview, when asked if she "often distort[ed] the literal facts of [her] life to present the emotional truth that lies under them," she replied:

Well, I think that is necessary. [...] [T]o make it clear and dramatic [...], you must distort some of these facts to give them their own clarity. [...] So you don't have to include everything to tell the truth. You can exclude many things. You can even lie (one can confess and lie forever) as I did in the poem of the illegitimate child that the girl had to give up. It hadn't happened to me. It wasn't true, and yet it was indeed the truth. (NES 75)

Like a chameleon, Sexton is extremely adept at blending into the lives of her personae, even though they adopt many different voices: that of a mental patient, child, mother, orator, storyteller, "Anne," "Ms Dog," "Mrs Sexton," "the author of the Jesus Papers," just to name a few. Yet in the background she is always there, linking the poems to each other with her authorial presence, somehow always akin to the characters and personae in her poetry – with husbands, lovers, daughters, mothers, fathers, and even aunts – by telling and re-telling their stories through her poetry. Sexton embarked on her career by defining her poetic world first through metaphors of madness, though subsequently her range of subject matter was broadened to include other topics such as spirituality, the re-telling and transformation of fairy tales, the relationships between men and women, war and other political issues, but backgrounding almost all of her poems is the spectre of mortality which probably originates from a poet's life troubled by madness and suicide.

"For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" was one of Sexton's early poems exploring notions of madness. It was written in response to Holmes' disapproval of her Bedlam poems, the manuscript of which she had shown him. Sexton has often been criticised for her subject material, which include many "taboo" topics such as madness, mental institutions, or other (what Julia Kristeva might call "abject") topics such as menstruation, menopause, abortion, excrement, or other

subjects that would generally not be discussed in genteel company, and which she had originally tried to control with formal poetic structure. In Sexton's words, this "certain frank style" (NES 78) and what Lewin describes as the persona of "crazy sexy poetess" (11), which she adopted and developed throughout her writing career carried onto her readings and public appearances. Linda Sexton recalls an occasion when Sexton gave a reading with her friend Kumin, and that Kumin was disgruntled with Sexton's behaviour both during and after the reading, making some sort of remark that the dramatic show Sexton staged was "prostitution" (Linda Sexton, Searching 162). There were many who strongly disapproved of the poetic persona Sexton had chosen to adopt and pursue.

However, Sexton felt that choosing to portray madness and to discuss it in her poetry was something that helped her to deal with her mental illness. As her speaker says in "For John," the poem (as are many of her poems) seeks to enforce "a certain sense of order" on "the narrow diary of my mind, / in the common places of the asylum." For the speaker, the mind itself is a kind of mental institution, a place in which she is incarcerated and defined by her madness. The poem was thus not intended to be "beautiful," or proper, but instead meant to enforce on her madness "a certain sense of order." In a manner similar to that of psychotherapy, the speaker sees poetry as a way to bring order to the fragmented and chaotic experience of madness, rather than to present it in an aesthetically pleasing manner. The speaker attempts to describe to "John" how a poem can convey, to a limited extent, the experience of madness in terms that he can understand. To the speaker, madness "was glass, an inverted bowl," which calls to mind Sylvia Plath's metaphor for her protagonist, Esther Greenwood's madness, as a "bell jar" in her novel of the same name. These various metaphors for madness all suggest that madness has the quality of separating its sufferer from the rest of the world, yet they are still able to observe it, albeit in a distorted version due to their mental disturbances.

The speaker acknowledges that the poem is only able to provide a limited perspective, and that it initially shares only "the narrow diary of my mind." The "cracked mirror" indicates that her view of her self has been distorted, just as the "cracked [...] glass" and "inverted bowl" through which she perceives her surroundings indicates that madness has affected how she contemplates the world. Yet through this emotional turmoil, the speaker goes on to attempt "to give you [i.e. John] something else, / something outside of myself," just as Sexton's poems often

find their genesis in something that she herself has experienced, but which she has enlarged into order to reach what she calls “a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one” (NES 74). When “For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach” (BP) was published, Ralph Mills, a literary critic, inferred that the poem was about Sexton’s dead brother, but she had none.<sup>6</sup> She said to him, “Ralph, I had no brother, but then didn’t we all have brothers who died in the war?” (NES 136). “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” (BP) was taken by the people in her husband’s town to have been an autobiographical account of her giving up her illegitimate baby, as she revealed in one of her lectures.

The poetic persona that Sexton adopts is one that appears to be directly addressing her reading audience about the facts of her personal life when in fact, this “truthful” mask was just a persona. Ostriker is of the opinion that in Sexton’s writing, “‘you’ [...] is the pronoun she employs, I would not be surprised to learn, more than any other poet in English” (“Anne Sexton” 161). John McLeod reminds us that a “narrative implies a *relational* world. A story exists in a space between teller and audience [...]. A story is performance” (38, McLeod’s emphasis). In most of her poems, Sexton chose to let her speakers directly address the audience, convincing them that it is her that is telling them the story, when it is in actual fact just a “performance” that her speaker is putting on for her readers. Thus when her speaker in “For John” says that the poem is “something outside of myself,” she is cautioning “John” against reading the poem as mere autobiography, and advising him to read the poem as having a larger truth. The speaker in this poem attempts to go beyond the “narrow diary of [her] mind,” so that her account of madness could possibly “be, finally, / an accident of hope” for “John.” She points out that although initially “It is a small thing / to rage in your own bowl,” by sharing her experience it could then become “more than myself; / it was you, or your house or your kitchen,” i.e. something that “John” could himself identify with.

Madness is, in “For John,”

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<sup>6</sup> Mill’s essay on Sexton’s poetry is reprinted in Colburn’s *Anne Sexton*. In it, he surmises that the death of “Johnny Pole” is the loss of one of many family members in Sexton’s life, confusing fact with fiction. He writes:

Mrs. Sexton’s parents are both dead – her mother died of cancer, her father died a few months after her mother; her brother was killed on a beachhead during the war; the great aunt she loved so fiercely in her childhood succumbed to deafness and to a resulting mental breakdown. Thus the poetry founded on such figures is one of bittersweet memory and loss. (113)

[...] my awkward bowl,  
 with all its cracked stars shining,  
 like a complicated lie,  
 and fasten a new skin around it  
 as if I were dressing an orange  
 or a strange sun.

When one creates a narrative, one attempts to make it whole and rational by filling in the missing parts, and making it into a linear, sensible, coherent story. Sacks writes, “experience is not *possible* unless it is organised iconically; action is not *possible* unless it is organised iconically. ‘The brain’s record’ of everything – everything alive – must be iconic” (156, italics in the original). The brain puts together the broken fragments in order to make a whole image. The speaker is taking the fragmented parts of her story, which she says is “like a complicated lie,” and attempts to give it wholeness by fastening a “new skin” around it to hold it together. Ostriker points out the “absurdity of trying to put the peel back on an orange, [and] the impossibility of ‘dressing’ an orange / or a strange sun,” then suggests that the speaker is attempting to bandage a broken, inanimate object (“Anne Sexton” 158). The bowl cannot be healed, and can only be put together temporarily. In its cracked state, it can no longer function the way a bowl is meant to, i.e. to contain liquids, even though in its bandaged appearance it may appear to be able to do so, hence it is a “lie,” a trick that leads the viewer to believe that it is whole when it actually it not. Sexton used the word “trick” more than once in reference to her poetry; she wrote to her psychiatrist:

If I write RATS and discover that rats reads STAR backwards, and amazingly STAR is wonderful and good because I found it in rats, then is star untrue? [...] Of course I KNOW that words are just a counting game, I know this until the words start to arrange themselves and write something better than *I* would ever know. [...] All I am is the trick of words writing themselves. (Biography 82)

When a poem appears to ring true to the poet’s life and seems like an autobiographical account, it may possibly be a “trick.” Sexton enjoyed word games – “rat’s star” and “rats live on no evil star” (which was “a palindrome found on the side of a barn in Ireland,” and is also a title of one of her poems [DN]) were two of her favourite palindromes; in her ninth of her Colgate University lectures, Sexton explains: “Rat’s star, by the way, is a palindrome. It reads backwards the same way as

it reads forwards. Rats is star spelled backwards. [...] It means something to me. My husband thinks it's crazy and has no meaning" (HRC). Palindromes and other poetic "tricks" held great significance and fascination for Sexton, even though they had no meaning for pragmatic non-poets. Sexton enjoyed how words were able to come into place, rhyming or reflecting each other in ways that she, the writer, had never intended them to. They might even have been accidental, as she admitted to her students in her seventh Colgate University lecture: "I have a confession to make. Some of the best metaphors are metaphors by mistake. By type, by mis-hearing or by misstriking a key" (HRC).

In a poem entitled "An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love"<sup>7</sup> her speaker celebrates how the name of such vile creatures as RATS can be reversed into a beautiful word like STAR without the writer intending it to,<sup>8</sup> and how words can be connected to each other as homonyms (such as "write," "right" and "rite"), or anagrams ("rites," "tiers," "tries"), or words that physically resemble each other ("star," "stare," "store"). In her writing Sexton worked at transforming the negative experiences of her own life into the creative work that was her poetry, which may have been what she was alluding to when she named her collection of re-told Grimms' fairy tales Transformations.<sup>9</sup> Another poem, "For God While Sleeping" (BP) started off as an experiment as an acrostic poem, with the first and last letters of each line, when read from top to bottom, spelling out:

STARBUCKSLUSTISNAUGHTYANDSICKHE

Tuckshistrickinacausticacrostic (HRC)<sup>10</sup>

The acrostic does not survive to the final published version of the poem, but it was literary tricks like this that Sexton liked to play when she was trying to figure out a way into a new poem. Such "tricks" are, in "For John," "complicated lie[s]," the appearance of wholeness and sense in a poem which does not in actuality exist.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This poem was first published in voices: A Journal of Poetry in 1959. It appears as the epigraph for No Evil Star but is not included in her Complete Poems.

<sup>8</sup> In "Rowing" (AR) the speaker refers to "the rat inside of me, / the gnawing pestilential rat." According to Middlebrook, "'rat' was one of Sexton's metaphors for her sick self" (Biography 124).

<sup>9</sup> The subtitle to Kirsch's work on the Middle Generation poets is "Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets"; "transformation" was indeed also a theme in Sexton's own poetry, and was also a title of one of her collections.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> In "Flee on Your Donkey" [BP 4-11] the speaker laments that  
 [...] disorder is not what it was.  
 I have lost the trick of it!  
 The innocence of it!

At the end of “For John,” the speaker reiterates that in this poem she “found some order there,”

[...] this kind of hope.  
 This is something I would never find  
 in a lovelier place, my dear,  
 although your fear is anyone’s fear,  
 like an invisible veil between us all...<sup>12</sup>  
 and sometimes in private,  
 my kitchen, your kitchen,  
 my face, your face.

In response to this portion of the poem, Bronfen writes:

Twice [the speaker] notes that her kitchen – the site of both family constraints and family bonds that has become uncanny, owing to her madness and her poetic confession – merges with the kitchen of the very teacher who calls for restraints, that her face becomes his [...]. Apparently, whoever engages with the gift [the speaker] offers can no longer protect her- or himself against its infection. (320)

While the word “infection” has negative connotations, perhaps one could rephrase Bronfen’s sentiment to say that with Sexton’s tendency to address the audience as “you,” it becomes almost impossible for the audience to remain separate from the experience which is being played out in the poem. The title of this poem comes from Bedlam’s epigraph, which quotes from a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe: “But most of us carry in our heart Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God’s sake not to enquire further....”<sup>13</sup> In “inquiring further” the truth of his heritage, Oedipus comes to a terrible realisation of his identity and what he has inadvertently done. The opinion of the speaker is that this epiphany leads to “some sort of order” – self-knowledge – something which may (or may not) be “beautiful” or “an accident of hope.” Sexton said: “I write very personal poems but I hope that they will become the central theme

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The speaker in this poem is ambivalent about going to the asylum to be “cured” of her madness, because for her madness equates to a “fruitful linguistic chaos” (Gill, Poetics 153). In Sexton’s poetic philosophy, as well as that of many of the Middle Generation poets, extremes of mood and emotion are inspiration and topics for poetry. One is able to write successful poetry if one is able to transform one’s pain into art.

In another poem, “The Dead Heart” (AR 36-37), “EVIL” juxtaposed against “death,” suggests, without directly mentioning, “live.”

<sup>12</sup> The ellipses appear in the original poem, and there is no missing text here.

<sup>13</sup> The ellipses are from the original epigraph to the poem. There is no missing text.

to someone else's private life" (NES 50); from what is personal and private to her ("my kitchen"; "my face"), it can become to what is personal and private to the addressee ("your kitchen"; "your face"). In reading this poem, the speaker hopes that "John" will come to a realisation about himself, rather than take a limited reading of the poem as just a record of the speaker's own experience.

There are times, when one reads Sexton's poems, when one is unsure whether the speaker's voice is that of the "Anne Sexton" we believe to be the poet, or whether it is a carefully and elaborately constructed persona. That we are actually in a state of ambivalence as to whose voice it is speaks to the success of the poetic persona that Sexton has so skilfully created. In the next chapter I will be discussing some of the different types of personae Sexton adopted in her poetry, and how she developed and exploited them across her writing career.

### **Becoming and Being "Her Kind"**

In this study of the construction of Sexton's poetic persona, it would do well to look at in greater detail the poem she herself called her "signature poem," and with which she began her readings with once she became an established poet, "Her Kind." This poem exemplified the "kind of poet" and "the kind of woman" she wanted to present to her audience. The drafts of Sexton's poems are loose sheets in folders kept inside boxes, and are frequently not stored in chronological order, so there is no way to determine exactly how the poem evolved. However, in the folder that contains the drafts for "Her Kind," there are two early versions titled "Witch" and are numbered "1<sup>st</sup>" and "2<sup>nd</sup>" in pencil on the top right corners of the page.<sup>14</sup> The document after that resembles almost word-for-word the final version of "Her Kind," and has "3<sup>rd</sup>" written in pencil on the top right corner, along with the title "Witch" cancelled out, and "Her Kind" written in pencil next to it.<sup>15</sup> While the earlier two versions bear little resemblance to the final version of "Her Kind," they do provide interesting insights into the published version's genesis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Numbered drafts are a rarity in the archives of Sexton's manuscripts. While there is a "certain sense of order" in her meticulous storage of her poems' drafts, most of them are not kept in the order that they had been written.

The main difference between the two drafts seem to be line breaks: the second version has shorter verse lines, which gives the effect of bring more abrupt and truncated.

<sup>15</sup> There is a fourth typewritten version of the poem which is the version that finally appears in print. On the top right corner Sexton had written in pencil: "3<sup>rd</sup> fixed a little – July 1959. I took one week to complete."

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix B.

According to Middlebrook, “Her Kind” started off as “Night Voice on a Broomstick” in December 1957, which was recrafted to “Witch” and then later to “Her Kind” in July 1959 (Biography 113). ““Witch,”” comments Middlebrook, “is spoken through a mask by a dramatic persona and offers a psychological portrait of a social type” (Biography 114). When expanding the poem and elaborating it into the final version which became “Her Kind,” Sexton chose three personae in three stanzas: a witch, a housewife, and an adulteress, all of whom were fictional, and all of whom Sexton used to represent her public personality. Sexton’s readings were performances for her, and her personae were thus her costumes. Middlebrook points out that in using this poem as the archetypal poem which Sexton used to represent her self and her poetry, “it was a most dramatic gesture, and one that Maxine Kumin disliked (she thought Sexton’s readings were hammy), but it was the way Sexton stepped from person to persona” (115). The phrase “from person to persona” is an appropriate way of describing how Sexton was performing, and putting on a character, when she gave her readings. She was not attempting to show exactly her true self, but was putting on a display of whom she wanted her audience to see her as.

Before “Witch” became “Her Kind,” the speaker in the original “Witch” could be said to have had a smaller personality. The speaker locates herself in Massachusetts, and reveals that she wanders around Boston, as well as the Conchituate and Walden bodies of water. In “Her Kind,” however, the speaker does not limit herself to one locale, but is unspecific about her location, making herself a more universal and archetypal character. Walden (which is incidentally a pond, and not a lake as mentioned in this poem) is likely mentioned to remind the reader of Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, his non-fiction memoir of his time in the cabin in the woods at Walden Pond. In this book Thoreau advocates finding oneself in the simple life, and a quote from it appears as the epigraph to another Bedlam poem “Kind Sir, These Woods,” where the speaker finds herself through being lost. This reference to Walden suggests that the speaker leads a spartan and solitary life; she wanders the stark countryside alone, separate and separated from “the old masked men” and “the old white dogs / dressed like a pack of Irish children.” The repetition of “old” and the poverty of the “Irish Children” with which the dogs are compared sets up the poem’s *mise en scène* of old age, stark lighting and poverty, and the speaker’s situation as one of exile. She is alone, “No lover calls or bends” to her, “No pale arm waves me to the ground”; and for those who are able to see her, all they see is “a wicked apparition

[...] if they dare.” Rather than be noticed, this speaker is one who is mostly unobserved by those whom she passes, and is seen as evil by those who do manage to see her.

The speaker in “Her Kind,” however, has greater dimension and power. The latter version is written in first person, as are many of Sexton’s poems, and the first stanza reminds us of the lonely and outcast witch of the earlier draft. However, this speaker takes the initiative to venture into the world (“I have gone out”), rather than to be passively isolated. The speaker seems to possess powers beyond her control (“possessed”; “out of mind”); Gill suggests that as the speaker is “braver at night” and “dream[s] evil,” these personae “are to be played out at night and in dreams and should not be confused with the real life of the poet” (23). The phrase “done my hitch” probably refers to the slang for a period of military service, suggesting that the speaker has committed herself to being different (or perhaps even deviant) from regular society. She is also “out of mind,” which Elizabeth Harries has interpreted to mean two things: “we can take ‘out of mind’ to mean both ‘out of *her* mind’ and forgotten, as in ‘out of sight / out of mind’” (124). She is also a “lonely thing,” one who is “not a woman, quite.” By using “Her Kind” as a signature poem for her readings, Sexton may have been pointing out she is different from other women and other poets, and also her underlying mental illness, as well as how she had been marginalised for her uniqueness and her madness. In her letter to Paul Brooks (her editor at Houghton Mifflin), she affirmed her sense of being ostracised: “of course I am a witch, an enchantress of sorts and have already been worshipped and hung and in the same order” (Letters 325).

Yet these three personae are not entirely separate, and Pollard suggests that “all three roles infect the others surrounding them” (4-5). They are also traditional archetypes for female deviance. The word “infection” is incidentally also used by Sexton in “Wanting to Die” (LD 58-59), which ends: “leaving the page of the book carelessly open, / something unsaid, the phone off the hook / and the love, whatever it was, an infection.” The love that suicides have, says the speaker, is a negative rather than positive affection, and harms the loved one just as an infection of illness does. The poem uses the word “suicide” to mean both the act of committing suicide (verb) as well as the suicidal person (noun). As earlier quoted, Bronfen also uses the term “infection” to describe the speaker’s effect on the addressee in “For John.” There is an agreement between poet and critic about the negative impact some of the poems’

speakers have on the reader, as well as the different personae in this poem. The speaker in the second stanza who makes her home in nature also possesses qualities of the marginalised witch in the first stanza as well as the ostracised adulteress in the third. While “Her Kind,” unlike “Witch,” does not contain the Walden reference, the second stanza suggests that she is able to make a home in nature, just as Thoreau did. She finds her abode in the “warm caves,” filling them with items of comfort and decoration in order to make hospitable the inhospitable, creating order in a chaotic world (“rearranging the disaligned”). Yet for all her domestic prowess, she is “misunderstood,” marginalised, because she is not quite human (“twelve-fingered,” from the first stanza) and crosses the line between human and supernatural (as one who “fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves”). And in the final stanza, the speaker confirms that she is alienated from society, as this time she is an adulteress on her way to be executed. Her arms are “nude,” reminding us of “nakedness,” the term the Beat writers used to describe the stark clarity with which they felt they were writing about the world around them. Gill reminds us that “naked” is also a word used to describe confessional writing (Confessional 24); this poem suggests that those who write from the persona of truth-telling and emotionality will be punished. Yet this speaker is a “survivor,” while defiantly being “not ashamed to die” or to face the consequences of her “nakedness.”

In beginning her readings with “Her Kind,” and using it to define the “kind of poet” and the “kind of woman” she was, Sexton began her readings on a note of defiance. Moving away from the more subdued defence of her poetic identity in “For John,” Sexton was displaying and flaunting her unruliness. Salvio reminds us that

Sexton’s subject matter and persona combined to violate the norms of what constituted a “civilized femininity” in post World War II suburban America. Her lecture notes, poetry, and public performances are fused with images of corporeal deviance that exceed the norms for being a good wife, obedient student, or respectful daughter. (Sexton 52)

No one in Sexton’s family “could understand why Anne wanted to breach the code of old Boston ethics upon which they had been raised by making family matters public” in her writing (Linda Sexton, Searching 35). But in an interview, Sexton’s contemporary and rival, Plath, said admiringly of Sexton’s choice of “peculiar private and taboo subjects” and unruly, badly-behaved women,

I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also of her experiences as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsmanlike poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something quite new and exciting. (Alvarez 62)

By calling herself “the *only* confessional poet,” it was likely Sexton was pointing out the taboos and rules of poetic conduct she was breaking by writing what she did, and developing her poetic personality as she did. To her, “Her Kind” embodied how she was not afraid of, or even embraced, being different and controversial.

### **Poetry as performance**

While poems in Bedlam and Pretty Ones were tight in structure and rich in formal effects, reviewers were looking for the same sorts of poems from Sexton's Live or Die collection onwards were disappointed with her increasingly loose style. But according to Middlebrook, Sexton was beginning to view her poetry as a “spoken art” (272), writing the poems more as “a published script for performance, with voice cues and pauses added” (273). This suggests that Sexton was perhaps anticipating, that her poems would be accessed more often as public performances rather than read in private.

Despite a broken hip, Sexton headed to London in July 1967 to give a reading at the annual Poetry International Festival. Although she was initially scheduled for only one reading at the festival, a no-show by John Berryman had Sexton filling his place in the opening-night programme, just before W. H. Auden's closing reading. Jon Stallworthy, Sexton's Oxford editor, recalls her behaviour as “ill-judged”:

When Anne had finished, she laid down her book, threw wide her arms like a pop singer embracing her audience, and blew them a fat kiss. It was in a hall that held about two thousand people, I should think, and they looked at her in disbelief and horror. It was the most grotesquely ill-judged gesture I've ever seen at a poetry reading. (Biography 278)

Once again Sexton had to face the criticism of being badly-behaved, just as she had been in her poetry-writing. While Stallworthy's condemnation of Sexton's behaviour may have, to a certain extent, originated from the cultural differences between American and English behaviour, there was no denying that Sexton viewed herself as

a celebrity, especially since she had received the Pulitzer Prize. Sylvia Plath had committed suicide in 1963 and left behind the unpublished manuscript of Ariel which later won her accolades; Sexton reputedly told her psychiatrist that same year: “I’ve been thinking I’ll write a book and leave it, so when I die it can be published posthumously” (Biography 201).<sup>17</sup>

Sexton also began to venture into popular culture in 1968. Following the suggestion of Robert Clawson, a high school teacher with whom she taught a course at a local high school, she started a chamber rock group, called “Anne Sexton and Her Kind,” that accompanied her readings with music. While Her Kind made Sexton’s writings accessible to the younger generation, there were others who were critical of this theatricality. Kumin recalls:

I hated her readings. They were so melodramatic and stagey. I felt they took away from the marvellous texture of the poems by making them into performances. I hated the way Anne pandered to an audience. I felt that way especially about the chamber rock group – even though it was my own darling son who wrote the music for “The Little Peasant.” (Biography 306)

Despite her detractors, Sexton’s work and performances continued to be popular. She requested exceptionally high fees (\$1000 by 1969 [Biography 319]), to appear at readings, and she put up dramatic and unforgettable performances at these events.<sup>18</sup> In 1969, her play Tell Me Your Answer True (originally titled The Cure) became Mercy Street and ran off-Broadway from October 3 to November 21. In 1970, she began a career as a university lecturer, receiving an appointment at Boston University and another at Colgate University in 1972; her writing, however, was receiving less positive critical acclaim, although she continued to be popular in mainstream publications such as Playboy and Cosmopolitan (Biography 337). Towards the end of her life, she struggled more and more with her alcoholism and dependence on prescription drugs, and emotionally she became more frail. With her diminished

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<sup>17</sup> The Death Notebooks was intended to be that book, but she eventually began publishing the poems intended for it in 1972 probably because she needed the money (Biography 361). The collection was eventually published several months before she died.

<sup>18</sup> According to Middlebrook, at readings Sexton dressed “in beautiful clothes” and traveled “with an entourage” (Biography 319). By 1974, the year of her death, her asking rate for appearing at readings was \$2000, although she usually settled for \$1500 (Biography 385). By then she was among the highest-paid poetry performers of her time.

career came a loss of self-esteem and loss of identity. It is possible that her declining career may have been one of the reasons that contributed to her suicide.

Sexton said, of her readings, “I am an actress in my own autobiographical play” (NES 109). It is difficult to determine where Anne the performer ends and where Anne the woman begins. “The Letting Down of the Hair,” a short story (or a “prose poem,” as Sexton herself calls it [Biography 359]) published in some editions of *The Book of Folly*, can be read as an allegory of this poet’s life.<sup>19</sup> The protagonist is the otherwise unnamed “The Lady of the Hair” who has never cut her hair, and her long, yellow hair reaches down five storeys. After her parents’ death she becomes a recluse, wearing white and living in the stone room at the top floor of her house. It is likely intentional that Sexton located her protagonist in the attic, alluding to the madwoman who is imprisoned in the attic in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, or to Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s melancholic Lady of Shalott. Both are reclusive, marginalised women like the one Sexton often portrayed herself as. Sexton herself wrote of being imprisoned in an attic in “Locked Doors” (AR 42-43):

However, there is a locked room up there  
with an iron door that can’t be opened.  
It has all your bad dreams in it.  
It is hell.

In the story, the performance of hair-drying is conducted from within the confines of the attic, where the mad are imprisoned, but when she hangs her hair out the window to dry it becomes a public spectacle. “I am becoming a tourist attraction,” she says, “and there is nothing I can do about it. The Grayline Bus arrives daily with a taped recording of facts – most of them false – about what I do and who I am” (87). Of her fans, she has “the college crowd who seems to have adopted me,” and “the people who have become very devoted or disgusted.” One fan refers to a psychologist on television who has talked about this woman and said that her “long hair is a symptom of a phobic fear of death” (88). Another fan calls her “Crazy-Hair” and tells her that she needs help (88). In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop in 1965, Sexton describes herself during readings as “rather like a whore, I think” (HRC), not discrepant with Kumin’s

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<sup>19</sup> The short story “was drafted and revised during the early to mid-1960s, and first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1972 and subsequently in *The Book of Folly*” (Gill, *Confessional* 116). Gill deduces that since Sexton referred to a story called “Hair” that she sent to her friend Ruth Soter on 16 March 1960, and that Soter died in 1964 with the story referring to the Ruth-character’s death, that the story was probably completed after this time (Gill, *Confessional* 197).

description of her reading performances. “Readings are a show” (*Letters* 150), wrote Sexton, during which she felt she prostituted herself for money. As Ostriker reminds us, “the quality of the relationship between poet and reader is never neutral. A poem is never simply an artifact, is always a transaction” (“Anne Sexton” 166). That the financial aspect of the relationship between reader and poet was always at the back of Sexton’s mind was not entirely surprising.

The lady with the hair believes that her hair indirectly caused her parents’ death, because one day her mother was so annoyed when her hair got caught in the pea soup that she shouted, “The sight of you! The sight of you makes me wish I were dead!” (84) The next day her mother gets “her wish” and dies in a car accident with her father. Her brother blames the protagonist for their death, and when he does rarely communicate with her, he sends her unpleasant notes. At the time of the story she is in her middle age; for years people have come to her house at noon to see her dry her hair out the window, and caring for her hair is the main activity with which she occupies her time. At the end of the story, her brother opens the trap door and speaks to her “for the first time in all these years” (90) to tell the woman that her only friend, Ruth, with whom she has been corresponding for years, has died. She had meant to ask Ruth about her situation: “Am I like a poet?” (89). But with Ruth gone, the many questions she had wanted to ask Ruth that will go unanswered: “I wanted to ask Ruth what my life meant” (90). But “there is no one to ask,” and of the people who wanted nothing but to see her hair, “I could hardly ask them” (90).

Those who “gawk” at her poetry use it to misinterpret and psychoanalyse her life, enjoying the performance that the poet is compelled to give because of reasons that they may not understand. In Sexton’s case, much of her public persona was adopted because she felt it helped her to become a successful and famous poet. Towards this performance she was ambivalent, because on the one hand it brought her fame and, to some extent, fortune, but on the other hand it placed a remarkable amount of stress on her frail psyche, her family, and ironically even on her ability to write.

Among Sexton’s manuscripts at the HRC there is a typewritten poem titled “The Green Room.”<sup>20</sup> On the top of the page Sexton typed: “Anne Sexton – Final Poem.” According to Middlebrook, Sexton had folded a copy of this poem and put it

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix C.

into her purse, and that it was “written for Schwartz” (*Biography* 395-96), Barbara Schwartz having been the psychiatric social worker Sexton had been seeing for psychotherapy at the time of her death. Although Middlebrook mentions that Sexton left her cigarettes and lighter in Schwartz’s office when she finished that day, she does not specify if Sexton had left behind the poem as well. The poem’s speaker tells the addressee, whom she calls “Lady, lady,” that she is looking “for death, for sleep, for the fumbled nirvana,” and pictures “the green room which you fill with morphine / and you kill the bad dreams, the awful sentences / that got stamped all over my body.” Yet the speaker’s “two mad selves have argued their way / out the door, to go sign up for the graveyard,” implying that her inner turmoil and confusion have abated, and

something in me is healing. [...]

I swing in water,

I am soaked in love

and, after forty-five years,

am given a home

where the shocks, the explosions are over.

There is a sense of resignation in the ending of the poem, where the speaker compels the “Lady” not to forget her: “Never tear me out!”

When one reads a poem that has been indicated as the poet’s final poem, and that she gave it to her psychologist on the last day of her life, it seems most appropriate to deduce that the poem’s speaker is anyone but the poet herself, since the poet often appeared to be unable to separate her psychic pain from her writing. It begs the question whether the poem is a “good” one or not, because of the baggage that the poem carries with it. If one reads the poem as Sexton’s last performance, one could choose to see the poem as a public farewell. Sexton had planned her posthumous performances; she had reserved poems to be published after her death (such as those in “Letters for Doctor Y.”), she had appointed a literary executor, she had saved her manuscripts and documents because she knew they would be a precious cultural commodity, and she had even appointed a biographer (Lois Ames, who eventually did not take up the role). She had probably predicted that the poem would eventually be made known to the public, although it eventually was not ever published. Thus in this last performance she made it so that her public would surmise that her death was intended to relieve her suffering. Whether that was truly that case would never be known, because Sexton died alone, and whether she left a suicide note has not been

made known either through her biography or her daughter's autobiography. What we have left is a performance.

## CHAPTER 4

### “THE SPEAKER IN THIS CASE”: ANNE SEXTON’S PERSONA POEMS

Muriel Rukeyser recalls seeing Anne Sexton reading at the Guggenheim Museum: “It was a beautiful woman standing there, in a beautiful dress. The expectation and the gossip around was one of confessional poetry” (Gill, Confessional 121). However, when Sexton concluded her reading, she admitted to her audience: “It is not true.” As Rukeyser comments:

When AS said, “But it is not true,” a waver went through the audience. No I cannot say that, I can only speak for myself. I thought, “It may very well be true.” She had cut through the entire nonsense about confessional writing, and returned me to the poem. (Rukeyser 155)

Anne Sexton wrote from the points of view of so many varied personae in her poems that it is difficult to imagine how readers might have misconstrued her poems as being entirely representational of her life. Perhaps, as Sexton postulated in a letter in 1970, it was because “No matter how hard you work at it, your own voice shows through” (Letters 372). Yet Jacqueline Rose explains that Sexton, “the most confessional and intimate of poets, [shows] us most clearly that the personal is always self-invention and myth” (23). Her biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook, has quoted Sexton as saying: “I use the personal when I’m applying a mask to my face, like a rubber mask that the robber wears” (Wachtel 163). Middlebrook goes on to explain:

In that metaphor she tells us that what sounds most authentic in her work may well be stolen. You think that the mask is her real face but she is an artist first and foremost, so whatever needs to be in the poem, whatever truth the poem needs, becomes the truth she tells. (Wachtel 163)

Sexton made numerous self-contradictory statements in her interviews and classes about the (im)personality of her poetry, which perhaps indicated that she herself did not have one set view about the autobiographical nature of her own writing.

Middlebrook calls Sexton’s poems her “script,” her poems the “performance” and the personae the “performer” (Wachtel 163). The poetic personae I study in this chapter are not an exhaustive list, as there are other personae that resist classification and do not fall into the categories that I explore.

Joyce Carol Oates notes that “Sexton was frequently criticised for the narrow range and intensity of her preoccupations: always the self, the self as victim, the self as Narcissus, the self as destructive unappeasable bully, more than half in love with sickness and madness and her own ‘violent heart’” (166). This criticism probably stems from Sexton’s tendency to write from the “I” persona, examining the human emotion from every possible angle, giving careful consideration to every nuance of hurt and happiness that she might have experienced within her lifetime. I agree with Ostriker who looks not only at Sexton, but also at the importance of the reading audience: “Indeed, the condition of her poetry is the presence of an audience, whom she needs to need her; Sexton’s vocation as a poet was determined to an extraordinary degree by an assumption of and dependence on readerly empathy” (“Anne Sexton” 160). Elsewhere, Ostriker views Sexton’s poems as being “written to a ‘you’ who may be a mother, father, daughter, husband, lover, psychoanalyst or God, but who is always also the reader” (*Stealing* 206). Thus while a great majority of Sexton’s poems are addressed to a “you” and are written in first-person, one needs to remember that in a great number of poems she is not herself, not “Anne Sexton,” but instead takes on a multiplicity of personae to address a myriad of issues and concerns from various perspectives. In Grace Schulman’s words, Sexton’s “best poems contain the autobiographical ‘I,’ but are strategically manipulated” (343). Even in poems in which the persona appears to be Sexton herself, addressing the audience from what seems to be a historical or biographical context, she is more often than not a caricature or a reflection of herself, “strategically manipulated” and adapted to suit her poetic intentions.

In this study of the types of personae that appear in Sexton’s poetry, I am not attempting to reduce her writing into methodology, but am instead trying to understand some of the ways in which she explored and dealt with many of the issues with which she was concerned in her writings. While the formal structures of her poems evolved and changed over the years, there were some kinds of personae that Sexton turned to repeatedly, perhaps so that she could further explore or expand on them, or perhaps because she felt that they were voices she could use in more than one way to address her poetic concerns. The writings are not just about mad women from a mad woman’s perspective, but Sexton also “dressed up” as mythological characters, characters whom she had read or heard about, or even actual family members and figures in her own personal history, the identities of which she assumed

in order to question issues about familial relationships which concerned her, “repeatedly [contemplating] questions of origin and ancestry” (Gill, Confessional 87). She also wrote about men, women and children who, in Salvio’s words, were “outlawed” (Sexton 49), of those who were marginalised or rejected. There are poems in which she impersonated the voice of inanimate objects, such as the moon or a painting. One of Sexton’s favourite personae was that of the witch/crone, and this character was not limited to the storyteller and various characters in the Transformations poems, but also made its appearances throughout her oeuvre. “All these imaginary characters,” as Robert Philips praises, “reveal Anne Sexton is very deft at assuming personae” (75). There are personae that fall outside the realms of these classifications, but this study is a useful way through which we can understand the issues that Sexton found important and chose to revisit over the course of her career.

### **Dressing Up As and Playing at Personae**

“I write very personal poems but I hope that they will become the central theme in someone else’s life” (NES 50), said Sexton in an interview. There are poems where, conversely, someone else’s life becomes the central theme. In some of her poems, Sexton “dressed up” as members of her family, such as her mother and great-aunt, or even fictitious family members in order to assume their identity and to imagine what they might have thought or experienced. Sexton metaphorically dressed up in the costumes of these assumed personae and played at being them, imagining what it might have been like to be them.

“The Moss of His Skin” (BP 37), an early poem, has an epigraph taken from an article from the Fall 1958 issue of Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Review, which recounts how “young girls in old Arabia were often buried alive next to their dead fathers, apparently as a sacrifice to the goddesses of the tribes...” (ellipses in the quotation). The persona, a young Arab girl, has somehow made herself willing to be buried with her dead father, and who romanticises the notion of her situation and her impending death, imagining her father’s rotting body as “the moss of his skin.”

George describes her embrace as

both familial and sexual, one that the child hides not only from the jealous “eyes of mother,” and her sisters, but from God himself; she

pretends “Allah will not see / how I hold my daddy / like an old stone tree.” (Oedipus 29).

The girl who has been buried alive with her dead father is thus an impossible narrator, in that no living person could genuinely be the persona, and could only have been imagined by Sexton from a cultural, emotional and literal distance.

There are many poems in which the persona is entirely fictional. In another early poem, “Where I Live in This Honorable House of the Laurel Tree” (BP) the I-persona is Daphne, the beautiful virgin nymph from Greek mythology who is chased by the amorous Apollo, and who was turned into a tree by her father, a god, who wanted to save her from being raped by Apollo and losing her virginity. The myth is usually told from an objective third-person point of view, and does not reveal to the reader Daphne’s state of mind after she had been turned into a tree, and it is this experience that Sexton imagines in this poem. She bemoans:

Too late  
to wish I had not run from you, Apollo,  
blood moves still in my bark bound veins.  
I, who ran nymph foot to root in flight,  
have only this late desire to arm the trees  
I lie within. The measure that I have lost  
silks my pulse. Each century the trickeries  
of need pain me everywhere.

Of her suffering, she laments, “There is no one left who understands,” but here is a poet who is attempting to understand her ordeal by imagining and assuming her experience. Sexton does similar things with the fishermen in “Water” in All My Pretty Ones, or the various personae in “The Wifebeater,” “The Firebombers,” “The One-Legged Man” and “The Assassin” in The Book of Folly, i.e. she costumes herself with the personae of those with whom she has had no personal experience with, and writes poems imagining what it might have been from their perspective.

The poem in which Sexton’s persona most obviously (and literally) costumed herself and played at being someone else is “The Papa and Mama Dance” (LP). As William H. Shurr (253) points out, Sexton had no brother, and thus this poem would seem “to come from another corner of the poet’s mind” other than memory (as “For Johnny Pole” might have). According to the Biography, this poem emerged from dialogue with her students, and although she observed in her journal that the poem

was about incest, her “students didn’t get it” (286). There are several layers to this poem, which identifies as being in “the convention of lovers pretending to be brother and sister, to heighten the erotic intimacy of the relationship” (253), yet it is also an anti-war poem. The persona refers to her lover as “my brother,” and they dress up in costumes from their (her?) Papa’s suitcase. They dance the Papa-Mama dance, sibling-lovers playing at being (their) parents. The speaker’s father has scholar’s robes and various other “costumes” that she and her “brother” put on in order to play at their various roles. They are not only siblings, but bride and groom (“Remember we played costume – / bride black and black, black, black the groom?”), and obviously have a sexual relationship (“your hands on my breast and all that sort of stuff”). With their costumes they can assume all sorts of roles, like that of chastity when she is in her nun’s habit and her lover pretending to be “a bourgeois / priest.” Their relationship is marked as one that alternates between being sexual and chaste/platonic.

All this dressing-up and play-acting is backgrounded by the painful reality that the speaker’s lover-brother has decided to enlist as a soldier to fight in a war (probably the second World War, as suggested by the reference to the S. S. Gripsholm, which was used in 1945 to carry German-Americans to Germany in exchange for American civilians who were held prisoner there), a decision for which the speaker condemns her brother: “You’ll be a pauper when you die, sore / boy. Dead, while I still live at our address.” She alternates between taunting and criticising him for his decision (calling him “sore boy” and “Mr. Gunman”), and pleading with him to stay (“Oh my brother, why do you keep making plans / when I am at seizures of heart and hands?”). The relationship between their Papa and Mama, which is referred to repeatedly in the poem as well as in the title, is the ideal to which they aspire, their “old romance” represented by how they danced together throughout their lifetime: “Papa and Mama did so. Can we do less?” The speaker desires a relationship based on commitment, which clashes with her lover-brother’s idea of war and heroism which will take him away from her. Their playacting and enacting may be a diversion to which they turn when they are unable to resolve their conflict.

Ostriker notes that Sexton’s work “repeatedly implies that the self is constituted by other(s) or that self and other overlap” (“Anne Sexton” 159). Sexton explored the notion of self by examining (often problematic) relationships with those who were close to her, to the extent of adopting their identities and personalities in an

attempt to better understand them, but often coming to the conclusion that it is impossible to discover the self by assuming someone else's life. While the events of her own life were often used as a springboard from which she examined her own issues and emotions in her poetry, especially the problematic relationships she had with her parents, as well as the unresolved emotions she had towards a great-aunt who went mad and died in a mental institution, one must remember that her poems are not merely about her own life and of her family, but in them "the subject attempts to represent her own identity by reference to the familial roots from whence she came, to situate her experience within a genealogy and tangentially, [...] a broader historical and political context," writes Gill (Confessional 87). In adopting or emulating someone else's life, her personae hope to come to a better understanding of their own identities, as well as their relationships with others and with the world around them.

Some of Sexton's personae try on and sometimes adopt the identities of their family members because they realise there is no escaping heredity, a theme that pervades much of Sexton's writings. "Mother, father, I'm made of," says the speaker in "Old Dwarf Heart" (PO); "A woman *is* her mother. / That's the main thing" ("Housewife," PO, emphasis in the original). "It's all a matter of history," sighs her resigned speaker in "The Hex" (BE). Her speakers inherit from the previous generation, and pass on to the next: "Now that you are eighteen / I give you my booty, my spoils, / my Mother & Co. and my ailments" ("Mother and Daughter," BE). Heredity, it can be seen, is a double-edged sword, since madness is, to Sexton's speakers, to a large extent caused by a family curse: "submerged in my own past / and my own madness" ("For the Year of the Insane," LD). Madness is an "infection" ("Anna Who Was Mad," BE) or a "curse" ("The Hex") that is passed from one generation to the next. Thus, in order to examine and to better understand her own madness, in some of Sexton's poetry she had her personae "dress up" as their ancestors, adopting their personalities and their lives in an attempt to better understand their hereditary burdens and to discover their roots.

"Some Foreign Letters" is from Bedlam, a collection in which Sexton attempted to understand and work out her mental condition. It was in her earlier collections that she spends the most time exploring the hereditary aspect of her mental condition, and in this poem her persona reads the letters her aunt sends home from her extended European tour, attempting to reconcile the notion of the mad "old maid aunt" who lives with her family with the young writer of the exciting letters with

whom she has never personally made an acquaintance. The “version” of the aunt she knows is the “old, / soft white lady of my heart,” that she has known “forever.” Yet the version who wrote the letters was one she could only imagine by mentally donning the “furs / and a new dress in the winter of eighteen-ninety.” The speaker is reading the letters, which were intended for an unknown audience (which we can speculate were probably the speaker’s mother or father or other members of her family), and were hence not even addressed to the speaker, yet she appropriates the letters for herself, vicariously reclaiming her aunt’s travels as her own, wearing them as a fur and new dress.

Sexton, herself an avid-letter writer, explores the textuality of letter-writing in “Some Foreign Letters” and illustrates how one can don the mantle of someone else’s life through writing. As Sexton said of the poem, ““Some Foreign Letters’ is a mixture of truth and lies. I don’t feel like confessing which is which. When I wrote it I attempted to make all of it ‘true.’ It remains true *for me* to this day” (Mills 115, emphasis Sexton’s). Here Sexton touches several times on the subjective notion of “truth.” “I don’t *feel* like confessing” (emphasis mine), she says, suggesting that during that interview she was not in the mood to differentiate between the “truth and lies” of the poem, but perhaps at some other time her mood may change. Yet when she wrote the poem, she “attempted” to make all of it “true,” so does that suggest that the “lies” component of the poem was a small and insignificant one? Yet the poem held truth *for her*, which leads us to question if it would be lies for someone else instead. A “lie” is told with the intention to deceive, which begs the question if Sexton was intending to deceive her audience. Yet it is a poem – not a historical document – so eventually does it actually matter whether or not it was “true”? When one wears a costume, or puts on someone else’s clothes, one is emulating or is pretending to be someone else. The audience does not generally expect the performance to be the “truth.” And by using inverted commas around “true,” Sexton appeared to be suggesting that it is a version of narrative truth, and could be what Sexton-the-poet treated as truth at the time of writing the poem.

In this poem, the aunt’s characterisation of herself in her letters is another version of the “truth,” because her portrayal of herself in her letters, which were addressed to her relatives, varies tremendously from how the poem’s narrator, her niece, has viewed her. In writing home, her aunt has chosen to censor herself, only recounting to her family what might have been flattering to her and leaving out what

might have put her in a bad light. She might have exaggerated, embellished, or even lied about her experiences in order to present a preferable version of herself to her family back home. However, what the speaker sees of her “old maid aunt” is an “old / soft white lady,” “a pleated old lady with a crooked hand,” who later became a deaf woman who “wore an earphone.” The speaker remembers how her aunt was taken from the speaker’s home by force “with your best hat over your face” to be, one would assume, institutionalised for a breakdown, when the speaker was seventeen. Thus the memories that the speaker has of her aunt are vastly different from the life of glamour and excitement that the speaker’s aunt has chosen to recount in her letters, which were clearly not intended for the speaker, since they were written “three generations before mine,” but read “as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.” The speaker imagines the aunt’s life into her own, and imagines her own life into her aunt’s, to the extent of attempting to

speak up and interrupt  
your letters, warning you that wars are coming,  
that the Count will die, that you will accept  
your America back to live like a prim thing  
on the farm in Maine.

As McClatchy points out, what happened to her aunt “is used as the focus of the poet’s own anxieties” (“Somehow” 259). While she does not go as far as to adopt her aunt’s identity as her own, the speaker adopts her aunt’s past as her own present, attempting to reach into the past to warn her then-unknowing aunt of all the bad that will befall her.

Another Nana poem, “Walking in Paris” (LD), found its genesis in Sexton’s own experience when she toured Europe:

I had her letters with me as I left for Europe and I was going to walk her walks, and go to her places, live her life over again, and write letters back to her. The two poems that I did write about Europe mention the letters. In “Crossing the Atlantic,” I mention that I have read my grandmother’s letters, and my mother’s letters. I had swallowed their words like Dickens, thinking of Dickens’ journals in America. The second poem, “Walking in Paris,” was written about my great-aunt, how she used to walk fourteen or fifteen miles a day in Paris [...]. (NES 97)

In this poem, the speaker goes even further by literally walking in her aunt's (or great-aunt's) shoes by retracing her aunt's steps and activities in Paris. "I have entered you," she says, metaphorically putting on her aunt as a costume and playing the part of her aunt:

I come back to your youth, my Nana,  
as if I might clean off  
the mad woman you became,  
withered and constipated,  
howling into your own earphone.

The word "withered" suggests infertility, both in the sense that she is unable to produce children (later in the poem the speaker calls her aunt a "virgin"), and that she has become uncreative. "Constipated" suggests that she has reached a stage of stagnation, decline, or even decay. Despite having once been a prolific and creative letter-writer, the aunt has now become incoherent even to herself, "howling" into her "own earphone." It is as if by reliving her aunt's experience the speaker might be able to create a better outcome for her aunt. The speaker adopts her aunt's persona, memorising her aunt's letters "like an actress learns her lines," "putting your words into my life," playing the role of her aunt. "What is so real as walking your streets!" the speaker proclaims. The speaker imagines she can re-live her aunt's life as if "1890 was yesterday / and 1940 never happened." The "soiled uniform of the Nazi," an emblem of the second World War, "has been unravelled and reknit and resold," repossessed by others rather than the Nazis claiming the possessions of the Jews.

Yet this role-playing is not "real," as the speaker has had to desert her husband and her children for this Paris trip, and she admits that she is only playing at being "sisters" with her aunt:

Come, my sister,  
we are two virgins,  
our lives once more perfected  
and unused.

However, as married woman and a mother, she can no more become a virgin than she can be sisters with an aunt who was in her twenties in 1890. Gill points out that the speaker has cleaned off ("deserted") her husband and children, issues current to her in American society ("the Negro issue, the late news"), and domestic responsibilities ("the hot baths"), in order to imaginatively rejoin her aunt ([Anne Sexton 97](#)). Philippa

Little describes the poem's ending as having "an element of fairytale [...] which imagines a dream journey in Europe" with the speaker's aunt: "There they will live a happy, independent (and highly romanticised) life" (151, bracketed text in the original). The only way the speaker can truly be kindred with the young woman who wrote these letters is to imagine living her life, to imagine that the bad things that happened to her aunt later in her life never occurred, (the war, her reluctant return home to the farm in Maine, her eventual madness), and to temporarily shrug off her true identity and life responsibilities to adopt that young woman's persona. While Cassie Premo Steele's opinion is that Sexton's speaker is nostalgic for her Nana in this poem (61), I suggest instead that the speaker is nostalgic for the *idea* of her aunt, because the aunt that she writes about no longer exists – the current version of her aunt is one that is insane and one whom the speaker fears instead of with whom she craves intimacy – and that this younger version of her aunt is one that she will never be able to know personally.

In this poem, the speaker hopes that by adopting her aunt's persona and walking in her footsteps, and somehow outdoing her aunt, she might avoid inheriting her aunt's madness and eventual devolution. Her aunt walked "fifteen miles a day," but the speaker "walked sixteen miles today. / I have kept up." Later in the poem, she says, "having come this far / I will go farther." In "Crossing the Atlantic", the poem immediately preceding "Walking in Paris" in the same collection (*Live or Die*) and apparently written a month before, the speaker this time plays the part of her mother (and her mother's mother), speaking her lines and taking to re-enacting her life like the speaker in "Walking in Paris" did with her aunt's letters and lines. In this poem, too, the speaker imagines herself more successful than those who have gone before: "Where Dickens crossed with *mal de mer* / in twenty weeks or twenty days / I cross toward him in five." She is taking a journey that her mother (and her mother's mother) had taken earlier, preparing herself for the role by memorising the lines of her maternal ancestors like a script:

I have read each page of my mother's voyage.

I have read each page of her mother's voyage.

I have learned their words as they learned Dickens'.

I have swallowed these words like bullets.

Being inside the ship's staterooms is, she thinks, "the way one would dig into a planet / and forget the word *light*." Metaphors for colonisation often connote the sexual act

of taking a woman's virginity, and the metaphors the speaker uses in this poem are similarly suggestive. The speaker in the poem has "entered" the ship (in "Walking in Paris" the speaker says she has "entered" her aunt); and the ship she is in heads east through the water "ripping it, pounding, pounding / forcing through as through a virgin." Just as colonisation is the act of repossessing land that already belongs to someone else, the speaker is colonising the journey her mother and her grandmother had taken before, but is donning their experiences as if they were her own. In "The Farmer's Wife" it is said that the wife is the farmer's "habit," which suggests not only that his relationship with her is acquired behaviour that he has stopped thinking about, but could also suggest a nun or monk's habit, i.e. a piece of clothing that represented and defined him. Both the farmer and his wife, have, over the years, grown to inhabit each other's lives. The farmer has fallen into "that old pantomime of love," in that his actions have become dictated by habit and repetition; the woman is "the farmer's wife," her identity defined by the profession of the man to whom she is married. In that sense they have both colonised each other's lives and donned each other's existence.

Not only do Sexton's personae "dress up" as members of her family in order to imitate or emulate them, they also sometimes enter or colonise them in order make them their own. Conversely, there are also images of eating and consumption that pervade Sexton's poetry. In "Hansel and Gretel" (Transformations), words of love are confused with images of eating:

Little plum,  
 said the mother to her son,  
 I want to bite,  
 I want to chew,  
 I will eat you up. [...]  
 Your neck as smooth  
 as a hard-boiled egg;  
 soft cheeks, my pears,  
 let me buzz you on the neck,  
 and take a bite. [...]  
 Come, my pretender, my fritter,  
 my babbler, my chicken biddy!  
 Oh succulent one,

it is but one turn in the road  
and I would be a cannibal!

In the poem “Oysters” (BF), part of the “Death of Fathers” sequence, the speaker eats the “moist and plump [...] father-food,” the description of which suggests semen, that the speaker swallows. “It went down like a large pudding.” While there are numerous instances of eating and consumption in Sexton’s poems, it appears, from these two examples, that eating is frequently linked to love and affection, or even sex. The act of one person exerting control over another is often expressed in terms of what the speaker eats. In “The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks” (BF) the final poem in the “Jesus Papers series,” the speaker explains that

When the cow gives blood  
and the Christ is born  
we must all eat sacrifices.  
We must all eat beautiful women.

Poems in which the act of entering (colonisation) and eating (consumption), those in which the speaker becomes part of the object, as well as the poems in which the speaker dons another’s identity, all suggest an attempt to control. In the earlier poems discussed, the speaker attempts to control another’s life by “wearing” their experiences as a costume and re-living their lives in order to produce a better outcome. In the later poems discussed in this section, the act of control is manifested in the act of entering or eating. In her tenth Colgate lecture, expounding on “Crossing the Atlantic,” Sexton explained: “I am like the ship, ripping through the ocean of my mother’s and grandmother’s lives, stripping it away, cutting through life.” She continues: “The ocean never stops, neither does the street of the bloodline” (HRC). Her speakers attempt to define themselves by donning or inhabiting the identities of their ancestors, attempting to outdo them and at the same time questioning them.

### **Outlawed Personae**

Salvio defines Sexton’s “outlawed” figures as those who “have spent time in the madhouse, the woman whose fears confine her to her home, women who are grieving, dying and lost” (Sexton 49). I extend this definition of “outlawed” figures in Sexton’s poetry to those personae and characters who are in exile, either by self-imposition or against their will. One can be exiled when one is separated from one’s home or comfort zone and forced to somewhere where one does not quite belong; in a broader

sense, one can also be emotionally exiled and socially marginalised although one is physically located around or near where one lives. In many of the poems in the first two collections, Bedlam and Pretty Ones, the personae are exiled in terms of the first definition; Sexton said that “in the first book, I was giving the experience of madness; in the second book, the causes of madness” (NES 94). Earlier in her career Sexton was still exploring the many facets of madness and institutionalisation due to her newly-diagnosed mental illness. In such a context, many of her poems were about being located in an asylum, away from home, or being socially and mentally exiled from the emotional well-being she once might have known. Early poems from Bedlam such as “Kind Sir: These Woods,” “Music Swims Back to Me,” “Her Kind,” “The Farmer’s Wife” (which was one of the early poems in which the persona did not speak from a first-person perspective), “The Expatriates,” “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” and “The Moss of His Skin” present personae who do not belong to where they are, and chafe with the discomfort of their exile. Sexton, however, never quite abandoned the theme of asylum poetry; as one who had frequently to do battle with her emotional monsters, she never moved away from the theme of madness and revisited it repeatedly in later collections, though it can reasonably be said that she diversified and expanded her concerns to other forms of exile. Not only are her personae in exile, but their bodies are often also broken; Salvio points out that “the bodies in Sexton’s poetry are most often women’s bodies – one freshly scarred from a hysterectomy, a dying woman who is incontinent, a young girl giving up her baby, a daughter refusing to grieve – who speak to the reader through dramatic speech” (“Loss” 107). The broken bodies of the exiled/outlawed figures in Sexton’s poetry are metaphors for their fractured psyches.

In later collections, Sexton ventured further from the walls of the asylum and re-explored the theme of exile from the perspectives of more varied personae. In Pretty Ones, she explored the mindset of one who has deliberately terminated her unborn child in “The Abortion,” one who is aged in “Old,” and several characters who reside together in an apartment building in “Doors, Doors, Doors” yet never seem to achieve any sort of psychic or emotional connection. We voyeur and eavesdrop on the most intimate thought of these characters, but they are unable (or perhaps unwilling) to connect with others outside themselves the way we are able to enter into their psyche; in fact, Sexton’s exiled characters often deliberately segregate themselves from those around them. Later, in the 1969 Love Poems, a collection

whose title purports to celebrate the intimate connection between two people, there seem to be more poems addressing the gulf between the personae and their loved ones, such as “Loving the Killer,” “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” “The Break,” “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,” and “Eighteen Days Without You.”

“Unknown Girl” is an example of a persona which is completely invented, yet written with such narrative skill that Sexton seems to have convincingly led readers to believe that she was the biographical speaker of the poem. In one of her Colgate lectures, she had this to say about the poem:

It might be noted that after I published “Unknown Girl” people in the town where my husband was brought up said, “Wasn’t he a fine boy to marry Anne after she had had that illegitimate baby?” So much for confession. So much for persona. (HRC)

Sexton dismisses both confession and persona as viable interpretations of the poem, coyly not revealing to her students whether the poem was inspired by experience or imagination, yet it was most likely that the persona was not entirely un-biographical, and that the emotional motivation originated from Sexton’s ambivalence towards her own children and her (in)ability to care for them when she was recovering from her first breakdown. “I started to write about myself because it was something I knew well” (HRC), Sexton told her students in her tenth Colgate lecture. Sexton locates this poem in the years following her breakdown, when she began to suffer from depressive breakdowns and anxiety attacks, during which she was unable to function as a mother. The care of her daughters was eventually relegated to Sexton’s relatives, mainly her sister and her mother-in-law, and she put aside raising them to convalesce after her hospital stay. Of “Unknown Girl,” Sexton wrote in the notes for her first Colgate lecture:

Thus, as I read it, I experiences [*sic*] my loss, my daughter gone, gone from me, gone forever. [...] All the love of the child, the newborn thing breathing its tiny air in and out, so small, so red faced, all lips, all suck, the child at the breast and the giving and taking of it, these were the things I thought of when I took the persona of that girl in the mental hospital. (HRC)

It is Salvio’s opinion that “unlike the poet who wrote this poem, the narrator understands the early hungers of the infant, their ruthless love and desire for constant sustenance” (Sexton 95). While biographical evidence argues that Sexton might not

have been a very good mother – there were unproven allegations that she may have sexually and physically abused her daughter – Sexton drew on her own experiences as a new mother to extrapolate the emotions the persona in “Unknown Girl” might have felt in the first few hours after having had her child and having had to give her up. The speaker of this poem is “in an institution bed,” and while she does not provide details as to what sort of institution she is in – the nature of the institution is unimportant – what it does suggest is that she is physically and emotionally alienated from her friends and family. (Sexton says later in that same lecture that the girl is in a mental hospital but this specific information is not vital to our understanding of the poem.) While the birth of a child is generally a happy occasion, celebrated by the friends and family of the child’s parents, in this poem there is no mention of anyone who comes to visit and share in the joy of the birth of this child. The speaker does not reveal any details about her identity, and by the poet’s naming is “unknown”; she is a “girl,” not a woman, who has been robbed of her childish innocence by having to bear an illegitimate child. “You will not know me very long,” she says to her child in the opening stanza, so we know that even the child will be separated from her and she will subsequently have no one else to define her. The only human contact she makes in the poem is with this child that she is soon giving up; in a later poem, “The Abortion” (PO), the poem’s refrain – “Somebody who should have been born / is gone” – suggests a speaker whose only emotional connection is with an unborn baby, whom she loses.

In “Unknown Girl,” what is remarkable is that despite the poem’s length, the speaker manages to tell us nothing of the circumstances surrounding her situation – how she came to be pregnant, who/where the father of the baby is (and whether or not he has truly abandoned her), and why she is giving up her child; what she does describe in great detail is her emotional and physical response to her child. And while she “never spoke a word” to the medical staff in the institution, in contrast Sexton has often been criticised for revealing too much of herself to her readers. Other than Holmes’ scathing critiques, Louis Simpson berated her 1969 poem “Menstruation at Forty” from Live or Die as “the straw who broke the camel’s back” with regards to what he considered her tendency for “self-dramatization” and self-revelation in her poetry (Biography 264). In this poem the speaker is contrastingly mute about her past and her circumstances, leaving the reader, along with the medical staff, to “guess about the man who left me.” All she is willing to say, when she finally does speak, is

“Name of father – none.” Yet, she admits, “I am a shelter of lies.” It is not that the child has no father (which would be biologically impossible), or that the father has no name, but that she does not consider him the child’s father, or it may be that she has been promiscuous and does not know who the father of the child is, or perhaps that she was raped. Her silence and her unwillingness to tell the truth is a “shelter,” perhaps to protect her child, but also perhaps because admitting his name would mean admitting to the wrong he might have done to her (or which she herself might have committed) which caused her to end up pregnant and alone. As readers, we can only speculate as to the mysterious background of this fictitious persona.

However, the notion of lies, or role-playing, of confession (whether partial or full), of the adopting of persona, of fiction, continually problematises our understanding of the “truth” behind Sexton’s poetry and her motivations behind writing it, as well as our readerly desire for poems to be “true” and for poets to “tell the truth,” especially for a poet such as Sexton whose most effective poems seems to feature an “I” persona; as readers we find comfort in the belief that a poem is authentic in its origin. In a Colgate lecture, Sexton said: “I like to lie. I like to confess. I like to hide” (HRC). In the fourth stanza, when the girl begins to speak, she reckons: “It is you my silence harms.” What is more harmful, then – to be silent, or to speak but to lie? When Sexton says she likes to lie, to confess, to hide, does she do all at the same time? For Salvio, her interpretation is that Sexton was thinking, “to protect myself, I intermingle fiction with autobiography – in short, I invent as much as I represent” (Sexton 63). For Salvio, Sexton “does not use writing to confess; rather, she performs and plays at confession” (Sexton 68). Thus in this poem, when the girl names her child as “bastard,” she is telling us more about her situation than she did in so many words in the rest of the poem: she is telling us that she has no husband and that the child is illegitimate, all of which we could only guess at as we read the earlier part of the poem. The speaker has lied, confessed and hidden all through the poem, and whatever conclusions we draw are our own. However, reader feels compelled to believe in the speaker, and even believe that the speaker is Sexton, because Sexton is so able at her “trick of investing the experience of *the other* with her own emotional realities” (Fields 78).

The speaker of “Unknown Girl” has voluntarily exiled herself from those around her by her deliberate silence; another persona in “Old” (PO) cuts herself off from the unpleasantness of her eighty-year-old existence of “needles,” “rubber sheets

and tubes,” “faces that I don’t know” and impending death by existing instead in dreams and recollections of her childhood. However, most of the personae in Sexton’s poetry are exiled against their will like in the asylum poems where the speakers are confined to an institution or exiled from society because of their troubled mental state. Or of “The Moss on His Skin” where the speaker is buried with her father against her will. The three personae in the three parts of “Doors, Doors, Doors” (PO) seem to live in the same physical space (in the same apartment building) and while they see each other come and go, they never seem to interact with each other. The first persona, the “old man,” knows his next-door neighbour only as “the fellow next door [who] has a girl who comes to call”; the “seamstress” cursorily views the first persona as “an old invalid” (“invalid” suggesting one who is infirm, as well as one who is no longer “valid,” i.e. one who is no longer relevant to his time and place) and another boarder as the “young one” who “carries on / with a girl who pretends she comes to use the john”; the last persona in the poem is the “young girl” who does not live in the building but goes there to escape from her “husband’s insane abuse” by meeting up with a man who has been abandoned by his wife (“your wild-eyed wife has fled”), and sees the other two personae as “the dear old man who always asks us in” and the seamstress as “the one who sews like a wasp and will not budge.” Each of the personae view each other from the rooms in the building which they inhabit, but as the title suggests, are separated from each other (and the rest of the world) by their “doors, doors, doors.”

The Love Poems ironically feature a group of speakers who are mostly exiled from those whom they love and instead lament their inability to be with them. Robert Philips rightly comments that “most of these [poems] are ironic love poems, speaking more of alienation than of conciliation, more of loneliness than togetherness” (82). The persona’s voice in “The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts” is that of a man who is having an affair and cannot be truly joined to the woman who is “not [his] real wife,” and he is being questioned by an anonymous and unseen interrogator on the moral aspect of the extramarital relationship that he is having. Richard Morton points out that the relationship between the man and the woman is a “morally complex one,” and the man answers the questions posed to him with “uncertainty and ambivalence” (63). Their affair is based on more than physical desire, since they have committed themselves to each other

the way a man joins

a woman and yet there was no place  
 for festivities or formalities  
 and these things matter to a woman [...].

Their commitment, the speaker admits, is a farce, because “I made up a song that wasn’t true. / I made up a song called *Marriage*,” yet it is a marriage that is imaginary because extramarital relationships carry a social stigma: “we live in a cold climate / and are not permitted to kiss on the street.” Yet they have committed themselves to each other, in their own way (“Thus I have laid my hands upon her / and have called her eyes and her mouth / as mine, and also her tongue”), so he has “not only bedded her down,” but has “tied her down with a knot.” His relationship with this woman is a complex one: she is

[...] my real witch, my fork, my mare,  
 my mother of tears, my skirtful of hell,  
 the stamp of my sorrows, the stamp of my bruises  
 and also the children she might bear  
 and also a private place, a body of bones [...].

Later in the poem, she is “standing there in my mother’s apron,” then she is “wearing my daughter’s / pink corduroys.” She is, to him, both a harlot (“the woman in red”) and an ingénue (“the girl in pink”): “but she was ten colors / and ten women. / I could hardly name her.” His mistress is to him one whom he cannot pin down in terms of defining who she is, but she is emotionally pinned down because he has tied her “in a knot” because of her desire for him.

He is a “man of many hearts,” which suggests that he has had affairs with many women: “each time I tied these women / in a knot. Once a queen came. I tied her too.” He has “tied these other knots,” he admits, “yet I would rather not think of them / when I speak to you of her.” While he admits that he has had numerous affairs, he would rather not confront his promiscuity. And while he is “determined to tie her up forever,” wanting her all for himself, he does not express any desire to remain true to her. (After all, he already has a “good wife.”) This “man of many hearts” is thus alienated from the one he loves, because he is not singularly loyal to her. As the interrogator condemns his affair, “Man of many hearts, you are a fool!” Morton approves of this multi-faceted view of love that Sexton takes on in Love Poems, because, as he argues, “only a fatuous, sentimental view of love would limit it to one mood or aspect of the lovers” (64). The theme of marital infidelity is addressed

elsewhere in Love Poems; in “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” she adopts the persona of the other woman. There are other poems about the end of a love affair, and in “The Break,” the voice of the speaker is that of a woman whose husband has tried to leave her for another woman (“I’m Ethan Frome’s wife”)<sup>1</sup>, where her broken hip is a metaphor for her broken heart. In “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,” the speaker mourns the lover she has lost to a “black-eyed rival” who “took you the way a woman takes / a bargain dress off the rack,” whom he eventually marries. A relationship between a man and a woman, it seems, is “like watercolor” (“For My Lover”), like a conversation that can be ended prematurely like by one party deciding to hang the phone “back on the hook” (“You All Know the Story of the Other Woman”) without the other party’s acquiescence. Love in the Love Poems is fleeting, doomed to fail, tragic, and affects the abandoned party with such an intense emotional injury that it often translates to physical pain. “A woman who writes feels too much” (“The Black Art”), but the scrutiny of one’s emotional pain was viewed as a necessity by Sexton to produce good writing:

Writing is “life” in capsule and the writer must feel every bump edge scratch ouch in order to know the real furniture of his capsule. [...] I, myself, alternate between hiding behind my own hands, protecting myself in anyway [*sic*] possible, and this other, this seeing ouching other. [...] I say to myself, sometimes repeatedly “I’ve got to get the hell out of this hurt” ... But no. Hurt must be examined like a plague. (Letters 105)

The outlawed personae in Sexton’s poetry are perhaps a result of her examining her own hurt like a plague. From her own life experiences she fashioned personae who are marginalised, injured, fearful and grieving, in order to master emotional pain as an effective subject in her writings.

### **Impersonating the Voice of Objects**

In a letter to a friend and fellow writer Oates, Sexton writes:

I have been given a dramatic role that I am popularly known as the crazy poet, something I avoid acting out in front of people. And after

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<sup>1</sup> Ethan Frome (1911) is the title of a novella by Edith Wharton. Ethan is married to the sickly Zenobia (“Zeeba”), but he falls in love and desires to elope Zeeba’s beautiful cousin Mattie. Mattie, however, suggests that Ethan and her ride a sled into a tree in a suicide pact. The pact fails, leaving Ethan and Mattie permanently crippled.

all, it is my fault. I did write about it thoroughly, explored it so I made my own costume, so to speak, and at each reading I must step into it, although it no longer fits, and I do everything in my power to act perfectly normal and charming and win them over. (Letters 396)

This letter, written a year before Sexton's death, shows Sexton to be extremely self-aware of her status as a poet who is known to act out a particular role. Even being "normal" is an act, a performance she must put on which involves being "charming" and winning her critics and audience over, implying that this performance is calculated to change the minds of those around her into feeling positive about her.

In Sexton's oeuvre, her personae tend to be people, though on rare occasion she did impersonate the voice of objects. In "Moon Song, Woman Song," the voice is clearly that of the moon and universalised woman. In "Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall" (BP) the persona is that of a portrait of an imagined woman and is, in that sense, an inanimate object. (An unpublished poem, "The Madness" [HRC] appears in a revised form in Words for Dr. Y.; in its original version, the personae are the voices that a mad person hears during her episodes. In the version that was eventually published, the poem was written so that the persona is the voice of a psychiatric patient who is relating to her doctor what her voices say, switching the personae from that of objects to that of an actual person. Since Words for Dr. Y. was published posthumously, it is inconclusive which version Sexton may have preferred for eventual publication, or if she wanted it published at all.)

"Moon Song, Woman Song" was written in February 1967 when Sexton was recovering from her broken hip at home. Shortly afterwards, in the same year, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and with that award came much publicity and fame. Consequently, when the Apollo 11 landed the first humans on the moon, the event was commemorated by a New York Times special supplement which included a reprint of "Moon Song, Woman Song"; the magazine Esquire, too, reprinted this poem in their commemoration of the moon landing. Middlebrook records that "when Harper's Bazaar asked a number of famous people what they thought should be placed in a time capsule on the moon, Joyce Carol Oates replied, 'The confessional poems of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and W. D. Snodgrass'" (Biography 320). Sexton's writing was lauded alongside with an immense human achievement, the moon landing, and was accorded accolades equal to other accomplished writers such as Plath, Lowell and Snodgrass.

Yet the poem displays none of the visions of grandeur in which it was later contextualised, i.e. Sexton's award-winning and increasing prestige, and mankind's astronomical achievements. Its title, "Moon Song, Woman Song," draws together the qualities that the moon and the universal woman share. "I am alive at night. / I am dead in the morning," the speaker laments. In the Complete Poems, this beginning of this poem is printed on the same page as the previous poem in the collection, "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman" (30), and the reader's eye is drawn towards the chords that resonate throughout both poems. "Daylight is nobody's friend," says the speaker of "Other Woman," echoing how the moon/woman is "dead in the morning." The moon and the woman are both useful only at night, "an old vessel who used up her oil," the word "vessel" suggesting the uterus, which implies that the woman is valued for sexual and reproductive purposes. Yet "I was always a virgin, old and pitted," suggesting that the moon/woman possesses the ability to make herself new, her presence echoing throughout history ("Before the world was, I was"). Gill reminds us that "although autobiography demands that one scrutinises one's self, the self – particularly the female self – who is both subject and object of the search is always split and never fully present to herself" (100). While this poem is not "autobiographical" in the sense the readers perceive Sexton's confessional poems to be, the speaker here is a split one, in a sense. Obviously the moon cannot speak, and the speaker is both woman and moon. She personifies the moon, yet speaks with the voice of a woman; she is both moon and woman.

The moon-speaker is addressing a man, who is "tall in [his] battle dress" and thus is most likely a soldier. Other clues to his identity come from the mention of the moon falling "like a jet over the Pacific," and committing "perjury over Japan"; he is emotionally "cold, cold," like a killer, and dons coveralls (also known as "overalls"), which may be work clothes, but is also the attire that some soldiers wear. Because he "walk[s] into the [speaker] like a barracks," it further confirms our suspicions that he is a soldier, and that the speaker provides him with comfort and shelter. He comes "cruising, cruising," which could mean that he walks and moves around with ease, but "cruising" is also an informal term for the act of wandering around in search for a sexual partner, usually one who is temporary, a one-night-stand. It appears that although the speaker waits faithfully for him to return, it is unlikely that he is similarly loyal to her, confirmed by the later sentence where he is "of the blast off," since rockets and missiles are often used as metaphors for the male sexual organ and

the instrument in the act of sexual conquest. The metaphor of the “blast off” echoes a similar phrase Plath uses in The Bell Jar, where the protagonist’s mother spouts platitudes like “What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security,” and, “what a man is is the arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (58). A major theme of that novel is that her inability to conform to the gender stereotypes of the era is a large contributor to Esther’s depressive breakdown, and what Esther wants instead is “change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (68). The moon/woman speaker in this poem is, unlike Esther, content to remain in her traditional gender role.

Yet the male addressee is also “of the bastion,” which is a projecting part of a city wall which fortifies a city against its enemies, indicating that while the man goes off on his sexual escapades, he is also protective of the speaker. A “bastion” can also refer to a person with strong convictions, which may contradict to the war and wandering references, but also suggests that while he is sexually unfaithful to the speaker, he is also contrastingly and conversely protective of her in other ways. Since to “close one eye” is a colloquial way of saying that one refuses to see, or selectively chooses to ignore, the negative aspects of a situation, the speaker suggests, by saying “I will shut my fat eye down,” that she has chosen not to pay attention to his philandering and his other shortcomings. Thus it appears that the moon-speaker – and thus the universal woman – always has the short end of the stick, and has had to put up with abandonments and infidelities, permanently trapped in an orbit around the man she loves, while he leaves her and attends to his activities outside the home.

This imagined moon/woman persona is content to remain in the traditional subjugated female gender stereotype. The speaker of “Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall” is the woman who is a subject of a painting – crones are fairly often the subjects or personae in Sexton’s poetry, as we will discuss later in this chapter – yet it is unclear whom exactly she is addressing, and it appears that the portrait/woman is very much ignored by the patrons of the tavern. The line “*Do you hear what it said?*” is repeated in the manner of a refrain at the ends of the first, second and third stanzas. It is not apparent who says the refrain, or to whom it is addressed; it is possible that an unnamed person (one of the children, poets, singers, or children that are mentioned in the poem) in the tavern seems to have heard a voice

coming from the painting and is incredulously asking his friends whether they have heard it as well.

Yet the speaker knows that she is ignored and unheard. That she “only said” suggests that the speaker is aware that whatever she has said is not terribly important to those in the college tavern. The pewter urn, to which she refers, is “as old as old is able,” omnipresent, and will be there longer than any of the students who come through the college tavern. The fact that it is a *college* tavern suggests that its customers only patronise it for the season that they are students in that town, so the poets who are there “singing and lying / around their round table” are transient, while the pewter urn and the portrait, as well as the “wreath / made of a corpse’s hair / framed in glass on the wall,” which are also “as old as old is able,” will outlast any of the tavern’s patrons who so callously ignore them.

The “singing and lying” that the poets do in the second stanza have a double meaning, as in the third stanza the speaker reveals that the poets are not lying down, as the reader might have initially surmised, and are instead telling lies, as the speaker calls them “liars.” Yet they are not the only ones who are telling lies, as the speaker “lies with all the singers.” We are made to realise that the corpse whose hair was used to make the wreath was, in fact, the woman of whom the portrait was painted, and it is her pewter urn that is pinned onto the wall. The question which underlies this entire poem is, then, who is the mysterious woman in the portrait, and why are her likeness, parts of her body and her belongings used to decorate the walls of this college tavern? How did she die? This old woman with her supernatural powers after death appears to be one of many witches that fill Sexton’s poetry. It appears that her presence is haunting the tavern, and it is her ghostly voice that speaks to the patrons of the tavern, causing them to ask each other, *Did you hear what it said?* Yet what the speaker is saying is that the singers lie (i.e. lie down, and tell lies) and she herself lies (“my lies with all the singers”), bringing us back to the problem of “narrative truth” which has been discussed in the earlier chapter. Sexton, as we earlier read, filled her poems with “a mixture of truth and lies” – so it should not be a surprise to hear her admit that poets lie. Even if the readers “hears what is said,” there is no guarantee that whatever has been said is the “truth,” in that it actually happened, or that it merely exists in a fictitious narrative. In this case, whatever the portrait has said cannot be the “truth” because the portrait and the woman in it are fictitious characters, so whatever the speaker has said is a figment of the writer’s imagination. Yet for the other poems in

which Sexton so convincingly wrote from the point of view of an “I” character, it is much more difficult to distinguish between the “truth” and a made-up “lie,” which is one of the points this poem seems to be making.

### **Witch/Crone Personae**

In many of Sexton’s poems her persona is that of a witch or a crone, a middle-aged or old woman with supernatural powers. The speaker in “Portrait of an Old Woman” can be said to be this sort of figure, but it is in the Transformations poems that the witch-speaker is the most prevalent. McCabe’s opinion is that

until Transformations, Sexton was concerned with herself mainly as a regular woman. The early poems about witchery, like “Her Kind” and “The Black Art,” are really about the life of the imagination for a woman who has the magic of language in her thrall. (225)

It is in this collection that Sexton fashioned a persona in the form of a “middle-aged witch” who narrates the re-telling of the Grimms’ fairy tales featured in the collection. She announces that the narrator of the stories, “the speaker in this case,” is “a middle-aged witch, me,” yet it is ambiguous if she is saying that the speaker who is telling the stories is a middle-aged witch, or if she is saying that she (i.e. Sexton) is, in fact, a middle-aged witch. Or perhaps she is saying both of these, because in the third poem of the collection, “White Snake,” the ten birds address the speaker with the matronly title of “Dame Sexton,” indicating that the speaker of Transformations is likely some version of Sexton. The speaker is ostensibly part Sexton, because the fairy tales which were eventually to be transformed were her daughter Linda’s favourites. Linda Sexton recalls:

One day Mother came into the kitchen and found me reading my Grimm’s fairy-tale book that I’d had since 1961. It had an introduction by W. H. Auden. She asked me which stories I liked, and wrote down the titles on a napkin. (Biography 333).

This explains why Sexton dedicated the book “To Linda, who reads Hesse and drinks clam chowder.”

Yet the book was written to an audience other than Linda; in the first stanza of the opening poem the narrator calls

all of you:

Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor,

Jane, Brian, Maryel,  
all of you draw near.

Her audience includes Alice, who is fifty-six, and Samuel, who is twenty-two. It then becomes apparent that these are not fairy tales for children. The boy that the narrator presents in the second stanza of “The Gold Key” “is sixteen and wants some answers.” The narrator then refutes the epigraph: “It is not enough to read Hesse / and drink clam chowder.” Whatever Linda is doing (reading existentialist writings and doing quotidian things like drinking soup), it seems, is not enough to arrive at the “answers” that the boy is looking for. The tone of voice that the witch-speaker adopts while narrating these poems is, as George describes, “tongue-in-cheek,” one of “casual and sardonic wit” (Oedipus 39). The main magical power that this witch-speaker has is the ability to “transform”: “As if an enlarged paper clip / could be a piece of sculpture. /(And it could.)” The speaker is able to magically turn a commonplace item such like a paper clip, or even the mundane act of soup-drinking, into a work of art. This vision that a paper clip (an everyday and functional object) that can be enlarged to become a piece of art, suggests that a morality tale can also function as an item with aesthetic appeal. For Juhasz, the Transformations poems “begin with present-day examples of situations of which the tales are archetypes” (128). Yet rather than read the tales as they traditionally were read, as morality tales, Sexton reveals, in her letter to her editor, Paul Brooks (at Houghton Mifflin, who initially did not want to publish the volume) about writing the Transformations poems, that

I realise that the “Transformations” are a departure from my usual style. I would say that they lack the intensity and perhaps some of the confessional force of my previous work. I wrote them before I had to... because I wanted to... because it made me happy. [...] It would further be a lie to say that they weren’t about me, because they are just as much about me as my other poetry. (Letters 362)

To Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., whom Sexton requested to write an introduction to the volume, Sexton wrote:

I feel my Transformations needs an introduction telling of the value of my (one could say) rape of them. Maybe that’s an incorrect phrase. I do something very modern to them [...]. They are small, funny and terrifying. (Letters 367)

Sexton herself appears to have enjoyed writing these poems, despite the rather shocking verb she used as a metaphor for her transformation of the stories. The Transformations poems are not just life lessons, which were probably the main motivation behind their original authors writing them, but Sexton most likely wanted her readers to also enjoy the poems by laughing at the narrator's sardonic wit and the possibilities she opens up with her humorous and ironic insights. The tone of the poems is one of black humour, and the linguistic similarity of that term to "black magic" – with which witches are synonymous – is unmistakable. To be "transformed" suggests "a marked change in nature, form or appearance" (COED). We can almost picture Sexton, herself a "middle-aged witch," chuckling to herself while composing these poems in the privacy of her study, transforming each tale that was seemingly dated and irrelevant to our current context, into ironic, black-humoured, amusing stories that deliver an underhanded moral kick. Sexton might even be considered ahead of her time, as fairy tale retellings have become popular in the twenty-first century cinema and television, with postmodern versions of Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, and other Grimms tales.<sup>2</sup> Thus while the poems are re-tellings of Grimm's fairy tales, which were originally published in the early nineteenth century, this narrator is one who lives in Sexton's era, and she transforms the ancient stories into those relevant to the mid-twentieth century by inserting current references such as aspirin and penicillin in "Red Riding Hood," Ace bandages, soda pop and Orphan Annie in "Snow White" and celebrities of the time such as Isadora Duncan ("Rapunzel") and Joe Dimaggio ("Iron Hans"). "You always read about it," the witch-narrator reminds us in "Cinderella," and she uses her magical powers to show us that there are other ways to read the fairy tales. Yet the witch-speaker has not only recontextualised the time period of the stories, but she has also magically turned the morality tales (that the Grimm's tales were originally intended to be) on themselves; as George reminds us, Sexton's versions remain as morality tales (Oedipus 105), albeit with different morals, i.e. morals to suit her generation, as it were. For example, when the speaker relates the fairy tale of "Red Riding Hood," she questions the practicality of bringing "wine and cake" to her sick grandmother: "Where's the aspirin? The penicillin? / where's the fruit juice?" Wine and cake, in today's context, would certainly not be considered suitable nutrition for a sick old woman.

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<sup>2</sup> "Snow White and the Huntsman" was a 2012 film, "Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters" was a 2013 film, and "Grimm" was a television series that began in 2011.

The witch figure is not just that of the narrator, as the Transformations tales abound with crones as characters. Snow White's wicked stepmother is "a beauty in her own right, / though eaten, of course, by age," and she frequently conjures a magical omniscient mirror to report to her who the fairest in the land is. Mother Gothel, whom the narrator explicitly calls "a witch," owns the life-giving rampions that Rapunzel's father steals for her mother. The poor soldier who solves the mystery of the "twelve dancing princesses" is aided by "an old old woman" who advises him not to drink the wine that the princesses will give him, and who gives him "a cloak that would make him / invisible when the right time came." The witch in "Hansel and Gretel" is a cannibal and imprisons the two of them with the intention of fattening Hansel up for a future meal. Briar Rose is cursed by the thirteenth fairy whom the king, her father, has neglected to invite to her christening. Yet these witches are often lonely, forgotten, neglected, like Red Riding Hood's grandmother exiled in the big wood while the rest of her family lives in the city, or like the rest of the outlawed personae mentioned earlier in this chapter. Dame Sexton, the witch-like narrator, claims a camaraderie with her characters while presiding over the telling of these stories; "And I, I too," she says, while relating stories about deceivers in the prologue to "Red Riding Hood."

If you danced from midnight  
 To six A.M. who would understand?  
 [...]  
 The drunken poet  
 (a genius by daylight)  
 who places long-distance calls  
 at three A.M. [...]. ("The Twelve Dancing Princesses")

The description of the "drunken poet" who is a "genius by daylight" and "places long-distance calls / at three a.m." does resemble Sexton. As Juhasz points out, referring to the Transformations poems: "like proper fairy tales, these abound with witches, for the witch has been traditionally the figure of the woman past middle age" (130), and also that "the tales Dame Sexton chooses from Grimm's collection deal with her favourite themes: madness, death, and women" (129). Witch-like personae and characters preside not only over the Transformations poems but abound in the rest of Sexton's oeuvre. In Sexton's trademark poem, "Her Kind," the persona has

gone out, a possessed witch,

haunting the black air, braver at night;  
 dreaming evil, I have done my hitch.  
 I have been her kind. ("Her Kind")

She is "not a woman, quite," but more so a magical, misunderstood, "lonely thing," as the witches in Sexton's poetry mostly appear to be. In her real life Sexton saw herself as being such a creature; to her editor Paul Brooks, she wrote: "of course I am a witch, an enchantress of sorts and have already been worshipped and hung in the same order" (*Letters* 325). Writing, we recall in "The Black Art," is a semi-conscious state during which one can communicate with those from another dimension ("trance"), or has the magical power to predict the future through things she sees around her ("portent"); writing can also be a magical phrase which has magical power ("spell"), or an object that has magical powers ("fetiche"). The act of writing is a "black art" – black magic – through which the writer can supernaturally take control of the world around her and transform it to suit her will. Yet the idea of writing being a "black" sort of magic, or "dark" magic, is that it is an evil sort of magic that is used for selfish purposes (as opposed to "good" magic which benefits everyone involved).

But when we marry,  
 the children leave in disgust.  
 There is too much food and no one left over,  
 to eat up all the weird abundance.

The witch-persona, in Sexton's writing, is lonely, solitary, and performs her magic surreptitiously, avoided by all others, even her own loved ones; in such a sense she is similarly isolated as the "outlawed" personae discussed earlier in this chapter.

The magic that Sexton's witch-personae perform is a dangerous one, that can have terrifying consequences, one of which is madness. "The witch-persona," in Middlebrook's opinion, "is the voice Sexton invented to tell the story of her changing relationship to a severe, incurable, but apparently undiagnosable malady" ("Poet" 449). The narrator in "The Double Image," where witches make their first appearance in the poems, is so troubled by the voices she hears in her head that she attributes to "green witches," and they fill her with so much shame and psychic unease ("I let the witches take away my guilty soul") that she, in McClatchy's words, "attempts to solve her life with death" ("Somehow" 261). In "Anna Who Was Mad," the speaker wonders aloud if she has inadvertently made the addressee (Anna) mad. And in the poem immediately following, "The Hex," madness appears to be some sort of curse,

but this time around the curse is reversed from the addressee to the speaker: the speaker believes that she has somehow been hexed by her aunt into a life of madness and misery. Frequently in Sexton's poems, madness is some sort of witchcraft with which one person can bewitch another, and this magic always appears to be most often performed by women, against other women. The "man of many hearts" calls his lover "my real witch," suggesting that she has somehow cast a spell on him. Men, in Sexton's poetry, are capable of misdeeds more often involving lust, sex and violence, but madness is more or less confined to the world of women, as is magic.

Language is a representation of both magic and madness, as the speaker correlates in "You, Doctor Martin": "the mad are magic, talking to itself, noisy and alone." For Juhasz, "a witch works magic," and Sexton's magic is the magic of words (127), able to conjure up the "trick of words writing themselves" (*Biography* 82), and the speaker in "Obsessive Combination" can transform one word into another, for example, like RATS is able to "amazingly and funnily become STAR" ("Obsessive Combination"). While in her poetry Sexton often romanticises the notion of madness-as-magic, she was ready to admit that madness was often more a stumbling-block than it was a source of inspiration. In a letter to a fan, she wrote:

Madness is a waste of time. It creates nothing. Even though I'm often crazy, and I am and I know it, still I fight it because I know how sterile, how futile, how bleak... nothing grows from it and you, meanwhile, only grow into it like a snail. (*Letters* 267)

Her speaker in "The Fury of Rain Storms" (*DN*) echoes this sentiment: "Depression is boring, I think, / and I would do better to make / some soup and light up the cave." However while words can be "miraculous," they are often not reliable ("Words," *AR*). It is a magic that is difficult to master, leaving words to sometimes uncontrollably "swarm like bees":

Yet often they fail me.  
I have so much I want to say,  
so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.  
But the words aren't good enough,  
the wrong ones kiss me.  
Sometimes I fly like an eagle  
but with the wings of a wren.

Thus while the witch-crone persona is a predominant theme and image in Sexton's poetry, there is the underlying admission that her magic can leave her lonely, feared, abandoned and isolated. It is tied with madness and the loss of (self-)control. The magic that comes from writing cannot give the "answers" that the sixteen-year-old boy is looking for at the beginning of Transformations. While it is not enough to "read Hesse and drink clam chowder," it is also inadequate to rely on the magic of words and poetry to control the troubling mental anguish that plagued most of the poet's life.

As illustrated in this chapter, Sexton was a consummate storyteller, imagining original tales, re-telling stories of her kin, and reinventing stories that had been told before in order to bring out new insights. As she says in "Rowing," the stories made her grow – "like a pig in a trenchcoat I grew" – in that it made her public persona appear larger than life, and her poetry seem as if she had lived all those lives and wrote about them. Sexton did not lack for invented identities, and used her vast imagination and keen storytelling skills to bring to the audience a wide range of personae that she has featured in her writings, yet we must realise that this is not an exhaustive list of them. This chapter opens with a quote from Sexton in which she says "I use the personal when I'm applying a mask to my face." The mask is a rubber mask, which can contort and flex in order to accommodate the face below it, and in reading Sexton's poetry we must remember that her face is beneath that mask, and it is her that adjusts and manipulates how she chooses to present herself to her audience.

CHAPTER 5:CONSTRUCTING THE PERSONA OF THE “MAD POET”

“The patient is, as one might say, fixated to his trauma. [...] This astonishes people far too little,” writes Freud (598), but this repetitive intrusion is a distinctive feature of trauma. The twenty-first century psychiatric name for this repetition is post traumatic stress disorder, and may result in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, as well as prolonged stress and anxiety. Since Anne Sexton began writing as a positive method of dealing with her emotional trauma at the suggestion of her therapist, her mental illness was linked both positively and negatively with her psychotherapy and her attempt to recover from her prolonged emotional trauma. Her discussions during therapy as well as the act of writing poetry were an attempt to re-enact, overcome and deal with her emotional crises. Yet as her career progressed, and since her success as a poet was tied to her self-created identity as a “mad poet,” Sexton’s identity became tied to her mental illness, as well as to the public self who became more and more successful as a performing poet.

The basis of the talking cure is the linguistic re-enactment and, over time, the (partial, if not total) resolution of the psychological trauma. The role of the therapist is to listen to and then interpret this re-enactment. For Sexton, as poet, the re-enactment occurred on two levels: the first, Sexton the patient re-enacted her trauma to her therapist and worked it out in a safe, clinical setting. On the second level, Sexton the poet re-enacted the clinical situation within the setting of the poem, re-representing it in the creative and aesthetic form of the poem (as well as some of her short stories). The therapeutic relationship in this case took on another dimension: while originally designed for the patient to re-enact and thus recover from her emotional trauma, the therapeutic relationship as a subject of the written word thus became (re-)re-enacted for aesthetic purposes. Sexton’s relationship with her therapist thus became more complex than it would have been in a traditional setting, since she was not just a patient, but also a poet who wrote about her therapy, since the therapist in her case was not only an object with which she, the patient, engaged in therapy, but was also a subject about which she.

In chapter two I examined how Sexton’s writing shaped her life as that of a “mad poet,” and how her lived persona as “mad poet” in turn shaped her writing. In chapter two, I examined some of the other personae that Sexton adopted and explored

in her writing, such as that of mad women, outcasts, the idea of family and their individual members, storytellers, or even inanimate objects. In this chapter I continue the discussion of personae, especially the one that Sexton revisited the most often in the course of her poetic career, that of psychiatric patient. First, I examine the difficulties the poet encountered in attempting to translate the language of madness into the language of sanity during therapy, in order for the patient to convey her experience to her therapist during talk therapy. I then discuss the construction and dramatisation of her persona of psychiatric patient, one that she described as a “fugitive from the analyst’s couch” ([Biography](#) 51). Finally, I study the poetic relationship her personae have with their psychiatrists and therapists, and how she dramatised the therapy session, re-enacting and play-acting scenes from the therapist’s couch. They sometimes address their therapists/doctors in first person, but there are other times when Sexton frames the setting of the poem from a third-person perspective, as if watching the two characters engage with each other. In the posthumously published [Words for Dr. Y.](#), there is a major section entitled “Letters to Dr. Y.,” which is a collection of poems where the first-person speaker directly addresses her psychiatrist. This on-going dialogue Sexton’s personae have with their therapists/doctors over the course of her writing career is evidence that the psychiatric session persisted as an important source of creative material.

Sexton was among the elite few accepted into the pioneer batch of Radcliffe scholars because, in Tillie Olsen’s words, she was one of those who possessed “intellects, powers of observation, life experiences” ([Biography](#) 196), despite her lack of a higher education. Her knowledge of poetry and the poetry world was garnered from her own experiences and her own private study, and not from a classroom setting. (Sexton taught a poetry workshop at Colgate University entitled “Anne on Anne.” The course was based her own poetry, and her students would “write poems, sometimes the continuation of a poem by Anne Sexton,” study Sexton’s worksheets, and discuss “the transformation of a living human being into the persona of a poem, Sexton style” [[Biography](#) 358]. It is highly unusual for a poet to teach a course on her own poetry, and students were able to learn Sexton’s poetry-making process from the creator herself.) The critical acclaim earned by Sexton is evidence that she was able to successfully develop a writing career from what began as a therapeutic exercise. She was also able to develop poetic and public personae that were well-received by her reading audience.

### **Conveying the message of madness**

In the second chapter I discussed Anne Sexton's poetic genesis, which began with her mental breakdown, and in turn led to her seeking psychiatric therapy, during the course of which she discovered poetry-writing and its therapeutic effects. I elaborated on how her career was shaped by her identity as "mad poet," and how subsequently her critics and audience found it difficult to distinguish her poetic persona from her private personality, especially since her writing was considered "confessional."

As mentioned earlier, Sexton began writing poetry shortly after a suicide attempt, in an effort to bolster her self-esteem by searching for a skill she could master, as well as finding a way to express the despair that had caused her to self-harm. When she began attending writing classes such as John Holmes', she found a sense of belonging within the writing community because they wrote, but also because many of them were "fugitives from the analyst's couch" like she was. One prominent persona in Sexton's writing is that of mental patient, which she first adopted when she started writing poetry, and is the most prevalent in her first and second collections. And although she explored other personae and themes later on in her writing, she continued furthering and manipulating that persona all the way till her untimely suicide ultimately ended her poetic career. The idea of the mental patient helped her deal with her mental anguish, and she was obviously very interested in the relationship between therapist and patient.

The therapeutic experience, one might say, is an attempt to translate the language of madness for one who speaks only the language of sanity. The mental patient needs to put the experience of madness into words that the therapist can understand, and in doing so makes the chaotic senselessness of madness understandable to both the therapist and to oneself. Sexton approaches the attempt of such a translation with the awareness of its difficulty: "Oh! There is no translating!" she says in "Love Song" (LD). In Shoshana Felman's words,

To speak about madness is to speak about the difference between languages: to import into one language the strangeness of another; to unsettle the decisions language has prescribed to us so that, somewhere between languages, will emerge the freedom to speak. (19)

However, as Jonathan Fine reminds us, "the speaker and the hearer may have different interpretations of the moment-to-moment meaning of a text. Moving from

the text that is being created, a text will also be created” (15). The translated text then becomes yet another text which needs to be understood and assimilated by the hearer/reader. And in Sexton’s case, much of her biography, written by Diane Wood Middlebrook, was based on the recordings made by Sexton’s psychiatrist Martin Orne during her therapy sessions, as well on as his notes. Sexton’s own words, transcribed then interpreted as evidence in her own biography, lead to yet another level of translation, which is then consumed by the reader of the biography (who may not necessarily be the reader of her poetry).

There is yet another layer to the translation of the therapeutic experience when the speaker in this case, Sexton, turns her therapy session into a subject for her poetry. McGowan reminds us that “the practice of poetry is the practice of language, at its limits; and the practice of poetry criticism similarly must involve itself in the analysis and understanding of how poetic language comes into existence as a distinct branch of human communication” (x). In communicating the nature of an experience, one often uses metaphors, similes, and other poetic techniques that translate it into terms the listener can understand. Poetry itself is no ordinary communication; it is a communication that uses heightened and often figurative language, and for Sexton, “her poetic is one that situates meaning within frameworks of codified lines and verses which function in controlled tensions with the predominantly masculine-oriented language of their construction” (McGowan 2). In poetry about therapy, the translation is thus two-fold: from the experience to the therapeutic session, and then from the therapeutic session to the poem.

In the therapy poems, the patient and the therapist become characters, serving as instruments of the poet’s attempt at communication. There are, in Fine’s words, “patterns of interaction” within that relationship, which “include meanings that are exchanged, the contexts those meanings are exchanged in and the language that carries the meaning” (15). This dialogue between patient and therapist operates within a specific context, in this case, that of the psychiatric therapeutic session. The relationship between the two subjects (who are sometimes also objects) operates within this fixed context, which would be different from, for example, a conversation between a child and a parent, a meeting between two close friends, or perhaps an office discussion between colleagues. Yet unless we were witnesses to or eavesdroppers at that therapy session, the session remains a reported one, mediated by the one who has reported it, from their perspective, coloured by their opinion and

prejudices. Therein lies the difficulty in translating the therapy session to the listener.

As the speaker says in “Love Song,”

I was  
 the girl of the chain letter,  
 the girl full of talk of coffins and keyholes,  
 the one of the telephone bills,  
 the wrinkled photo and the lost connections,  
 the one who kept saying –  
*Listen! Listen!*  
*We must never! We must never!*  
 and all those things...

In this poem as well as in many others, the personae are aware of the difficulties of communication, and how attempts at conveying meaning can be interrupted and thwarted. A chain letter is not a personal letter written by the sender, but a letter copied and sent to successive people, with the purpose of raising money or spreading a message, and often contains an implicit threat that illness or evil will befall recipients who do not continue the chain. “Talk of coffins and keyholes” suggests gossip, with people recalling anecdotes of someone who is no longer alive, or eavesdropping through keyholes in order to acquire juicy information without the original subjects of the conversation knowing. Telephone bills and lost connections allude to people who gossip over the phone, and a wrinkled photo may be one that is old, where the picture has faded and where it is difficult to discern the details. This poem’s speaker reminds us that the original message may be adulterated or misremembered (and thus mis-relayed), or that the eventual recipient receives a message that was not intended to have been conveyed. The speaker says, “We must never!” but does not elaborate on what it is that we should never do; in this case, her message is not fully articulated and we have to guess at what it is that she is trying to say. The conveyance of meaning (and meaning itself) is a tricky and complicated business. There may be “nothing more honest / than your hand in her hand,” but there are some experiences or emotions that just cannot accurately translated into words.

Two major themes that emerge repeatedly in Sexton’s therapy poems are: one, that it is difficult to say exactly what one means, and that it is difficult for one to accurately express oneself; two, that it is equally, if not more difficult, to convey a message from one person to the other, as there are obstacles in communication and

translation. This struggle to transmit meaning thus also lies within the rigid context of the relationship between therapist and patient, with both of them playing fixed roles. Sexton's therapy poems are mostly written from the perspective of the patient, in the voice of either the first or third person, addressing a therapist who is most often not given the chance to respond. We are thus privy to only one side of the therapeutic relationship, i.e. that of the patient's, which we see most in the first two collections as well as in "Letters for Dr. Y." With the exception of a rare few poems, the voices in the therapy poems are that of the patient's. Rarely is the therapist given a voice; in "June 6, 1960" (WDY 5-6) the speaker anticipates that the therapist will ask, "*And where is the order?*" but the speaker is putting words in the therapist's mouth rather than allowing him to speak directly. She predicts what he will say on the basis of what he has probably said before. In most of the therapy poems, the reader is witness to only one side of the conversation, much like how she would eavesdrop on a telephone conversation. There are thus gaps in meaning that the readers themselves must fill. Roland Barthes writes in The Pleasure of the Text:

Is not the most erotic part of the body *where the garment gapes?* In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no "erogenous zones" (a foolish expression, besides); it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of appearance as disappearance. (9-10)

It is often more erotic to offer a suggestion of flesh, e.g. the cleavage or the upper thigh, than to display complete nudity. Similarly, in language, it is often the suggested and the imaginable that seduces the reader, rather than laying it all plain and bare. Gaps are as much of "Language" (Sexton's term for poetic language) as words are, not as fissures, but are as meaningful as words themselves, because of the possibilities they offer in their multiple interpretations by the listener or the reader.

Words, as Sexton expresses in her poetry, are more problematic than gaps or silences, as exemplified by the poem simply titled "Words," written on January 30

1973, from her 1975 collection, The Awful Rowing Toward God.<sup>1</sup> It is a simple poem which elaborates on the speaker's love-hate relationship with words, a relationship which is so important to the poet yet so understated, because it goes without saying that a poet uses words to express herself. Simply put, a writer's success lies with her relationship with words and how well she uses them. "Be careful of words," the speaker cautions. For Sexton, language/"Language" is not a stable entity that expresses a thing in a definite way; it works within the contexts and constructs of society and history to deconstruct and destabilise meaning, rather than to concretise a solitary, stable meaning. Sexton realised that communication is not a straightforward process. The difficulty with language is that it is relational, in that a word cannot stand alone: it is always connected to and finds its meaning within a whole series of other words. If one were to look up the meaning of a word in the dictionary, for example, one is faced with several other words that have a similar meaning, but which may possess a slightly different meaning from the original word.

Furthermore, an individual's understanding of a word may be coloured by her personal association with that word. Deborah Cameron elaborates: "the underlying idea is that language can be described as an abstract system of rules which speakers use more or less imperfectly, hampered by their memories, their emotions, their state of health, and so on" (22). She also writes, later in her book, that

Language is seen to have the dizzying effects of a dictionary: each word, definition by definition, refers to all others by a series of equivalents; every synonymous substitution is authorised. Language results in tautology, without any moment having been able to hook onto any signified at all. (168)

As Saussure has established, language is an unstable system, where words seldom mean one thing; they slip and slide in their meaning so that often it is difficult to ensure that what one has said is understood in the entirety of meaning with which one had originally intended. Sexton reflects an understanding of this difficulty when she writes in "Said the Poet to the Analyst":

My business is words. Words are like labels,  
or coins, or better, like swarming bees. [...]  
I must always forget how one word is able to pick

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<sup>1</sup> The poem's completion date was typed at the bottom of the manuscript of the poem, which is housed at the HRC.

out another, to manner another, until I have got  
something I might have said...  
but did not.

Sexton's fondness for wordplay, for example her love for palindromes ("rat's star," "Dog-God" and her nickname for herself, Ms. Dog), as well as puns and other word "trickery," were used to explore "the possibilities of the word" ("Letter Written During a January Northeaster," PO). In a draft of Sexton's play Mercy Street, the protagonist Daisy speaks:

Guilty! Guilty! That's what I am! Why don't you admit it? Admit it, Doc! [...] What makes you think you know everything, Doc? You're a dog-god, a no good God damn dog or a Doc. All you do is sit here watching your precious little clock. Ha! [...] Hello little clock, Tickety-tockety-cloctety. Who invented you, anyhow? Freud, that fraud. Little clock, little clock what makes you stop? What you need is a sock, little clock. [...] How do you like that, you – you little Doc Clock? [...] Real people like you, Clock-Doc? Doctor Alex's block with a face like a clown, brown block, brown clown! Oh! You're a naughty clock of a Doc. What you need very much more than a sock is a KNOCK! [...] And knock and a knock and a knock. (HRC)

This excerpt is an excellent example of a word "picking out another," and what Middlebrook refers to as Sexton's signature "clang," a technique where Sexton put words that sound similar (e.g. doc, god, dog, clock, sock, knock; Freud, fraud; clown, brown, block), but which do not necessarily rhyme, so that their sounds link each other together. Interestingly, some patients with bipolar disorder sometimes display "clang association," where in their speech they associate words by sound rather than by coherent meaning. The words involved often have a rhyming, near-rhyming, or punning (choosing words based on double meanings) quality to them (Vann 1).

In the poem "The Touch," Middlebrook refers to these similar words (off-box-looked-clock-knuckles-not of) as a "sonic maze" (Biography 293), and their sounds tie the poem together. Blasing notes the wordplay Sexton has conjured with her own first name:

Her name, in intratextual order, is a crazy playground of "Anne": Anna (Dingley) or "Nana," her "twin," whose mental breakdown and accusation "You're not Anne!" (Biography 16) continue to haunt her;

Anne (Wilder), another “twin,” plus psychiatrist – though not Sexton’s – plus lover; Anne of Rimbaud’s elemental hunger (and even the *ane* Anne would flee on); Orphan Annie of Daddy Warbucks (“Daddy’ Warbucks,” 45MS); and finally Anna O. of Breuer – the Anne of Dr. O. (184)

Even her own name “mannered” and echoed against other Annes in her personal history, as well as in literary and popular culture, entered in what Blasing calls “free play beyond reference.” The multiple references Sexton made with her own name and the multiple identities she allied herself with both in her life and in her poetry allowed her to play many roles while keeping her name.

In “Flee on Your Donkey,” the speaker is Rimbaud’s Anne, and she laments that having her sanity restored meant that she has lost the spontaneity of words.

I have come back  
 but disorder is not what it was.  
 I have lost the trick of it!  
 The innocence of it!

Sexton’s greatest fear was that she would lose her power over words, which eventually did decline in the last years of her life. While losing the “trick” or the magic of words was one tragedy, losing the “innocence” was another; to be unable to say or not having the words to say what one meant spelt the end of a wordsmith’s career. While the concept of irony, for example, where one means the opposite of what one says, adds further possibilities for the interpretation of words (since an ironic message may be translated in face-to-face speech as one is assisted by other indicators such as tone of voice and facial expression), in the written word it is difficult to convey irony because of the lack of additional cues. The reader has to interpret for herself whether the writer is being ironic or literal. While there was no evidence as to whether Sexton had read Saussure or was familiar (or even aware) of linguistic theory, Gill believes that “it is justifiable to suggest that [Sexton’s] problematisation of language, her demonstration of the two-sided and arbitrary nature of the sign, and her denial of the referentiality of language, echo and exemplify his thought” (Mirror 169). In an attempt to play with words and to exploit the possibilities of the disorderly ball of words, the writer faces risking being misunderstood.

This sentiment is expressed especially in the poem “Words.” “Be careful of words,” the speaker warns. They sometimes “swarm like insects,” grouping together

to form an uncontrollable and dangerous group. Or they could “leave not a sting but a kiss,” having an effect opposite to what the speaker had intended. In “Said the Poet to the Analyst,” the speaker describes words as being “like labels, / or coins, or better, like swarming bees.” Words are not “like dead bees,” but as Blasing explains, “are moving, buzzing, communicating with each other by a different code in their hive. They have their own system, which poses a threat to the ego, as a swarm of bees would to a person” (182). The “bee” metaphor, as Gill explains, expresses the volatility, erraticism, and self-possessed quality of language (Confessional 162). She also points out that Thorazine, the medication which Sexton was prescribed and which she took sporadically for eight years, produced the side-effect of a sensation akin to bees stinging the skin, especially when she was exposed to sunlight. Yet in “Words,” language can be “both daisies and bruises,” potentially pleasant yet possibly causing hurt, both a gift and a punishment. Gill points out that

The figure of the bee is used consistently in Sexton’s poems about language as a metaphor with which to encapsulate the simultaneously functional and destructive, purposive and erratic nature of language. In addition, “Bee is the nickname which the poet James Wright bestowed on Sexton around this time when the two were involved in a relationship” [Biography 128-34]. That Sexton uses the same signifier (“Bee”) for her writing self and for language is deeply telling. (Confessional 155)

There is the possibility that writers may place a personal significance on the symbols that they use in their work which only they (or those who knew them personally) may be aware of, such as, in this case, the intimate resonance of the pet name “Bee” that Wright had given to Sexton, or the stinging effects of sunlight on her skin when she was on Thorazine.

“God is in your typewriter,” Sexton was once told by a priest (Kumin xxiii), and the act of writing, in Sexton’s poetry, takes on a religious significance. The typewriter is the instrument in which she finds religious salvation: “Bless all useful objects [...] / the typewriter that is my church / with an altar of keys waiting” (“Is It True?”, AR). The “forty-eight keys of the typewriter,” the instrument on which Sexton wrote her poems, are “waiting like a cave of bees” (“The Room of My Life,” AR); God “is in the swarm, the frenzy of the bees” (“Not So. Not So.” AR). “I am, each day, / typing out the God / my typewriter believes in,” her speaker says, and is

caught in “this frenzy, / like bees stinging the heart all morning” (“Frenzy,” AR). In “Flee on Your Donkey,” the speaker returns to the “scene of disordered senses,” where “hornets” (a large stinging wasp) “have been sent”:

Hornets, dragging their thin stingers,  
 hover outside, all knowing,  
 hissing: *the hornet knows*.  
 I heard it as a child  
 but what is that he meant?  
*The hornet knows!*

The speaker mentions “The Green Hornet” in a later stanza, a radio and comic book masked vigilante who was also featured in television programmes and even in a Hollywood film in January 2011. The hornet resembles the bees which appear so frequently as a metaphor in Sexton’s poetry, as one who knows even though masked and thus unknown to others.

Blasing and Gill both suggest that the hornet is a veiled poetic reference to Orne (i.e. hORNET), Sexton’s psychiatrist, which is again another personal significance of the poet’s that the reader may not have been aware of. He, who also makes his appearance as “Doctor Martin,” is “god,” and thus the omniscient “hornet [who] knows.” In “Hornet,” part of the “Bestiary U.S.A” sequence in 45 Mercy Street, “a red-hot needle / hangs out of him,” and “he / would get in the house any way he could.” A similar “thin hot wire” appears in the first poem of the “Dr. Y.” sequence, suggesting that the psychiatrist/Orne/Doctor Martin/Dr. Y. character is able to penetrate her psyche, break through whatever psychic defences she may have put up and become privy to her most private and personal thoughts. Yet the hornet is not benevolent or even benign; it wants to penetrate her in a sinister and persistent manner:

Do not sleep for he is there wrapped in the curtain.  
 Do not sleep for he is there under the shelf.  
 Do not sleep for he wants to sew up your skin,  
 he wants to leap into your body like a hammer  
 with a nail [...].

In Blasing’s words, the hornets are “male figures threatening to mangle her body” (186), the “thin hot wire” and “red-hot needle” surely alluding to the male’s role in

the sex act. The hornet wants to penetrate the speaker in a painful and invasive way, into her most personal and private spaces:

[...] he wants to slide under your  
 fingernail and push in a splinter, do not sleep  
 he wants to climb out of the toilet when you sit on it  
 and make a home in the embarrassed hair do not sleep  
 he wants you to walk into him as into a dark fire.

Returning to the poem “Words,” it seems that the speaker’s words allow the listener (who, in the case of the therapy poems, is the male psychiatrist) access into her innermost thoughts, but this access is oft-times invasive and sinister, sometimes against her will, which is why one must “be careful of words.” One may lose control of one’s words, which can have dire consequences when they “swarm like insects.”

Gill suggests that “the speaker’s relationship with language is, then, a sexual or even masochistic one” (Confessional 163), a speculation that is confirmed when the speaker says, “Yet I am in love with words,” as well as with the sexual undertones of the “thin hot wire” and the “red-hot needle.” The speaker launches into a ballad-like praise of words:

They are doves falling out of the ceiling.  
 They are six holy oranges sitting in my lap.  
 They are the trees, the legs of summer,  
 and the sun, its passionate face.

There is another “yet” – although the speaker loves words, “they often fail me.” Words are inadequate for the writer to express what she wants: “I have so much I want to say, / so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.” The use of “etc.” or “et cetera,” a Latin expression meaning “and other things,” illustrates directly how the speaker has run out of words to express what she wants to. No matter how much she loves words, paradoxically they have failed her: “the words aren’t good enough, / the wrong ones kiss me.” Earlier the speaker pointed out that a word can “leave not a sting but a kiss,” so here not only has the expression of the word failed, but in fact the wrong word has been used. “Sometimes I fly like an eagle, but with the wings of a wren.” The speaker has thoughts and experiences (and “stories, images, proverbs, etc.”) but does not possess or have access to the vocabulary that will enable her to express herself fully. Proverbs are short, memorable statements that suggest a universal truth, (for example, “a stitch in time saves nine,” or “a place for everything and everything

in its place”), but this begs the question of what a universal truth might be. Universal to whom? A truth for whom? Language makes use of the assumption that the user understands it in the same way as the person for whom the message is intended, but as we have seen, this is often not the case. Some recipients of the message may understand it better than others, due to what they might have in common with the messenger. In a letter to Sexton, which was much treasured by her, a psychiatrist wrote:

Your poems I find unusually *paleological*, even physiological. [...] Understanding the language of psychiatric patients, or of anyone, for that matter, is advanced by sympathy, I think, more than any acumen for the recognition of the *mot juste* or the *bon mot*. (Biography 273, italics in the original)

It is not surprising that a large number of Sexton’s readers were themselves sufferers of mental anguish, as they probably identified with her emotional struggles. On the other hand, it also meant that those who did not suffer from the same struggles might have found it difficult to understand her language, despite the fact that they might have been well-read in this genre of poetry. This also likely explains the kinship between Sexton and Kumin. As a fellow writer, Kumin understood Sexton, her linguistic ambitions and her creative temperament better than many others, such as Sexton’s non-literary family.<sup>2</sup> Language/language and the attempt to translate it has its limitations, as meaning often transcends the linguistic.

This poem is full of sentences that begin with co-ordinating conjunctions (“for,” “yet” and “but”). The speaker progresses through the poem offering one point of view, then seemingly going “on the other hand,” and “but on the *other* hand.” She seems to have an alternating, love-hate relationship with words. She ends the poem,

But I try to take care  
and be gentle to them.  
Words and eggs must be handled with care.  
Once broken they are impossible  
things to repair.

In a letter written to her husband in August 1964 (while recovering from a breakdown), Sexton apologised for her need to write.

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<sup>2</sup> Sexton’s elder daughter, Linda Grey, eventually became a published writer, but when her mother died in 1974, she had not yet embarked on her literary career.

So you have to sit on sidelines, chewing your jealousy over and over. Alone with it. Who would sympathize? I'm supposed to be a genius or something. But I know, who wants to be married to that – you wanted *me*, not the sound, the frenzied sound of this machine... Whatever takes me from me, absorbs me, that will make you feel left out.

(Letters 247)

The word “frenzy” is one that is repeated in “Not So. Not So.” (AR 83-84), a 1973 poem, that refers to the “frenzy of the bees.” God may be in her typewriter, but God is also “in the swarm, the frenzy of the bees.” The poet’s ability with words is both masterful and toying with danger, because while writing stabilises the unstable psyche of the mental patient, it seems a fragile sort of control.

Words are fragile, easily broken, and easy to lose one’s power over. And once control is lost, it is difficult to wrest it back. In the earlier days of her writing, Sexton appeared to place much more effort and emphasis on using the “right” words. In a 1965 interview, Sexton revealed:

I will fool around on the typewriter. It might take me ten pages of nothing, of terrible writing, and then I'll get a line, and I'll think, “That’s what I mean!” What you’re doing is hunting for what you mean, what you’re trying to say. [...] I work on [a poem for] a very long time. For one lyric poem I rewrote about three hundred typewritten pages. Often I keep my worksheets, so that once in a while when I get depressed and think that I'll never write again, I can go back and see how that poem came into being. You watch the work and you watch the miracle. You have to look back at all those bad words, bad metaphors, everything started wrong, and then how it came into being, the slow progress of it, because you’re always fighting to find out what it is that you want to say. You have to go deeper and deeper each time. [...] It’s a struggle, but there’s great happiness in working.

(NES 73)

It is difficult to write exactly what one means, but “fooling around” might trigger one’s subconscious and aid one in figuring out how one wants to say what she means. On the other hand, “bad words, bad metaphors” can lead one down what the writer may deem to be the “wrong path,” which resonates with what the speaker expressed when she said, “I must always forget how one word is able to pick / out another, to

manner another, until I have got / something I might have said... / but did not.”

Sexton references T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” in her poem “Hurry Up Please It’s Time” (DN 62-74), titling her poem with a line that appears several times in Eliot’s poem. This Eliot reference calls to mind another of his poems, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” where the speaker laments the impossibility of true communication: “It is impossible to say just what I mean! [...] That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all.” (Prufrock 1) However, the possibility of words being able to pick out unintended words may help the speaker express ideas in her subconscious that she might have otherwise not been able to, which might then become the “right” words. In a London Magazine review of Live or Die, critic Alan Ross writes: “Anyone experiencing the process of breakdown knows the impossibility of describing it. Once you can find the words you are half-way cured and it is another situation altogether” (Biography 277). As her speaker says in “The Dead Heart” (AR),

The tongue, the Chinese say,  
is like a sharp knife:  
it kills  
without drawing blood

For all their weaknesses, words also had the power to heal and even to kill.

On the typed cover sheet for the worksheets of Awful Rowing Sexton described the poems as being written between 10 and 30 January 1973 “with two days out for despair and three out in a mental hospital” (Biography 366). Kumin recalls,

When Anne was writing The Awful Rowing at white heat in January and February or 1973, and the poems were coming at the rate of two, three, even four a day, that awesome pace terrified me. [...] Fearing a manic break, I did everything I could to retard the process, long-distance, during daily hour-long calls. (xxxix)

Middlebrook describes the Awful Rowing poems as “short, loosely organized explosions of imagery; the theme, if it can be generalized, was self-disgust” (Biography 366). Sexton’s “manic energy” reminded Kumin “uncomfortably of the stories told about Sylvia Plath writing Ariel at white heat” (Biography 367), a few weeks after which Plath committed suicide. A colleague at Boston University, John Malcolm Brinnin, advised her to look carefully through her work, suggesting that she “spend months selecting & examining what your net has hauled in” while an old critic and friend, James Wright, exhorted similar selecting and pruning (Biography 367).

While on the one hand, her change in poetic style was in great part a deliberate decision, it also appeared to many of her colleagues that she was losing her earlier masterful control over words, especially in her declining years. Words were “picking out” one another, “mannered” one another, and but without Sexton’s careful harvesting and censoring, some of her late poems’ meaning and ideas became confusing and garbled at times. It does appear that words “once broken [...] are impossible / things to repair,” even in this prolific writer’s case.

### **The persona of the “mad poet” and the fictionalisation of the self**

No matter how much one writes about oneself or one’s own experiences, writing about the self as a subject involves fictionalising the self, even if the piece of writing deals with events that have actually occurred. Of the tradition of women’s writing, Gill comments:

it is the poets themselves who are very consciously manipulating their performances, the roles they play, the voices and identities they choose to project. This is part of a strategic, and again a self-reflexive, examination of vital questions about subjectivity, authority and language. It is a strategy in which women position themselves centre stage as subjects rather than accepting the place of marginalised objects. (Women’s Poetry 73-74)

Rather than accept the marginalised position of being a mental patient, Sexton turned it into the starring role in her writing, a “career,” so to speak. (One thinks of the “moral career” of the asylum patient, a term that Erving Goffman first used to describe the sense of self and identity that characterises one who has been hospitalised and diagnosed as suffering from a mental illness.) Sexton even formed a chamber rock group called “Anne Sexton and Her Kind,” but what exactly did being “her kind” entail? Were they “fugitives from the analyst’s couch”? Were they poets, or women, or narcissists? Of Pretty Ones Robert Lowell had tactfully said (despite pronouncing the poems as containing faults such as “loose edges” and “a certain monotony of tone”) that the poems “are Sexton and therefore precious” (Biography 185-86). Sexton knew that she was, more than she was a poet, “a person selling poetry” (Biography 63); Middlebrook wryly points out, “readers are only predisposed to praise a poem that carries some guarantee of cultural value. This point was not lost on the daughter and wife of a salesman” (Biography 83). Her understanding of the

literary marketplace meant “her kind” was a kind of woman, who wrote a kind of poetry and gave a kind of performance that she knew would attract and retain a readership in order to further her literary career. In Jacqueline Rose’s words, “Sexton was a mistress of the “I” as fiction – the personal as the ultimate persona” (23). What she wrote, seemingly of her “true self,” was but a character in her own fiction, in which she played the starring role, and she made no pretenses regarding this role.

In a 1973 essay entitled “The Freak Show” (NES 33-38), Sexton characterised the nature of the “performances” poets had to put up when giving readings. In order to make a decent living and not have to take on a “day job,” Sexton frequently gave readings, for which she charged high fees. Because of her high asking rate and her unwillingness to travel, she frequently had to reject many invitations for readings (mostly from educational institutions who could not afford to pay commercial rates), as attested by the many letters she had filed away, and which were later archived at the HRC. In one of her essays, she revealed that her imaginary audience was that “one person, that one perfect reader who understands and loves” (NES 33). She thus had in mind the ideal reader when she wrote. Yet when she performed her poetry, the audience was quite different from that perfect reader. This was how she viewed herself when she was performing:

You are the freak. You are the actor, the clown, the oddball. Some people come to see what you look like, what you have on, what your voice sounds like. Some people secretly hope your voice will tremble (it gives that extra kick). Some people hope you will do something audacious, in other words (and I admit to my greatest fears) that you vomit on the stage or go blind, hysterically blind or actually blind.  
(NES 33)

Since Sexton could never have known what was truly on the minds of the members of her audience, she was obviously extrapolating her personal fears of embarrassing herself or not being able to live up to her audience’s expectations. The listening audience, unlike the reading audience, is there for more than just the poetry; they are there for a show. Sexton’s daughter Linda Gray feared that her mother would somehow make a spectacle of herself, especially towards the end of her life, when she was becoming increasingly emotionally unstable: “Watching her readings I always had the fear that she would fall apart in front of all these people, and oh how embarrassing” (Biography 391). But that was what the audience wanted: “it was

reported to me [i.e. Sexton] that my lecture bureau (one of their agents happened to be in my audience the night when I cried) speaks proudly of my presentation to their clients thusly: ‘It’s a great show! Really a pow! She cries every time right on stage!’ (“Freak Show,” NES 34-35). The listening audience can also respond directly to the poet at a reading more immediately and more directly than the reading audience; Sexton recalls the time when she read and “a man yelled up from the audience as I was speaking [...], ‘Whatever you do, Annie, we’re with you’” (NES 35). The reading audience may only communicate with the writer via the limited medium of correspondence, but they are not able to respond as directly and as viscerally as the audience that is present and immediate to the performing poet.

Bronfen writes:

The act of performance emphasizes what is implicit to all intimate poetry: that writing turns the intimate into something exterior, draws a boundary between experience or feeling and expression, creates a distance between the speaker and the persona or self-representation articulating the speaker in the process of poetic transformation. (292)

The performer, in Sexton’s words, is asked “to make a show of it” (NES 35). What Kumin might have criticised as “melodramatic and stagey” (Biography 306) was, in great part, what the audience might have wanted. Sexton was the pop star of the poetry world, as this description of her attests: “She brought to the task the charisma of the *artiste*, dressing in beautiful clothes and, as often as possible, travelling with an entourage. Moreover, her readings were carefully rehearsed” (Biography 319). To an academic admirer who was unaware of this careful choreography and thought her performances ad-libbed, she explained, “All the things you quote from the reading, my little introductory notes, are, I hate to tell you, not in the least spontaneous with the exception of one or two sentences” (Biography 319). Actor Marian Seldes, who played the lead role of Daisy in Mercy Street, saw the natural actress in Sexton: “there was a great deal of what people think of as an actress about Anne. She was a dramatic-looking person; her behaviour was interesting; her laugh, people would say if she was an actress, was a theatrical laugh” (Biography 320). Fellow poet Allen Grossman called her “a seducing sort of woman, constantly talking about her body and its mutilations” (Biography 250). It was as if she wanted to call attention to herself without actually focusing on her personality, displacing the focus onto her outer appearance instead, as if it were separate from her self, which she could

manipulate like a mask. However, Sexton did not find her readings/performances to be an easy part of her career. Sexton described her breakdown as feeling “unreal” (Biography 31), yet in a journal that she kept for Herbert Kohl while working with the Teachers and Writers Collaborative in 1967, she records that when she gives a reading, “I feel that I am faking it” (HRC). Skorczewski notes that Sexton “often spoke of her performances as if she had to don a mask to survive them” (147), and had to bolster her strength with drugs and alcohol. Readings caused her to present an unauthentic self, and took a great emotional toll on her: “I find a poetry reading takes a month from my writing – the trauma” (NES 36). She explains to Barbara Kevles:

A week before it happens, the nervousness begins and it builds up to the night of the reading, when the poet in you changes into the performer. Readings take so much out of you, because they are a reliving of the experience, that is, they are happening all over again (NES 108-9)

But the poet performs for an audience because she “will need the money from the readings. It is a way of getting by” (NES 36). The poet does it for the mundane reason of sheer economic survival.

While Sexton was often classified as a confessional poet (a title she was unwilling to take up), it can be said that the seeming “truth” or “authenticity” of her work gave it an apparent value to her readers. The phrase “actress in my own autobiographical play” highlights the distanced and mediated nature of the poetic identity from the poet’s own, and the role the poet has to play. Although I had access to the archives of Sexton’s papers, which might be the closest, one might say, that one can get to a writer’s true self (other than meeting the writer in person, which is impossible in this situation), it is yet another mediated encounter. In Steedman’s words,

the past, [...] a structure or event, a happening or a thing, through the activities of thought and writing [...] were never actually *there*, once, in the first place; or at least, not in the same way that a nutmeg grater actually was, and certainly not as the many ways in which they “have been told.” So there is a double nothingness in the writing of history and the analysis of it: it is about something that never did happen in the way it comes to be represented (the happening exists in the telling or

the text); and it is made out of materials that aren't there, in an archive or anywhere else. (154)

All retellings, no matter how immediate, are mediated, distanced or removed from the actual occurrence, because they are always but representations of the happening, and are shaped by the perspectives of the representer (or re-representer). There is a meaningful order imposed upon it that may or may not have been there. In Bronfen's words, "the speaking woman transforms into an image of herself, repeating an intimate scene but at another site, at another temporal moment, no longer authentic" (296). No matter how autobiographical a representation of an experience might appear in poetry, it is "no longer authentic," an inaccurate representation of the lived event. Thus the therapy poem is a representation of the therapy session, which in itself is a distanced retelling of a particular trauma; the poem is twice removed from the actual experience. Sexton herself wavers between the belief in the autobiographical authenticity of her poetry and its universal truth during the course of her career. In an early interview, she says of the poem "All My Pretty Ones,"

Well, my poetry is very personal. I don't think I write public poems [...] This is a very personal poem, of course; I bring in all these intimate details. But I hope that I give it a rather authentic stamp; that's always my hope. (NES 50)

In another interview given that same year, however, she seems to change her view: "But then, poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical" (NES 103). Her self-consciousness in how she needs to address that "one perfect reader" involves her taking on a number of guises and roles, even within the therapy poems.

It's a little mad, but I believe I am many people. When I am writing a poem, I feel I am the person who should have written it. Many times I assume these guises [...]. Sometimes I become someone else and when I do, I believe, even in moments when I'm not writing the poem, that I am that person. (NES 103)

Bronfen gives her the label of "hysteric" because of Sexton's ability to role-play, as does Sexton's first psychiatrist, Orne, because "like a chameleon, she could adopt any symptom"; he was sure that if she were put into a ward of schizophrenics, she would soon exhibit their symptoms (*Biography* 39), like the "actress" she claimed to be.

The role-play and the mimicking of symptoms may point to her deeper fear that as a performer, she had no true self.

In fact, it comes down to the terrible truth that there is no true part of me. ... It is as if I will permit my therapy and think it all very interesting as long as it doesn't touch me. I am a story-maker. [...] I suspect that I have no self so I produce a different one for different people. I don't believe me, and I seem forced to constantly establish long fake and various personalities. (Biography 62-63)

Making her life more dramatic was possibly one way Sexton attempted to succeed as a poet. In producing a different self for different people, she ensured that she constantly dramatised different possibilities and perhaps gave herself more subject material: "...in this poetry biz [...], we are asked to make a show of it" (NES 35). As Bronfen notes,

The act of performance emphasises what is implicit to all intimate poetry: that writing turns the intimate into something exterior, draws a boundary between experience or feeling and expression, creates the distance between the speaker and the persona or self-representation articulating the speaker in the process of poetic transformation. (292)

All writing implies an audience, whether it be the writer herself, a small/private audience, or the public. In producing a different self for different people, Sexton ensured that she constantly dramatised different possibilities and perhaps gave herself more material to write about. In "The Play" (AR) the speaker examines her life through the analogy of a performance. It is a play in which she is the "only actor":

The play is my life,  
my solo act. [...]  
All I am doing onstage is running,  
running to keep up,  
but never making it.

When reading her biography, it is easy to be critical of the sort of person she appeared to be: reliant on drugs and alcohol; attention-seeking; a neglectful parent. But one needs to remember that because she was viewed by many as a confessional poet, she perhaps felt obliged to live her life dramatically so that she had subject matter:

The audience rushes out.  
It was a bad performance.  
That's because I'm the only actor  
and there are few humans whose lives

will make an interesting play.

Don't you agree?

After her father passed away, she wrote in a letter: "So now he is funeraled, cremated, and I have no parents to run away to Calif. [sic] from. Some misty God has shoved me up the latter and I am my own interior.... I am going to try NOT to write a poem about it" (Letters 81). In another incident, Sexton had an emotional breakdown at her psychiatrist's office, where she

went directly to the air conditioner and began cradling it in her arms, then collapsed on the floor, where she spent the entire appointment curled up in a trance, ignoring Orne's voice, praying, and calling him Nana. The next day she wrote a poem, "For the Year of the Insane," based on her inner experience of that hour. (Biography 201)

The theatrical nature of this account could easily make a sceptic speculate that she perhaps made her episode more dramatic than it actually was so that she could have more to write about. Deryn Rees-Jones calls the confessional poem "an aesthetic of the truth – an authenticity which is as paradoxically subject to 'tinkerings,' as Lowell called them, as any other piece of creative writing" (283-84). The insight that Orne had is that "her poems invented a self that others valued, and this endowed her real life with opportunities" (xx). The word "invented" is highly telling, because it implies that she created or designed something that had not existed before. But these invented identities had both positive and negative aspects for Sexton: "all I have is a lot of faces that signify my failure. It is easier, if I am sick, not to have to watch the constant mirror of my daily failure to make anyone happy or pleased with me" (Biography 60).

### **Sexton's "doctor" poems**

The high level of importance that Sexton placed on her relationship with her psychiatrist was justifiable on many levels. Her family did not understand the importance of poetry and therapy in her life; Sexton's father-in-law, who paid for most of her medical bills, wrote to Orne: "It is my personal belief that she is playing us all for a bunch of suckers, and that she has no intention of ever assuming her family responsibilities" (Biography 73). Sexton's own husband "told her that poetry was an indulgence, just as her psychiatry was an indulgence, and he was tired of

trying to explain her selfish behaviour to both sides of the family” (*Biography* 79).<sup>3</sup> Sexton’s father only empathised with her depressions when his wife, Anne’s mother, died of cancer, and he confided in Sexton “that he had grown suicidally melancholy and that he now understood how she had felt when she tried to kill herself” (*Biography* 116). Her family could not understand why she did not function like a normal housewife should; Sexton would spend only half an hour cleaning the house, then devote the rest of her day to the typewriter (*Biography* 73). Middlebrook’s biography of Sexton as well as Linda Sexton’s memoirs reveal a Sexton that was severely lacking as a mother, in that she often neglected her children, and Linda Sexton alleges that her mother physically and sexually abused her. Her breakdowns and depressions were unfathomable to her family. Conversely Orne, who was her psychiatrist for eight years, understood her emotional struggles and nurtured her talent for poetry at a level that no one in her family was able to provide. As Skorczewski neatly summarises:

Orne clearly learned from his mentor [i.e. Elvin Semrad, supervisor and clinician at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute] about the value of his patients’ stories and their pain, and he added his own conviction that patients who had found something productive to do with their lives fared better than those who did not. It is nonetheless extraordinary that in this cultural climate, in a mental ward in a Boston suburban mental institution, a psychiatrist’s encouragement could help a young mother become an internationally published poet in scarcely two years. (xiii)

Sexton was fortunate to have found a therapist who was able to recognise her particular talent in writing, and who encouraged her to pursue it.

However, what Sexton recognised, and which perhaps has seldom been highlighted by those who have written about her, is that her life and that of her therapists (especially Orne’s) were intertwined; it was not just that the patient depended on the doctor, but also that the doctor was defined by his relationship to the patient. In one of her therapy sessions, Sexton told Orne, “I’m only sorry how much of my life is tied up with yours – you are [attached to me] too – it’s an odd kind of transference. I’m not in love with you; you are not a father figure” (Skorczewski 13).

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<sup>3</sup> Sexton met Orne for therapy at least two or three times a week for the next eight years (Skorczewski xvi), which meant a sizeable investment of time and money in psychiatric therapy.

As Skorczewski points out, during therapy Sexton often expressed their relationship in terms of a “we,” rather than the two of them individually. “The ‘we’ hold the power of their working relationship, a power that Orne has over Sexton, but also one that she had over him, for he could not create what they had with anyone else” (14). Skorczewski also brings to the fore that Sexton “emphasized her attachment to Orne as an interdependence rather than a dependency.” She acknowledges, on his behalf (though he may not agree) that they are interdependent. Thus her poetic accomplishments are his accomplishments too, because it was under his care that she discovered her talent, and his faith in her encouraged her to develop it to a level of great success; he helped to nurture the creativity she had not received her parents’ or husband’s praise for.

When Sexton returned prematurely from her European travels in October 1963, she was severely depressed and suicidal. Middlebrook records that “on the tape Dr. Orne made that night, a thin, listless voice sighs from what sounds like a shrunken version of Anne Sexton. [...] ‘There’s a simple rule in psychiatry,’ he told her gently. ‘You’ve got to have a patient’” (*Biography* 209). The therapeutic relationship has to have two participants – the doctor and the patient – because without either, there is no session, just as a performer requires an audience and vice versa. There is no therapeutic session if the patient does not have the therapist to whom she can tell her story. While in society doctors generally have a higher social status than poets, the speakers in Sexton’s therapy poems view their work as having primary importance, as reflected in “Said the Poet to the Analyst”: “My business is words,” while the analyst’s “business is watching my words.” Her performance has to exist in order for there to be an audience. The doctor’s existence is dependent on (or interdependent with) that of the patient, as in the therapy poems they are defined by the patient as much as, if not more than, the patient is by them. The importance and the complexity of the relationship between her poetry, her mental health and her therapist is emphasised in the first poem of *Bedlam*. In “You, Doctor Martin” despite the direct address implied by the title of the poem, indicating a close relationship between the speaker and the addressee, the poem focuses instead on the wide emotional gulf between the two, as well as how they are conversely tied to each other.

The poem is set in a mental hospital, probably in the 1950s or 1960s, when Sexton was first hospitalised. It begins: “You, Doctor Martin, walk / from breakfast to madness.” The world, to the therapist, is filled with everyday and prosaic activities

such as breakfast; the speaker's experience is the total opposite, as it is the strange and unnerving experience of madness. The doctor has the power to move in and out of the hospital, a freedom that the patients do not have. He is the deified "god of our block, prince of all the foxes"; in comparison, the speaker and the other patients are helpless and trapped. Like prisoners, they "stand in broken lines / and wait while they unlock / the door and count us," one patient indistinguishable from the next. Even the speaker views herself and the other patients as "large children," juxtaposed against the apparent omnipotence of the doctor. Although the doctor seems to be an omniscient being with a "third eye," the speaker "gazes from her own third eye, painfully and sanely aware of the psychic dynamics she and her fellow inmates play out (George, *Oedipus* 26). The "third eye" is a reference to the "eye of insight" in Eastern mysticism, but is understood in general terms as one's intuition. One would imagine that the asylum would have closed-circuit television cameras to monitor the patients and to ensure that they did not escape from their confinement, but while the doctor may be able to physically keep watch over the patients' actions, and to be able to interpret their actions based on what he has acquired academically, the patient is sane enough to regard her doctor with scepticism about whether he is truly able and willing to help her. A "god" requires believers, a "prince" requires subjects, just as a doctor requires patients in order to define his role.

The poem is set at the end of summer, in late August, when the days are shortening and suggest the impending autumn, which brings the temporary "death" of trees and foliage. The inmates seem, in Jeffrey Berman's words, "more dead than alive" (179), possibly medicated into compliance. The hallways are filled not only with the patients who are childish (or childlike), but also with the spirits of "the moving dead" who "still talk / of pushing their bones against the thrust / of cure." The pun on "still" is repeated later in the poem: the speaker asks, at the end of the poem, if she is "still lost." "Still" could have the double meaning of not moving, being passive and resigned, but it could also mean that the patients have maintained their mentally ill state and have not been cured by psychiatric therapy. The seemingly all-powerful doctor has failed to cure his patients. In fact, the patients push "against the thrust / of cure," resisting instead of submitting to the doctor's ministrations.

Sexton was fond of puns and wordplay. Puns subvert the notion that language has a stable meaning, since not only can a word have more than one meaning, but it can also inadvertently suggest other meanings through its association with other

words which the writer may or may not have originally intended. An example of the use of double meaning occurs when the speaker says:

I am queen of all my sins  
forgotten.

The speaker could mean that she, the queen, has been forgotten, or alternatively could mean that all her sins have been forgotten. Sexton's skill and fondness for wordplay found their way into Sexton's poetry throughout her career, but mostly during the earlier part of her career when she was more concerned with form and structure. (Her early major poem "The Double Image" is an example of her interest in double meanings and reflected images in language.)

The therapist in Sexton's poetry appears as a sort of failed saviour-figure. In "You, Doctor Martin," he cannot cure the speaker. Rather than recovering, her condition seems to have degenerated since she was admitted to the hospital, since "once [she] was beautiful," which implies that she no longer is, and now has been relegated to the menial occupational therapy task of making moccasins (how is this activity supposed to help her recover?). Yet while the doctor has administrative power over the speaker and the other patients, he seems to be powerless over her mental health, since she is "still lost," without a concrete identity. She seems to find meaning only by rebelling against the doctor's authority. The speakers in the therapy poems often see their doctors as god-figures, such as in "Flee on Your Donkey":

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,  
were better than Christ;  
you promised me another world  
to tell me who  
I was.

Once again, this speaker is a mental patient in a hospital who is physically and emotionally lost. She turns to her doctor to restore her identity, but – "Six years of such small preoccupations! / Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!" – after six years of therapy and hospitalisations, she is still consumed by an emptiness from which she cannot escape. Instead of finding comfort and consolation, the speaker comes to the conclusion that she should "flee this sad hotel" (of an institution), since "there are brains that rot here / like black bananas." The mental hospital is not a site of recovery, but of decay. The doctor, instead of being able to save her, is once again unsuccessful in carrying out his duties.

Sexton's therapy poems reveal her speakers' disappointment and dissatisfaction with doctors who are supposed to save them from their mental anguish. Doctor Martin's "business is people." In "Said the Poet to the Analyst," the poet's "business is words," while the analyst (most likely a synonym for therapist or psychiatrist) has the "business" of "watching [the poet's] words." This poem sees the persona elevating herself from the status of patient to that of poet, even though at the time of writing this poem, Sexton had not yet published her first book. Rather than being in a passive role, waiting for the doctor to treat her, the speaker is now one who possesses a vocation, just as the analyst does. The word "business" suggests a financial transaction, so while the speaker derives her livelihood from the creative enterprise of poetry-writing, the analyst's livelihood is dependent on the observing, critiquing and criticising of that act. The "business of words" is a pressing and stressful responsibility; in "The Ambition Bird" (BF) "the business of words keeps me awake," says the speaker.<sup>4</sup> That Sexton has placed the business of the speaker in one verse, and the business of the analyst in the second verse, emphasises the gulf between their two interests and purposes, and limits the possible communication between the two persons. In McGowan's words, "the disjunction between the two positions in language, analytic on one side and poetic on another, is matched by a similar gap between what is said to the analyst and what is not, or cannot, be said" (18). It is interesting to note that of the two stanzas, the poet's is densely symbolic and puzzlingly enigmatic, reflecting the richness and suggestiveness of poetic language, while the analyst's stanza is far more straightforward, just as the scientific method is supposed to be (as opposed to the poetic method). The speaker elaborates on the possibility of misinterpreting symbolic language, as well as being misinterpreted by one's analyst during psychotherapy. Misinterpretation by the analyst is a possibility, since the analyst might arrive at something the speaker "might have said... / but did not." Because of this possibility of losing control over her words, the speaker attempts to remain resistant to the analyst's interpretations – "I admit nothing" – in a move not to implicate herself. Levi-Strauss writes that the weaving of the personal myth in cultural anthropology brings "to a conscious level

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<sup>4</sup> Sexton suffered from insomnia, as recorded by Middlebrook in Sexton's *Biography*. An acquaintance noted that the dose of medication Sexton felt she "needed" in order to sleep "was excessive in amount, an unorthodox mixture of major and minor tranquilisers, antidepressants and barbiturates. She seemed to take them indiscriminately" (281).

conflicts and resistances which have remained unconscious” (198). While he is not referring specifically to psychotherapeutic practices, what he says about the iconic representation of the self is similar to how the patient here makes sense of her self and resolves her trauma. However, Sexton’s speaker suggests through this poem that it may often not be quite so simple, since her representation requires an interpretation. If the analyst wrongly interprets her words, he may lead the patient into false assumptions about herself.<sup>5</sup>

The analyst’s business is “watching” the poet’s words. When someone says, “I am watching you,” the person is doing more than just observing; he is waiting to catch you in the act of making a mistake. But what is “right” or “wrong” in a psychoanalytic session? The analyst has power over his poet-patient, as he has the power to pronounce her sane or insane, which may have implications for her freedom and rights in society, and if he “should say this is something it is not,” then the poet-patient “grow[s] weak.” Such a pronouncement that the speaker has said something untrue or wrong makes her hands feel “funny,” which is an uncharacteristically imprecise word for one whose “business is words.” The analyst can disarm the patient’s power over her words, and cause her to lose confidence in that which she had originally deemed her “business.”

In “Letters to Dr Y.” the reader is invited into the speakers’ therapeutic sessions, where the poems are not structured around a particular theme, but instead seem to be random collection of poems of which the addressee is the therapist/doctor. The poems were written over the course of Sexton’s career, and although she had originally wanted to publish them as part of The Book of Folly, but “when friends and editors convinced her that it did not belong there, she specifically reserved it for publication after her death” (CP 559, editor’s note). However, George sees this collection as “violating the therapeutic session [...]; the reader is in the doctor’s office, invading, albeit by invitation, a space as sacred as the confession booth” (Oedipus 147). The modern notion of doctor-patient confidentiality, which many critics have

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<sup>5</sup> “False memory syndrome” (FMS) is a “condition in which a person’s identity and interpersonal relationships are centered around a memory of traumatic experience which is objectively false but in which the person strongly *believes*” (McHugh 67, emphasis in the original), and false memories may on occasion be accidentally planted by therapists.

Early in Sexton’s therapy, she invented a persona she called “Elizabeth,” who was a dissociated part of her personality that she imagined had an incestuous relationship with her father. Orne was of the opinion that Elizabeth was made up (Sexton herself admitted, “I made her up – I think I did” [Biography 63]), but believed that “Anne did not have multiple personality disorder, though she could have been encouraged in that direction” (Biography 61).

accused Orne of having violated when he released to Sexton's biographer tapes of recordings he had made during her therapy sessions, is shattered here when Sexton allows us to eavesdrop on her speakers' side of the conversation they are having with the therapists. Yet this conversation is one-sided; we can only be privy to what the speaker is saying, and in that sense the speaker is usurping the power of the psychiatrist as he is rendered speechless, unable to respond or to defend himself. She has total power over the conversation and the information she that she chooses to reveal.

Gill reminds us, however, that the aural pun of Dr. Y. is "Doctor, why...?" and that in the manuscript drafts of the poems, this sequence is entitled "Letters to Doctor Why – 1958-1968" (Confessional 151). The speaker may be imploring the doctor to answer her questions and to shed some light on her condition, yet his lack of speech or his predictable answers provide her with none. The speaker's frustration with her doctor is especially evident in the untitled poem dated "June 6, 1960." While this poem was published posthumously as part of Words for Dr. Y. in 1978, the date of the poem implies that it was written shortly after the publication of Bedlam. Sexton's concerns with language and communication are evident when the speaker opens the poem with "I have words for you, Dr. Y., / words for sale." We recall that in "Said the Poet to the Analyst," the psychoanalytic session has been commodified, and that the speaker needs to pay the therapist for his time and his attention. We recall also that Sexton was one of the most financially successful poets of her time, not only because of the popularity and artistic quality of her work, but also because she wrote as one who was very aware of her readers and what the market expected of her. Sexton realised that poetry is an enterprise (i.e. a business of words), as was the psychoanalytic experience: "Who listens to dreams? Only symbols for something – / like money for the analyst" ("Imitations of Drowning," LD). Sexton also realised that poetry is also another sort of enterprise (i.e. a formidable task of some scope) that involved selecting and assembling words in a way that her readership could accept and understand. While the poet is selling her words to a reading audience, she is paying the analyst to listen to her words.

The refrain (if we could call it that) in the June 6, 1960 poem has the poet ventriloquising the doctor's response: "*And where is the order?* you will ask." The speaker's understanding of language is very different that of her analyst. The speaker expects and predicts that the doctor will insist that order must exist, and that language

must be pinned down, but her speakers know that that is an impossible task. The speaker's desire to speak the "hoarded up" words is for the "pleasure act" of letting them emerge, but she predicts that the analyst will insist that the words must be structured for an end. To "order" can also mean to command, which implies that the speaker assumes that the analyst will want to know how the speaker will control how what she says. But rather than to conform to what the doctor may have "ordered" her to do, the speaker insists on a "disorderly display of words, [...] an old string ball." This resonates with Henri Bergson's notion of consciousness as the "unrolling of a spool" (192). Bergson represents his understanding of consciousness through metaphors: consciousness is cumulative, "as a continuous winding, like that of a thread into a ball, for our past follows us, and becomes larger with the present it picks up on its way; and consciousness means memory" (193). We are the sum of our lived experiences. However,

No metaphor can express one of the two aspects without sacrificing the other. If I evoke a spectrum of a thousand shades, I have before me a complete thing, whereas duration is the state of completing itself. If I think of an elastic being stretch, of a spring being wound or unwound, I forget the wealth of coloring characteristic of duration as something lived and see only the simple movement by which consciousness goes from one shade to the other. The inner life is all that at once, variety of qualities, continuity of progress, unity of direction. It cannot be represented by images. (194)

Bergson recognises that no one metaphor is adequate to express another notion without leaving out some characteristics that the original object possesses. Each metaphor can only express one aspect of the thing being described, and one might never be able to fully express one thing in terms of another's characteristics. Language, especially symbolic language, is such that words do not just stand on their own; if one uses a metaphor, or a word, to symbolise or to explain a concept, the other meanings of the words used get involved in the linguistic equation and become, in the poet's speaker's words, "a huge gathering ball of words." There is no order of the sort that the doctor is asking for. Yet that the doctor is only able to speak in response to what the speaker has said first again makes clear that the doctor's existence, in this poem at least, is dependent on that of the speaker's.

The notion of order emerges several times in Sexton's poetry. In "February 3rd" (WDY, part of the series of poems entitled, "Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems"), the speaker laments that "My ideas are a curse. / They spring from a radical discontent / with the awful order of things." The "awful order" suggests disorder: both the lack of order, or a mental disorder (i.e. a mental illness); it is because of this "awful order" that the doctor in "June 6, 1960" sees the need to impose a sense of order. Quoted earlier, "Flee on Your Donkey" also frames disorder as positive, with the speaker lamenting its loss and "innocence." "Awful" could also mean full of awe or inspiring awe (i.e. full of awe), though this meaning is less commonly used; this reading could suggest that the speaker is expected to be in awe of societal order, such as the power of the doctor over the patient, but instead she feels discontented and trapped by societal expectations due to her circumstances, which in this case could be her femaleness, or perhaps her label of mental patient, which cause her to be subjugated by the (male) doctor. She resents the "awful order of things."

A single word is, in this poem, a "slim precise girl, a sunflower seed," something that we could "surely overlook. / So easily lost, a dead bee." A word may be weak on its own, but symbolic language, which pulls together clusters of associated words and meaning, is not orderly at all, or at least not in the way that the doctor asks it to be. Words when used together can be powerful; in "Poet to the Analyst," words are "like swarming bees," not just a solitary dead bee, or dead bees in the attic. The symbolic language that the speaker uses, which is the opposite of the precise scientific language that the doctor/therapist is more accustomed to, is deemed by the speaker to be more powerful than the direct "order" that she thinks the doctor/therapist wants, and the speaker repeatedly refuses to give in to his notion of order. The poet-patient deems herself to be more powerful than her doctor, a dramatic reversal of the status that society has given them. The doctor is "almost mighty" ("The Operation," PO), but then again, not quite.

In her poetry, Sexton often challenged her subservience, as patient, student, woman or daughter. Foucault writes:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or the virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority which requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates

it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, console, and reconcile.

(History 61-62)

Just as the priest requires a confessor, and the doctor requires a patient, those in power need someone over which to exercise their control. The authoritarian figure of the doctor is called “father-doctor” in “Cripples and Other Stories” (LD), highlighting his paternalistic attitude towards the speaker in that poem. The father could be a paternal parent, or a priest, and the thirty-six-year old speaker is trapped by her father-doctor in the childish rituals of her past, which is reflected by the sing-song nursery rhyme quality of the poem. While George reads the poem as one with sexual undertones – “You hold me in your arms. [...] You kiss me in my fever” – it may well be actions that a parent performs while taking care of a sick child. The speaker has been infantilised and rendered powerless by her illness, but she expresses great anger with regards to her weakness, and directs this anger against her father-doctor (“God damn it, father-doctor. / I’m really thirty six”).

Subjugated and treated like an inferior, it seems that the act of denial is the only way the speaker can assert herself. Gill highlights the pun on “lie” when the speaker lies in her crib (which in the case of the mental patient, might be the psychiatrist’s couch). She may be lying down, or she may be telling a lie. This pun on the word “lie” is one that appears elsewhere in the poetry: in “The Truth the Dead Know” (PO), the speaker is “tired” of pretending to be brave. She asks, “And what of the dead? They lie without shoes / in their stone boats.” The dead lie down in their stone boats, but they are also trapped within what Sexton might have thought of as the “the frozen sea within us” (from a letter of Franz Kafka, quoted by Sexton as an epigraph to Pretty Ones), for which books (and implicitly, the written word) are the ax. The truth, as the speaker in “For John” has told us, is sometimes found within “a complicated lie.” Many of the poems in Pretty Ones, especially, explore the relationship between truth and lies, between acceptance and denial. In the title poem “All My Pretty Ones,” the speaker finds her mother’s diary, where one usually records one’s innermost and most intimate thoughts. Yet even to her own diary, her mother is unable to admit that her husband is an alcoholic: “You overslept, / she writes.” The complicated lie that the speaker’s mother tells herself is a truth that helps her to tolerate his condition. And in “Consorting With Angels” (LD), the speaker refuses to admit to being a woman: “I’m no more a woman / than Christ was a man.” When one acts, one pretends to be something or someone that one is not: one lies, yet

this lie is the refusal to submit to what the dominant forces insist is the truth. Her play-acting, dramatisations, masks and trickery are an attempt to assert herself against the repressive forces that the female mental patient, or the female poet, is subject to; one of Sexton's favourite paradoxes was, "In poetry, truth is a lie is a truth" (Biography 258).

The relationship between doctor and patient in Sexton's poetry is very much that of a long-standing power struggle. While the dialogue revealed in the poetry is one-sided, only revealing the thoughts and words of the poet, the identity of the poet-as-patient is predicated very much on that of the therapist, but this is an interdependent rather than a dependent relationship. Rose writes that "shame requires an audience" (2). All confession and performance requires an audience, just as any audience requires a performance. Sexton's persona of "mad poet" and "psychiatric patient" is a carefully crafted, well thought out one, and played a major part in her success as a poet.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

When I began writing this thesis, I set out to study how Anne Sexton represented madness in her writings, and how she used persona to do so. What I came to realise during the course of this study was that it was easy to reduce her person and work to a single representative icon and to forget about the evolution of her work over the course of her writing career, from around 1956 to her death in 1974, a period which constituted the greater part of her adult life. With her legendary rise to literary fame, and her large body of work being condensed into a single volume with a title as deceptive as The Complete Poems, it is not easy for the casual reader or the unobservant critic to keep in mind that Sexton grew as an artist and a person over the course of the eighteen years that she identified as a writer. I have strived to evolve my critical reading of her work in line with these considerations, and as a result, this study has sought to answer these questions: firstly, how did Sexton write about madness, and how did this change over the course of her career? Secondly, how did she conceive of and develop the persona of madness both in her writings and in her professional life, and what other personae did she use to explore and develop her ideas about madness?

In the introductory chapter to this thesis, I explained how I intended to approach my two main considerations about Sexton's work. I elaborated on how my month spent at the HRC was invaluable in furthering my understanding of Sexton's career outside of the published material that Sexton and her estate have made to the general public. Especially useful were the lecture notes that Sexton made for her term as professor at the Colgate University in 1972, when she had been an established poet for many years, and was able to reflect on the evolution of her career as well as her poetic philosophy. Additional insight also came from studying drafts of the unpublished play Mercy Street, as well as many unpublished poems, prose, notes and letters.

In my second chapter, where I began my discussion about the issues highlighted above, I focused on the structural forms of Sexton's poetry, especially on her move from a very strong use of fixed forms to a greater experimentation with alternative forms such as free verse and experimental poetry. While many critics have argued that such a movement indicated a slackening in the discipline she displayed towards her writing, I argued that this shift was a deliberate move as she did less work

under the academic tutelage of her mentors, and moved towards discovering her own ways of saying what she wanted to say. She became, in her words, more “comfortable” in using more alternative forms, “depending on what the poem requires” (NES 94), as I argued in chapter 2. When she began her writing career, the topic of madness was one that she was preoccupied with, and so a strict formal structure helped her to control the unruliness of that topic. But later in her career, when she embraced the persona of mad poet and became more successful, she had the freedom to experiment with other forms and to move away from the original motivations she had for writing. What some perceive as indiscipline I argue was a purposeful shift in her writing trajectory. The chapter thus logically examines some poems that were regular in form, especially those from her earlier collections, then moves to look some of her later experimental poetry and alternative forms, pointing out that regular forms also made an appearance later in her career, albeit less often.

The third chapter moved on to an in-depth study of how Sexton developed her poetic persona, i.e. the “kind of poet” and the “kind of woman” that she wanted her audience to perceive her as. Most who are familiar with Sexton know the biographical story of how her life was transformed from housewife’s to that of poet, as well as the legendary account of her breakdown and the subsequent discovery of her writing talent. It was necessary to reiterate this albeit well-known account because it underlined the relationship between therapy and poetry in Sexton’s context, as well as how madness as a metaphor and theme became prevalent in her oeuvre. It is from this relationship that the persona of mad poet emerged, and this persona became an effective marketing device for Sexton as a writer and a public figure. I elaborated on how Sexton carefully cultivated and played the part of mad poet as a performance, and that this persona should not be taken purely as biographical truth, but as one of many personae that she explored during the course of her career. She believed this poetic “truth” to be larger than that of herself and her own experiences, and she used her poetry to “enquire further” on what she felt were greater universal issues.

Chapter four went beyond the persona of mad poet to explore some of the other personae that Sexton’s speakers adopted. Although Sexton often wrote from the first-person point of view, she exhibited great artistry in the invention and wearing of the masks of her personae, to the extent that many critics thought she was writing about herself even while the poetic voice was an invented one. I examined some of the more prominent genres of the many costumes that she “dressed up” her speakers

in. In her earlier collections, Sexton metaphorically dressed up her speakers and played at being her family members, as well as some fictitious characters. She examined the troubling notion of heredity in these poems, especially in those about her mother and great-aunt, with whom she had problematic relationships. Someone else's imagined life thus became the central theme of some of her poems, and this chapter examines some of those imagined lives, such as the young Arabic girl buried with her father, and the mythological Daphne. Sexton also created fictitious outlawed characters and explored them with such elaborate detail, such as that of the "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," that she unintentionally convinced some of her readers these imagined characters were autobiographical further attested to the authenticity of her narrative voice. Less frequently, Sexton's personae also adopted the voices of inanimate objects, such as the moon and a portrait. It is through these invented personae that Sexton explored the notions of madness and showcased her keen storytelling skills, as well as the deftness with which she developed her public image.

Chapter five wrapped up my discussions about poetic personae by returning to Sexton's primary poetic persona, that of the mad poet. Many of her poems touch on the difficult of translating a lived experience into words, especially the experience of madness. Thus in this chapter, I first examined the difficulties the poet encountered in attempting to translate the experience and language of madness into the language of sanity and that of poetry. Sexton's early experiences of attempting such a translation occurred on the analyst's couch, in an effort to convey the experience of madness to her therapist during talk therapy. The persona of mad poet was thus one that appeared frequently in her body of work, especially in the early writings when madness was a topic that preoccupied Sexton. This chapter focused on poems that discussed the difficulties of meaningful communication that arise when attempting to convey an experience into language. Her speakers have so much to say, but they are often unable to find the words with which to say exactly what they mean. This chapter also examined the construction and dramatisation of her public persona, with the self as the ultimate persona: one of the characters that Sexton dressed up as was herself, or more specifically, how she wanted her public to view her. Although perceived by the public as being authentic and autobiographical, the performing persona was in actual fact a carefully constructed and well developed character that Sexton played both in her professional life and as a public performer. I argued that it is impossible to ever

permeate the levels of role-play and performance to fully understand the authentic Sexton through her writings and other re-representations, since she herself possibly made her own life more dramatic in order to give herself more material to write about. Concluding this chapter is a discussion of some of the “doctor” poems, which explored the linguistic relationships that her personae had with their therapists. While poetic language provides many levels of interpretation as compared to scientific language, I argue that on some levels “the business of words” is a transactional relationship, as is the doctor-patient relationship, and that the language we use is dependent on the roles that we play.

I believe that Sexton scholarship has made a slow but sure evolution away from a view of her writing as autobiographical and confessional, or as evidence of her psychopathology, towards a more greater understanding of her work as separate but related to her life. I have maintained that although Sexton explored and examined what she believed to be issues greater than that of her own life, such that of as language and communication, as well as the many levels of possible interpretation that poetic language and the poetic personae may provide, she did that in relation to herself and her self’s relationship to the world around her. Madness was not an end in itself, but a tool with which she related to the world. She did not write in an isolated creative bubble, but was instead extremely aware of her relationship with her mentors, readership, critics, publishers and doctors. As the archives of her papers at the HRC attest, she spent a great deal of time and effort corresponding with her readers and fans, along with mentors and friends. Thus while it is my belief that many of the earlier studies of Sexton’s work focused on its autobiographical and psychopathological aspects, more recent Sexton scholarship has moved on to new ways of reading her work, such as Rees-Jones’ examination of the appearance of the “I” as subject, and the literary self that is subject to “tinkerings” in the name of creativity (283-84). Gill, who is arguably currently the pre-eminent Sexton scholar, further examines the idea of self-consciousness of Sexton’s writings, and is concerned with Sexton’s ideas of “truth, authenticity, subjectivity, and reference” (*Confessional* 4). Along with my own study, I believe the direction in Sexton study continues to move away from psychoanalytical and autobiographical readings, and along the lines of subjectivity and the authorial representation of the self.

Earlier criticism of Sexton’s work focused mainly on her published material, but scholars such as Gill, Salvio, Skorzewski and myself have had the additional

advantage of accessing Sexton's archived papers and other materials that the general public have not been able to see and thus have achieved additional insight into how Sexton lived and worked. Skorczewski has also had the further privilege of being the only scholar other than Middlebrook to have heard Sexton's therapy tapes, perhaps because of the controversy surrounding them. Skorczewski thus has a unique insight into Sexton's poetic philosophy, especially since she focused on the tapes in the final stages of Sexton's therapy with Orne, when Sexton was already a successful poet. Those, such as myself, with access to Sexton's material other than that of just her published work are able to look beyond the poems and short stories to better understand the poet's character and her rationale behind her public personae.

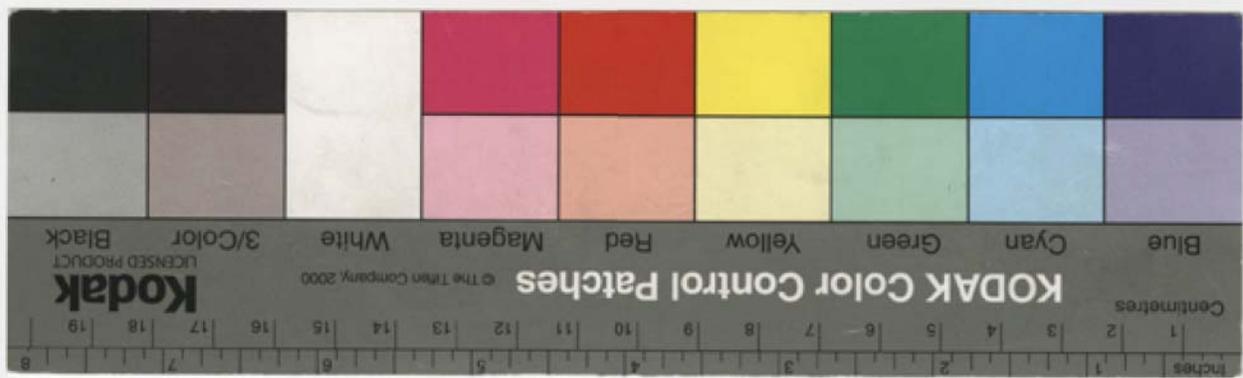
It would also be helpful if more biographies were to be written about Sexton. The aims of poetry and autobiography are radically different, and there is only one official biography of Sexton, by Diane Wood Middlebrook, which provides only one interpretation of the poet's life. Many who are interested in Sexton's poetry are interested also in her life, and alternative biographies would provide a more well-rounded view. Although Linda Gray Sexton has written a memoir about growing up as Sexton's daughter, it is more a memoir of her own life than that of Sexton's; as the parent-child relationship is a complicated one, it would be difficult for Linda Sexton to provide an unbiased biographical record of Sexton's life, despite her being a competent writer in her own right. It would be helpful if there were a scholar willing to undertake the monumental task of writing another Sexton biography, but that is a task that is impossible for one such as myself given the time and financial limitations of a postgraduate degree.

In spite of these limitations, I was privileged to have been given the opportunity to spend the month that I did at the HRC. I believe that it gave me a much greater insight into Anne Sexton the poet, as well as to Anne Sexton the person. It allowed me to see beyond her poems as evidence of her mental illness and to better understand that how she portrayed madness and wrote about it was part of a more elaborate and careful crafting of her public persona, that so effectively captured the literary interest of her critics and readers alike. While one can feel strongly either for or against Sexton and her work, it is impossible to ignore her poetry and the impact on how women have written since.

Starbucks lust is naughty and sick he/ tucks his trick in a caustic  
acrostic

s	t
t	u
a	c
r	k
b	s
u	h
c	i
k	s
s	t
l	r
u	i
s	c
t	k
i	i
s	n
n	a
a	c
u	a
g	u
h	s
t	t
y	i
a	c
n	a
d	c
s	r
i	o
c	s
k	t
h	i
e	c

*Logic  
magic*



## WITCH

I sail, like a terrible balloon  
past the

## Witch

Who see me here,  
see their apprentice  
or their lost ~~kin~~ kin.  
On harbor gales I sail  
my black kite in to watch  
for my love in the hallow fogs,  
to sail past the jagged bowl  
of Boston, past the eyes of the churches,  
past the bogs of mellow berries,  
past the old masked men ~~wae~~ dressed  
like boys, past the old white dogs  
dressed like a pack of Irish Children,  
past the frozen suck of the stone frogs  
in Lake Cochituate and Lake Walden,  
but he is not there.

No lover calls or bends.  
No pale arm waves me to the ground.  
A dog whimpers by the hanging tree  
and October ends. The wind sucks me  
in and out, howling over the graves  
and goblins. Who see me here,  
this ragged/~~body~~ apparition in their own air,  
see a wicked appetite ...  
if they dare.

HRC



Jud

WITCH

Who see me here,  
a blasphemous cinder  
in the black sky,  
see their apprentice  
or their lost kin.  
On a sullen gale I  
ride my black kite in  
to watch for my love  
through the hallow fogs,  
to sail out over  
the jagged bowl of Boston,  
past the old masked men  
dressed like boys,  
past the mellow bogs  
of berries, past the squat  
rows of patriotic streets,  
past the old white dogs  
dressed like a pack  
of Irish Children,  
past the frosty such  
of the old stone frogs  
in Lake Cochituate  
and Lake Walden,  
but he is not there.  
No lover calls or bends.  
No pale arm waves  
me to the ground.  
A dog whimpers  
by the hanging tree  
and October ends.  
The winds blowze me  
in and out, howling  
over the graves and goblins.  
Who see me here,  
this ragged appartion  
in their own air,  
see a wicked appetite,  
if they dare.



WITCH

~~I/XXXX/XXXXX/~~

~~XXXXX// WITCH~~

Her Kind  
possessed

I have gone out, a wild witch,  
haunting the black air, ~~bat~~ braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

I have ~~xxx~~ found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and ~~xxx~~ my ribs crack where your wheels wind.  
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.  
I have been her kind.



3<sup>rd</sup> fixed a  
little -  
Goh 135  
July 1959  
(took  
one week  
to complete)

HER KIND

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.  
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.  
I have been her kind.



THE GREEN ROOM

Lady, lady, <sup>bfs</sup>  
 north wind blows through me like a sieve,  
 and my mouth is stuck to the glacier,  
 and horses gallop through my eyes  
 looking to the right, to the left  
 for death, for sleep, for the fumbled nirvana.  
 Somewhere, in the back of my mind,  
 there is a green room which you fill with morphine  
 and you kill the bad dreams, the awful sentences  
 that got stamped all over my body.  
 And in this green my grief flops out over the bed,  
 and lies in a pool like a broken doll's head.  
 My happiness is cottoned up in your hand on my forehead,  
 and my two mad selves have argued their way  
 out the door, to go sign up for the graveyard.

*Unachieved.  
 A little bit  
 about a 40 year  
 her her  
 100, then the  
 present day her  
 in my dream*

Lady, Lady, <sup>(bfs)</sup>  
 exactly where have you put me?  
 Am I important enough to be here? *Special Cup*  
 Shut up, Annie, and listen to the sooths!  
 My body is kind of a cloud that you swallowed  
 and it is floating in destiny's bathtub.  
 \* Something in me is healing,  
 because the altar where I knelt in pain,  
 yet spitting into the altar cups,  
 has changed completely,  
 has gone deeper than five fathoms, or fifty fathoms.  
 I swing in water, - *Sea - the woman's mother*  
 I am soaked in love  
 and, after forty-five years,  
 am given a home  
 where the shocks, the explosions are over.

*(Dennis) I don't know  
 how the fact is  
 that I'm here*

Lady, lady of the sea, <sup>bfs</sup>  
 in your womb my heart beats like a junkie.  
 Never tear me out!

*Directly, Mrs. ...  
 Love - for cant. ...  
 incredible ...  
 need - Mrs - then ...  
 heart - can't be ...*

October 1974

Dear ...

*Just ... that the ...  
 use of the ...  
 give up the ...  
 brought ...  
 enter ...  
 (just ... 3 year ...  
 not dead).*



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