CONTEXTUALIZING ANNE SEXTON: CONFESSIONAL PROCESS AND FEMINIST PRACTICE IN THE COMPLETE POEMS

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Department of English, in the University of Toronto

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Abstract: Contextualizing Anne Sexton: Confessional Process and Feminist Practice in *The Complete Poems*
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This dissertation examines each of the volumes in Anne Sexton’s *Complete Poems*. I attempt to identify Sexton’s work with Confession and autobiography as a sustained feminist project. The Confessional voice, I maintain, offered Sexton a way of inscribing her subjectivity, as a woman, within her work. I locate each of Sexton’s collections within a wide range of social, critical, popular/literary, and political contexts. Methodologically, this dissertation proceeds and departs from the extant Sexton scholarship; it offers a thorough contextual examination of the *Complete Poems* and suggests, in relation to the poems, a great many literary influences and analogues.

I locate the Confessional Group (in Chapter One), drawing from the existing criticism, and both confirm and trouble the notion of a knowable Confessional school; central to this discussion is my assertion that the ambitions of the male and female Confessional poets both intersect and differ (a concept which is rarely, if ever, addressed in critical readings of Confession). Chapters Two and Three examine Sexton’s work (in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, *All My Pretty Ones*, and *Live or Die*) with Confessional themes - suicide, mental illness and despair - themes which are strategically gendered in her poems.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six trace Sexton’s movement, in her writing, away from Confessional poetry, a movement which enabled her to expand her thematic range, compound her personal voice, and abandon the traditional Confessional themes. The female body/erotic bliss, fairy tales, and biblical themes are investigated, respectively, in my examination of *Love Poems*, *Transformations*, *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks* and *The Awful Rowing*. 
Poems, Transformations, The Book of Folly, The Death Notebooks and The Awful Rowing Toward God. Sexton's work in these, and all of her collections, is highly gynocentric, providing critical discourse on female representation and experience.

In the Conclusion, I raise questions about the editing of Sexton's posthumous collections (collections she had not completed at the time of her death in 1974), and suggest that a discussion of this poetry would be more appropriate to a biographical study than a critical study, given the incomplete, harrowing nature of these poems.
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& All My Pretty Ones

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Abbreviations

NALW: The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women

NAMP: The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry


Star: No Evil Star

SPL: Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters

CP: (all) Collected/Complete Poems
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Introduction

But what if the "object" started to speak?

Luce Irigaray, "Trivia"

And to imagine is only to understand oneself.

Paul Valéry

A certain image springs to mind when I read literary biography... and when I read Middlebrook’s book in particular. A friend has an old Labrador dog named Dirt. Dirt finds dead things and rolls in them. ...Middlebrook too, rolled in a dead thing. The only difference is, Middlebrook believes she has fooled us: she seems to believe that we will mistake Sexton’s talent and poetry for hers.

Erica Liederman, "From Behind the Bedlam"

Anne Sexton, who was born in 1928 and died in 1974, published eight books of poems in her lifetime, one of which - Live or Die - received a Pulitzer Prize. Two additional collections of poetry, which Sexton had not completed, were published posthumously. She also wrote and produced a play entitled Mercy Street, published fiction and a children’s book (The Wizard’s Tears). Sexton received a number of honorary doctorates, lectured and instructed in many colleges and universities, and received a series of prestigious grants and fellowships. Her career, which peaked between the years of 1966 and 1971 - when she published her most acclaimed books, Live or Die, Love Poems (1969) and Transformations (1971) - began to decline after this point. Following Transformations, Sexton’s work was increasingly ill-received and criticized, and reviews tended to be "uniformly poor" (Sexton-Gray, Ames, Self-Portrait in Letters: 361). The most telling evidence of the decline in her reception as an artist may be found in Robert
Lowell's memorial of Sexton, which was published after her death. Lowell, who was Sexton's poetry instructor in 1957, and who was instrumental in the publication of her first book, To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), acknowledges that Sexton once "cut a figure" in poetry (The Artist and Her Critics:71). He goes on, however, to ask: "What went wrong? For a book or two she became more powerful. Then writing was too easy or too hard for her. She became meager and exaggerated" (71).

After her death, Sexton's reputation languished. She had appointed Lois Ames (who was also contracted to write Sylvia Plath's biography) as her biographer in 1966, a project which Ames never completed. Sporadic criticism appeared after her death, but her poetry was very rarely included in anthologies, or in critical overviews of the Confessional poets. A few important books appeared in the late 1970's, however, including J.D. McClatchy's anthology, Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics and Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters, which was co-edited by Linda-Gray Sexton and Lois Ames. Sexton's Complete Poems was published in 1981, with an introduction by Sexton's long-time colleague, Maxine Kumin. In her introduction Kumin states that it "seems presumptuous, only seven years after her death, to talk about Anne Sexton's place in the history of poetry," but she acknowledges that Sexton "has earned her place in the canon" (xxxiii,xxxiv). The appearance of the Complete Poems, as well as Kumin's introduction to this book, in which she states that women poets "owe a debt to Anne Sexton," precipitated a flurry of reviews, and renewed interest in Sexton's canon. Many of the reviews were equivocal, but the (re)emergence of Sexton's work in a collected format attracted one extremely significant commentator: Diane Wood Middlebrook. Middlebrook chose to examine the collected poems as a complex literary process, which exhibits varying "artistic goals," and an evident,
developing preoccupation "with the psychological and social consequences of inhabiting a female body" ("Poet of Weird Abundance": 294).

Middlebrook would eventually become the most prominent scholar of Sexton's work and life. She wrote many important biographical/critical essays, and co-edited the second Selected Poems in 1988, with Diana Hume George. George would also prove to be a formidable Sexton scholar, who also published biographical/critical essays, and the first significant study of Sexton's work, Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton (1987). When I began this thesis in 1987, a virtual ground swell of Sexton-criticism had started to appear, which included, in addition to Middlebrook and George's work, Carolyn King Barnard Hall’s Anne Sexton (1989), Steven E. Colburn's Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale (1988) and three major anthologies: Critical Essays on Anne Sexton (1989), edited by Linda Wagner-Martin; Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton (1988), edited by Frances Bixler, and Sexton: Selected Criticism (1988), edited by Diana Hume George. No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose (1985), also edited by Colburn, provided valuable documentation of Sexton's commentaries on her work and ideas.

The most anticipated book of this period was Middlebrook's 1991 biography of Sexton, a book which would provide further details of a life that, according to Kumin, had already been "mercilessly dissected" (Intro, CP: xxxiv). The biography received an inordinate amount of pre- and post-publication attention, as Middlebrook used information from Sexton's psychiatric sessions in her work. One major review was titled "Portrait of the Artist as a Very Sick Woman," which indicates the tenor of the attention the book received, and also underlines Middlebrook's psycho-biographical agenda. Because the book is a biography, it necessarily delves into Sexton's life - a life fraught with mental illness, self-injury, abuse and ultimately
suicide. Middlebrook’s biography was, until very recently, the only biographical study of Sexton’s life. Linda Gray Sexton’s memoir, Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton, was published in 1994, after I completed the research for this thesis. It is a highly personal account, which elaborates on many events recounted in the Middlebrook biography. Searching for Mercy Street, however, focuses more on Sexton’s relationship with her family and her mental illness than her artistic achievements. While the memoir’s many (Mommie Dearest-style) descriptions of Sexton scaring her family - with the drunken request that they "unbind (her) chains" - are riveting, the book offers very little in the way of Sexton scholarship (Searching for: 113).

In his preface to Authors’ Lives, Park Honan suggests that in order to write a good biography, the biographer must "acquire a special intimacy with the author…until it is possible at least approximately to think and feel in the distant and lost world of the subject" (xii-xiii). Sexton’s "world" was hardly "distant" or "lost" to Middlebrook: she was able to interview many of the poet’s associates, friends and family, and was also given access to all of Sexton’s public and private archives'. Middlebrook immersed herself for almost ten years in what she describes as the "ample and often harrowing records of Anne Sexton’s life," and the biography does provide an intimate and well-documented examination of the poet’s history and character (AS:xx). Middlebrook’s preface begins with a description of Sexton arriving late at a poetry reading, in order to "let the crowd work up a little anticipation," and "saunter(ing) to the podium" to read the poem she began each reading with, "Her Kind". Sexton would read this poem in order to tell the audience, in her words, "what kind of a woman I am," and Middlebrook evokes this scene in order to reveal her own intentions as a biographer. She
documents the "kind" of woman Sexton was in the multiple terms inscribed in "Her Kind," rendering a portrait of the artist's "persona," as a performer, while drawing attention to the "serious disciplined artist" "behind" this persona (AS:xix). On many levels, the book is a critical biography, as Middlebrook interprets much of Sexton's work in relation to her life, a strategy which confessional poetry, by virtue of its nature, invites. Sexton's work in particular invites biographical interpretation, because her work is autobiographical, and because she so often presented her poetry - in interviews, letters and within the writing - as something that saved her life.

Sexton's work provided her with a way of combatting and supplementing her depression, despair, suicide-desire and other manifestations of the mental illness that is so carefully outlined in the biography. Middlebrook pays lavish attention to and codifies Sexton's mental illness in the biography: there are 87 citations under this particular index heading, a focus which prompted one critic to describe the book as a "Freudian telephone directory" (Fineberg:K14). Under the index heading "Poetry," conversely, the listings number only a fourth of this figure, which is a good indication of the intensive psycho-biographical nature of the text. Details of Sexton's mental illness are germane to an account of her life, and to certain interpretations of her work, since the work itself employs the subject of mental illness as a recurring theme. However, these details also provide the biographer with a means of characterizing her subject in a way that ultimately benefits not the subject's, but the biographer's, work. For example, the many accounts of Sexton's isolation and fear of the outside world serve to substantiate the way that Middlebrook isolates Sexton in the biography. Middlebrook locates Sexton in terms of her difference, and creates a closed hermeneutic circle as she interprets her poetry through the
peculiar lens her subject provides. What is obscured in Middlebrook’s scrutiny is the manner in which Sexton’s work is discursively, thematically and ideologically connected with the work of her precursors and contemporaries. Because her poetry is viewed as somewhat of an aberration, Sexton herself is never fully identified as contributing to or participating in any significant artistic genre. Her work is identified as being forceful, distinctive and "profoundly important," a phrase that Middlebrook does not clarify, and the work is not assessed according to its relevance to or location within the spheres of autobiography and confession, American poetry or even women's poetry (Anne Sexton:xxi).

Instead, Sexton’s writing is presented as the anomalous by-product of its unusual creator. Although many of Sexton’s colleagues and associates are introduced in the text, what is missing are those writers, critics and readers who were and are indirectly affected by Sexton’s work. The writers and critics who influenced and shaped Sexton’s vision and art are also largely absent, and it is this surfeit of absence which determines the strange isolation of Middlebrook’s subject. Middlebrook’s strategy, as biographer, is not unfamiliar; this kind of portraiture appears in many biographies of women writers. The life of Charlotte Brontë, for example, is often assessed within the parameters that Elizabeth Gaskell delineated when she set out to examine that "wild, sad life, and the beautiful character that grew out of it" (in Shelston:14).

Publishers often design books about Charlotte and Emily Brontë which highlight, on the back cover copy, a contradiction between the life and art of these writers. An examination of several cover texts reveals how the Brontës are marketed, and often perceived; Charlotte is referred to as a "paranoid" "recluse," whose work is evidence of the "fiercely romantic imagination" that was hidden beneath the "unassuming mask" she wore, and her novels - particularly Jane Eyre -
are often treated as autobiographical documents. Emily is also subject to incredulous scrutiny: 
"How could a young woman without much formal education and little experience of life write such an extraordinary work as *Wuthering Heights*?" This question or conundrum is generally resolved through biographical readings which imply that the Brontës were dissembling autobiographers. Such readings are inadequate because they fail to consider autobiography as a literary genre, rather than an artless transcript. Further, what is implied in this kind of biographical reading is that artists can create only within the confines of their formal education and life experience, a theory which devalues or fails to consider the artist’s intellectual resources and imagination. The work of Emily Dickinson, another reclusive artist, is often assessed in similar tones of ill-concealed disbelief; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have inquired, "How did Dickinson, who seemed...so timid, even so neurotically withdrawn, manage such spectacular poetic self-achievement?" They maintain that she was a "poser," who wore the "mask" of the "pathetic creature" in order to conceal her "Satanically assertive inner self".

Biographies that utilize the artist’s work as evidence of the subject’s inner self, concealed beneath layers of artifice, are disquieting because they attest less to the powers of the artist than to the cunning of the biographer. The biographer’s methodology, in such instances, is similar to that of the intrepid archaeologist, who essays to uncover, reconstruct, define and (re)value an arcane artifact. The archaeologist’s artifact is without volition; its significance lies dormant until animated by the skills of the archaeologist. And archaeology - and biography, in this case - is, as Derrida has observed, "nothing more than a rewriting...a regulated transcription of what has already been written". It is not, he notes, "a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object" (140).
Middlebrook is enamoured of the concept of the fairy tale transformation; in her critical writing and in her biography, she considers Sexton's transformation of herself from "housewife into poet" as near-magical\textsuperscript{10}. Sexton herself employed the language of magic in her writing, and often described herself as a witch; however, she used this language as poetic imagery, and with considerable irony, as a means of demonstrating the power of her writing. Middlebrook, conversely, reads Sexton's apprenticeship quite literally as a Cinderella story, a reading criticized by Nancy Mairs in a Los Angeles Times book review. In her review, Mairs states that the fairy-tale analogue is a dubious and objectionable cliché; "as though," she writes "suburban housewiferery (is) a wicked spell dooming its practitioners to stupefaction" (4). Early in the biography, Middlebrook recounts Sexton's apprenticeship, drawing from certain biographical facts - such as the details of her first poetry workshop with John Holmes - and from the testimony of her psychiatrists and colleagues (Sexton's good friend and colleague Maxine Kumin is a key source). She also draws from Sexton's own accounts of her apprenticeship, and cites as central the incident which appears to have been very important in Sexton's life - her viewing of an educational television show about the composition of sonnets.

After watching this program, Sexton wrote some sonnets of her own, and showed them to her psychiatrist, whose approval encouraged her to continue writing, and gave her "something to do with (her) life" (in Anne Sexton:43). What is unsettling about Middlebrook's account of this episode is that she never examines its significance as an autobiographical narrative, and does not question why Sexton chose repeatedly to isolate this particular incident as being representative of the beginning of her career as a writer. The life story of a writer - of a Confessional poet in particular - should be scrutinized in the same manner as any other
autobiographical document. Sexton first told this story in a 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles; Kevles notes in her introduction that Sexton's responses during the interview were quite theatrical, and compared her to (using one of Sexton's phrases) "an actress in her own autobiographical play" (Star:84). Sexton's account of the effect of the sonnet program is dramatic, as it lends an air of chance and circumstance to the inception of her vocation. It is, without a doubt, a provocative story that implies that Sexton was fated to be an artist, due to the magical intervention of Professor I.A. Richards, the televised sonnet-lecturer. Such autobiographical glosses are commonplace in autobiographical accounts, which often seek to distil riches from life, to extract symbolic episodes from the vapour and tedium. It is Middlebrook's decision to recount this incident - without critical commentary - that is significant, because the story so clearly supports her conceptualization of Sexton as a woman who was transformed, in a virtually mystical manner, from a housewife into a poet. What is missing from this formulation is Sexton's agency; it is as though, in an odd, inverted manner, the poetry (transmitted in the biography through the television's cathode-rays) transformed the woman/artist.

ii.

_Yet really we had the same life..._

Robert Lowell, "For John Berryman"

_The difference between confession and poetry? is after all, art._

When I began researching and writing this thesis, I was primarily concerned with the distinction between the male and female Confessional poets. In order to draw this distinction, I examined first the extant definitions of the Confessional group itself. Throughout the thesis, I capitalize the word "Confessional" when I am referring to the Confessional group or school, and use the word "confessional" (in lower-case) to refer to poetry that is autobiographical in nature, yet is not associated with the work of this particular group. Because the terminology is fluid, and there is little critical consensus as to what constitutes Confessional poetry, a poet's work may be viewed as both confessional and Confessional. Further, a movement can be observed in a poet like Sexton's canon; while her collected poems are almost entirely autobiographically centered (confessional), her early work (in her first three collections) is Confessional, as it contends with themes and issues that are central to the Confessional group's practices. In Chapter One, I survey the critics who have attempted to define Confessional poetry. What emerges from this study is a sense of the randomness of the extant definitions. Critics tend to concur on the issue of what characterizes Confessional poetry, that "great terrain of subjectivity and autobiography whose opening was signaled by Robert Lowell's Life Studies" (Rubin:17). There is no consensus, however, regarding membership. The list varies whenever the members of the Confessional group are named, while the principal figures - John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton - are always cited.

In The New Poets (1967), M.L. Rosenthal remarks that the term "Confessional poetry" has "done a certain amount of damage" because it is "both helpful and too limited" (25). Definitions of "poetic practice," he argues, usually entail the recognition of "the simultaneous acquisition of an idiom of thought and of technique" (25). It is this notion - of "simultaneous acquisition" -
which forms my own definition of the Confessional school. By defining the Confessional group, I am attempting to locate them within a literary and historical context without limiting or homogenizing what is heterogenous in their art and practices. The Confessional group consists of five poets: in addition to the four principal figures, I include W.D. Snodgrass, whose Heart's Needle (1959) influenced both Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. These five poets "simultaneously" produced work that is remarkably similar in subject matter and technique. They are also linked by geographical proximity, association, and influence; they worked with and knew each other, and gestured to each other in their work. There is very little historical or biographical material available that offers a sense of the Confessional school's inception or existence. There are various biographies of the individual poets which mention how these poets intersected in their work and lives. There are also a number of clear references in the poetry and enough scattered biographical materials to confirm that these poets did form a school of writing and did acknowledge each other's roles in the formation of this school. To date, however, no one has produced a comprehensive examination of the Confessional group, one which describes the precise social, cultural and historical location of the school, or relates how the poets conceived of themselves as a group.

In Chapter One I discuss the Confessional group and define the central characteristics of Confessional poetry, which typically employs the subjective voice and themes of madness, despair and suicide. Confessional poetry may also be defined as a practice, one which the group adopted during a specific time period. The major Confessional texts are Snodgrass's Heart's Needle, Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959), Anne Sexton's To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), John Berryman's 77 Dream Songs (1964) and Sylvia Plath's Ariel (1965), which was
written in 1962. Berryman and Lowell continued to employ Confessional themes in their work until and in their final collections, *Dream Songs* (1969) and *Notebook* (1969). Lowell’s later work, however, was less deeply subjective than *Life Studies*, indicating, in Rosenthal’s words, his "modulation toward a more impersonal style" (*New Poets*:78). Plath committed suicide after completing *Ariel*, and Snodgrass’s second book, *After Experience*, published 11 years after *Heart’s Needle*, was not confessional. Sexton continued to write in a deeply subjective voice throughout her career, but she abandoned the themes of Confessional poetry after the publication of *Live or Die* (1966). In Chapter Four I discuss Sexton’s movement from the personal to the "transpersonal" voice, a movement which the poet signals in "Live," the last poem in *Live or Die*. In "Live," Sexton announces that she will no longer "hang around in (her) hospital shift," here, wryly commenting on Confessional poetry's shelf-life (*Complete Poems*:170).

Although I define Confessional poetry in terms of its dominant characteristics, practitioners and time-frame (the late 1950s to the late 1960s), these definitions are useful only to a point. What is excluded in any definition of Confessional poetry is both difference - in terms of the individual poet’s practices - and the work of other writers and groups (for instance, the Beat poets) whose work is similar in nature. It is more useful, then, to define the Confessional poets as a group, as opposed to a genre, or sub-genre. Like the Beat or Black Mountain poets (to name but two groups), the Confessional poets, then, may be seen as an interconnected group whose individual ambitions are not necessarily congruent, and whose work may often be seen to transcend the confines of genre. At present, it is difficult to discuss the Confessional group in any substantive way; conjecture, and informed guess-work is required to gauge the extent to which these poets influenced each other.
Sexton did not know Berryman, but she was aware of his work and refers to it in her poetry: "The high ones, Berryman said, die, die, die" (CP:601). The relationship between John Berryman and Robert Lowell, however, is well documented in biographies, including Eileen Simpson’s biography of Berryman, Poets in Their Youth (1982), and Ian Hamilton’s Robert Lowell: A Biography (1982). In his biography, Hamilton also discusses the link between Lowell and Snodgrass, and suggests that the "almost sentimental" Life Studies is indebted to Heart’s Needle - which Snodgrass composed, in part, under Lowell’s tutelage (Hamilton:254). The Berryman and Lowell biographies, however, scarcely discuss Plath or Sexton. Further, they do not evoke a sense of the Confessional group that Plath praised for its "vitality" and "immediacy" to the BBC, in 1962 (in Wagner Martin:224). The Confessional poets make explicit their connection to each other in their public and private writing. In interviews, Sexton always mentioned how profoundly influenced she was by Snodgrass’s poem "Heart’s Needle". In her letters to Snodgrass, Sexton is ardent in both her praise of his work and in her acknowledgment of how instrumental this work was for her: "How many times I read your poem, crying," she writes, "and not knowing what or why" (SPL:34).

Sexton’s published letters, edited by Linda Wagner Martin and Lois Ames, contain only a selection of her correspondence. There are elements of Sexton and Snodgrass’s writing relationship that have never been made public. Her poem "The Double Image" is deeply indebted to "Heart’s Needle," something which Sexton admits she was "afraid of," while writing the poem (SPL:60). It is implied in the published letters that Snodgrass was disquieted by his "influence" on Sexton, but there are no biographical materials available which discuss the extent of the two poets’ relationship as artists (Sexton SPL:65). Both poets published poems entitled
"The Operation" (Snodgrass’s precedes Sexton’s by three years), and, as I note in Chapter Three, Snodgrass published a poem, "The Starry Night" (based on the Van Gogh painting), in 1968, which is similar to Sexton’s "The Starry Night," published in 1962. While it seems clear that the two poets discussed this painting and its history, it is not possible to confirm this fact. Snodgrass’s "The Starry Night" appears in After Experience (1968), but he began composing this poem, as part of a set of poems about paintings, in the late 1950s. In "Poems About Paintings," Snodgrass refers to reading "the great collection of (Van Gogh’s) letters which was just then becoming available in English" (89). He does not indicate when "then" was, but Van Gogh’s collected and selected correspondence began appearing in the late 1950s and early 1960s (the most accessible volume being Van Gogh: A Self-Portrait, edited by W.H.Auden, and published in 1961). Sexton quotes from one of Van Gogh’s letters to his brother Theo in "The Starry Night," and likely owned a copy of his correspondence. It is also likely that Snodgrass wrote his poem first, for, in an October, 1958 letter to Snodgrass, Sexton includes a critique of his poem "The Red Studio," which is based on the Matisse painting, and one of his five poems about painting (SPL:37).

Sexton wrote "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" (All My Pretty Ones) for Snodgrass, which she referred to as a "not so good poem" (Sexton, SPL:88). It appears immediately before "The Starry Night" in All My Pretty Ones, symbolizing what is both known and unknown about Sexton and Snodgrass’s alliance. Snodgrass is cast as Icarus in "To a Friend," perhaps in sly reference to a 1959 letter, in which he admonished Sexton, telling her to "shuck off (her) poetic parents (SPL:65).

Sexton’s relationship with Lowell is better documented. Middlebrook’s "Anne Sexton and
Robert Lowell" is a good account of the two poets' working relationship, as well as their simultaneous adoption of a poetic voice "based on self-examination" (6). Middlebrook also discusses Sexton's poem about Lowell, "Elegy in the Classroom" (To Bedlam), and observes that "Today, Sexton's work is rarely paired with Lowell's in discussions of contemporary poetry" (20). Other aspects of their influence on each other's work remain open to speculation. For example, Lowell is very likely the source of Sexton's To Bedlam epigraph (virtually the subject of Hume George's Oedipus Anne) - which is a quotation from a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe. "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" (in Life Studies) also begins with a (different) quotation from Schopenhauer, and it seems reasonable to assume that Sexton, who, in her late twenties had yet to begin reading in earnest, was referred to the letters of Schopenhauer by Lowell.

In addition to Lowell, Berryman refers to Plath in Dream Songs. In one of a series of poems about Delmore Schwartz (Song 253), he writes that "the god who has wrecked this generation...gorged on Sylvia Plath" (172). Plath and Sexton's association, which is immortalized in George Starbuck's Bone Thoughts - "I weave with two sweet ladies out of the Ritz" - has not been examined by biographers in any detail (Starbuck:40). Middlebrook's biography does provide an account of Lowell's Boston University poetry seminar, which Plath and Sexton both audited from 1958-1959. Middlebrook also mentions, on several occasions, the sense of rivalry and "warm admiration" the two poets felt for each other (105). Plath's journals convey the same ambivalence toward Sexton. On March 20th, 1959, Plath writes: "Lowell...sets me up with Anne Sexton, an honor, I suppose" (JSP:300-301). Plath and Sexton corresponded with each other after meeting in Boston, but this correspondence has never been published.
Sexton refers to these "happy, gossipy-letters" in "The Bar Fly Ought to Sing," her memoir for Plath (Star:10). She also refers to the letters in "Sylvia's death" (Live or Die): "Sylvia, Sylvia/Where did you go/after you wrote me/from Devonshire/about raising potatoes/and keeping bees?" (CP:126)

Plath and Sexton's influence on each other lasted far beyond their brief association in Boston, where they often drank cocktails after class and talked about death with "burned-up intensity" (Sexton, "The Bar Fly":7). In 1963, Plath told a BBC interviewer how much she admired "the poetess Anne Sexton" whose work she thought contained "emotional and psychological depth" and was "new and exciting" (in Middlebrook, AS:105). In Chapter Four and the Conclusion I discuss how Plath's work influenced Sexton's later writing, often with disastrous results. Sexton's final poems are particularly derivative; "The Wedlock" (45 Mercy Street) contains verses which are so awful, they almost appear to be parodies of Plath's "Daddy". Plath's "Panzer man" "with a bag full of God" (Collected Poems:223,222) appears, in "The Wedlock," as "Mr. Panzer-man" "with your pogo stick/...with your bag full of jokes" (510). It is ironic that Sexton pilfered from "Daddy" in many of her last poems, as this poem was, as Heather Cam has revealed, "deeply indebted to an early, virtually unknown" Sexton poem entitled "My Friend, My Friend" (223). Sexton published this poem (in the Antioch Review) in 1959, and very likely read it in Lowell's seminar (Cam:224).

The extent of the personal and professional relationship between Plath and Sexton has never been fully examined. Leslie Ullmann has observed that both poets "firmly grounded the Confessional movement in a more direct and intense use of the personal" (195). She argues that these two poets "broke ground for women writers and also expanded experiential territory for
all writers by making female experience and sensibility not only visible but powerful subjects for poetry" (196). Sexton appears to have been aware of the significance of her association with Plath. In "The Bar Fly," she discusses herself and Plath and refers to their "breakthrough in poetry" (Star:10). She also comments that "...poets not only hide influences. They...bury them!" (10). It is, ultimately, the task of future biographers and critics to uncover these buried influences, and to assess the dimension and importance of Plath and Sexton's artistic affiliation.

iii

*I am learning more than you could imagine from Lowell. I am learning what I am not...also a fear of writing as a woman writes. I wish I were a man - I would rather write the way a man writes.*

Anne Sexton, Letter to W.D.Snodgrass, October 6, 1958

*In class and in the office hours to which Lowell invited a few privileged younger students every week, he spent a good deal of time mulling over whether this or that poet was "major" or "minor," and women were almost inevitably categorized as "minor, definitely minor"...*

Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*

*Not being old enough to know what to do, I just wanted to be the girl in the Leonard Cohen song...And then I came around. "No, no, no. I don't want to be the girl. I want to be Leonard Cohen!"*


When the Confessional poets are discussed as a group, gender distinctions are rarely drawn among them; they are more commonly categorized by virtue of their shared treatments of the themes of despair, self-injury and mental illness, and their employment of the autobiographical
voice. In Chapter One I discuss how the confessional voice is used differently by both male and female poets. The employment of the confessional voice for women writers, and for Plath and Sexton specifically, represents a shift - from object to subject - in women's poetry. By adopting the first-person confessional voice, Plath and Sexton were able to inscribe their subjectivity in their work, and to use this work as a means of disseminating information and ideas about female experience. When Plath and Sexton used such distinctly Confessional topics as institutionalization, suicide and so on, they encoded them with reference to gender, and created discrete and alternative female readings of these topics.

During the course of my research, it became evident that critics invariably make distinctions between male and female Confessional poets. Although the Confessional poets are generally discussed as a homogenous group, distinctions are often drawn between a poet like Robert Lowell - whose Confessional poetry is seen as existing within a literary, historical tradition - and a poet like Anne Sexton, whose work is seen as the by-product of her singular and isolated existence. For example, when Helen Vendler writes about Lowell's Confessional poetry, she describes its "elegaic," and "metaphysical" nature, and lards her assessment with references to William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Henry James, Walt Whitman and many others ("Robert Lowell's Last Days": 161). Conversely, In "Malevolent Flippancy," Vendler's essay about Sexton's Complete Poems, she casts aspersions on the poet's poor "taste" in literature, citing the books Maxine Kumin lists (in the text's "sometimes vulgarly feminist" introduction) as being valuable to Sexton (439,437). When Vendler calls attention to Sexton's dubious "imaginative sources," she is also commenting, implicitly, on Sexton's dubious status in literary history. She is also invoking, rather haughtily, a hierarchical distinction between low and high
literary forms. Vendler is supercilious on the subject of influence, inquiring how fairy tales can "possibly rival as imaginative sources the Bible and Greek mythology" (439). Since Sexton used both the Bible (a major resource for a great deal of her work) and Greco-Roman mythology (Icarus, Oedipus and Artemis/Diana), Vendler’s argument is not only pompous, it is completely misinformed. In The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry, Vendler (who edited the text) erroneously describes Sexton as a former child-model, who formed a "jazz band," and killed herself because of "her dependence on alcohol" (421). Vendler obviously does not feel compelled to research Sexton’s work or life beyond the narrow field of her own "malevolent flippancy".

Vendler discusses Sexton’s confessional poetry exclusively under the aegis of "journal" writing, claiming that the voice in the poetry is merely conversational: it "chatter(s)" and "moan(s)" in a "facile" fashion (443). Vendler unfavourably compares the "I" of Sexton’s poetry to the "I" of Berryman’s poetry, and observes that Berryman’s "I" is a complex, compound-voice: his "Henry" is always controlled and constructed by Berryman’s "intellect" and "moral(ity)" (445). Conversely, Vendler describes Sexton’s work as being, variously, "child-like" (440), "infantile" and "babyish" (441), lacking "the complexity of the Gospels, and... the worldliness of the Greeks" (440). Clearly, Vendler, who believes that it does "not do" to "hail any poet as a ‘woman poet’" (because there is only "one sort of poet - a poet of the native language"), is ill-equipped to assess (and hostile to) Sexton’s gynocentric poetry (438).

Vendler’s assessment is more dismissive than most, but her reading of Sexton’s collected poems as a journal is not uncommon; Sexton herself used the phrase "the narrow diary of my mind" to describe her confessional practices (CP:34). Sexton used the phrase in the poem "For
John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further"; however, she did so in response to criticism regarding her methodology. Because Sexton's poetry does draw from details of her life, the journal analogy at first appears credible, but the analogy is theoretically unsound, partly because much of Sexton's poetry uses verse conventions that journals rarely employ, and partly because the analogy operates on the assumption that a journal is an unmediated transcript of a life.

Journals, like other autobiographical texts, are composed in accordance to implicit conventions and models. Writing as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" is an appropriate description of one of the conventions of journal writing, but it is an inappropriate assessment of Sexton’s poetry, which she laboriously and meticulously drafted and revised, and which often employed complex metrical and rhyme schemes (Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads: 448). When critics like Vendler create an implicit correlative between Sexton's private "chatter(ing)" and her public discourse/poetry, they are constructing the poet's craft as a closed teleological circuit that communicates exclusively between the life of the poet and her account or transcription of this life. This notion was recently confirmed by a Toronto Star reviewer, who deemed the Confessional work of Sylvia Plath as a "minor art," art which only treated the "self," "not the world" (Toronto Star: September 30th, 1989). It is this relationship, between the female Confessional poets and "the world," that critics seek to negate, and it is a negation that defines and mars, for example, much of Middlebrook's biographical thesis. The male Confessional poets are widely considered to transcend the Confessional genre by virtue of their relevance to and place within the tradition of American poetry. In his recent overview of American poetry, American Poetry and Culture: 1945-1980 (1985), Robert von Hallberg is
careful to contextualize Robert Lowell within a substantial literary tradition, and doesn’t refer to Sexton once in his book. Plath is mentioned only in (undifferentiated) conjunction with Berryman and W.D. Snodgrass as a member of the Confessional group.

Sexton had an aversion to being "lump(ed)" with or categorized as a Confessional poet, and this aversion to genre is more relevant to the female Confessional poets than their male counterparts. While Lowell is routinely singled out for his "politically powerful" poetry and for the scholarly and "encyclopedic grandeur" of his work, female Confessional poets are usually abandoned to the hermetically-sealed confines of genre, disconnected from the poetry/ideas that precede them, and, more significantly, from the work that proceeds from them (Von Hallberg:152). Leslie Dick has referred to genres as "institution(s)," which "have a tendency to rigidify, to sediment and fossilise" (209). When critics and commentators relegate Plath and Sexton to the institutional confines of the Confessional genre, without examining how Confessional discourse intersects with other regions of discourse, they are diminishing these poets’ substantial contributions to the broader generic regions of women’s autobiography and feminist discourse, and negating their potency as primary and radical practitioners of a relatively new theoretical model of women’s writing.

One of Middlebrook’s most significant strategies in her biography is the covert manner in which she undermines Sexton’s intellectual activities. She refers to Sexton’s well-stocked bookshelves in the biography, and in a 1991 interview she recalled seeing the uncut version of a USA:Poetry television film, which featured Sexton reading, and being interviewed in her home. This film, she claimed, was invaluable to her biographical enterprise, for it allowed her to look at the many books on Sexton’s shelves, which offered considerable information on the
poet's studies and literary tastes. Middlebrook does not, however, identify these texts in her biography of Sexton, an omission which serves to protect her attempt to depict Sexton as an intuitive, isolated, and virtually untutored artist. Middlebrook does list some of Sexton's favorite reference books; she mentions, as Kumin does in her preface to the Complete Poems, her enjoyment of popular psychological texts, as well as the Brothers Grimm. She rarely refers to other books, although Sexton began reading avidly in her early thirties. In a 1960 letter to Nolan Miller, Sexton lists some of the books she is reading, listing "Kafka, Mann, Dostoyevsky, Rilke, Faulkner, Gide - etc." (SPL:106). She also states that she had "never read anything" in the past, and is "eating books" in order to "form" (106). It is clear, even through the most cursory examination of Sexton's epigraphs - which feature a varied and thoughtful array of influences - that the poet was very well-read. And as I laboured through the poetry, it became increasingly evident that Sexton was working with a wide array of texts and textual themes/ideas, since she directly refers to a great number of diverse authors in her work. Ultimately, it became frustrating that I had no critical or biographical sources at my disposal to confirm Sexton's obvious interest and engagement with the secondary narratives and texts she drew from, and utilized in her work. As a result, I have been compelled to conjecture, and to compose a figurative library for Sexton. It was, for example, not until 1994, when reading Linda Gray Sexton's memoir, Searching for Mercy Street, that I discovered that Sexton used a rhyming dictionary when she wrote, while similar craft-related information is never overlooked by Plath's biographers. Sexton's literary resources should have been discussed by Middlebrook and others (in her memoir, Gray Sexton refers only to a small selection of the books Sexton read) as a central feature of her - or any intellectual artist's - creative process.
In "The Politics of Subjectivity," Felicity A. Nussbaum discusses the perils of considering the work of a specific author/subject as the "expressive products of an individual self, and a single consciousness...as the originating impulse" (33). She proposes instead that this subject be "situated in its historical specificity"; critical constructions of a "closed, fixed, rational and volitional self," she argues, are "fostered within a historically bound ideology" (33). It is, ultimately, more productive to view the subject as producing "incongruent" discourses, and to resist, as a critic, the "ideological pressures for subjects to make order and coherence" (Nussbaum:33). I began this thesis with the intention to demarcate the discrete and significant ways in which Sexton (and Plath) strategically employed the Confessional voice as a way of inscribing their subjectivity in a manner politically distinct from that of the male practitioners of this genre. As my work and research developed, it became clear that I needed to situate Sexton's work historically, to contextualize her individual collections in terms of their relevance and relation to literary history, to women's autobiography, and to the writing of her contemporaries, as well as to contemporary developments in philosophical, political and popular thought. In many ways, my reconstruction of the contexts of Sexton's books was an exercise in detective work, detective work which should have been unnecessary, had Sexton critics considered or offered a taxonomy of her intellectual enterprises.

iv.

With the exception of the first chapter, which is an overview of the Confessional mode, this thesis is arranged chronologically. The chapters conform to the publication order of Sexton's books. I have focused on those books that were published in Sexton's lifetime. Although Sexton
had prepared two additional poetry manuscripts before her death in 1974 - *45 Mercy Street* and *Words for Dr. Y.* - she had not finished editing or revising these books, a process which was integral to her work. Four of the chapters treat individual collections of poems, while two chapters group two or three as collections which I suggest illustrate a sustained treatment of a specific theme. In each chapter I attempt to create a social, literary and political context for the dominant themes of the individual books. I also attempt to relate Sexton’s work to the work of other women writers whose work is either influential or analogous. The unseen and unknown regions of Sexton’s education remain, for the most part, an enigma, but I have tried to argue that her references, images and ideas provide clear evidence of her immersion in social, cultural and literary events and trends. I have created analogues or connections between the work she creates and the sources or influences that are evident in the work. The *Complete Poems* present a discourse which maps Sexton’s development as a commentator and innovator. The trajectory of the poems/collections also exhibits Sexton’s stature as an acute and innovative commentator and interpreter of a woman’s response to inhabiting a female body. In this respect, it is not irrelevant to note the impact of this work on Sexton’s audience, an impact best expressed by a letter Sexton once received, and often quoted: "Thank you," the reader commented, "for the poetry of your life" (*Self-Portrait in Letters*: 372).

Each chapter in my thesis, with the exception of the first chapter, is divided into two sections. In the second section of each chapter I examine a group of poems which best reflects the theme(s) of the book or books in question. In the first section of each chapter, I provide a context for the book(s) of poetry I am examining, in order to emphasize the literary traditions and dominant theories that surround and support the books. Chapter One traces the various
origins of the Confessional mode. I argue that the term "confession," even within its secular context, retains a non-secular ethos, an ethos which is largely obscured in autobiographical documents. Autobiographical documents purport to recount a life, while confessional documents recount a life of extremity, sin, or salvation. Although Confessional poetry is autobiographical, it is important to recognize that it is a literary practice and, necessarily, informed by life and art. In her memoir of her mother, Linda Gray Sexton refers to Sexton's "literary license" (Searching for: 128). In "Live," Sexton describes a litter of puppies she plans to drown, a "fiction" which Gray Sexton carefully denies: "Mother had never any real intention of drowning the puppies" (128). Here, Gray Sexton misses a valuable opportunity to discuss the aesthetic meaning of this fabrication. Confessional poetry, as Sexton observes in "For John, Who begs me Not to Enquire Further," is a "complicated lie" (34). The conflation of life and art that characterizes confessional writing is elegized by Sexton in one of her last poems, appropriately titled "The Lost Lie". "Once there was a woman," she writes, "full as a theater of moon" (533). It is this notion - the theatricality of the self-in-writing - that best informs a critical reading of the "complicated" act of literary confession.

I provide an overview of the significant and useful criticism about the Confessional model in Chapter One, in order to situate my own argument within the extant scholarship. In this chapter I distinguish between confessional writing and Confessional writing, as the latter refers specifically to the small group of practicing poets - Snodgrass, Lowell, Plath, Berryman and Sexton - who 'confessed' similar experiences and emotions. Finally, I trace the disparity between the male and female Confessional poets in terms of their discrete political objectives. In the final section of the chapter I relate the work of Plath and Sexton to an ongoing project in women's
writing, and explicate what is politically imperative in their insistent attempts to inscribe the female "body electric" (Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric," *Leaves of Grass*:78).

The second and third chapters discuss Sexton's struggle against mental illness and self-injury, struggles which she presents in dialectical terms. In her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), she recounts her voyage into madness and subsequent institutionalization, and concludes the volume with her initial movement, "part way back," from this voyage. The poetry in this book is theoretical in nature - it suggests and outlines her poetics - and initiates strategies of self-representation that are sustained throughout her work. It is in *To Bedlam* that Sexton presents herself as a multiple speaker. In the poem "Her Kind," the poet posits herself as a mother and care-giver (a "housewife"); as a magical "possessed witch," or "twelve-fingered" poet; and as a woman capable of brazenly proclaiming her suicide desires.

Sexton will not commit to any one role - the refrain in this poem is "I have been her kind" - and this unspecified subjectivity is critical, as it confirms the idea that she, that women, must resist categorization. Further, it offers the reader multiple points of entry and interpretation with regard to the confessional poems the volume(s) contain. The poet's construction of herself as a witch is also critical, as Sexton relies extensively on the witch/craft conceit throughout her work. As the witch-subject, she is the exclusive agent of her craft; when she draws upon the imagery of magic and witches she is also acknowledging the power of her poetry, in terms of its ability to spell her subjectivity, and to transform into empowering discourse what is inherently powerless in the Confessional nexus of despair, self-injury, illness and institutionalization. Sexton's discourse provides a therapeutic "talking cure"; by speaking about her predisposition toward isolation and despair, the poet is assuming agency and control over this condition, and
subverting her subject position, from, as Diana Hume George has observed, analysand to analyst. Finally, by aligning herself with witches, she is aligning herself with a female collective, negating the myth of her anomalous individuality, and astutely acknowledging and critiquing her historical role among women who have been "misunderstood," persecuted and restricted from practicing their craft ("Her Kind":15). Finally, Sexton's proclamation of her suicide-desire is significant, because this desire is assessed throughout her work. She proudly "wave(s)" her "nude arms" at the spectators in "Her Kind," a liberating gesture which suggests that the poet intends tactically and courageously to demolish the silence that has always surrounded cultural taboos (16).

In **To Bedlam**, Sexton creates a discursive space for the issues that will recur in her work, a space she actualizes in her many poems about institutionalization. I propose in this chapter that the institution functions as an elaborate metaphor for the alternative site that she/women must construct in order to create outside the dominant culture and male-dominated literary establishment. It is within this space that Sexton proclaims she has become herself ("You, Doctor Martin":4); within the institution she has divested herself, to cite Plath, and "dissolv(ed)" her (former) "selves" (**Collected Poems**:232). Sexton's self-reconstruction as an author/agent begins in this volume, and is suggested by the phrase "part way back". The process constitutes a development throughout her books, and each of my chapters investigates the various ways in which Sexton utilizes her subjectivity both as a means of self-discovery/explication, and as a means of formulating ideas within broader contexts and issues.

**All My Pretty Ones** (1962) and **Live or Die** (1966) - the subjects of Chapter Three - are collections which contend primarily with death and suicide, or suicide-longing. In the **To Bedlam**
chapter, I provide a cultural, theoretical and literary context for Sexton’s work in the area of mental illness and institutionalization. In this chapter I offer a similar context, particularly for her work on suicide. I examine these texts as Confessional documents, which trace the poet’s experiences with death (the deaths of her "pretty ones"), as well as her suicide attempts and lingering suicidal desires. In this context, I explore the ways in which Sexton is able to articulate these themes as both narratives and narrative strategies. To Bedlam begins in despair, and the second culminates - after a series of candid treatments of the seductive nature of suicide - with her decision to "live" because she has supplemented her desire to die with her desire to live through and because of her poetic "gift" ("Live":170). In this, as in each chapter, I provide a theoretical and contextual framework for my discussion of the individual poems. Suicide is not only a cultural taboo, it appears also to be a taboo in the feminist sphere; in my discussion I examine the phenomenon as an indication of certain feminists’ construction of suicide as capitulation, as a problematic concession to the deep cultural trope of death and femininity. Ultimately, I appraise these Sexton poems as examples of the many ways she assails silence and taboo in her writings.

The urgency with which feminists advocate freedom of choice is relevant to Sexton’s work: the decision to die is germane to freedom of choice, and further, Sexton’s explication of the suicidal predisposition, however frank, does not advocate this choice. Rather, it disseminates, as much of her work does, information about this private condition - private, because it is rarely discussed beyond the confines of therapy and textbooks - and offers readers the opportunity to engage in a similar talking/reading cure. Solitude, silence and shame characterize much of the suicidal character; Sexton’s thoughtful and extensive assessment of suicide presents a means of
shattering these conditions, and enlarging the territory of this particular discourse.

Sexton's first three collections are dominated by traditional Confessional themes, themes which she insistently genders toward the presentation of a distinctly female perspective. She draws extensively from her own experiences, and then goes about aligning these experiences, theoretically, within an implicit female collective. The "woman" Sexton renders is often converted into a multiple construct - "women" - a conversion which is achieved strategically throughout the work. This strategy is executed in complex terms: the poet both addresses and includes women through direct communication, imagery and theory. Many of Sexton's poems are directed, quite intimately, at an implied listener; the images - particularly the non-secular images - create a powerful sense of a theology and familial/world order that is female-gendered. Similarly, Sexton's construction of institutions, the family, the cosmos and desire as feminine spheres suggests a feminist methodology in the poetry, a revisionist ontology and framework for the (singular) female narrative that governs the work. Black feminist critics have often noted that it is critical to recognize the accounts of black women as authentic historical commentary and legitimate artistic expression. Although black women have historically confronted a far more dire and repressive history in America than have white women, their recognition of the importance of the obscured region of experience and oral testimony as significant features in the (re)construction of women's history is germane to my assessment of Sexton. It is my contention that Sexton asserted her private experience as a woman within the public sphere of poetry both to affirm its validity and political significance, and as a means of demolishing artificial, culturally imposed barriers.
Sexton's Love Poems, her fourth collection, constitutes a methodological departure for the poet. Although she continues to write in a deeply subjective, confessional mode, she departs, in this volume, from the traditional themes of Confessionalism. In Chapter One I argue that the poetry of the Beats is synchronic, while Confessional poetry is diachronic in nature. That is, while Beat poetry tends to inscribe and celebrate the immediate, Confessional poetry is marked by a reflective study of the past, of remembered experiences, an approach that resembles the process of psychoanalysis. The poetry in Love Poems, which I argue (in Chapter Four) is indebted to Beat poetry, is largely celebratory. Further, Sexton's poems recount experiences that are based on current events, and not contingent upon, or related to past events. This shift in Sexton's writing is anticipated in her previous collection, Live or Die, as the poems in Live or Die are scrupulously dated, in the manner of a diary. Although the Live or Die poems delve backwards into remembered experience, the emphasis on the temporal, and specifically on the present, suggests her movement in her work as a whole away from the past, and into the present. Finally, Sexton's emphatic decision to live, in the poem which concludes Live or Die, suggests that the work to come will be marked by this decision, and the poetry of Love Poems affirms and articulates her choice.

Love Poems is a loosely arranged collection which touches on a number of subjects, although love, as the title suggests, is the governing theme. I examine the text in two ways in Chapter Four: first, as a sustained commentary on gender relations within a specific romantic framework, and subsequently as an architectonic text which seeks to build the female body in incremental and positive terms. Because there is such a substantial literary canon of love poetry,
I have isolated that poetry which I felt was relevant to Sexton's work. I examine primarily the work of female poets, poets whom I felt had made substantial and subversive contributions to this genre. I also examine the work of Diane Di Prima, a Beat poet whose work anticipates a good deal of Sexton's work. Sexton's name does not appear in biographies or autobiographies of the Beat writers, and, of these writers, Sexton refers only to Ginsberg (in passing) in interviews. Since it is extremely difficult to determine whether or not Sexton was familiar with any of these artists, I have created analogues between Sexton and the women whose work appears to have influenced her own work. I do, however, note that Sexton once referred to herself a "secret Beatnik," an appellation which intimates the poet's familiarity with Beat poetry (and also rather ominously describes how her literary influences and endeavors have been obscured, as "secrets" to the Sexton scholar).

The love poetry itself is somewhat unstructured. *Love Poems* traces the evolution of a disastrous heterosexual love affair, and the poet describes this affair, variously, as an exciting, empowering, disabling and miserable series of events. A lesbian encounter is also described, but the poems are largely heterosexual in orientation, and the events that transpire are fairly conventional. One poem is entitled "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman," a title which is, in itself, an acute commentary on both the familiarity of her material and her own recognition of what is common to romantic experiences and romance literature. Sexton does, however, create a number of strategic ways to recount these familiar tales. The poems are embedded with ironic fairy tale narratives, and occasionally the recurring figure of the male lover is less a singular construct than a symbolic figure whose actions in conjunction with those of the female speaker constitute a commentary on gender relations. But it is Sexton's work with
the female body, and female sexuality, ultimately, that distinguishes this collection, providing informative scrutiny of matters that were, previously, unheard of in women's poetry. The bold jouissance that characterizes Sexton's discussions of her body and sexuality provides a critical key to her political strategy, a strategy which is committed to challenging misinformation, taboo, and secrets, and which seeks to replace oppressive, socially constructed female stereotypes with female/self-authored revisions of these models.

Sexton's play with the fairy tale in Love Poems prefigures her subsequent volume, Transformations, a collection which consists of a series of revisionist fairy tales. This collection is not confessional, although it employs the first-person voice and subjective monologue in a number of the poems. Transformations constitutes a formal departure in Sexton's writing, and it serves to confirm the break from the Confessional mode she instigated in Love Poems. In Chapter Five I locate Sexton's work with fairy tales within a literary and critical context, and closely examine two poems that I feel are representative of Sexton's various ambitions. I also offer a brief history of the fairy tale, and proceed to examine contemporary treatments of these narratives. Sexton's work stands at the forefront of a great body of (largely female-authored) revisionist fairy tales; she was one of the first women writers to experiment with this genre as a way of critiquing its inherent ideologies. Sexton's own voice as narrator/speaker appears in the text, but is presented as the voice of a witch, a tactic which recalls the origin of the fairy tale, tales which were historically told by women, but transcribed and re-told, as literary texts, by men. Sexton's use of the witch-speaker recalls a consistent pattern in her previous volumes, for the witch - in Sexton's poetry - is a symbol of power. But Sexton complicates this notion of power by suggesting how the witch has been historically persecuted and feared because of this
power, and by suggesting that witchcraft is analogous to the power of the woman who writes ("such trances and portents!"). who transforms through language (Sexton: "The Black Art": 88).

I have chosen to examine "Cinderella," and "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" in detail because these two poems represent discrete strategies at work in Transformations. "Cinderella" is an arch reconstruction of the Cinderella tale, wherein Sexton provides a witty and acute commentary on its persistence and cultural significance, while the "Briar Rose" narrative is used as a framework for a trenchant analysis of father-daughter rape. It is this poem which lays the foundation for Sexton's last three collections, which are primarily devoted to examinations of theology, and to the figures of Christ, Mary and God. "Briar Rose," like many of the poems in Transformations is a dramatic monologues, and Sexton's adoption of this form appears to have been liberating.

It is in her final, post-Love Poems, collections that Sexton is able to bring her theoretical concerns to the forefront by interfacing autobiography and theory. Sexton does continue to draw from personal experience in her later work, but after the inception of the witch-speaker, she comes to construct herself as a speaker whose voice is complex, and not necessarily self-referential. The strategy is exhibited in her long poem sequence "O Ye Tongues," (which appears in The Death Notebooks [1974]), in which she employs the figure of Christopher Smart in a dialogue/interaction with "Anne," an appellation which supplements the more immediately self-reflexive "I". I employ Estella Lauter's locution, the "transpersonal" model, in my discussion of Sexton's later work, because it is an insightful assessment of the manner in which the poet came to employ and transcend the personal in her work, and trouble the immediate relationship between herself and herself-as-speaker.

In the sixth and final chapter, I discuss Sexton's last three collections of poetry: The Book
of Folly (1972), The Death Notebooks and The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975). I consider the posthumous work collected in the Complete Poems in my conclusion. My final chapter is divided into three sections; in the first section I look at Sexton's poem-sequence "The Jesus Papers" (Book of Folly); in the second, I examine a long poem from The Death Notebooks, and in the third section I also examine one of The Awful Rowing's long poems. These books, as I have already acknowledged, are primarily concerned with faith, Christianity and biblical figures. Religion figures prominently throughout Sexton's work: her struggles with faith are well documented in the collected poems, and much of her poetry attempts to envision a Christian model that is gynocentric, and reconcilable with her own beliefs and ideas.

In All My Pretty Ones, Sexton articulates her inability to entrust her faith in Christ (whom she likens to a "chunk of beef") and God, whose "name" she does "not know" (62,63). Her creation of a female-centered cosmos constitutes an act of faith for the poet. In "With Mercy For the Greedy," she explains that her poetry supplements and re-orders traditional belief systems. Poetry, she cryptically explains, is "the rat's star," and like this palindrome, it is capable of reversing language and ideas, without sacrificing meaning (63). In her last collections, Sexton employs another palindrome, "Ms.Dog" as a personal appellation, a playful and critical indication of her theological methodology. The name, or persona, suggests Sexton's awareness of and connection to the second-wave feminist movement, and this virtually undocumented political engagement underlines much of her work with Christian iconography, theory and text.

In Chapter Six I contextualize Sexton's work with religion by locating it within a body of feminist criticism and commentaries on Christianity. The feminist critics I discuss are, for the most part, contemporaries of Sexton's, and their work represents one of second-wave feminism's
most urgent agendas. Christianity is ordered in patriarchal and paternalistic terms, with reference to (among other things) its notion of the ontology of man, the gender of Christ and God and their paramount hierarchical status, and the problematic and often marginal representations of women in the scriptures. Because of this, many feminist commentators have attempted to reject, refute or re-order Christianity, or classical interpretations of Christianity. Sexton’s examination of her/the Christian faith provides a discourse that is amenable to these feminist ambitions, and her examination functions on many different levels.

In each of her last books, Sexton secularizes the figures of Christ, Mary, God and other biblical figures, in order to demonstrate how their original and persistent representation collides with and shapes secular notions of gender. She resuscitates several female biblical figures in the poems, with a strong focus on the figure of Mary, whom she attempts to reconstruct and place at the center of her own faith and Christian faith. Finally, she struggles with her own faith in these volumes, a faith she cannot profess in traditional, male-ordered terms. Although the poet expresses an identification with the suffering, mortal Christ, her own spirituality is constructed as a separatist space, for herself - as woman - and for the women who occupy and preside over this sphere in her work.

The poems I discuss in Chapter Six illustrate the scope of Sexton’s analyses of faith, analyses which provide a directed narrative, culminating in the concluding poem which is aptly titled "The Rowing Endeth". The poems as a whole constitute an argument without closure, or conclusion, yet they do suggest a resolution that evokes all of her work - the resolution to impose a female stamp on traditionally male domains, institutions and ideologies. Finally, through her revisionist biblical re-tellings, she exhibits how women may be empowered by self-
recovery and reclamation, when they become, at last, the lions writing history.
Chapter One

Locating and Gendering Confessional Poetry

rejected yet confessing out the soul
to conform to the rhythm of thought
in his naked and endless head

Allen Ginsberg, Howl

Confessional poetry is thought to begin with the publication of Robert Lowell’s Life Studies in 1959. In this collection Lowell "abandon(ed) the formal concerns of his first collections" and turned to "free verse," and "the voice of intense personal concern" (Marowski:232). The poems chronicle Lowell’s family and personal history, and many of them concern his mental illness and recovery. "Skunk Hour" in particular, which concludes the book, is a first-person account of the poet’s "ill-spirit" and isolation: "My mind’s not right./...I myself am hell;/nobody’s here" (Life Studies:90). The complexity of Lowell’s strategy is signified by his (embedded) reference to Milton’s Satan, a strategy which suggests a conflated system of voices, as opposed to a purely self-referential confessional voice. Lowell has listed Milton’s Satan and Melville’s Captain Ahab as the "two great symbolic figures," and as "two sublime ambitions that are doomed and ready, for their idealism, to face any amount of violence" (NAMP:925). This characterization is also applicable to the Confessional poets, whose work recounts the similarly "sublime ambitions" of figures that are, simultaneously, autobiographical and "symbolic".

Life Studies has traditionally been interpreted in terms of "historical overture" (Rosenthal,"Robert Lowell":119); Lowell’s work is distinct because it is predicated on "person,"
and "fact," as opposed to persona and fiction (Phillips: 20). The poems are larded with personal references and details, but they also present a number of sociopolitical statements. In "Memories of West Street and Lepke," Lowell writes:

These are the tranquilized Fifties, and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime? I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O., and made my manic statement, telling off the state and president, and then sat waiting sentence in the bull pen beside a Negro boy with curlicues of marijuana in his hair. (85)

The quality of free, or open verse (Lowell used the terms 'raw' and 'cooked'), and the surfeit of memory and (self) revelation emphasize the subjective quality of this poem. But it is what Lowell chooses to reveal which attests to the symbolic quality of the poem, or to its "descent" from "form into 'life'" (Cox: 3). Lowell's autobiographical revelations are not random, but rather, ordered toward the presentation of a seditious, political self. Here, as elsewhere in his poetry, Lowell positions himself in terms of his other-ness. The suggestion of other-ness, in one sense, creates or reveals the fracture between the self (Lowell), and the self-in-writing (Lowell's self-representation), a fracture that Lowell articulates in "Waking in Blue" when he describes himself as both a "victorious figure of bravado ossified young," and an institutionalized "old timer" holding a "locked razor" (82). These two images provide an illustration of how the self and the self-in-writing are divided and joined in autobiographical writing - the "locked" and enclosed self is transcendental in writing, and may emerge "victorious" in poetry. What is particularly Confessional about Lowell's strategy, in "Waking in Blue," is the way in which he deploys his other-ness in service of the presentation of a cohesive, divided self. Lowell was imprisoned for sedition in 1943, and served a sentence (of one year and one day) at the Federal
Correction Center at Danbury, Connecticut. And while he did write a blistering letter to Roosevelt, refusing to serve in the military because of America's "Machiavellian contempt of the laws of justice and charity between nations," Lowell was not drafted, but inducted, after enlisting on at least two occasions (Hamilton:89,86). Lowell's poetry does not reveal this fact: the "idealistic" self-in-writing he constructs is "ready...to face any amount of violence" other than factual inconsistency.

By positioning himself as a ("fire breathing") other, Lowell aligns himself with contemporary political and poetic discourse. References to sedition and imprisonment are entangled with the depiction of the poet's "manic" illness, a common-place (represented) duality in American culture at this time. R.D.Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960), for example, discusses mental illness in terms of its relation to and reflection of society's malaise. *The Divided Self* (which in 1972 Laing described as an "example of how people were thinking in the Fifties") is of great importance to the Confessional poets, as its central conceit and its political explication of mental illness are germane to their own concerns and strategies (in Showalter, *The Female Malady*: 226-227). Lowell's employment of Beat imagery is also significant. The evocation of marijuana and race ("a Negro boy") act as indexical signs, signifying his employment of Beat poetry, the other contemporary American autobiographical genre. The Beats and the Confessional poets share, in Hyatt H. Waggoners' words, "a repudiation of our cultural past and a distaste for present society" (565). The Beats, however, were actively iconoclastic in their work and practices, in contrast to the more conservative Confessional poets. Known variously as the Beat, Bop, and Subterranean Generation, the Beat poets embraced the alternative realms of fashion, style, drugs, music, travel, protest and sexuality. These practices were inscribed in
their work, and the poets themselves were known as a cultural phenomenon, as "bearded cats and kits," spreading "cool and beat" aesthetics and "bop visions" throughout the post-war counter-cultures².

Lowell, further, is not the "existential hipster" described by Norman Mailer in The White Negro (1957), a term which best describes the Beats, who "divorce(d) themselves from society and lived without roots" (Mailer:11). The contrast between the iconoclastic Ginsberg and the patrician Lowell (the respective founders of Beat and Confessional poetry) is captured in Barry Miles’s 1989 biography of Ginsberg. Miles describes Ginsberg and Timothy Leary visiting Lowell at his Riverside Drive apartment in 1961, in order to turn him on to drugs (280). When Leary asks why Ginsberg wants to dose Lowell with psilocybin, he replies: "if Pulitzer Prize-winner Robert Lowell has a great session, his product endorsement will influence lots of intellectuals" (281). James Breslin also effectively contrasts Ginsberg and Lowell. In his essay "Robert Lowell," he recounts a New York Times description of a joint reading the two poets gave in 1977. The Times saw the two as "opposite ends of the poetic spectrum," a view which Breslin supports when he compares "Ginsberg - the rhapsodic hip visionary" with "Lowell - the ironic and reserved aristocrat" (110). Breslin observes that while both writers use the confessional voice, Ginsberg "immers(es) himself in immediate feeling and thought" while Lowell "always preserves some personal distance and artistic control" (110). Life Studies is a formal study of a poet’s personal history, and its approach is diachronic, in contrast with the immediate, synchronic quality of Beat poetry. This distinction reflects the centrality of psychoanalysis to the Confessional poets, as well as their unique implementation of the autobiographical as "public" poetic voice.
In "Finding a Poem," W.D. Snodgrass describes the completion of his poem "Heart's Needle." He states that, through meticulous revision, he created "a better poem, more personal and so more universal" (Radical Pursuit:32). Snodgrass studied with Lowell at the State University of Iowa, and there the two poets "taught each other a new confessional mode for modern poetry" (NAMP:1084). Heart's Needle and Life Studies were published the same year, so it is not possible to determine who originated this mode. Both poets employ comparable voices in their texts, as they are both concerned with the merger of the personal, and the "universal," or public voice. Heart's Needle contains a number of Confessional poems, which concern the poet's life experiences, but the first two poems in the collection are, significantly, not confessional. The first poem, "Ten Days Leave" is a third person account, and the second poem, "Returned to Frisco, 1946" is written in the first person plural voice: "We shouldered like pigs along the rail to try/And catch that first gray outline of the shore" (4). The first section of Life Studies is comprised of non-confessional dramatic monologues, which also employ informal or untraditional language within formal, or traditional rhyme schemes and verse forms. The principal similarity between the two collections, however, is the way in which the personal voice is processed. The confessional voice is not immediately adopted in the texts, rather, both books begin with poems that are im-personal, oblique reflections on post-war society. In "Inauguration Day: January 1953," Lowell writes: "Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move./Look, the fixed stars, all just alike/as lack-land atoms, split apart" (LS:7). Snodgrass's "Returned to Frisco" also uses collective personal pronouns (we/our), and depicts a similarly static and fractured portrait of post-war America. In the final stanza, Snodgrass describes the Golden Gate Bridge, standing, "like the closed gate of your own backyard" (5). This particular phrase underlines an explicit
political agenda, as the shift in pronouns and the evocation of a mutually exclusive society intensifies the speaker's referentiality. By initially pluralising the voice, and drawing upon common experience, Snodgrass and Lowell are able to expand, ultimately, the parameters of their confessional selves.

In "The Bildungsroman," M.M.Bakhtin discusses the various kinds of "novels of emergence". The fifth category, he writes, is the "most significant"; in this type of text "man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence" (23). In Snodgrass and Lowell's early poetry, the emergence of the Confessional voice may also be linked to historical emergence. The "antiestablishment" quality of Confessional poetry derives from its historical situation (Phillips:13). This time (the late 1950's/early 1960's) may be periodized as an "age of conurbations," and of considerable public unrest (Lerner:102). The events and effects of the second world war are well documented throughout the arts in this period. For example, Film Noir, a post-war genre, is generally characterized by a pervasive sense of "despair, alienation ... and psychos(i)s," wherein life is "conceived to be a hopeless proposition, with people having no control over their fates" (Ottoson:1). In visual art, Abstract Expressionism, another post-war genre, is governed by a similarly chaotic aesthetic. Its new "permissiveness," expressed in a virtual lack of formal restrictions, exemplifies its efforts, in Robert Rauschenberg's words, to bridge "the gap between art and life" (in Adams:25). The disorder of the "life" depicted constitutes a break from both traditional method and society itself. Abstract Expressionists stressed the importance of viewer participation, or the triangular relationship among artist, art, and spectator. The viewer is invited to witness, among other things, social pathology, and the decline of the knowable social subject in these fragmented and diffuse paintings. Much of the
fiction and non-fiction of this period also illustrates themes of "psychic havoc," alienation and artistic revolt (Mailer:1). Although they occupy a unique space in American poetic history, the Confessional poets are, ultimately, not unique in documenting, or implementing the discourse of, in Yeats's words, "mere anarchy".

The Confessional voice, as adopted by Snodgrass and Lowell, is necessarily highly subjective and self referential. However, it is important to emphasize the objective, and public element of this voice. Waggoner describes contemporary confessional poetry as a sign of the end of Modernism, for, unlike Modernist poetry, it encourages a "communion" between poet and reader. He also observes that confessional poets try to "transcend the self" in their work, "by responding to value and meaning in the world outside the self" (566). The introspective and individualized nature of Confessional poetry is connected to a collective sensibility, as the poetry suggests a connection between the personal and the public. As Anne Sexton once noted, "I write very personal poems but I hope that they will become the central theme to someone else's private life" (No Evil Star:50). It is this duality that attracted Sylvia Plath, who told a BBC producer in 1962 that the best poetry is both "real and relevant...relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau" (in Martin, Sylvia Plath:224). The conflation of the "real" and the "relevant," or the writer's existence and socio-historical context, is central to the Confessional poets. The construction of the personal/pluralistic self-in-writing indicates a democratic privileging of each member of society. In "A Poem's Becoming," Snodgrass describes what motivated Confessional poetry: "We have come to value matter and the physical world - perhaps because we are in much more danger of losing them than people ever were before" (RP:54).
As I observed earlier, W.D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell are thought to have created the Confessional model, but even this point is debatable. In an interview with Barbara Kevles, Anne Sexton says that she submitted her unpublished work to Lowell (when she was applying to his poetry workshop) while he was compiling the manuscript of *Life Studies*, and notes "Perhaps I even influenced him. I have never asked him" (Star:90). In fact, when Lowell responded to Sexton’s application, he wrote that he had read her poems with "a good deal of admiration and envy...after combing through pages of fragments of (his) own unfinished stuff" (Middlebrook, "AS & RL":1). He went on to note that he valued her work's "truth" and its "simple expression of difficult feelings," since this was the "line of poetry" he was "most interested in" ("AS & RL":1). It is unclear, and in many respects, irrelevant who began this "line of poetry"; each of the poets uses similar strategies in his/her writing (the alignment of the personal and political), yet each poet also expresses different ambitions and concerns.

Like the Metaphysical poets, the Confessional group is "more often named than read" (Eliot:2300). They are generally numbered at four, with the inclusion of John Berryman (in addition to Lowell, Plath and Sexton), and the exclusion of Snodgrass. The four (or five) poets
were all associates, and their creation of the Confessional mode is related, in part, to their early associations with each other. Although these associations are not well documented, the literal formation of the group can be reconstructed. Snodgrass studied under Lowell at the University of Iowa, and Lowell instructed Plath and Sexton in a creative writing seminar at Boston University (Plath and Sexton were classmates from 1958-1959). Plath would go on to cite Lowell and Sexton as being very influential, by virtue of their "vitality," and their employment of "interior experiences" and "private and taboo subjects" (in Martin, SP:224). Lowell has stated that Snodgrass "did these things before (he) did, though he's younger...and had been (his) student" (Phillips:6). And John Berryman was a close friend and colleague of Lowell's; in Lowell's poem "For John Berryman," he writes: "I feel I know what you have worked through, you/±now what I have worked through- these are words/John, we used the language as if we made it" (Notebook:255). Berryman writes about Lowell in Dream Songs, and their friendship, for Lowell, constituted, in Paul Mariani's words, a "heady... philosopher's circle" (61). Berryman's work in 77 Dream Songs had a profound and "weird effect" on Lowell, and he felt "env(ious)" of Berryman's work (Mariani:61). These poets also referred to each other within their poetry: Sexton and Berryman wrote about Plath, Sexton wrote about Lowell, and Lowell wrote the introduction to Ariel, and was instrumental in the publication of Sexton's first collection.4

The Confessional poets were also influenced by, and related to, a number of other contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, including Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Delmore Schwartz and Theodore Roethke. Several of these poets are routinely linked with the Confessional poets, and have written confessional poems. Roethke, in
particular, is often linked with the Confessional group although he has also been described as having "produced in a vacuum" (Phillips:107). But Roethke is not a Confessional poet, according to Robert Phillips, because he refers only to the "interior of self" in his writing; he does not refer to history, or the exterior world (107). Adrienne Rich, who is often compared to the Confessional poets, began writing "directly about experiencing (herself) as a woman" in the late 1950s, but it was not until she wrote "Planetarium" in 1971 that, in her words, "the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem became the same person" ("When We Dead Awaken":44,47). The exclusiveness of the Confessional group is less related to their mode and method, however, than to their subject matter. Each of the four poets struggled with mental illness and institutionalization in his/her lifetime, and three of them committed suicide. These experiences are documented in their writing, and ultimately led to their being classified as, in A.Alvarez's term, "extremist" artists.

It is M.L. Rosenthal who coined the phrase "Confessional Poets" in his 1959 review of Robert Lowell's Life Studies. This group of American poets can be characterized, using the following criteria: their membership is limited, and their practices are fairly homogeneous, that is, they all employed similar strategies, styles, diction and topics, and they all wrote autobiographical poetry. In many respects, all poetry is confessional, "in so far as it is a record of a poet's states of mind and feelings and...vision of life," but the Confessional group is distinguished by their method of recording life, and the "quality of ... life" they describe (Cuddon:152). In Robert Phillips' long, point-form definition of the Confessional mode, he cites the depiction of "unbalanced and afflicted" protagonists as one of the vital components of this form (17). The Confessional poets, then, may be defined as a small group of interrelated
twentieth century poets who wrote first person accounts of their (often painful) experiences, and who attempted to address personal and public issues in their writing.

The evolution of the confessional voice, however, is more complex, as it has considerable historical/literary precedent. In an essay about Anne Sexton, J.D. McClatchy observes that "surprisingly little has been written with any authority on the subject of confessionalism," a "sincerity" motivated "impulse behind many of the social movements and styles since 1960" (31). Confessional poetry is discussed in overviews of American poetry, and confession is often discussed, in a broad way, as a rhetorical form (Theodore Reik's *The Compulsion to Confess* (1961) provides a thorough analysis of modes of confession). There are, however, only a few critical essays and books devoted exclusively to the Confessional poets. The extant scholarship provides several useful ways of locating, defining and interpreting Confessional poetry, but McClatchy is correct in his assessment of the paucity of the scholarship surrounding this mode of writing. The work of A. Alvarez, Donald Davie, Laurence Lerner, E.V. Ramakrishnan and M.L. Rosenthal offers, collectively, a critical model of Confessional poetry, and a literary/historical context for Confessional poetry. None of these critics has examined confessionalism at length - a subject which is a study in itself - but their work establishes a practical definition of the Confessional poets, or the Madhouse Muses, as they were sometimes called (Phillips:15).

In his 1966 essay, "Sincerity and Poetry," Donald Davie attempts to define twentieth century American confessional poetry, using the Romantic poets as an analogue. He notes that with *Life Studies*, Lowell introduced poems that employed a first person speaker, an "I" who "nearly always asks to be taken, quite unequivocally, as Robert Lowell himself" (142). The confessional
poem, Davie argues, is "a vehicle by which the writer acts out before his public the agony or the discomfort...of being a writer" (142). Davie contrasts the contemporary confessional poem to the poetry of Wordsworth and Byron, poets who confessed, respectively, "virtue" and "vice" (143), and observes: "woe betide that (contemporary) poet whose life...does not reveal fornications and adultery, drug-addictions, alcoholism and spells in mental homes" (142). Davie's cynicism about the sensational nature of confessional poetry further reveals itself in his assessment of the "new confessional poets," poets he describes as being "very bad," with the exception of Robert Lowell (142). His essay does not provide a definition of, or thorough literary/historical context for, the modern confessional poets (for example, he does not distinguish between the Beat and Confessional poets), but it does raise some interesting questions about "sincerity" as a criterion for poetry.

"Sincerity," according to Davie, is related to what a poem "costs" a poet (142). By revealing intimate and painful details about his/her life experiences, a poet introduces an element of personal risk into his/her writing. In "Crying," Laurence Lerner adapts Davie's notion of sincerity, and deems confessional writing an act of "narrative," "pronoun" and "emotional courage," terms which suggest the element of risk inherent in the practice of confessing "feelings of disgust, self-hatred and despair" (112). There is an artistic risk involved in confession as well; by employing the (non-fictional) subjective voice the poet assumes responsibility, even culpability for the ideas expressed in the poem in a way that evokes the practice of non-secular confession. To confess is to acknowledge that one's experiences, ideas, and emotions are meaningful, and of consequence. Confessional poetry also gestures to the meaning and consequence of personal experiences, ideas and emotions, and this gesture has artistic and
In "In Memorium and the Rhetoric of Confession," W. David Shaw provides a list of the "Characteristic features of confessional writing" (80). One characteristic is the "personal, and often private" nature of confessional writing, another is its "polemical nature"; the confessor, Shaw notes, "is often the advocate in disguise" (80, 83). Walt Whitman’s poetry provides a good example of confessional writing that is both personal and political. In his Inscriptions, he writes: "One’s self I sing, a single separate person,/Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse" (Leaves of Grass:3). Whitman’s verses are polemical because they propose a joining of the personal and public spheres, a strategic merger which prefigures the work of both the Confessional and the Beat poets. Davie acknowledges the significance of this merger in "Sincerity and Poetry" when he describes confessional poets as artists "trying to break out of the world of rhetoric," and create an intersection between the "world of literature" and the "adjacent worlds of biography, history and geography" (145). By creating this intersection, the confessional poet assumes agency, and becomes his/her "own biographer," cultural commentator and public speaker (Davie:145). Davie’s use of the word "own" is significant, as it draws attention to the autonomy and agency encoded in the subjective voice, objectives which are, in his words, "so patently the impetus behind (confessional) writing" (145).

"Sincerity and Poetry" sets the groundwork for locating confession - in twentieth century American writing - as a genre, although Davie’s essay does not distinguish between the various confessional sub-genres. A. Alvarez’s 1967 essay, "Modernism," is considerably more categorical in its assessment of confession, and though Alvarez does not define or even name the Confessional poets, his essay provides a valuable way of looking at Confessional, or
"extremist" poetry. In this essay Alvarez criticizes the notion of the alienated artist, arguing that the post-modern artist "is not 'alienated', he is simply lost" (7). He describes the "ideological void" this artist confronts, lacking "altogether the four traditional supports upon which every previous generation has been able, in one degree or another, to rely: religion, politics, national cultural tradition, reason" (7).

Alvarez's essay is broadly socio-historical in its scope. He examines the contemporary aesthetics, politics, media, art and religion in order to create a portrait of a post-war world that is bereft of any traditional or unified beliefs. Contemptuous of the contemporary avant-garde, Alvarez isolates extremist artists such as Berryman, Lowell and Plath (writers who narrate the extremes of personal experience) as being able to fulfil his definition of what constitutes a "genuine artist". The true contemporary artist, according to Alvarez, lacks "external standards by which to judge his reality;" and must "launch his craft," "control it" and forge "his own compass" (15). The extremist artists were "risk"-takers, he noted, writers willing to narrate the "violence and destructiveness of the period" in "modern, analytic terms" (17). Alvarez cites the painter Sidney Nolan, who claims that artists serve as an "Early Warning System for history," in order to support his theory that the extremist artists' work constitutes a profound personal, political and philosophical commentary on their times (17). He also differentiates between the extremists and other confessional artists and states that while other "pop" artists' work is merely a "reaction against a dead or dying formalism" (19), the extremists' work is a "courageous response" which proposes, in itself, an "artistic order" with which to replace the artistic chaos of the period (20,21).

Although Alvarez does not name the Confessional poets or define the group, "Modernism"
is useful to the study of Confessional poetry. He characterizes extremist poetry as something distinct from Modernist poetry, which emphasized the "direct treatment of the thing" (**NAMP**:5) and which was predicated on T.S.Eliot's "impersonal" model, wherein the "man who suffers" and "the mind which creates" are separate (**NAEL/2**:2297). By identifying Confessional poetry's distinctly non-Modernist quality, and by isolating its extremist, personal/political nature, Alvarez contributes substantially to the scholarship regarding the group.

M.L Rosenthal's *The New Poets*, published in 1967, also provides a useful assessment of the "confessional mode," which he claims was "discover(ed)" by Robert Lowell (26). The term "confessional mode" - is "appropriate enough," he argues, because "of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of *Life Studies*" (26). In the chapter "Other Confessional Poets," Rosenthal discusses the work of six poets - Berryman, Ginsberg, Lowell, Plath, Roethke and Sexton - who tend to "place the literal Self at the center of the poem" (27).

Rosenthal's discussion of Lowell is illuminating, suggesting a distinction between Beat and Confessional poetry. Rosenthal describes the "myth" that Lowell presents in *Life Studies*, of "an America (and a contemporary civilization generally) whose history and present predicament are embodied in those of his own family and epitomized in his own psychological experience" (61). Ginsberg's confessional work often incorporates references to American politics - "It occurs to me that I am America" - and his long poem "Kaddish" is an elegy to his mother Naomi ("America," *Howl*:32). Lowell's family history is very different than Ginsberg's - from his dolorous aristocratic family, Lowell inherits a "bristling and manic" temperament ("Commander Lowell," **LS**:70); from his intellectual, working-class Communist mother, Ginsberg inherits a
"radical bias" (Ellmann, O’Clair, NAMP:1118). While both poets gesture to the significance of their families, Ginsberg’s sexuality, necessarily, divorces him from a family-based identity. Ginsberg’s work celebrates the homoerotic. The "best minds" of Ginsberg’s "generation" "scream with joy" while being "fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists" ("Howl":12). And while "Kaddish" consecrates the deep bond between Ginsberg and his mother - the "beautiful Garbo of (his) Karma" - the poem’s conclusion suggests how the two are divided.

"Kaddish" ends with Naomi Ginsberg’s poignant, and clearly ingenuous, admonition: "Get married Allen don’t take drugs" (31). Unlike Lowell, whose other-ness is grounded in his melancholic disposition, Ginsberg’s is rooted in a sexuality that he celebrates throughout his work. Rosenthal expresses distaste for Ginsberg’s homoerotic writing. The "frankly homosexual passages," he writes, exhibit "an exhibitionistic and self-advertising quality, rarely serving any poetic end" (112). Rosenthal also takes issue with the many references, in Ginsberg’s poetry, to his lover Peter Orlovsky, and to his Beat "circle" (112). These poems, he argues, lack the "emotional power" of those poems that "have explicitly at their centers the body of family experience" (111). Howl is dedicated to the major male Beat writers - William Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Jack Kerouac - who were all bisexual/gay, and Kaddish is dedicated to "Peter Orlovsky in Paradise". Rosenthal appears to be oblivious to the fact that these men are, to Ginsberg, "family". Ginsberg’s need to "advertise" and affirm his own and his colleagues’ sexual preference seems critical, given the heterosexist cultural, social and critical biases gay confessional poets must confront. Beat poetry’s connection to Confessional poetry should not be overstated, as the two groups, ultimately, express quite different desires and objectives in their work.
A "genuine confessional poem," according to Rosenthal, achieves the "fusion of the private and the culturally symbolic" (80). Rosenthal does not address issues of gender, class, race or sexuality in his evaluation of what is political, or "culturally symbolic," and merges the work of six poets by virtue of their shared sense of Self as the "embodiment of civilization" (78). Confessional poetry is a "poetry of suffering," he notes, which expresses a "heightened sensitivity to the human predicament in general" (130). Rosenthal is most vivid and insightful when emphasizing the personal and political quality of Confessional poetry. He observes, astutely, that there is a "magnificent fusion of private and universal motifs" in the Confessional poem. Like Alvarez, Rosenthal asserts this "fusion," suggesting a way of examining how Confessional poetry's "literal Self" as "self-transcenden(t)," grounded in "an aesthetic realization that goes beyond the literal subject matter" (67).

Robert Phillips' book *The Confessional Poets*, published in 1973, provides a more substantial and specific assessment of the Confessional group, although he is somewhat evasive about naming the Confessional poets. Phillips views confession as a way of writing specific to literary works published after 1959, many of which may be categorized as being confessional. He sees certain volumes by Randall Jarrell, Maxine Kumin and Stanley Kunitz as confessional, even if these poets are not usually described as Confessional poets. But Phillips focuses much of his introductory discussion on the work of Berryman, Lowell, Plath, Sexton and Snodgrass because their work conforms most consistently and emphatically with the definitions of the group he outlines in essay and point-form.

Phillips point-form list of the key characteristics of confessional writing includes characteristics which Davie and Alvarez also acknowledge, such as "moral courage," the
subjective presentation of "afflicted protagonists" and extremist themes, the "expression of personality," "antiestablishment" ideas, and the lack of "barriers between the reader and poet" (16-17). He also notes the open form and "open language" of confessional poetry, qualities which recall Wordsworth's poetic objective, as outlined in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, to "choose incidents from common life" and to "relate or describe them in a selection of language really used by men" (446). Phillips attempts to place contemporary confessional writing in the context of literary history by offering an overview of confessional writing, a genre which has a great number of precedents, influences and analogues. He also briefly gestures to confession's secular and non-secular strains, acknowledging the enormity of his task when he observes that even cave paintings can be seen as paleolithic confessions. He cites Catullus and Sappho as early practitioners of confessional verse, and, quoting Catullus, narrows his search to work (he cites the confessions of Augustine and Rousseau as examples) which delves into the realms of personal, "eternal torture" (3).

After discussing each of the distinguishing characteristics of Confessional poetry, Phillips concludes that the poets are a "magnificent" group, who have "penetrated to the heart of darkness that is American life" (15). He compares the Confessional poets to the discontented and alienated post-war American youth, and claims that these poets are "especially" alienated, because they are "older and more sensitive" (13). Like Alvarez, Phillips reveals a certain conservatism in his writing, a disdain for the "self-indulgence" and "shock"-value of more outré forms of pop and protest poetry. He is careful to cite the Confessional poets' literary influences, observing that Lowell modelled some of his poems after Rilke and Beaudelaire, that Sexton quotes from Kafka, and so on, in order to create a literary context and pedigree for
Confessional poetry. Phillips’s work is significant because it establishes Confessional poetry as a mode of writing; by providing confessional writing’s literary context, he offers a sense of its tradition, its historical sense, and, in T.S. Eliot’s words, its "temporal" and "timeless" nature (NA/2:2294).

More recently, E.V. Ramakrishnan and Laurence Lerner have also attempted to provide a literary historical context for Confessional poetry in their work. In the introductory chapter of Crisis and Confession (1988), Ramakrishnan traces the roots of confessional literature, which begins, he notes, in European civilization, with Augustine’s Confessions (1). Ramakrishnan observes that confession and autobiography are similar genres, and claims that confession became a "distinct genre" with Rousseau’s Confessions (2). He uses the work of Roy Pascal and Northrop Frye to classify what is distinct about the confessional genre, and isolates "the concept of sincerity" as originating in Rousseau’s work, and as the definitive characteristic of confession (2). Sincerity, according to Ramakrishnan, entails "being true to one’s innermost nature of the self," and sincerity motivates a great deal of 19th century writing, particularly the work of the Romantic poets (2-3). Because he is not employing a rigorous definition of confession - he acknowledges the ways in which autobiography, personal novels, and confession intersect - he discusses a wide array of European and American authors whose work can be construed as being confessional, including Albert Camus, Jean Genet, Herman Hesse, and Henry David Thoreau. Ramakrishnan’s scope is ambitious, and his overview implicitly asserts that confession can not be simply categorized, although he does narrow his scope eventually in order to define twentieth century confessional literature.

This definition is predicated on the contrast between Romantic and Confessional poetry, the
same contrast that is at the center of "Sincerity and Poetry". Ramakrishnan concludes that Confessional poetry is distinct from Romantic poetry quite simply because it is more aggressively anti-establishment and more concerned with "extreme mental states" and, ultimately, it is a specific product of its historical period. Alvarez's socio-cultural study of confession is evoked in Ramakrishnan's work, which also points to the "psychological violence" and "terror" inherent in the post-war American "human condition" (20). The "destructive landscape of passion and paranoia" (Ramakrishnan:20) the Confessional poets occupy is viewed as an analogue for, in Plath's words, "the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America" (in Crisis and Confession:20). Ramakrishnan asserts that Confessional poetry is a highly political and contemporary mode, which conflates the personal and public, and which strategically constructs a social and political critique. Although their poems are "personal in essence," they are also pluralistic, as they address the concerns and conditions of many (20). While Ramakrishnan does not introduce any novel ideas about Confessional poetry in his work, he does confirm and emphasize what is known to be unique, political, and contemporary about the group. His insistence that the "formation of an autobiographical personality suggests a purposeful progression and continuity" is illuminating. This remark suggests both the time-specific purpose of the formation of the Confessional voice as well as its location within a historical context.

Laurence Lerner's "Crying," which is a chapter in his Frontiers of Fiction (1988), concerns the "overlap and differences between literature and crying," "Crying," to Lerner, is a verb that indicates a variety of non-verbal "bodily gestures and contortions" (96). The term "crying" also acts as a supplement for "confession" in Lerner's work, and is equated with the "extreme form"
of "sincere" expression (96,95). Lerner briefly traces the origins of confessional writing and theory, acknowledging that Confessional poetry is the "child of Romanticism," with "unsystematic" roots in Plato, Aristotle and Longinus (96). He reviews Davies' and Alvarez's assessments of confession, and likens a poet's confession to a misguided Protestant's confession in a Catholic church. Here, Lerner distinguishes between secular and non-secular poetry by observing that "confession as ritual is quite different than confession as release". He also refers to confessional poetry as a "practice" and lists its three dominant characteristics (101,107).

Confessional poetry, according to Lerner, contains a "factual element"; the experiences it describes are often "sordid and degrading" and "there is a peculiar and disturbing intensity in the language" (109-110). Lerner lists these characteristics - using one of Sexton's poems as a model - in order to assert that Confessional poetry is distinct and easy to identify. He is not, however, interested in narrow extant definitions of Confessional poetry. Rather, the essay, which is highly theoretical in nature, seeks to create an expansive concept of confession as a rhetorical and expressive form, with no definitive literary/historical tradition, and with no inflexible characteristics.

Lerner's essay raises questions about critical ways of examining Confessional poetry. He suggests, for example, the difference between confession and "mere confession" (103). Citing a sluggish Lowell poem entitled "St Marks 1933," Lerner remarks that weak Confessional poetry has "all the characteristics of confession" (including "self-abasement" and "self-centredness") and "none of the characteristics of poetry" (107). Here, Lerner suggests, as Sexton has also observed, that "art," is what distinguishes a successful Confessional poem. Lerner, who is passionate about Sexton's poetry, maintains that it is the conflation of life and art, that best
characterizes confessional writing.

Lerner also suggests how to examine the relationship between the Confessional poet’s self and self-in-writing. He proposes that confessional writing should be considered as an expression of the "motion of the ‘author’," troubling the word "author" here because it is, arguably, "theoretically inadmissible" to construct a seamless relationship between the artist as person and the artist’s personal expressions (139). Lerner’s proposal that there is a gap between the self and self-in-writing is particularly useful to the study of Sexton, whose work is often examined as a series of diary entries rather than as strategic, crafted poems. Sexton is, in fact, at the center of Lerner’s discussion of confessionalism, because, as he puts it, "no poet was more consistently and uniformly confessional than (she), and her name has almost become identified with the genre" (107). While his analysis of her poetry is excellent, Lerner does not suggest how Sexton’s use of Confession is different from Snodgrass’s or Lowell’s use of Confession. In fact, none of the critics who have considered it at length has attempted to gender confession; the practices of the male and female Confessional poets are always seen to be uniform.

iii.

I think I began at this point to feel that politics was not something "out there" but something "in here" and of the essence of my condition. In the late fifties I was able to write, for the first time, about experiencing myself as a woman...I had been taught that poetry should be "universal," which meant of course, non-female.

Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision"

In The Confessional Poets, Robert Phillips observes that of the Confessional group, "only
Lowell has produced a significant body of overtly public and political poems" (15). What Phillips is suggesting is that political writing is comprised, exclusively, of critiques of the dominant culture's militaristic, institutional and capitalist practices. When Plath described herself as a "political" poet, however, she was referring not only to world events, but to her increasing interest in her own "interior experience," in "consummate poems about women's subjects, observed through a woman's eyes and told with a woman's voice" (Martin, SP: 217).

To be a female writer in the late 1950's and early 1960's was a political act in itself. That the female Confessional poets' work was considered of a piece with the male Confessional poets' work is, in this context, remarkable. The Beat poets, for example, for all their transgressive acts and writing were an extremely androcentric group; the women, as Ann Charters has observed, "mostly stayed on the sidelines as wives and girlfriends" (xxxiii). And virtually all of the women's writing included in the Beat Reader evokes women's peripheral status within the group. In Minor Characters, Joyce Johnson "eavesdrop(s) from the kitchen" while Jack Kerouac is being interviewed (483). In Off the Road Carolyn Cassady cooks and feeds children while Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac write. In How I Became Hettie Jones, Hettie Jones describes her pots and dishes, and all of the cooking she did for literary parties she hosted with LeRoi Jones. None of these women published their memoirs until at least twenty years after the events they describe; in contrast, Plath and Sexton were mothers and homemakers who also wrote and published. Their work is encoded with images of domesticity and motherhood - images which gender their poetry - and their employment of the first person pronoun supports, in Diana Hume George's words, "an objection to the persona and the extreme of the masculine...definitive of it" (OA:92-93).
Critics concur that the intersection of the personal and the public is a characteristic of Confessional poetry, and yet they do not acknowledge what ideologies compose the concept of what is public or universal. It is practical to think of the public that is addressed in Confessional poetry in terms of mathematical sets (which are rendered, diagrammatically, as spheres) which intersect, and which are not, in themselves, inclusive. Sexton and Plath's personal poetry draws a corresponding sphere that is public and female, and while it does not address the interests and experiences of all women, it addresses interests and experiences that are not addressed in the poetry of Berryman, Lowell or Snodgrass. The political themes that all the Confessional poets employ - mental illness, despair, post-war havoc - are universal insofar as these issues affect and concern a great number of men and women. What further distinguishes Plath and Sexton's work, however, is the manner in which they gender these themes. They treat themes that are characteristically Confessional from a woman's perspective, and in doing so, assert the different experience of inhabiting a female body within the culture that the Confessional poets critique.

Plath and Sexton's poetry was written before the rise of the women's movement in America, but it creates a system of separatist and feminist discourse about the female body and self. Plath and Sexton were unique in their personal and sustained employment of the subjective voice, and in their adoption of the practice of writing "as women, toward women." (Cixous,"Medusa":226). The confessional "narratives" in their poetry, in Leigh Gilmore's words, "can be understood as a canny raid on the discourses of truth and identity" (226). Such narratives are also, Gilmore suggests, "effective as political rhetoric precisely to the extent that they claim to 'speak the truth' at a particular time and in a particular place" (226).

The difficulties inscribed in this personal and political method are articulated in a
confessional poem by Elizabeth Bishop. Although Bishop greatly influenced Robert Lowell, her work was only marginally confessional. Bishop described elements of her life in her work, but not herself, and refused to have her work included in anthologies of women poets. In "In the Waiting Room," Bishop describes herself looking at a naked woman in a magazine, and writes: "But I felt: you are an I./you are an Elizabeth/you are one of them" (1751). The tension, described here, between subject and object, and between the female self and its representation, may be transposed to the examination of women's poetry, to the tension inherent in the collision of female experience, with traditional, (in Adrienne Rich's terms) "non-female" poetry.

Several of the poems in The Colossus (1960) are Confessional, but Plath completed only one Confessional collection, Ariel (1965), before her death in 1963. In his introduction to Ariel, Robert Lowell describes Plath's self-in-writing as being "super-real, (a) hypnotic great classical heroine," and as a "character" that is "feminine, rather than female" (vii). The "feminine" and the "female" are opposed in this distinction, because, presumably, the former is more abstract, more tenuously connected to its referent. In this context, the feminine is a kind of simile, artificially connected to the subject, by language. Plath, however, conceives of her self in terms of metaphor - she becomes (she is not "like") the various aspects she adopts. She adopts, or adapts a number of classical/historical guises in her text, the most notable of these being the figure of Lazurus. In "Lady Lazurus" the gender of the biblical figure is transformed, and compared to, alternately, a phoenix, and a maenad: "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air" (Collected Poems:247). In this manner, Plath creates a series of gendered metafictions, and calls attention to the mutability of history. The female subject is empowered in Plath's "re-vision," with regard to the space that women traditionally occupy in
literature. Her poem "Medusa" concludes with a powerful renunciation of male authored female subjects: "Off, off, eely tentacle!/There is nothing between us" (226) and the majority of her other poems are engaged in the destruction of similar "dead stringencies" ("Ariel":239).

Images of birth and rebirth are manifest in *Ariel,* and these images emphasize the singularity and commonality of the speaker/subject. Plath's subject is protean; in "Tulips," for example, she describes herself as being "efface(d)," suggesting not only an infinity of possibilities, but a blank space, which she, and the female reader, may personally inscribe (CP:161). In many of the poems, Plath employs gendered metaphors, which refer exclusively to the female body. In "Nick and the Candlestick," she describes herself as a "miner"(240), and describes her child as the "ruby" in the "earthen womb"(241). In one of her early poems, "Her Kind," Sexton also describes herself finding "the warm caves in the woods" and "rearranging the disaligned" (Complete Poems:16).

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous exhorts woman to "put herself into the text"(225), to engage in a "passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity" and "bodily functions" (226). Both "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Her Kind" exhibit a similar agenda; they employ the language and image(s) of the female body, and they situate the female subject as the architect, or author of her self. One of the synonyms of the word confession is the word "own," which refers to the act of self-acknowledgement, an act which underlines Plath, and Sexton's assertion that "Mine is a place" (Wakoski, *Magellanic*:126). By rendering vivid feminine landscapes - mines, caves, hives - Plath and Sexton evoke regions that women inhabit and possess - gendered "place(s) of force" (Plath, "The Rabbit Catcher":193).

I have already suggested that Confessional poetry involves the conflation of the poet's self
and self-in-writing, a strategy which is particularly significant to Plath and Sexton. For example, the subject in *Ariel* is a figure of great female strength and autonomy, who is able to transcend the mundane and oppressive conditions of her existence, "the viciousness in the kitchen," the "smog of cooking, the smog of hell" ("Lesbos":227,228). In her poems, Plath often describes a transcendental self who ascends her "skin/old bandages, boredoms, old faces" ("Getting There":249), and lives "on air, on air" ("Stopped Dead":230). She is able to achieve this ascension through the medium of poetry, the "blood jet" that cannot be "stopp(ed)". Poetry, for Plath and Sexton acts as a powerful means of conflating the desiring self and the self-in-writing ("Kindness":270). And the merger, in both women's writing, of female life and the female "imaginary" - the "rearranging (of) the disaligned" (Sexton, "Her Kind": 16) - suggests that women's independence, or "liberation," is not a fiction (Cixous:226).

In *My Life a Loaded Gun*, Paula Bennett writes:

> Plath's new woman-the voice of her final poetry-is in many ways a terrifying figure, for she is wedded to separation and therefore, in Plath's mind, to death. But insofar as she draws her creative power entirely from herself, dependent on neither husband nor children, she embodies the freedom and autonomy that might well have saved Plath's life had she been able unambivalently to embrace them.

(138)

Plath's writing, in spite of her biography, creates and generates feminist discourse, for it proposes a "new woman," who exists, simultaneously, in life and art. And this composite woman exists, not on the margins, but at the center of the symbolic order. Like the queen bee in "Wintering," she has "got rid of the men/The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors" (219).
Winter (and this separatist poem), she writes, "is for women" (219). In The Resisting Reader, Judith Fetterly observes: "American literature is male. To read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male" (xii). Fetterly's emphasis on reader-identification is salient, with regard to the study of Sexton's poetry, as Sexton's work directly addresses this issue.

In her first collection, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Sexton writes in a "feeling, bodily, feminine voice" (George, OA:91) about "feminine experience from within a female body," a "bold stroke," writes Diana Hume George, for which there was "no modern precedent" (OA:91). Sexton writes in opposition to the male persona in American poetry, and suggests a female epistemological principle in her writing, one which identifies the quality and character of female experience. Indeed, her employment of the Confessional voice appears to have been calculated in these terms, for this method allowed her to ground her writing, as one critic has observed, "quite deliberately, in her existence as a woman" (NAMP:1195). The intersection of the personal and the political that is central to Confessional poetry, is posited, in Sexton's poetry, in novel terms. Unlike the male Confessional poets, and unlike Plath, she ignores politics "out there" in favour, exclusively, of politics "in her(e)". Her work, in the true spirit of confession, constitutes the first beginning of good works, toward the establishment, and institution of "the newly visible world of female culture" (Showalter,"FP":190). In her introduction to Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems, Maxine Kumin observes:

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter...Anne delineated the problematic
position of women—the neurotic reality of the time...

(xxiv)

The particular "neurotic reality" that Sexton addressed was the absence of women’s lives in poetry, the "dream of subjectivity" (NALW: 1678) that would come to preoccupy and motivate many of her colleagues and successors. In the first poem in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, she writes: "Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself," a statement which suggests—within this recuperative text—a radical desire for (self) recovery (CP: 4).

In several interviews, Sexton identifies her first efforts at Confessional writing with her discovery of Snodgrass’s poem, "Heart’s Needle" ("I read it and I (thought) ‘That’s it!’") (Star: 137). Snodgrass’s poem, she claims, gave her the "permission" to write, or to continue to write personal poetry, and to no longer "disguise" her voice (Star: 79, 89). Her early poem, "The Double Image" is, in many ways, a re-working of "Heart’s Needle," and it employs many similar images, ideas, structures and metrics. Sexton’s poem may be conceived as a response to Snodgrass’s poem, for both texts contend with the loss of a child, using different perspectives.

In his poem, Snodgrass describes the loss of his daughter, through divorce, and concludes that he is her "real mother" (64). The child’s mother does not exist in Snodgrass’s poem, and this absence is addressed in Sexton’s poem, which describes a mother’s (her own) separation from her child. Sexton’s emphasis on the female subject gives "priority and presence to an all-too historically absent life," to the life of the "real mother" (Schenck: 305). In interviews, Sexton insisted that she was not a "polemicist," and that her early Confessional work was an "accident," a result of her efforts to do her "own thing" (Star: 110, 52). It is precisely because she does her "own thing" that her work is polemical, however, for Sexton’s assertion of the female-authored,
female subject assisted in the stretching of generic and gendered boundaries in American poetry (Schenck:289).

Sexton’s influences, with regard to her radical and significant employment of le moi, are not easily traced; she usually described herself as having "little formal education and little informal education," and the literary and personal influences she did cite offer little information with regard to her development as a poet (Star:43). It is possible, however, to contextualize her work in terms of its connections to a number of its contemporaneous discourses and ideas, including popular psychology. Sexton described the conditions of her first breakdown, and the subsequent beginning of her writing career, in this way: "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" (Star:84). She goes on to say that "the surface cracked" eventually, precipitating a "psychotic break," and a suicide attempt (84). It was at this point that Sexton became engaged in rehabilitation and therapy with the doctor who encouraged her to write. His encouragement gave her, in her words, "a feeling of purpose, a little cause, something to do with my life" (Star:85). This self-assessment is highly Confessional, for Sexton, like Lowell, uses the language of psychotherapy, and of Laing in particular, to construct a self that is fabricated in layers, or halves. Unlike Lowell, though, she employs feminist discourse in this conception of a poet who is, like Emily Dickinson, "partially cracked" - mental illness, chaos, and divided lives were the subject of many women’s critical and fiction texts during this period (Higginson, description of Dickinson, NALW:2029).

Sexton’s 1968 description of the beginning of her apprenticeship as a poet, or her "buried self," is similar to Rich’s description of her own radicalization, and her emphasis on interior
experience. It is also evocative of "the problem that has no name" that Betty Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, "the inner voice that is driving women to become complete" (364). The white, middle-class audience, or woman that *The Feminine Mystique* addresses could in fact have been modeled after Sexton, whose life history closely resembles the majority of the women interviewed and cited in this text. Its narrow scope and vision, and its exclusive attention to the white middle-class make Friedan's book extremely problematic, but, as Janet Todd has noted, this text was a useful part of "nascent feminist awareness" since it promoted reform, and action (20). Sexton's audience is less easily located, but it is clear that her personal poetry is informed by in her experiences as a white, middle-class woman. Her work is almost exclusively self-referential, and her politics are located within her poetic method; Sexton writes her self, at a time when this action constituted a reformist strategy. By privileging her own subjectivity, she suggests an analogous directive for all women, and "provide(s) extreme but illuminating variations on a core female position...that the...self-exploratory, open poem speaks of and to something larger than a sole self" (Ostriker, STL:207).

Sexton's description of her writing career (at its outset) as "a little cause" is reminiscent of an entire history of women's literary apologies. Her use of the diminutive recalls the introduction to Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse* (1650), which asserted that Bradstreet's poems were the "fruit of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments" (NALW:60). Her use of the word "cause" however, is enlightening, because it clarifies the nature of the poet's "little" venture. Sexton's poetry may be regarded as a cause for two reasons: it is, in itself, an occasion for action, and it produced great effect. According to Sexton's own, and her friends' testimonies, writing literally saved her life - she came to "live...for the excitable
gift" (CP:170). The "feeling of purpose" and salvation Sexton experienced stands as her legacy to American women's poetry, which in her words "flows over boundary lines" and "corresponds to the rights of the readers" (in Jong, How to Save:172). Readers' and women's rights are actualized in her work, which is consecrated "in celebration of the woman I am," and "many women singing together in this" (CP:182,3). Sexton's sense of the union of the personal and political is realized in strictly feminist terms, and because of her work she was able to resist being, in Ann Rosalind Jones's words, "a subject of discourse" and was able to become "a subject in discourse" (in Smith:51).
Chapter Two

Madness as Method in To Bedlam and Part Way Back

All I did was take a few pills - three pills - and leave a phony suicide note. The next thing you know, I'm in Bellevue. Boy, you could really go crazy there. Real nuts around you, screaming and carrying on. I guess I actually flipped from fright. I began to scream and wound up in a straightjacket. So, since my husband could afford it, I came here. Signed myself in. Then, when I wanted to leave, he had me committed. I've been here five months.

Jacqueline Susann, The Valley of the Dolls

In 1963, Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar was published under a pseudonym "because she didn't want (it) to be judged as the work of a poet" (Stevenson: 285). Plath described this novel as a "potboiler" on many occasions, and she was fairly secretive about its composition and publication (Stevenson: 227). Some critics maintain that Plath's secretiveness resulted from the autobiographical nature of the novel; many of its central characters resemble, often unflatteringly, people who were close, or related to Plath. Biographer Edward Butscher has noted that the novel "has engendered much unhappiness, many people being wounded and perplexed to discover themselves mercilessly belittled in a book by a girl they had once regarded with affection" (345). The confessional nature of the novel may have caused Plath some anxiety, but, as Anne Stevenson has observed, she appeared to be more concerned with the book's quality, than with its "barely disguised, hurtful portrait of her mother," or of anyone else (285).
The subject and plotting of the novel were most likely the result of Plath's ambivalence regarding her work, since the novel was admittedly conceived for "opportunistic" purposes (Stevenson:154). In a November, 1958 diary entry, Plath writes: "Must get out Snake Pit. There is an increasing market for mental hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive it, recreate it" (in Stevenson:154). The "increasing market" is evidenced by the number of novels that appeared in the early 1960s that were similar, in theme and content, to Mary Jane Ward's The Snake Pit (1946), including Jennifer Dawson's The Ha-Ha (1961), Janet Frame's Faces in the Water (1961), Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook (1962) and Hannah Green's I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (1964). The popularity of the subject of women's mental illness, breakdown and institutionalization explains Plath's employment of the term "potboiler," as the popularity of the genre would have assured her a considerable livelihood, in this particular era.

The Bell Jar is autobiographical, with reference to Plath's own experiences with mental illness, but her decision to describe these experiences was motivated, in part, by the increasing public and literary interest in this subject. This interest was not restricted to novelists; a number of popular works in this era considered or re-considered the sociological and philosophical implications and medical conceptions of mental illness. R.D. Laing's The Divided Self (1959), and The Politics of Experience (1967) and Michel Foucault's Madness and Civilization, or Histoire de la Folie (1961), were extremely influential texts which considered madness in relation to its social construction and definition. Plath scholars have never discussed Laing's influence on Plath's Bell Jar: The Divided Self may be seen as a blueprint for her novel, as Laing's text recounts a case study of a schizophrenic woman, whose poetry and condition resemble Plath's, and who refers to herself as the "told bell" or "told belle" (187).
sense of the failure of contemporary psychopathology is germane to critical assessments of both Confessional poetry and women writers' accounts of madness. By "the very nature of its basic approach," Laing writes, psychopathology "precludes the possibility of understanding a patient's disorganization as a failure to achieve a specifically personal form of unity" (Divided Self:24).

Laing's notion is useful, suggesting that madness is socially constructed - he likens the patient and doctor relationship to that of the "author and the expositor" (32). Madness, from a Laingian perspective, is relative; it often constitutes an expression of personal difficulties that are less pathological than political. Laing does not, however, expand on the political implications inherent in a failure to achieve "personal unity". Further, he does not differentiate between male and female experiences of mental illness and institutionalization. As Elaine Showalter has observed, "gender analysis and feminist critique" are "missing from the history of madness" (Female Malady:6). According to Showalter, women have historically constituted the "majority of clients for private and public psychiatric hospitals, outpatient mental health services and psychotherapy" (Female Malady:3). Mental illness is, in her terms, a "female malady," an observation which is confirmed by a 1967 study that "found 'more mental illness among women than men from every data source'"(3).

The issue of women and madness has been discussed in feminist terms by Phyllis Chesler, Hélène Cixous, Jane Gallop, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Barbara Hill Rigney, Elaine Showalter, among others. One of the most useful ideas that arises in these feminist critiques, with regard to the study of women writers, is the conceptualization of madness as a "symbolic illness" (Showalter, FM:248). In Critical Practice, Catherine Belsey writes:

women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses...The attempt to locate a single
and coherent subject-position within these contradictory discourses and in consequence to find a non-contradictory pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressures. One way of responding to this situation is to retreat from the contradictions and from discourse itself, to become "sick". (66)

Like Barbara Hill Rigney, Belsey envisions madness in terms of the "alienated female consciousness in opposition to a male society," or as a female response to "a patriarchal political and social system" (11,7). Cixous suggests that female madness involves wilful agency, a theory which is particularly useful to an examination of Plath and Sexton. Madness, specifically hysteria, is seen by Cixous as "a genuine form of resistance to the patriarchal order," as it is a "kind of female language that opposes the rigid structures of male discourse and thought" (in Showalter, FM: 161,160). Cixous's idea is valuable because it positions madness in alternative terms, and because it suggests the conjunction of madness and creativity. Adrienne Rich claims that creative women have, historically, "felt their active, creative impulses as a kind of demonic possession" (Of Woman Born:70). Women traditionally have had very little access to the sphere of art and creativity, and as a result creative women have, for centuries, been "punished" for and excluded from this ability (QWB:70). The volume of female-authored texts treating the theme of women's mental illness in the 1960s appears to constitute an organized resistance and reaction to women's marginalization, in society and in the arts.

Organized resistance is the subtext of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, an important second-wave feminist text which also touches on women's mental illness. Friedan cites a number of American women's responses to the "unpunctuated monotony" of their lives, responses which include substance abuse, chronic fatigue and severe depression (240). Where Plath's work departs from Friedan's text/thesis is in its argument; Friedan offers higher education and gainful
employment as solutions to her subjects' malaise, propositions which Esther Greenwood (Plath's protagonist in *The Bell Jar*) has already rejected before her breakdown. It is the breakdown itself which is instrumental to Plath's text, a text which is not cautionary on the theme of madness. Madness is an aesthetic in Plath's work, constructed as an alternate condition. Like the protagonists of the *Ha-Ha*, and the *Golden Notebook*, Plath embraces madness or chaos as an alternative to the (male) ordered world of the mental institution, or society itself.

The idea of the self-healing breakdown is Laingian in origin, but it takes on a different meaning in women's literature and criticism. Although writers like Plath, Dawson and Frame actually experienced madness (their novels are autobiographical), they also employ this theme, collectively, toward an alternative discourse. There is a categorical distinction between the experience of madness and the creation, or "recreation" of that experience, which is related to authorship. In the first instance, madness dictates or authors the subject's experience, and in the second, madness and experience are authored by the/its subject. The act of writing then, engenders power, wherein the subject is able to order and master rather than submit to the chaotic experiences she experiences, or creates. As such, women authors may become their own agents and analysts, in spite of their experience(s) within the male-dominated and patriarchal institutional system.

Madness is a persistent and critical theme in post-modern literature by women, and its significance is primarily related to its literary tradition, and its political efficacy. The conflation of art and madness is conventional in the composition and consideration of art and artists. This union was first proposed by Plato, who argued "for the existence of a mystical, heaven-sent spirit or *furor*, through which a select few could be ‘inspired’" (in Porter:60). This Platonic idea
was revived in the Romantic era, most notably in the work of William Blake, whose "visionary" art reflected his belief that "imagination was the prerogative of the mad" (Porter:64). According to Roy Porter, Virginia Woolf was also a "latter-day Platonist," who once claimed, in a 1930 letter to Ethel Smythe, "as an experience, madness is terrific...and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about" (60). Woolf privileged madness, in a Platonist fashion, as a feature of her creative mind, but she also discussed its debilitating nature at great length. The last section of her novel The Waves, for example, describes the ways in which creativity is assailed, and ultimately devastated by extreme depression. According to Quentin Bell, Woolf "could profit by her illnesses," as "moments of depression" were often "followed by moments of creativity" (112). In her memoir, Searching For Mercy Street, Linda Gray Sexton makes a similar connection. "Mother wrote at such a high level of concentration," Gray Sexton observes, "she induced in herself a trancelike behavior similar to that which preceded a hospitalization" (93). Although Woolf was often able to creatively counter her depression, throughout her life and "in spite of her remonstrances," she was subjected to a variety of "rest cures" - supervised by her specialist, Dr. Savage, and her husband, Leonard Woolf (Bell:13).

Woolf's rest cures involved prescriptions of drugs, rest and food; when she was depressed, she was urged to stop writing and "lead an invalid's life" (Bell:163). The effects of a similar rest cure are documented in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), a story which recounts a harrowing fusion of madness and creativity. Gilman's text also differentiates between male and female experience of madness, and constructs them in disparate terms. Because Gilman's narrator is denied access to writing, she, in Annette Kolodny's words, "progressively gives up the attempt to record her reality and instead begins to read it" (167).
Gilman’s narrator, Kolodny argues, reads her reality "as systematically adumbrated in her compulsion to discover a consistent and coherent pattern amid...the wallpaper" (167). The rage for order and the connection between the spheres of creativity and madness in women’s lives are the two central themes of "The Yellow Wallpaper". Plotted like an American Gothic narrative (Kolodny has noted Gilman’s use of Edgar Allan Poe’s work), Gilman’s story describes female madness as a response to sinister male-domination in institutional and private spheres. Gilman’s story anticipates much of Plath’s work - the image of the malevolent yellow wallpaper (which eventually attacks the narrator) is similar to Plath’s violent "tulips," the "dozen red lead sinkers" that "eat" the speaker’s "oxygen" ("Tulips," *CP*:61).

Plath does not discuss Gilman’s work in her journals, but does mention her admiration for Woolf, whose suicide she attempted to "reduplicate" in 1953, and whose novels, in her words, made her own novels "possible" (*Journals*:152,168). In her journals, she cites Woolf’s method of dealing with rejection slips - "she works off her depression...by cleaning out the kitchen" - with admiration, and suggests she is connected to her somehow (*Journals*:152). Woolf’s therapeutic practice, of working to heal depression, is also a theme in Gilman’s essay, "Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’," which posits "work, the normal life of every human being" as a means of "recovering...power" (in *Female Malady*:141). The example that Plath isolates - Woolf’s conjunction of depression and housework - is significant, because it suggests a relationship between the female artist and the domestic sphere. Her housework, in this example, may be seen as an attempt to impose order upon the disorder or chaos of depression, a psychic struggle that is well documented in post-modern women’s literature. In the *Golden Notebook*, Anna Wulf’s blue notebook is filled with the details of her domestic and private life. In one
section she describes the disastrous preparation of a meal and writes, in its aftermath: "I know that an awful black whirling chaos is just outside me, waiting to move into me" (360). What is suggested here is that the ephemeral order that housework provides is an antidote to disorder within and without. In Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich describes the remembered act of sweeping a floor, the day after her marriage, as an "age-old action," one which "women have always done," and goes on to say that she felt as though she was "bending to some ancient form, too ancient to question" (25). Rich also recalls that at this time she thought "Now I am a woman," for the performance of these "ancient forms" has traditionally defined a woman's femininity (25). Traditionally, housework has served not only to define women's femininity, it is also related to women's segregation within the domestic or private sphere. Both Rich and Lessing have attempted, in their writing, to dismiss the "false dichotomies and divisions" (Lessing, Introduction, TGN:8), the "artificial barriers between the private and the public" domains (Rich: 1972 letter, in NAMP:1222). Housework, in their writing, represents a poverty of access to self-healing strategies, and symbolizes the inherited structures and divisive elements inherent in the social construction of women's work.

Morse Peckham has argued that "hypostatization serves as a defense against the problems and confusion...which are elicited in the individual when (s/he) notices disparate data, when (s/he) becomes aware of the gap between the behavioral pattern and the demands made by the interaction with the environment" (30). Art is in itself expressive of the desire to hypostatize, or order one's relationship to, and perception of, life's chaotic patterns, and the tension between order and chaos, the "master-theme of Elizabethan poetry," is a common literary theme, or impulse (Tillyard:22). This conflict becomes particularly relevant to post-modern women's
literature, a literature which is engaged in the expression of the gap or artificial division between the female subject and its symbolic/social representation. In the *Bell Jar*, Plath uses the image of a fig tree to symbolize Esther Greenwood's mediation between the self and its social construction. Esther describes her life "branching out before (her)" like a fig tree, where each fig represents an option, such as poet, professor, wife, athlete, and so on. She goes on to describe herself "starving to death" as the figs fall and rot, because she can't make up her mind to choose one "meant losing all the rest" (80). As Linda Wagner-Martin has observed, this passage reflects an "artificial dilemma," which relates to the "social pressures" which "force choice" (186). Esther's struggle with these pressures instigates her breakdown and suicide attempt, and it is only when she is able to move from society into madness that she is able to recuperate.

Recuperation is integral to the *Bell Jar*, and to women's accounts of madness, in literature. Plath's novel ends with a description of Esther, who has been "born twice," "patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (257). The image of Esther as repaired vehicle recalls an image that Sexton uses in her poem "The Operation". In this poem, the speaker compares her recovered and sutured self to "a football," "laced up" "for the game" (*Complete Poems*:59). Both Plath and Sexton's images are wry, yet they serve to underscore the utility of recovery, and signal the authoritative narrative play these authors employ in their staging of their "rebirths". The image of rebirth is essential both to the *Bell Jar* and to Plath's poetry, which also evokes, on many occasions, the image of the "retreaded" self. If Esther is reborn in the novel, then her madness may be conceived as a gestation period, as a period of growth and self-definition. Madness then is calculated here in ontological terms; it is the *ex-nihilo* state from which embodiment proceeds.
Plath’s descriptions of electroshock therapy are rendered in similar terms; in "Hanging Man" she writes: "By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me/I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet" (Collected Poems:141), a description which is evocative of the scene in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, where the creature is infused with "the spark of being," with the "instruments of life" (42). Gilbert and Gubar have read similar depictions of female monstrosity as examples of women authors "looking through a glass darkly" at their male-authored selves, an interpretation which is supported (in this case, and in the Bell Jar) by the male technicians of electroshock therapy (Madwoman:17). Plath conceives of electroshock therapy, however, in terms of empowerment and of self-creation and inspiration; like a "desert prophet," she receives it in solitary and mystical terms. In Chaos, James Gleik writes: "Where chaos begins, classical science stops...The irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side - these have been puzzles to science, or worse, monstrosities" (3). In Plath’s work, science, represented by the male ordered process of electroshock, is also supplemented by the chaos/madness it attempts to regularize and arrest. Chaos, which is synonymous with creativity in Plath’s writing, is a "monstrosity" that is engendered in response to a "recollection of (the) injustice" of imposed, masculine ("some god") order (Frankenstein:204).

In This Sex Which is Not One, Luce Irigaray asks "how can women ... inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine?" (81). One possible response to this question exists in women writers’ adoption of (the disorder of) madness as a form of political discourse. Madness is, as Foucault has argued, a "symbolic position," which places its subject in "the interior of the exterior," with reference to the literal and symbolic function of institutions (M&C:11). The individual and collective alienation that characterizes the institutional experience
is comparable to a separatist feminist position, which is simultaneously located in and dislocated from the masculine order.

Popular female accounts of institutionalization and madness stress the necessity of recovery, an emphasis which further distinguishes and genders this kind of writing. The protagonists of Dawson, Frame, Green, Lessing and Plath’s novels return to the ”lawless and wild” world in the end, having recovered in two distinct ways (Green:299). Recovery is conceived in these novels as a return to health and/or society, but it also refers to the location and repossession of the self - retreaded, and golden. This repossession is facilitated by madness, which is seen in these novels as a discrete feature of the process of recovery, of the accretion of a revised and ”superior sanity” (Rigney:7). Male confessional poets, including Berryman, Lowell, and Roethke also contended with madness in their writing, but, in Alicia Ostriker’s words, they ”appear relatively reconciled to their own and the world’s bruised destinies” (STL:163)^4. Madness, in Lowell and Berryman’s work, is constructed as a ”hurrah of mourning” in a ”lunatic world,” as a political expression of resigned otherness (Dream Songs:170,166). The discourse of madness is also political in women’s writing, but may be characterized as a refusal to resign to the sexual politics encoded in the ”lunatic world”. Recovery then, is an imperative to women writers’ accounts of madness, for it culminates in the inscription of women’s progress toward self-definition, and sovereignty.

ii

Here is the poem, done for the moment ["The Double Image"]...I want to know if you think this works, if it has a reason for its violence, a reason for being written (or rather read) aside from my own need to make order from chaos.
Anne Sexton's first book of poetry, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, was published in 1960. As she prepared the manuscript she was auditing Robert Lowell's creative writing class at Boston University, and, as Diane Wood Middlebrook has noted, Lowell was instrumental in its editing process. In "Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell," Middlebrook says that Lowell helped Sexton select the poems and "review the manuscript," and he suggested the inclusion of a number of poems that "strengthened the theme of bedlam" (12). "The topic of mental illness, underscored in the title," Middlebrook writes, "would attract a wide range of reviewers to the book" (12). Mental illness is the predominant theme of this collection and Sexton's two subsequent collections; her breakdown, suicidal feelings, institutionalization and, ultimately, recovery are charted progressively through these texts. Reviewers were drawn to the book because of its "candor and courage" (Dickey:118), and because of Sexton's "finely compassionate impressions of pitiful life" (Rosenthal, New Poets:136). Although other women poets, such as Elizabeth Bishop, had discussed mental illness in their poetry, Sexton was the first post-modern female poet to employ and sustain a subjective narrative on this theme.

When Sexton's Complete Poems was published in 1981, the reviews were mixed. Joyce Carol Oates criticized the many emotions that "are flicked" through the text, "like playing cards," and remarked upon the "tragic limitations of this kind of life-in-poetry" ("Rise and Fall":3). Middlebrook observed at this time that the appearance of this text presented the "opportunity to pose questions about a writer whose body of work is the necessary critical context" ("PWA":72). The body of Sexton's writing contains, as Jacqueline Rose (in a
discussion of Plath's poetry) has remarked, a "body in her writing, a body whose relationship to writing and representation (her) texts repeatedly comment on and speak" (29). Her poetry is an autobiographical document of her life, and this life begins with the act of writing.

Many biographical memoirs and accounts of Sexton have described this function of Sexton's writing. In "A Friendship Remembered," Maxine Kumin writes: "She lived her poetry, poetry was her life" (52). Kumin goes on to note that it had also saved her life when Sexton began her career, and Middlebrook has even suggested, in her biography of Sexton, that she ended her life in 1974 because she could no longer write (52-3). It is also a common biographical contention that Sexton's breakdown, and the advice of her therapist, precipitated her writing career; in effect, her writing originates in madness. Madness, in Sexton's poetry, and in her autobiographical accounts of her life is seen as a salutary "break," away from conventional structures and into the anomie or (comparative) normlessness of the institution. It is within this sphere that she is able to begin her life as an artist, or effectively, begin her life, as the author and agent of her own experience.

Sexton's collected books of poetry, or poems can be read, as Vendler has noted, as a journal, or as the progressive portrait of an artist who is "preoccupied with the psychological and social consequences of inhabiting a female body" (Middlebrook,"PWA":72). Her first three books are, in Sexton's words, a "mixed bag"; their (personal) themes include madness, love, family, death(s) and religion, and there are a number of non-confessional poems included as well (Star:154). Although there is a diversity of themes and subjects treated in the collections, the three books may be conceived as a single narrative which traces Sexton's process, from madness to recovery, and which emphasizes the recuperative and transformative powers of her own
Sexton establishes a poetics in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), a theory of Confessional poetry which equates the implementation of this voice with salvation. Madness, or the world of the institution, is positioned initially, in Sexton's autobiographical accounts, as an alternative to "conventional" life, and as a world of "nightmares," "visions" and "demons" (Star:84). According to Denise Levertov, much of the "audience" of Confessional poetry felt that a "nervous breakdown was...an invaluable shortcut to artistry," but Sexton herself has refuted this idea ("Light":55). In a 1966 interview she says that "genius and insanity" rarely "grow in the same bed," and goes on to say that artists must have a "heightened awareness that seldom sprouts from mental illness alone" (Star:71). Mental illness is defined by Sexton as a catalyst, not a synonym for "genius," or artistic ability; it is the "visionary" state which precedes artistic vision. Madness is proposed, initially, in Sexton's writing as an alternative world which is authored and ultimately supplemented by the act of writing. It is the poetry itself which comes to represent an other world, a world of the author's own creation.

Creation, in all of its facets (what Rich describes as "the passion to make and make again") is central to Sexton's poetry, and to the poetics she establishes in her first book. In "Venus and the Ark," in *To Bedlam*, Sexton describes two male scientists sending an ark-missile to the planet Venus, and despairing at the ensuing chaos of "disrepair" (14). As they die, they witness "two fish creatures (who) stop/on spangled legs and crawl/from the belly of the sea"; and they hear "the first fruit drop" (15). The revisionist Eden Sexton sets up in this poem is symbolic of the female-gendered sphere she creates in her poetry, a sphere which also conforms to her own Creation myth. Sexton's early poetry - and her later, more detailed work with Christianity - is
ordered in the manner of this chaotic and self-generated Venus; it represents a female/feminist heterocosm, and forges a detailed history. Her work constitutes what some feminist theorists would describe as a "herstory," because it is autobiographical, and because it is populated, variously, with female systems of creativity, biology and theology which specifically name and privilege mothers, daughters, the female body, nuns, and the Christian Mary. Male experience is also represented in the poems, but it is always related to, and supplanted by, female experience, a process which is encoded in the fate of the scientists on Venus, and in many other of Sexton's poems. Creation is paramount in the poetry because of its complex meanings. It relates to reproduction, or childbirth, and poetic creativity itself, which in turn relates to subjectivity, or the ability to create and dictate a subjective self and personal sphere. When she was asked, by Patricia Marx, if she felt there was a connection between her gender and her creativity, Sexton replied: "I think they are really very closely allied...It's within a woman to create, to make order, to be an emotional, full human being" (Sexton, 76). The creative capacity Sexton perceives here as being intrinsic is in fact extrinsic in her work, work which represents her effort to order and present a self, fully defined by writing.

The cover illustration of To Bedlam is an image of a mother and daughter, hand in hand; the back cover features a photograph of Sexton, "all wrinkles," and looking as though she is "about to cry" (Sexton, in "AS & RL": 17-18). A 1961 photograph shows Sexton holding this book and posing with her family; she is seen looking directly into the camera as her husband and children smile at the text itself. This remarkable photograph illustrates the conflict or distance between Sexton's self, and her self-in-writing, and it also illustrates the symbolic nature of the poetry itself. Sexton's "self" is represented here in two ways; she is depicted before and
after her breakdown and recovery through the sorrowful and solitary (dust-jacket) image, and through the image of herself at home, surrounded by her family. The book, in the picture, mediates between these two images; it contains the first image of Sexton (the dust-jacket photo), and it is contained by Sexton in the second image. The successful recovery that the family portrait attempts to actualize is belied by the centrality of the book, which is the focal point of the picture. It is the text or the poems themselves, which bridge the gap between the dual images, and which symbolize the essence and process of the poet's recovery. When the dust jacket photo was taken, Sexton described it as being part of her "truth and no masks kick" ("AS & RL":18), because it is representative of her condition at the time of the book's composition, a representation completely opposed by the formal, benign family photograph. The second photograph - of Sexton and her family - is loaded with contradiction and artifice; however, like To Bedlam itself, it captures Sexton's deeply conflicted self-image. This conflict is centered in Sexton's life inside and outside the institution, and throughout the book she attempts, successfully, to reconcile these two states.

Sexton's journey, "to bedlam and part way back," begins, in medias res, in "You, Doctor Martin," the first poem in To Bedlam. Her books comprise a portrait of the artist, and this portrait begins with a series of images of childhood, and of second childhood. In "You, Doctor Martin," the first of the "Bedlam" poems, Sexton describes the eponymous doctor walking "from breakfast to madness" in the poem's first two verses (3). The word "breakfast" is used as a pun in this context, referring to the immediate (fast) break between the outside world and the world of the institution. The image of the doctor walking easily between these worlds signifies the power and mobility that the poet, who makes "moccasins all morning," is attempting to achieve
The institution, or "summer hotel," is the speaker's exclusive domain; she is its "queen," its "laughing bee," an image which also resonates with female power (3). These images of power provide a stark contrast to the powerlessness described in the poem, as the inmates are described as standing in "broken lines," and eating in "rows" in a "smock of smiles" (3). The description of the regulation and restrictions of the institution is evocative of elementary school, with reference to the ordered rows and lines, and this parallel is sustained throughout the poem. The poem's third verse, "I speed through the antiseptic tunnel" is a birth metaphor, followed by a series of words and phrases evocative of childhood or a child's education - plates that "whine like chalk," a "block" (3), a "nest" and "separate boxes" where the patients "sleep or cry" (4). In the penultimate stanza, Sexton uses the phrases "large children" and "foxy children," which support the preceding imagery, and which contrast the "oracular" power of the supervisory doctor (4).

Sexton uses these images of childhood, and depicts herself as a metaphoric child in "You, Doctor Martin" to underscore the restrictions and loss of freedom inherent in her institutionalization. She is also creating an autobiographical revision of her life in this poem, associating her birth, or rebirth, with her madness, and equating her childhood with her institutionalization, and her apprenticeship as a writer. The underlying crisis in this poem is related to the tension of its central dichotomy; although the speaker is an adult woman - "queen" - she is relegated to a child's position in the poem, because of her marginalization and her education. This crisis is articulated in the third stanza:

.....At first my hands
kept empty, unravelled for the lives
they used to work. Now I learn to take
them back, each angry finger that demands
I mend what another will break. (3)

The anger Sexton describes here relates to both her condition, and her desire. At the beginning of this stanza she states: "There are no knives/for cutting your throat" (3), a phrase which asserts her anger’s duality. The "your" of this verse refers not only to the general patient, but to the doctor, who is addressed in the title and first verse, "You, Doctor Martin" (3). Sexton’s anger is self-directed, pointing to her own suicidal impulses, but it is also directed, homicidally, at the figure who is empowered throughout the poem. Although "Doctor Martin" (Sexton’s therapist Martin Orne) is always cited in Sexton biography as the person who encouraged Sexton’s writing career, his authority is problematized in this poem, and is related, alternately, to an enviable power, and to intolerable control.

Although this is a poem about birth and childhood, Doctor Martin is not cast in a maternal role. Rather, he is a "god," a "prince" who wears a "third eye" that illuminates the various patients (3,4). While these figures emphasize the doctor’s role in the poem as a laudably powerful, and distressingly invasive presence, they also serve to emphasize his subordinate role in relation to the poet. Sexton is cast here as a queen, a title she repeats in the last stanza, and he as a mere prince; she is also a (queen) bee, and he is, because he works in her service, a drone. In the fourth stanza Sexton addresses him and states "Of course, I love you," which may be read as a voluntary statement, or as a response to a question (3). This "question" is silent in the poem, just as Doctor Martin is silenced while the speaker’s voice dominates. Sexton dictates the form and structure of the poem, and she undercuts his authority by removing him completely from the poem in the penultimate stanza. In this stanza Doctor Martin is paged by an intercom, and he leaves "twist(ing) in the pull" of the patients (4). His role as an agent of the outside
world is clarified - he is an observer, a visitor in the domain the poet presides over, and creates. These creative powers are asserted in the final stanza when Sexton describes herself, and the other patients, as "floods of life in frost," and as "magic talking to itself," descriptions which suggest the rejuvenating powers beneath the static surface of her condition (4). In this final stanza Sexton describes the patients as being "noisy and alone," and continues:

....I am the queen of all my sins
forgotten. Am I still lost?
Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
counting this row and that row of moccasins
waiting on the silent shelf. (4)

The forlorn quality of the silence and solitude experienced here is mitigated by the use of the word "forgotten," which may be seen to relate to the speaker's isolation and to her former "sins". In the latter sense, her sins are relegated to her previous life, that is the life which precedes the rebirth that is initiated in this poem. The poem ends with the speaker in a suspended state. Having effaced her former life as well as Doctor Martin, the ostensible subject of the poem, the patient becomes "herself," or her own subject. Although she expresses uncertainty - "Am I still lost?" - she is also seen anticipating the mobility that the moccasins (her own creation) will afford her.

The other "Bedlam" poems in To Bedlam appear in the first of two sections in the book. Jeanne H. Kammer-Neff has suggested that these poems contain a "riddle," one which concerns "the game of order in disorder, structure in chaos" (115). Like "You, Doctor Martin," the "Bedlam" poems are part of the poet's struggle for self-definition, the personal quest which Sexton evokes, via Schopenhauer, in the book's epigraph:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it
in face of every question that makes the philosopher.
He must be like Sophocles's Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our hearts the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to enquire further. (2)

The two tenets of this quotation reveal the motivation for the "Bedlam" poems, poems which also contend with Sexton's decision to make a "clean breast" of her past, and to recover her identity, the "answer," within the "appalling horror" of her condition, and through the "indefatigable enquiry" of her poetry. The "Bedlam" poems are all situated in an institution that is evocative of Theodore Roethke's "violent ward," and Elizabeth Bishop's St. Elizabeth's. The erasure of the past and the emphasis on the poet's child-like status in "You, Doctor Martin" are also employed in poems which further explore the interior of "Bedlam," and the condition of the poet therein. These three poems, "Music Swims Back to Me," "Ringing the Bells" and "Lullaby," are dream-like texts which attempt to replicate the experience of institutionalization through language, sound and melody. Unlike "You, Doctor Martin," they are not concerned with process or recovery. Rather, they enclose, in the manner of the institution itself, a series of memories and episodes. They are meant to evoke a state that precedes Sexton's writing career, but the music they recount functions (like the moccasins) as her poetry incarnate, or as a symbol of her writing.

In the first verse of "Music Swims Back to Me," Sexton employs a child's voice, and asks, like "an orphan seeking the way" (Johnson:85): "Wait Mister. Which way is home?" (6). The institution is depicted as being isolated - "there are no sign posts in this room" - and populated with women who are "over eighty, in diapers every one of them" (6). She goes on to describe hearing a song "they played/the night they left me/in this private institution on a hill," a song
which "sees more" and "remembers better" than she (6). She has "forgotten the rest" she says, which again suggests her eclipsed past; music, she states, "pours over the sense" (7, 6). Memory, in this poem, is linked to the process of writing autobiographical poetry. The song that the poet recalls in the present, "La la la, Oh music swims back to me/and I can feel the tune they played," allows her to reconstruct the past (6). In the second stanza of the poem the speaker says that on the night she was left at the institution, she felt the moon "stick (her)/with a singing in the head," although she forgets "all the rest" (7). The song, then, functions as a bridge between the past and present, but it also supplements the past by remembering and seeing more than she can. Sexton’s Confessional poem also functions as a bridge between the self and the self-in-writing, which incorporates the past and present, and which re/members the experience described.

In the third and final stanza Sexton writes, in a repeated line, "The night I came I danced a circle," adding later that she "was not afraid" (7). These verses draw attention to the circular function of the song/poem, which evokes feeling rather than "sense," and which communicates, without interruption, between the past and present. When the poet says she dances, unafraid, she is illustrating her ability to metamorphose experience, and referring to the easy communion between experience and art that characterizes Sexton’s poetry. "Music Swims Back to Me" is a critical model which suggests the poet’s past is no longer personal, but poetic, a past which is structured and presented in accordance to the poet’s present objectives. Memory and personal history are evoked and transformed through the medium of poetry, without the bias of logic, of linear sense. This process evokes the rebirth that Sexton inscribes in her work, which is fundamentally related to her own conception of her self as an artist. Autobiography generally
casts into the past to find details which support the present, and Sexton's poetry, or portrait of
the artist, also selects details and memories which call attention to her present enterprise.

Sexton employs, to use Sidonie Smith's locution (which Smith uses in her work on
autobiography), a "doubled subjectivity" in the "Bedlam" poems in order to convey her complex
subject position; she creates a self which experiences, and one which interprets or narrates her
history through a poetic matrix (17). The finished poem conflates this duality, but it also
represents the distance and the "symbolic contract" between the two subject positions - the
woman who experiences and the woman who creates (Smith:57). "Music Swims Back to Me,
like the remembered song, resists temporal constrictions and is inexorably intertwined with the
poet's own creation, and re-creation.

"Ringing the Bells" uses, as Paul A. Lacey has noted, "childlike" verse to create a "whole
illusion of meaningful pattern and activity," which is "demolished" in the last two lines of the
poem (101). This is a poem about music, which describes a "bell-lady" who gives music lessons
to the "crazy ladies" in Bedlam (28). The images that Sexton uses to describe this music are
static and "dead" (Lacey:101). The patients "mind by instinct, like bees caught in the wrong
hive," images which underline their lack of volition and self-government, and the speaker, when
directed, plays the "E flat" bell (28,29). The "flat" and orchestrated music is described as being
"as untroubled and clean/as a workable kitchen" (29), an image which betrays its utilitarian and
female-gendered purpose, as these lines suggest that the female patients are being taught the
"game of order in disorder, structure in chaos" (Kammer-Neff:115). The music that the speaker
is made to play is paralleled with housework, implying the artificial and impersonal quality of
both endeavors, endeavors which are designed to impose an extrinsic order upon an intrinsic
disorder. The unique order that music/poetry creates in a poem like "Music Swims Back to Me" is absent here, because the music in this poem is not self-determined, it is conceived and generated by someone other than the poet. Furthermore, the poet is seen here as an instrument among many, "my hand that responds to the lady/who points at me," rather than an individual musician or composer; she imitates, which is inimical to personal autonomy and creativity (29).

In the last two verses Sexton describes the failure of this artistic undertaking when she states: "and although we are no better for it,/they tell you to go. And you do" (29). This statement is both personal and pluralistic, as it describes her resistance, as an artist and as a woman, to modes of self expression that are extrinsically defined and enforced. The image of the women who "smile" at the "smiling" female instructor evokes the manner in which gender is socially constructed, not by "instinct," but through a calculated and imitative process (28). The authority of the "bell-lady" is undercut in the poem by the abrupt and cynical end-lines, and by the reluctance of the poet, the "small hunched squirrel girl," and the "gray dress" who "grumble," distracted, throughout (28). Self-expression, Sexton argues in this poem, can only be achieved through a conscientious objection to this and other forms of regimented behaviour. At this stage in her autobiography, she has located the cause of her malady; in the second section of the book she begins to formulate a remedy.

The poem "Lullaby" is, effectively, a lullaby, a song which eases the poet into sleep. It is about sleep and forgetfulness, which are constructed here as preparatory, anticipatory states. The rhythm and structure of the lullaby/poem is created by the poet; unlike "Ringing the Bells," this poem is unmediated by external direction and melody. The poem contains two stanzas, which reflect and oppose each other, with respect to imagery and process. In the first stanza, Sexton
creates a scene of serene amnesia:

It is a summer evening.  
The yellow moths sag  
against the locked screens  
and the faded curtains  
suck over the window sills  
and from another building  
a goat calls in his dreams.  
This is the TV parlor  
in the best ward at Bedlam.  
The night nurse is passing  
out the evening pills.  
She walks on two erasers,  
padding by us one by one.  

The repeated "s" sounds, and the words "sag," "faded," "evening," "night" and "dreams" create 
the somnolent tone of the stanza, while the strange presence of the "goat" (who is, presumably, 
a male patient from "another building") contributes a biblical aura - the separation of the sheeps 
from the goats - to the scene. The metaphor of the nurse’s shoes, which are "two erasers," 
compounds her function as the dispenser of sleeping pills, and suggests that she is erasing the 
patients as she moves past them.

In the second stanza, Sexton employs the first person singular voice, and continues/recreates 
the previous stanza:

My sleeping pill is white.  
It is a splendid pearl;  
it floats me out of myself,  
my stung skin as alien  
as a loose bolt of cloth.  
I will ignore the bed.  
I am linen on a shelf.  
Let the others moan in secret;  
let each lost butterfly  
go home. Old woolen head,  
take me like a yellow moth  
while the goat calls hush-
According to Cheryl Vossekuil, the "proliferation of white images" in this passage suggests a "purity," a "return to ...a life of possibility" and the "elusiveness of a dream" (123). Sylvia Plath describes a similar state of purity in her poem "Tulips" (which is also set in a hospital), where she is "snowed-in" by whiteness (CP:160). Plath says, at the outset of the poem, that she has given up her "name," "day-clothes," "history" and "body" to the nurses and surgeons, and states: "I am a nun now, I have never been so pure" (161). The capacity for divinity, or transcendence, is inscribed in both poems. In Sexton’s text it is suggested by the the image of the floating, ascending self, and the progressing moth and butterfly images. The moths that sag against the locked window in the first stanza are transformed in the second stanza to embody the desire of the speaker. Her desire to transcend physical or mortal boundaries is also reified in the object of the butterfly. This butterfly concludes the sleep/chrysalis stage that precedes its appearance, and illustrates the transformative process of the poem. Although the sleeping pill, the "splendid pearl," is the transformative agent in the poem, "it floats me out of myself," it is the lullaby/poem itself that creates and recreates its subject(s). "Let the others moan in secret," she writes, and implies, in turn, that her own words are audible; they generate motion and conversion. Sleep, in this poem, functions as a state of suspension that is similar to the "waiting" period she recounts in "You, Doctor Martin". The theme of rebirth that dominates the latter poem is reworked in "Lullaby," and the "Bedlam" poems, overall, comprise a unified portrait of the artist in utero, an artist who has conceived herself.

The theme of self-conception and self-definition is a critical element in the formation of Sexton’s poetics. In "Her Kind," Sexton describes three "kinds" of women, and suggests that
she is, or has been, all of them. The women (or woman) of this poem is a "twelve-fingered," "possessed witch" who is "not a woman, quite," a homemaker who fixes "suppers for the worms and elves," who is "misunderstood," and a suicide, a "survivor...(who) is not ashamed to die" (15,16). The poem considers the theme of "false dichotomies and divisions" that Lessing addressed in The Golden Notebook, and presents a female figure, who is "not a woman, quite" because she is fractured, and compartmentalized.

Steven E. Colburn has observed that the speaker in "her Kind" is a "symbolic figure whose experiences at the hands of a hostile, uncomprehending society are representative of the misfortunes of women in general," an observation which undermines the striking power of the speaker in "Her Kind" (169). More credibly, he also notes that her shift in voice, from the subjective "I," to the objective - "a woman like that" - illustrates the personal/political focus of the poem, for, in his words, "the fate of the witch is the fate of any woman" (169). Like the narrator of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing (1972), Sexton allows herself "to be cut in (three)" in this poem, like a woman "sawn apart in a wooden crate," in order to exhibit the various roles she occupies: the witch/poet, the wife and mother, and the exultant suicide (Atwood:124). By dividing herself into discrete figures, she is able to comment on the inadequacy of each role. In "Her Kind," the social construction of gender is equated with half-life, identity-negation and doom, as illustrated by the witch-hunt and witch-burning sequence in the final stanza, which evokes the Salem witch-trials. Self-definition and synthesis are indirectly proposed as vital alternatives to the punishing order of socially defined feminine roles, which are examined here in terms of their limitations, erroneous assumptions and dangerous misconceptions.

By defining herself as a witch in this poem, Sexton not only examines the "legendary fate
of the witch" (Axelrod:176), she also recovers this figure, and resurrects it as a symbol of women's power. "Her Kind" may also be seen as a mythological witch-poem. "Where I Live in This Honorable House of the Laurel Tree," another To Bedlam poem, is based on Ovid's account of Daphne and Apollo. Daphne was a huntress, like Artemis (Diana in Roman mythology), the "Lady of Wild Things" (Edith Hamilton:31). According to Edith Hamilton, Diana was the "goddess with three forms"; she is associated, in the later poets, with "Selene in the sky, Artemis on earth" and "Hecate in the lower world and in the world above when it is wrapped in darkness" (31). Selene is the moon-goddess and Hecate is a witch, the "Goddess of the Crossways" (32). Tricksters, in African religions, are always associated with crossroads (the word originates in the Latin word *trivialis* - its etymon is *tri via* - means "of the crossroads") a place "where territorial boundaries begin to dissolve into each other" (Wafer:129). Hecate, like Artemis herself, suggests - liminally - an intricate, compound female spirit. "Her Kind," with its three-tiered structure and tripled persona, evokes the same spirit. By gesturing, in this poem, to history, fairy tales, and myth, Sexton creates a complex interpretive trivium for her work.

The "twelve-fingered" and magical witch is a potent symbol of Sexton's poetic abilities, and this witch symbol is comparable to the images of word-magic she inscribes in "You, Doctor Martin". When Sexton described "Her Kind" as an example of the kind of woman and poet she was, she was commenting on the Confessional connection between her art and her gender that this poem proposes. "Her Kind" is an effective "signature" to Sexton's poetics, because it exemplifies her poetic theory and practice, and introduces a complex female subject position that is personal, and that "dramatizes the experience of women in the world" (Axelrod:176).
"When you say Man" said Oedipus, "you include women too. Everyone knows that."
She said, "That's what you think".

Muriel Rukeyser, "Myth"

"For John, Who begs Me Not to Enquire Further" is the first of three poems, in the second section of To Bedlam. The poem's title refers to the Schopenhauer epigraph at the beginning of the book, and the poem itself is addressed to John Holmes, who was Sexton's poetry instructor from 1958 to 1962. According to Middlebrook, Holmes criticized the Confessional nature of Sexton's poetry, and cautioned her to abandon this mode, because she would "certainly outgrow it, and become another person" (in Middlebrook, "Housewife":493). Middlebrook feels that "For John" is central to Sexton's poetics, and Diana Hume George has also commented extensively on this poem in Oedipus Anne. George closely examines the relationship between To Bedlam's epigraph and "For John," and remarks upon the poems's revisionist nature. George sees Sexton's poem as a "declaration of independence, a bill of poetic rights," which casts Holmes, "the father figure who warned her about writing about her neuroses," in the "role of the symbolically weak woman," the Jocasta who begs Oedipus "for God’s sake not to enquire further" (7,8). Sexton, conversely, casts herself as "the truth-seeker Oedipus" in the poem, as she attempts to locate and defend her poetic method (George:8). Several verses and words are repeated in the poem, a strategy which emphasizes its didactic nature. The first verses, "Not that it was beautiful, but that, in the end, there was a certain sense of order there," are repeated, and serve to echo the conclusion to "You, Doctor Martin": "Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself". Beauty, in these poems, is synonymous with surfaces and artificiality. According to
Middlebrook, what "took Sexton to the hospital was a preference for suicide over the role of mother...in the world's eyes, a competent, well-bred woman" ("Housewife":500). It is the "worst of anyone" ("For John":34) that interests Sexton, the "worst" being, in this poem, "an accident of hope" which could never be found "in a lovelier place" (34,35).

Through poetry, Sexton is able to "order" her various and chaotic experiences; poetry enables her to "fasten a new skin" around the self she perceives in the "cracked mirror" (35,34). The disparate themes of To Bedlam - transformation, rebirth, and salvation through the poetic medium - converge in this Confessional caveat, as Sexton explains what is "worth learning" in the "narrow diary of (her) mind" (34). What is "learned" is what is "special...in this kind of hope" (25), in the desire to learn "how one's mystery can be unwoven" (George:9). Sexton's agenda is deceptively simple in this poem, revealed in her refusal to "give...something outside of (her) self," and her decision instead to explore and re-create her own female experience in her work (34). The image of the "cracked mirror" in "For John" expresses a common sentiment in women's poetry of this period, that, according to Ostriker, "self-division is culturally prescribed, wholeness culturally forbidden, to the woman and the woman poet" (STL:83).

In the Elizabethan age, Elizabeth was viewed as the center of the "divinely ordered universe"; she was compared to "the primum mobile, the master-sphere" (Tillyard:16). In "For John," Sexton employs a succession of spherical images, a bowl, an orange, a sun, to convey a similar working cosmology. Wholeness, or the undivided self, is the implicit objective of this poem, a self which is positioned at the center of the poet's discourse so that she may "rage in (her) own bowl" (34). Self-empowerment is achieved through the Confessional process, a process which is articulated in the poem's progressive images. The poet's head, the "glass"
"awkward bowl" (34) is initially deemed a "complicated lie" - when she "fasten(s) a new skin around it" and "dress(es)" it, it becomes a "strange sun" (35). The writing of poetry is viewed here as a means of self-definition, as Sexton re/dresses what is transparent ("glass") and erroneous ("a complicated lie") in the "arbitrary character of patriarchal ascriptions of temperament and role" (Millet:44).

Sexton also uses images of glass and mirrors in "For John" in order to convey another element of her Confessional strategy. In the final verses of the poem she writes:

although your fear is anyone's fear,  
like an invisible veil between us all...  
and sometimes in private,  
my kitchen, your kitchen,  
my face, your face. (35)

The "invisible veil" (like the mirror and glass), and the rhymed oppositions, "my kitchen, your kitchen"/"my face, your face," serve to highlight what is common, or "commonplace" ("For John":34) in Sexton's experience/poetry, and suggest a link between the poet and the female reader. In "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience," Ostriker remarks upon Sexton's attempts, in her poetry, to "engage the reader in participatory acts that will rupture both literary rules and the rule that we must not try to penetrate the 'invisible veil between us all'" (14).

According to Ostriker, Sexton's work contains a "moral resonance" that relates to "the real lives of women," and which inscribes this relationship within itself (16). The connection that Sexton suggests here, between herself and the female reader/audience, is significant because it relates to the matrilineal order she creates in her work. In the other two poems of the second section, and in much of her later work, Sexton renders a "line of feeling" (Bogan, in Ostriker, STL:10) between mothers and daughters, in order to create, in Frances Bixler's words, "her own soul,
In her assessment of "For John," Diana Hume George cites the poem’s references to the "cracked mirror" (of the asylum), and the "cracked stars shining" (34) (in the glass bowl) and states that these images reflect not only each other, but the fact that "we all, in kitchens or madhouses, aim toward the same general human truths that shine differently in different lives" (QA:10). Life after "selfish death" is the truth-seeking quest of the second section of To Bedlam, a reconstruction visible in the image of the "cracked" bowl/head in this poem ("For John":34). What is cracked or damaged in the poet’s mind is resurrected in the form of stars, "signs radiant with significance," that indicate transformation and conversion (Middlebrook, AS:101).

To Bedlam is a conversion narrative that traces both Sexton’s development as an artist, and as the subject of her art, a process which is/was facilitated by her breakdown. This breakdown engendered her poetry, a complex teleology which is represented by the image of the broken glass, and its arbitrary and calculated patterns. The whole self that emerges in this poem, then, is still visibly divided, but these divisions are rendered topical, geographical beneath the stars.

In the second section of To Bedlam, Sexton begins to expand her galaxy of one, to include those relationships that have also been fractured in the "break". Mother/daughter relationships are the focus of the last two poems of the second section. In "The Double Image," the first of these poems, Sexton recounts the loss of her daughter Joyce, whom she was "too sick to keep" (Star:89). In interviews, Sexton often stated that when she first read "Heart’s Needle," she found the "courage" to bring her daughter home (from her mother-in-law’s care), and said that she felt "a poem should...move people to action" (Star:89). Sexton’s mother also figures prominently in the poem, as she went to live with her, "Part way back from Bedlam" ("The Double
Sexton uses images of mirrors and portraits in this poem in order to convey the double, or doubled images of mothers and daughters. The poem's events are similarly doubled: Sexton's mother becomes ill after her daughter's suicide attempt and "say(s)" she "gave her cancer"; Sexton attempts suicide and returns from the institution twice in the course of the poem, to reclaim her two year old daughter (38). An intricate dichotomy emerges as a result, which can be traced to the image Sexton uses of "the double woman" who stares in the mirror, "as if she were petrified" (41).

Sheila Rowbotham and other feminist critics, have employed the mirror as a symbol of the "reflecting surface of cultural representation into which a woman stares to form an identity" (in Friedman:38). Susan Stanford Friedman has observed that this mirror "does not reflect back a unique, individual identity to each living woman"; rather, it "projects an image of WOMAN, a category that is supposed to define the living woman's identity" (38). Sexton, as subject, is doubled in the poem; she is both her "own Dorian Gray" (41), who is tormented by "ugly angels" and "green witches," and a dutiful wife who "serve(s) cocktails as a wife should" (36,39). In "The Double Image" Sexton challenges "the equation between 'female' and 'feminine'," by presenting and negating a divided self (Poovey:23). The poem's tension is related to the conflict between the self as individual woman, or the "self's self," and the refracted image of the socially constructed self ("The Double Image":36). This doubleness is also evoked in the form of the dying mother, who represents illness and suicide, and the "well and whole" daughter, who represents the poet's choices in the poem ("Double Image":36). It is a life with this daughter that the speaker chooses, but she complicates the terms of this choice. When Sexton appears, in the fifth stanza, with a "complete book of rhymes," a typewriter and
suitcases, it is a self-reflexive gesture. She arrives as the mediating poet/author, who is prepared to "take action," and "learn...life" from her "splendid stranger," her daughter (39).

In many ways, this poem is structured as a mystery; Sexton represents herself as a detective who must "learn," or solve the puzzle that death and suicide presents: "why (she) would rather die than love" (39-40). In the poem, death is embodied in the poet's history - "I let the witches take away my guilty soul./I pretended I was dead" - and in the mother's body and gestures (36). The mother, who cannot "forgive" her daughter's suicide, has her "portrait done instead" (37). The mother commissions two portraits, one of herself, one of her daughter, from an artist who remarks on their similarity to each other. She also has her daughter's hair "restyled" for the portrait, which heightens the resemblance, the "matching smile, matching contour" of the two women's faces (37). The portraits hang, a "cave of a mirror" in the "chill north light," and these images, in conjunction with the image of the portraits themselves, correspond to the question, raised in the poem, of the nature of women's representation (38). The cave-portraits are clearly related to Plato's allegory, which considers the human delusion that there are "no realities except those shadows" of "handmade," or artificial things (Dialogues:313). Sexton also contests this delusion in "The Double Image," by drawing attention to the static and artificial quality of certain forms of representation. The poem's picture gallery evokes an image of the history of women's representation, of women represented as unchanging imitations of each other. The mother continues this tradition in the poem - "acquainted with my face, you wore it" ("Double Image".39) - by contracting an artist to efface the difference between the women, and unite them in a one-dimensional history, a "hall of mirrors" (Friedman:38).

Sexton ironizes the practice of superficial representation in this poem, and in doing so,
comments on the impoverished status of women's history. Her appearance, as the poem's author, typewriter in hand, signals her attempt to interface, and supplement the medium of painting with the medium of poetry. The limitation of the artist/painter's gaze are contrasted with the dynamic process of the poetry, which composes a changing portrait, and multiple perspectives. The eye of the poet/poem is able to move, beneath the exterior, and depict the emotional and intellectual life within the "canvas home" (40). The objectivity of the painter, is also contrasted to the subjectivity of the poet, who is the subject/author of her own representation. It is this subjectivity that enables her to render her mother as her "first image," and compound the circumstances of their resemblance to each other (40). The speaker notes that her mother wears her (her daughter's) face in the portrait, and that Joyce, her own daughter, "resemble(s)" her (38). Sexton writes: "unacquainted with my face, you wore it. But you were mine/after all" (39). Here, Sexton is troubling the process of biological reproduction by asserting a similarity between mother and daughter, that exists in spite of their physical or formal resemblance (39).

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses a mother's belonging, with regard to her children, as a creative "illusion" (468). Reproduction as a creative act is illusory, she writes, because a woman "does not really make the baby, it makes itself within her"; a mother "cannot give to this independent person, who is to exist tomorrow, (her) own reasons, (her) justification, for existence" (468). In "The Double Image," the poet's mother is seen attempting to perpetuate this illusion, by blurring, and re-creating the resemblance between herself and her "outgrown child" (37). Sexton seeks, conversely, to create her own "justification for existence," and to offer this same liberty to her daughter. In the last verses she writes:

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (41-2)

Here, Sexton expresses her fear of having created a "genetic reproduction" in her daughter, and of having attempted to define herself through this daughter (Honton:100). She forges this definition because of her own uncertain self-image - "I, who was never quite sure about being a girl" - and her own uncertainty finds a tentative expression in motherhood. The "guilt" that is expressed in the poem is expressed in the past tense, for the speaker goes on to "find (herself)," not through her child, but through her poetry. Sexton's daughter becomes, symbolically, an autonomous model, a choice in the poem, that the poet makes with regard to her own destiny. She decides to "find" herself in her poetry, and to seek the figures of her mother and daughter there, within the context, but not the confines, of her biological relationship to them. Finally, the poet offers her daughter a valuable "truth" in this poem, according to Diana Hume George; she gives her "a chance to escape the prison of poisonous identifications handed from mother to daughter" and to "know that the trap lies baited for her" (QA:12).

Sexton's "poisonous identification" with her mother is symbolized by the disease, the cancer her mother accuses her of giving her, "as if death transferred" (38). In "The Division of Parts," the last of the To Bedlam poems, Sexton forms a different identification with her dying/dead mother, one which is predicated on her knowledge that death does not "transfer," and that her daughter may be hers, "after all" (38,39). "The Division of Parts" is important to Sexton's poetics, because it creates a theological context for her writing, a "narrative of (her) search for Grace" (Morton:13). Sexton attempts to "leave Bedlam behind her" in this poem, in Greg Johnson's words, by "finding solace in the attempt to appreciate -and record- the complexities
of her experience" (87). Her mother's death is expressed in complex terms in "Division of Parts". Sexton uses two embedded narratives- King Lear and The Gospel According to St. John - in order to support the central, confessional narrative. The events of Good Friday and King Lear are alluded to or named, primarily because of the divisions which occur in each text. In John, the Roman soldiers divide Christ's garments, and in Lear, the kingdom is divided among the King's daughters. Both texts also contend with death, resurrection, and redemption; Christ the Redeemer is seen ascending to God, in John, and Lear witnesses Cordelia's life after death:

"she lives! if it be so,/ It is a chance which redeems all sorrows" (V,iv,II.267-8:899). In her poem, Sexton explicitly parallels her mother's death with Christ's crucifixion, though the poet would later refer to this parallel, in an interview, as a "bad metaphor" (Star:60). In this interview Sexton explains that her poem reflects the fact that she "didn't want to believe in Christ's rising" or "in anything," at the time of the poem's composition (60). Sexton's belief in Christ's ascension is unchanged in the course of the poem; her belief in "anything," however, is dramatically altered, through the representation and conception of her mother.

The events of "The Division of Parts" occur on Good Friday, as "the hours of The Cross unwind" (42), and its central figures are Sexton's "Mother, (her) Mary Gray" and "Jesus, (her) stranger" (42,43). The poem is a conversion narrative; "dangerous angels" "walk through Lent," and "beguile" the speaker: "Convert! Convert!" (45). These angels are symbolically aligned with the "ugly angels" of "The Double Image"; they represent madness, the voice of dementia praecox, or the "other mind" (Porter:33). The angels demand a Christian conversion. As Sexton says, in her discussion of this poem, they are calling her to convert to "the magic of the resurrection" (Star:61). Sexton rejects this conversion, and converts instead to "love as
reasonable/as Latin" (45). Specifically, she chooses to create an alternative "magical" resurrection in the poem ("Division":45). On many occasions in her poetry, Sexton rejects Christian dogma and Christ. In "With Mercy for the Greedy," she describes her desire, to accept "beautiful Jesus," an attempt that fails, because "Need is not quite belief" (62). In this poem, the Sacrament of Confession is rejected in favour of the "sacrament of poetry," but the secular and non-secular spheres often collide in her poetry as a whole (Lacey:109). In "The Division of Parts," these spheres collide in a revisionist manner, as Sexton resurrects and consecrates her mother within the ceremony of poetry.

In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly writes:

Radical feminism is not reconciliation with the father. Rather it is affirming our original birth, our original source, movement, surge of living. This finding of our original integrity is re-membering our Selves...Radical feminism releases the inherent dynamic in the mother-daughter relationship toward friendship, which is strangled in the male-mastered system...What both demand of each other is courageous moving which is mythic in its depths, which is spell-breaking and myth-making process. (39-40)

Sexton is "spell-breaking" and "myth-making" in this poem, as she affirms, through the narrative of her mother, a Christian "original source" in Mary, the mother of God. In this sense, her poem is a kind of *Song of Bernadette*, wherein she locates Mary as the "immaculate conception," and places her at the center and source of her faith. In Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley, the novel’s protagonist, decides, as a child, to "do something dangerous, rebellious, perhaps even blasphemous" by praying to the Virgin Mary, instead of God (196). Mary becomes Elaine’s "Lady of Perpetual Help" in the novel, and she performs a similar function in Sexton’s poem. Her mother, Mary, and the Virgin Mary are nominally
related in the poem, but they are also related in terms of their relationship to Sexton's "search for a clearly confirmed past, ... for a tradition of female power (Rich, QWB:85). The poet expresses this desire in the third stanza when she writes, "I fumble my lost childhood/for a mother," a loss which is not mitigated by her ability to bring her mother "flapping back," with her "rhyming words" (44,45). Although her mother returns through Sexton's poetry, she appears "divided," with "three stones" slipping from her "glittering eyes". The reference to division, and the number three suggest the Christian trinity - the male, or masculine gendered Holy Family, which is constructed here as a "reversed mirror image" (Daly:85). Here, as elsewhere in her poetry, Sexton suggests a flexible and female Holy Family, or a female-biased Christianity that isolates Mary/Madonna, Mary Magdalene, and, on one occasion, a group of flying nuns. Christ and God are also treated, at great length in the collected poems, but they are considered as a "theological problem" in the work, as Sexton "investigate(s)" Christ's male body, and "Mary's role in the Incarnation" (Middlebrook, AS:352).

In the final verses of "The Division of Parts," Sexton resolves her inability to believe in the "grotesque metaphor" of Christ's resurrection, by supplanting his image and "sacrifice" with the image of her mother, the "brave" and holy "ghost" (46). She describes her mother, in a long series of images, as a "skipper homeward," a "museum keeper," a "bride among children," a "dove," a "pilgrim woman" and finally, as "my Lady of my first words" (46). This litany interfaces secular and non-secular images of women (the "dove," the "bride," the "Lady") and suggests a communication between these spheres. The legacy implicit in the terms "pilgrim," "museum keeper," and "first words" relates to the terms of Sexton's inheritance; the poem begins with material inheritance, "the division of money," and concludes with the spiritual
inheritance that her mother/mothers extend (42). Without "praise/or paradise," her mother makes her "(her) inheritor," and offers her the ability to look "homeward," toward an entire history of women, and their origin, artifacts and words.

In Talking Back, bell hooks describes how she "rescued" herself through autobiographical narrative. Through the process of remembering, she instigated the "cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments," and was "made whole again" (159). In To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Sexton re/members herself in a similar way, as she reconstructs her life and self through autobiographical narrative/poetry. She also creates a sense of female community, history and religion in this text, and locates herself within a feminine context, or sphere of reference. Many of Sexton's feminist strategies are encoded in "The Expatriates," a poem which appears in the first section of the book. The poem describes a forest, which can be read as a symbol of women of "parallel...lives/filed out in exile...too alien to know/our sameness and how our sameness survives" (22).

The events of this poem are obscure, but well-suited as a series of epigraphs to Sexton's poetic practice and ambitions. "Today I must dream the forest whole," she writes, referring to her narrative's collective purpose, and revisionist capacity, and its/her ability to remember, and reclaim a space and time, "butchered from time,/that we must tell of quickly/before we lose the sound of our own/mouths calling mine, mine, mine" (22).
Chapter Three

This is how I want to die: Suicide/Desire in All My Pretty Ones and Live or Die

We have had enough suicidal women poets, enough suicidal women, enough self-destructiveness as the sole form of violence permitted to women.

Adrienne Rich

Because you were selfish and sad and died

Anne Stephenson, "Letter to Sylvia Plath"

I was much too far out all my life
And not woving but drowning.

Stevie Smith

In Fear of Flying (1973), Erica Jong's autobiographical narrator discusses Sylvia Plath: "...I was talking for days about her suicide and how I wanted to write great poetry and put my head in the oven" (85). This passage recalls a number of popular stories and rumours about the suicide cult generated by the lives and writing of the female Confessional poets. In "Light up the Cave," a memoir of Anne Sexton published in 1975, Denise Levertov writes that she has "heard many stories of attempted -and sometimes successful- suicides by young students who loved the poetry of Plath," and goes on to express her concern regarding a "new epidemic of the same syndrome occurring as a response to Anne Sexton's death" (74). The breakdowns and
suicides of the Confessional poets, particularly Plath's, have been scrutinized by many artists and critics. In "A Fine, White Flying Myth," Sandra M. Gilbert speaks ominously of the "Plath Myth," supposedly originating in the poet's suicide, which relates to women's fear of the "risks of freedom" and their inability to survive this fear (601). Margaret Atwood has also described her perception of this myth. In "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All," she recounts her early conception of female artists: "As a woman writer you...would have to Suffer. We read Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, suicides, both. Novel writing was safer. You could do that and live" (17). Several contemporary women artists have come to similar conclusions about these deaths and their legacy, including Joyce Carol Oates, who refers to Plath's death as an "adolescent gesture" ("The Art":210), and Diane Wakoski, who wrote about Plath's suicide and concluded, of herself, "I wont wont wont/die,/even for poetry" (Collected Greed:12).

In "Darkness Visible," William Styron makes a list, a "sad but scintillant roll call," of artists who committed suicide in the twentieth century, a list which includes Sexton, Plath, Berryman, Mark Rothko, Randall Jarrell, Diane Arbus, and others (214). Many of these deaths occurred in the same period (the 1960s and 70s), a period which is documented in Berryman's Dream Songs: "All these deaths keep Henry pale & ill/...You can count with stirring love on a new loss/& an emptier place" (210). A. Alvarez has characterized this rash of suicides, and the rise of suicidal, nihilistic art as an "extremist" response to, or reflection of, "the nihilism of our own violent societies" (278). He also considers, in The Savage God, the "tradition of suicide," with regard to creative people, and cites an unprecedented "casualty rate among the gifted" in the twentieth century (57,259). Alvarez attempts to explain this phenomenon by noting an increasing
experimentation, in the arts, toward a "profound internal shift," that is, a shift toward introspection and confession (259). He then explains that the events of the twentieth century, particularly the wars, have created a kind of mass feeling of "numbness - beyond hope, despair (and) terror...which no amount of creative effort and optimism can ...remove" (163).

The suicidal artist, in Alvarez's terms, responds to an intolerable society by creating what Plath has called a "concentration camp in (the) mind," or an equally intolerable inner world, which the art reflects (in Butscher, "In Search":26). There is something entirely too Miltonic about his postulate however, for the notion of the cruel world within - "myself am Hell" - does not begin to account for individual responses to, and experiences within, the world (Paradise Lost,81:l.75). The idea of a group of suicides, or a knowable suicidal disposition, is also suspect, since it excludes issues of gender, class, religion, race and nationality, which are all considered in scientific and statistical studies of suicide. Alvarez proposes that there is a disproportionately high number of artist-suicides in the twentieth century, and he also cites statistics pertaining to the rest of the population. The week Plath killed herself in 1963, he notes, over ninety-nine people committed suicide in Great Britain; in the United States the figure is four times higher (Savage God:57). Suicide occurs far more frequently than murder; in the United States 22,000 suicides are documented each year, and this figure is twice as high in several European countries (Menninger:13).

In spite of its frequency, suicide is rarely discussed; it remains a profound cultural taboo. In his introduction to Man Against Himself, Karl Menninger says that he was advised to keep the "gloomy subject" of suicide out of the book's title, because it would "repel" readers (13). As John Donnelly has observed, "civilized society still frowns upon and shudders at suicide," and
public ignorance and "ambivalence" toward self-killing is, in Fred Cutter's words, the "single greatest obstacle to the achievement of a zero suicide rate before the turn of the century" (10,258).

In The Myth of Sisyphus (1942), Albert Camus refers to suicide as the "one truly serious philosophical problem," a problem which is made "urgent" by "the actions it entails" (11). He also refers to suicide, in this text, as an act of confession, that it is "confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it" (13). Camus' assessment of the problem of suicide also implicitly addresses the problem of suicide-writing, and he justifies this discourse by emphasizing its imperative and instructive nature. To discuss suicide is to acknowledge its "urgency"; to attempt to explain it is to contribute "understanding" to the suicidal, and to the "ambivalent public". Alvarez claims that the many artist-suicides of the twentieth century constitute a cultural phenomenon. He states that in this century, "the better the artist the more vulnerable he seems to be" (259).

Alvarez's reasoning is flawed for several reasons. It is not possible to quantify, in any exact way, the comparability of artist-suicide rates from century to century. There are no statistics to support Alvarez's theory, and, prior to the twentieth century, if an artist committed suicide, it was unlikely that this information would become public knowledge. Mary Wollstonecraft is known to have attempted suicide at least twice - she admits this in her letters to Gilbert Imlay, which William Godwin published, "unconscious of taboo" (St.Clair:182). We now know that Wollstonecraft's daughter, Fanny Godwin, killed herself in a Swansea hotel in 1816. The signature on Godwin's suicide note was destroyed, according to William St. Clair, "by a member of the hotel staff who knew the indignities which the law commanded for suicides"
John Berryman, whose father was a suicide, and who wrote with great candour about suicide-desire, killed himself in 1972, and was almost refused a burial on "consecrated ground" (Simpson:252). According to Eileen Simpson, this burial only occurred because Berryman's mother believed his death was "an accident" (252).

Alvarez's theory, finally, is Eurocentric, ignoring, for example, the historical practice of hara-kiri - a respected form of self-sacrifice - in Japan. Yukio Mishima's 1972 suicide, by seppuku, or ritual self-disembowelment, is less related to a recent phenomenon in the arts than to long-standing Japanese cultural practices. Mishima's suicide was both political - he wanted to incite the formation of an Emperor-governed Japan - and erotic. Many commentators believe that his suicide was, in effect, a shinju, a lover's suicide, which Mishima plotted with his male lover Masakatsu Morita (Stokes:245). While his suicide was perceived by all as tragic, hara-kiri is "the ultimate spiritual action in the Japanese tradition" (Stokes:254). In western countries, conversely, suicide - which until very recently was punishable by law and continues to be condemned by the Christian Church - is a taboo act. Alvarez's notion, of the artist-suicide phenomenon, is better expressed in terms of contemporary artists' attempts to confront this taboo.

Suicide-artists attained a new visibility in this century, assisted in part by an increased dissemination of information and art about suicide. In the period of, and following the publication of Carus's text, suicide became increasingly visible as an artistic theme, particularly in America. Allen Ginsberg's Howl, published in 1956, incorporates many references to the "best minds of (his) generation" killing themselves, by cutting their wrists, leaping from windows and bridges and creating "great suicidal dramas" (9,13).
Suicide was also well represented in the visual art of the period; Jackson Pollack, Andy Warhol, H.C. Westerman and other visual artists employed the theme in works such as "Suicide Tower" and "Ten Ways of Killing Myself". The prominence of suicide art in the post-war era can be related to societal conditions. A similar wave of art about self-injury appeared in Germany between 1890 and 1933, when the German Expressionists used this theme to express their "passionate and righteous indignation about the immorality of their times" (Cutter:122). German Expressionism has been described as "one long continuous psychological scream," a phrase which could also describe a great deal of American post-war art in the latter half of the twentieth century (Cutter:122). The Confessional poets adopted themes of suicide and despair in their writing, but their work is distinguished by their employment of the subjective, personal voice. Through the employment of the first-person voice, in Confessional poetry, the "best minds" of a generation are suddenly telescoped, or reduced, in effect, to a single, superior "mind".

A transition in suicide discourse occurs with the Confessional poets' use of the subjective voice, as their poetry explores the theme of self-injury empirically, from an insider's perspective. Theoretical discussions of suicide often attempt to formulate, in Harold Lasswell's words, "tendency conceptions," which introduce "order in complex phenomena" (223). Lasswell observes that tendency conceptions can be "aimless classifications" which cannot account for each "given constellation of personality events," an objection which is implicitly encoded and redressed in a Confessional or individual response (223). Berryman, Plath and Sexton's Confessional accounts of suicide may also be construed as being political because they provide a kind of empirical evidence of a larger system of events. When Anne Sexton describes her
suicide attempts in the poem "Wanting to Die," she describes her own tendencies, and locates these tendencies within a community of suicides who have a "special language," an "almost unnameable lust" (Complete Poems:142). Diana Hume George has observed that the speaker of this poem is not attempting to "recruit company for her agony"; rather, she is asking "to be understood" ("Suicide Poems":221). She is also explaining suicidal desire in the poem, and asking that it be understood. As Sylvia Plath has commented, "What the person out of Belsen - physical or psychological - wants ...(is) the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just what it is like" (Letters Home:473).

According to the suicidologist Edwin S. Schneidman, "Practically all suicidal behaviors stem from a sense of isolation and from feelings of some intolerable emotion on the part of the victim" (154). In The Social Meanings of Suicide, Jack D. Douglas includes pages from a diary of a suicidal woman named "Marion," who expresses her sense of isolation on many occasions, and writes in one entry, "Oh, God, how lonely. I am starving" (292), an image which parallels a refrain in Sexton's "Flee on Your Donkey": "O my hunger! my hunger!" (101). Sexton once wrote that "You're not crazy if you can find one sane person who you can talk to," a sentiment that she shared with a woman who wrote to her from a mental hospital after reading her poetry (Self-Portrait in Letters::291). Sexton was often inundated with fan letters from institutionalized devotees of her work, and she always responded, believing that "any communication...was better than silence" (SPL:281). This sentiment could also be applied to Confessional suicide poetry, to subjective communications that rupture the silence of cultural taboo and the individual isolation it perpetuates.

Many critics have spoken cynically and angrily about the "heroism of sickness," the
"glamour of Fatality" (Howe:225), the "imaginative risk" or danger inherent in Plath's suicide poetry (Lowell, in Rosenthal "SP&CP":72). Sexton's suicide poetry was similarly critiqued in her lifetime, for its "monstrous self-indulgence," and for being an extension of the "Romantic stereotype" of the suffering artist (Gullans:131). Harsh criticism of suicide-writing is generally reserved for Sexton and Plath, because, as women, they are near-anomalies in the usual artist-suicide roster; the suicides of Hemingway, Mishima, Rothko, or even Berryman (to name but a few male artists) are rarely, if ever, discussed with acrimony. Self-destruction is not conceived as a conventionally feminine activity, and the average statistical survey of suicide describes male suicides as using "active" means, while females employ "passive" means of death. Feminist artists and critics have also isolated Sexton and Plath as dangerous models, as the "gravitational pull toward death" they describe in their work is construed as being disempowering to women, and because they do not appear to advocate survival (Oates, "The Art":211).

In "Suicide and Self-Starvation," Terence M. O'Keeffe distinguishes between "instrumental" suicides, which are politically motivated, and "noninstrumental suicides," "in which the overriding intention is simply to end one's life" (127). Although Sexton and Plath appear to have committed noninstrumental suicides by all accounts, their suicides have been discussed as if they are instrumental, producing a malevolent politic or "epidemic" (Levertov:74). Both women's suicides are viewed as being instrumental because of their work; both poets spoke longingly and explicitly about self-killing, what Sexton called "that ride home/with our boy" (Sexton,"Sylvia's Death":126). Their deaths have been conceived, by Gilbert and Gubar, as acts of "dangerous impersonation" of their "own metaphors," a conception which echoes Lowell's understanding of the "imaginative risks" inherent in suicide poetry (Madwoman:549). This theory is flawed
because the subject (Plath or Sexton) is considered to be subordinate to her subject matter, as if it is the metaphor that produces the artist. In Plath's poem "Edge," she describes a "perfected" "dead" woman, whose children are "coiled" beside "pitcher(s) of milk," a description which is both metaphorical and premonitory - before Plath killed herself, she left cups of milk beside her sleeping children (Collected Poems:272). It is more logical, however, to view Plath's (and Sexton's) metaphors as "impersonat(ing)" the authors' desires and literary strategies. This distinction is critical because it relates, fundamentally, to the construction and political nature of the subjective voice. Life-writing, for Plath and Sexton, was a significant process, as it enabled them to author their lives within their poetry. This gesture is reflexive in the poetry, which refers, on many occasions to the empowering practice of confession, and the (re) birth it engenders. Death-writing provides a similar function, for it asserts the same principle, the right of the individual to assume control of her body, to author her life, and death, as she chooses.

In "The Ethics of Suicide," Thomas S. Szasz writes that "successful suicide is generally an expression of an individual's desire for greater autonomy - in particular, for self-control over (his/her) death" (166). He also discusses suicide as an individual's "inalienable right" with respect to "human freedom," an inalienable right that historically has been contested in western civilization due to legal, medical and religious sanctions against suicide (172,176). The right to end one's life is analogous to the feminist pro-choice struggle (which concerns women's rights regarding their own bodies) in that it pertains to individual choice in opposition to socially dictated, prohibitive measures. Women in western society have had little access to the expression of suicide-desire, although there are a great number of male-authored female suicides in art and
literature, such as Dido, Cleopatra, Ophelia and Lucretia, to name but a few. The expression of this desire may be seen, ultimately, as a useful and preventative measure, for it indicates a growing discourse and awareness of another, statistically significant, "female malady".

*True Confessions* is a popular magazine that performs a function that is comparable to female authored Confessional poetry, since it offers accessible, confessional stories that are exclusively concerned with women's issues. A recent story, entitled "Depression - The Deadliest Disease," concerns a woman's struggle with chronic depression and multiple suicide attempts. Depression is not the central issue in this story; what is highlighted instead is the narrator's harrowing attempt to have her illness diagnosed and properly treated. She sees a number of doctors and social workers who mis-diagnose her illness, and is institutionalized on several occasions. After "years of hell crying out for help," the woman receives adequate treatment for clinical depression (77). The story ends with her exclamation, "I want to live!," and with her acquired knowledge: "I have a disease called depression" (77). The subtext to this subjective narrative is a crisis of access experienced by the narrator; her greatest suffering is experienced when she is unable to locate and define her illness. The medical communities represented here are the engineers of this crisis, as they attempt to isolate her, misrepresent her illness, and stupefy her with a variety of prescriptions (she is given massive doses of valium) and proscriptions. These doctors and social workers are metaphorically cast within a system that perpetuates denial and withholds information and access. It is significant that when the narrator finally names her illness, she begins to recover, a process which attests to the power of autobiography in two ways. Primarily, as she learns the language of her illness, the woman is able to treat it independently; it is no longer "the problem that has no name". And finally, as
she disseminates this story to a substantial female readership, she instructs and educates others - many of whom may be similarly affected - about the nature and structure of her illness, and the relief they may obtain.

When the editors of True Confessions call for submissions, they write: "Tell us your story, just as it happened. Write it simply, as you would tell it to a friend." It is unlikely, however, that these stories are "true". Their structures are extremely formulaic, and many women writers, including Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood, have submitted fictional stories to this magazine. The employment of the True Confessions subjective voice is comparable to the Confessional process. In a Paris Review interview, Allen Ginsberg defined the confessional poet as one who did not distinguish between what "one would tell one's friends and what one would tell one's muse" (in Phillips:xv). Ginsberg's definition recalls the dramatic monologue, as both definition and monologue encompass the author and the reader, or implied listener/"friend". Sexton's poetry often creates this same relationship. "Wanting To Die" begins as an answer to an unspoken, implied question: "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember" (142). Such a dialogue is alarming to some, who may fear that intimate, seductive accounts of suicidal desire may foster an autobiographical (suicide) pact between the author and reader. Suicide poetry, however, rarely proposes conversion; rather, it speaks to the converted, and names the "unnamable lust," in the "special language" of suicides ("Wanting To: 142). Plath and Sexton's isolated suicide poems are insistently morbid accounts of personal desire, but they are also accounts of a "disinherited" community, a collective longing for, in Kristeva's words, "the secret and unreachable horizon of our loves and desires" (Black Sun:145). Their efforts to communicate this "wretchedness" (Kristeva:145) and melancholy constitute an attempt to make
what Muriel Rukeyser calls, in "Kathe Kollwitz" - "the confession of No," - and testify to "the
gifts and madness of full life" (NALW: 1786, 1784).

Kollwitz, a German graphic artist, is best known for her series of eight lithographs entitled
"Death," and her conception of a "full life" is related to Plath and Sexton's studies of the strange
meeting of "gifts and madness" in their own lives and work. Although each of these poets' isolated suicide poems is resolutely death-oriented, their combined effect is optimistic. Plath originally ordered her Ariel manuscript to end with an image of transcending female symbols, of bees flying into the Spring, but this manuscript was edited and re-ordered, after her death. Sexton's Live or Die also ends with the poet's decision to live, a decision which strategically follows a long and complex series of suicide meditations. This meditative process must be considered in the examination of Sexton's suicide poems, because the suicide meditations are ordered toward a conclusion inscribed in her work (and an intended conclusion, in Plath's case). The impulse to engage in backward-reading of this work originates in the actual suicides of the poets, as if their deaths preserved their contemplative study of the act, and negated their solutions, solutions which may have considerable value to a "disinherited" community of readers. The deaths of these poets actually have very little to do with their suicide poetry, for even within the discourse of suicide, in the work of both these women, life resides and resurges within the poetry itself.

ii

god, there's no music, no trumpet here, it is fast,
and there's no sound at all, just this white
heat of July going on and on, going on like this

Lorrie Moore

In "Poems About Paintings," W.D. Snodgrass discusses his poem, "The Starry Night," which was published in 1968, in his collection *After Experience*. He wrote this poem after being commissioned by an art magazine to write four poems about paintings, and he chose Van Gogh's work because it combined "matter and energy," or "order and disorder," a theme which he was "concerned" and engaged with, throughout this poem cycle (90). Snodgrass doesn't mention Sexton in his essay, although, as I have already noted, she had previously published a poem based on Van Gogh's painting, also entitled "The Starry Night," and no critics have commented on the relationship between these two poems. The poem was included in her collection *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), a "thematically elegaic" book that focuses on the deaths of both of Sexton's parents (Middlebrook, AS:163). According to Diane Middlebrook, Sexton was "acutely suicidal" as she worked on this manuscript, and the themes of bereavement and suicide are entangled in the poetry (AS:164). "The Starry Night" is one of the first poems in the book; it appears in the first section, and it is, technically, Sexton's first suicide poem, or at least it is the first poem that directly addresses her suicidal desires. Her choice of Van Gogh's work as a subject is appropriate, for a number of reasons. Sexton always felt an affinity with the painter, who also committed suicide. In a 1966 letter she writes of one of his paintings: "It's lovely. It writhes. It makes me want to stand out there with him taking my sleeping pills" (SPL:262). Van Gogh was a confessional painter, in many ways: he painted numerous portraits of himself and his surroundings, and his brushwork always reflected "the life of the painter's hand"; his brush was "a direct and spontaneous extension of his internal state of being" (Elsen:285). In a letter to his
brother, Van Gogh maintained that "I myself, as a suffering human being, cannot get by without something greater than myself, something that is my life- the power to create" (531).

Sexton quotes one of Van Gogh's letters, as an epigraph to "The Starry Night": "That does not keep me from having a terrible need of - shall I say the word - religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars" (Complete Poems:53). The quotation functions as an epigraph to the poem, which is a statement of "terrible need," and the book as a whole, which describes the origin and process of this need, and the ways in which it is (partially) resolved through creativity: "Then I...paint the stars". In the first stanza of the poem, Sexton begins to describe/interpret the painting:

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman in the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die. (53)

The first three verses locate the perspective of the painting/poem. The verse, "The town does not exist," explicates that the "town" represented in the painting is a "relic or text from the past" (Berger:10). In the second clause ("except where..."), Sexton clarifies the textuality of the image of the town, by drawing attention, again, to representation, and to the ways in which the image reflects the perspective of the "image-maker" (Berger:10). Through the process of metaphor, two image-makers emerge in the subordinate clause; the "black-haired tree" that dominates the visual field of the Van Gogh painting is evoked as a symbol of composition, a symbol which signifies the interpreting painter and poet. The simile which follows, "like a drowned woman," interpolates this dual perspective, as the speaker of the poem becomes the subject of the poem
and painting; she is superimposed against the "hot sky". The image of the "hot sky" that "boils" with stars captures the "frenzied drama" of Van Gogh's brush-strokes, as well as the quality of the speaker's observing/participating gaze (Murray:72). She is, like Browning's Andrea del Sarto, transfixed by the "sudden blood" that "burns" and "boils" within the work, by the conflict between the static and the animate the work engenders (Browning:209).

The painting itself is static and "dead"; however, like the "black-haired tree," it contains, or is disrupted by, a field of energy and movement, an antithetical "life" force. The intensity of this duality is explicit in the speaker's cry: "Oh starry starry night," a statement which effectively doubles the subjective focus of the painting/poem, with reference to its doubled naming of the title. The last statement in the stanza, "This is how/I want to die," further complicates the ways in which death is composed in the poem. The figure of the "drowned woman" is transformed in these verses. She becomes an agent of the poet's suicidal desire, she is "this," that which incorporates life and death through the artistic medium: "so long lives this/and this gives life to thee" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 18:1063). Van Gogh's notion of the "something greater than myself, something that is my life" dominates this poem, for Sexton also positions her self, as subject, as subordinate to the "power to create," and to empowering creation. The image of the mortal self, dormant against all of creation, the sky and stars, reflects this relationship, and evokes an Elizabethan concept of the immortal, with regard to its suggestion of "the bond between macrocosm and body politic" (Tillyard:98), and, in Shakespeare's words, "the living record" of "powerful rhyme" (Sonnet 55:1068). To die like "this," in one sense then, is to live eternally, a "still un ravished bride of quietness," sealed within the "slow time" of representation (Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn":207).
The speaker's expressed wish to die "this" way, or to die, as she states in the last stanza, "with no flag,/no belly,/no cry" articulates her "sickness unto death," her suicidal despair (54). Kierkegaard refers to the sickness unto death as an "agonizing contradiction"; it is a "sickness in the self" a "dying of despair (that) transforms itself constantly into a living" (151). Despair, or anatomical melancholy, is a recurrent theme in All My Pretty Ones; several of the poems focus on the conflict between the living body, "the body is dumb, the body is meat," and the suicidal impulse: "Fact: death too is in the egg" (57). The image of the "egg" suggests that death is a natural part of/conclusion to the life cycle, but it also implies that death, or the desire to die, can be genetically inherited, an idea that is supported by Sexton's reactions to her parents' deaths. In several poems she parallels her own death-wish with the actual deaths of her parents; in "The House" she describes her parents and writes, "Father, father, I wish I were dead" (74); in "The Operation," she recounts being under anaesthetic, and "calling mother at the dying door" (58). The idea, first expressed in "The Double Image," that death "transfers," or "is catching," is actualized in Sexton's second collection, as she appears, in a sense, to "catch" death from her parents, and expresses the fear that she is, in turn, transferring this death to her daughter: "the brown mole/under your left eye, inherited/from my right cheek: a spot of danger/where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul" (38,66).

There is a formal sense of tragedy to All My Pretty Ones that is underscored by the book's epigraph, a quotation from Macbeth:

All my pretty ones?  
Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?  
What! All my pretty chickens and their dam  
At one fell swoop?...  
I cannot but remember such things were,  
that were most precious to me. (47)
Sexton leaves out several parts of Macduff's speech in this quotation, including the way he feels his loss "as a man," and his decision, through Malcolm's inducement, to "let grief(Convert to anger" (Shakespeare:IV,iii,1.219,228-229:827). By omitting this passage, Sexton underlines her own position as a female tragedian, and as a woman who is "tired of being brave" (49).

In "The Truth the Dead Know," a poem that is dedicated to Sexton's parents, she speaks of "touch" and states: "Men kill for this, or for as much". She goes on to ask "And what of the dead?", a question which reflects the search, throughout these poems, for a way of converting grief, not through anger - "men kill for this" - but through elegy (49). Sexton is critical of elegy, however. In "A Curse Against Elegies," she writes: "I refuse to remember the dead/ And the dead are bored with the whole thing" (60). The dead, in her own elegies, cannot be re/membered, and their mortal bodies are contrasted with their immortal remains, with their resurrection in the poetry, and in the poet herself: "mother, father, I'm made of" (55). Ultimately, it is the poet's life that is scrutinized in the poems, for the deaths of all her "pretty ones" have highlighted "the decay we're made of," and her own, perilous mortality (54).

Death and dying are often gendered in Sexton's poems. In "The Operation," she observes that "a woman's dying/ must come in seasons," referring to the stages of women's biological lives (57). By focusing on "a woman's dying," Sexton creates a discursive distinction in her work, which refers back to the Macbeth epigraph; her loss is expressed "as a (wo)man," and she aligns herself subjectively with this loss. Sexton uses revisionary retelling (a device used by Jean Rhys in her novel Wide Sargasso Sea) in her work, and centers on the story of the "pretty chickens and their dam," on obscured female experience in her work. This revisionary retelling is evident in "The Starry Night," with reference to the way in which the male-authored
landscape is gradually gendered through the female author’s gaze. The second stanza progresses, from the image of the tree/drowned woman:

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons.
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die... (54)

The moon, mythically feminine, is presented in maternal and gynecological terms, in the image of the "orange irons". The serpent, or the "infernal Serpent" of Paradise Lost is an archetypally masculine figure that signifies, in "The Starry Night," death, temptation, consumption and effacement (Milton, Paradise Lost: I,1.34:6). The serpent is seen swallowing the moon's stars, which may be interpreted in two ways. First, death, the serpent, the "spirited sly snake" is constructed in the archaic act of deceiving/seducing the mother (Milton, IX,1.613:212). Subsequently, death devours her "children" - the "stars" - an act which recalls Milton's Eve's account of post-lapsarian life:

...devoured
by Death at last (and miserable it is
To be to others cause of misery,
Our own begotten and of our loins to bring
Into this cursed world a woeful race ...(X,II.980-84:429)

It is not possible to determine whether Sexton was familiar with Paradise Lost, but Milton's work with the figures of Eve and the Serpent is analogous to Sexton's interpretation of these figures. Sexton, however, is ambivalent in her evocation of Eve and the Serpent; she uses these figures as representations of death's transference, and to signify, again, its presence "in the egg." but her rendering of cosmological sexual politics, with reference to the binary opposites, the moon and serpent, is framed with her insistent wish to die, a desire which complicates the
rendering of the two figures. The feminine figure in the poem can also be interpreted as the woman who appears in the twelfth book of Revelations, who is "clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet" (HB:12,1,11.1-2:173). Sexton draws from the language and imagery of this book in her poem: in Revelations, a "dragon" appears in the heavens to "devour" the woman's child, a child "who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron" (12,5,1.2; 4,1.3:173). The dragon, "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan" is seen tormenting the woman on earth, and their struggle, or "war" concludes Book Twelve (Revelations:17,1.2:173).

Eve, or the woman "who is clothed with the sun" (who is seen, in Revelations, taking "nourishment"); the act of "swallow(ing)" and the Serpent are evoked by Sexton as deep tropes; they are consumers, and they signify the relationship between male and female desire (HB:12, 16,1.2; 14,1.3:173). Images of consumption are central to Paradise Lost; as Maggie Kilgour notes, eating, in this poem "provides the model for the sublimation of matter as it is turned from flesh to spirit and the absorption of one lower form into another" (123). "The Starry Night" also delineates the "sublimation of matter," and exhibits a model of transubstantiation that is derived from a "need of...religion" but is predicated on the non-secular, aesthetic world. Sexton's poem expresses desire regarding complete consumption in a way that is both nihilistic and entirely sentient; consumption in the poem may be viewed as assumption, as the speaker's living body is transformed into spirit, and assumed within the painting, poem, and cosmos.

The figures of the moon and serpent are interfaced as a symbol of Sexton's attempt to interface Van Gogh's painting/desire, with the obscured region of her own/feminine desire. She does this by treating the painting as a "stereographically plural" text, as a "passage, a traversal" between her own and its author's subjectivity (Barthes, "From Work":171). She does not merge
these subjects in her own text; rather, she achieves what Barbara Godard has called "the dialog...a differential process of reading when subject and object are the one-within-the-other, double, polyphonic, not singular" (117). The desire that frames the poem - "This is how I want to die"- is also doubled; Van Gogh's dying words were: "zóó heen kan gaan," which may be translated: "I'd like to die like this" (in Snodgrass's "Poems About Painting": 91-2). Sexton's unstated translation of Van Gogh's words brings the representative process of the poem full circle; and suggests that there is no material boundary, "no belly...no cry," no country, "no flag," between the artist's desire, and the poet's desiring (re)telling.

iii

Onanism, autophagy, suicide, it was all the same - a component part trying to run the whole show. She smiled reluctantly and returned the knife to its sheath.

Lisa Alther

Sexton's suicide-desire is never resolved in All My Pretty Ones, and this desire becomes a subject of increased urgency in her next collection, Live or Die. In the author's note, Sexton states that she has arranged the poems in this collection in the order that they were written, and apologizes, because "they read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy" (94). There are several explicit suicide poems in Live or Die, which include "Suicide Note," "Wanting to Die" and "Sylvia's Death," and these poems pose a question that is answered in the final poem, "Live". "Live" refers back to the book's epigraph, which is an excerpt from a draft of Saul Bellow's Herzog: "With one long breath, caught and held in his chest, he fought his
sadness over his solitary life. Don't cry you idiot! Live or die, but don't poison everything" (CP:94). The decision to "live or die" dominates this collection, and suicide is considered, throughout these poems, as a discrete subject. Sexton's suicide attempts are linked with her descriptions of breakdown and institutionalization; however, she focuses on suicide-desire, in this book, as a polemical issue or condition. In "Flee on Your Donkey," one of the first poems, she defines a persistent "hunger" for death, which exists after another breakdown and suicide attempt: "I have come back/but disorder is not what it was./ I have lost the trick of it!/The innocence of it!" (103). The phrase "I have come back" refers to Sexton's return to madness, but it also alludes to the status of her recovery. The recovery that is articulated in To Bedlam and Part Way Back is sabotaged, to some extent, by the recurrent images of breakdown and suicidal desire. In her first collection of poems, Sexton attempted to define her illness, and inscribe a recovery that is predicated on self-definition and autobiography. What was neglected in this initial self-portrait was the constancy of her desire to die, and she essays, in her third book, to explore, and ultimately vanquish this desire.

The deaths of Sexton's parents are also extricated from her own death-wish in Live or Die. In "Suicide Note," she writes: "please do not think/ that I visualize guitars playing/or my father arching his bone./I do not even expect my mother's mouth" (159). The poet is a solitary suicide throughout these poems; she is a "chronic suicide," who "postpones death indefinitely, at a cost of suffering...which is equivalent to a partial suicide, a 'living death'" (Menninger:88). If Sexton was a chronic suicide in life, her poetry performed a "talking cure". Sexton's poetry functioned as, in Artaud's words, an "anterior suicide, a suicide which made (her) retrace (her) steps, but to the other side of existence, not to the side of death" (103). Sexton explores suicide
as a facet of her existence and being in her work. Like Plath, she considers it as "an art," as theater, as a "call(ing)" ("Lady Lazurus":245).

In "Sylvia’s Death," Sexton discusses suicide longingly and jealously. Addressing Plath (and Plath’s death) she writes: "Thief!-/how did you crawl into,/crawl down alone/into the death I wanted so badly and for so long" (126). In "Wanting to Die," she creates a utilitarian contrast between suicides and carpenters: "they want to know which tools./ They never ask why build" (142). In "The Addict," one of the many poems included in Live or Die that does not deal directly with suicide, Sexton refers to the subject in different terms. Sexton describes her drug addiction and explains that her "capsules" keep her "in practice," they provide a "diet from death" with a supplementary "pint-sized journey" (165). This poem clarifies the "terminal" nature of Sexton’s suicide-desire, but it also acknowledges the complexity of this desire (George,"SP":216). Pill-addiction, and conversely, suicide is compared in "The Addict" to a "ceremony...full of rules" (166). The reference to "rules" here is related to the many ways in which suicide is represented throughout the text. "The Addict" is the penultimate poem in the book, and it is loaded with language that symbolizes the preceding work. The term "black sacrament" is used in this poem to suggest the eucharistic nature of substance abuse, and the term also conveys the symbolic structure of suicide, as seen through the collected suicide poems. For although suicide is constructed in these poems as a series of symbolic gestures, each bearing distinct meanings, the (sacred) thing signified - death - is irreducible, constant, and singular.

Because of the nihilistic tenor of the poems preceding "Live," some commentators are sceptical of its hopeful nature, and victorious conclusion (Ames,Gray SPL:204). In Anne Sexton, Middlebrook claims that Sexton "knocked out" this poem "to meet a deadline," and implies that
it is reflective of her "bad writing" (294). The poem is jarring, in one sense, in its contextual relationship with the preceding poems. The terrible dilemma of Sexton's "innocuous occupation," suicide, is almost summarily dismissed in "Live," and the suicide-desires that are expressed throughout the book are banished (166). However, these earlier expressions are at least acknowledged at the outset of "Live". The poem begins: "Well, death's been here/for a long time-" (167). These opening lines refer not only to the persistence of Sexton's suicidal impulses but to the persistence of suicide as a topic in Live or Die. The tone used here is also significant, as the initial word - "Well" - and subsequent pause suggest that a response, or summary is being initiated. Although "Live" may be viewed sequentially, as a poem that follows another in time (each poem in the book is dated) and space, it may also be seen as conclusion and revision of the preceding work, or as the sum of its parts. The dates that appear on the poems suggest a linear sequence of events, and there is also a conclusion implied in this accretion of time. In this respect, Sexton's description of the poems as "a fever chart" is revealing, as the poems are plotted in an ascending manner, toward the fever's break, or end. In A Brief History of Time, Stephen Hawking refers to a "cosmological arrow of time," a "direction of time in which the universe is expanding, rather than contracting" (145). Sexton employs this temporal arrow in her text, and presents, with the final poem, an "expanding," expansive view of her own creation.

The first two stanzas of "Live" are written primarily in the past tense, as Sexton recounts many of the crises, the "hell/ and suspicion of the eye," that are recurring themes throughout her books (167). The "chief ingredient," she writes of her self-in-writing, "is mutilation./And mud, day after day,/mud like a ritual" (167). The use of the term "mud" recalls Jean Paul
Sartre's conception of existentialism, whereby "despair," and "angoisse," are experienced by certain individuals who are aware of the what is harrowing in human existence - the mud or "treacle" that adheres to us, filling us with both "fascination and horror" (Warnock:100). Sexton demarcates this "dreadful" (Warnock:100) existence in horrific terms in the first two stanzas, and depicts a life that is/was "an outright lie," a "perjury of the soul" (167). The "outright lie" is related to the conflict between the body and mind, between life and death, that characterizes much of Sexton's suicide discourse. She writes: "I kept right on going on,/a sort of human statement,/lugging myself as if/I were a sawed off body/in the trunk" (167). The living body opposes the dying mind, and creates a division that is similar to the "double(d) image" - of herself and her image in the mirror - a division that Sexton investigates in her first book of poems. She describes her naked body, and its otherness, in the second stanza of "Live," and states, "I...dressed it up like somebody's doll". The image of the self as doll is employed earlier in the book; in "Self in 1958," she writes: "I am a plaster doll...Someone plays with me...They think I am me!"(155). The divided self of To Bedlam is resurrected in "Live," which not only suggests the distance between this poem and her earlier work, but intimates another, newly realized division, pertaining to societal notions of the passive feminine body, and the individual, aggressive female mind. Sexton uses images of hideous violence to underscore the anguish/angoisse that accompanies the reformation of the divided self. In the first stanza, she writes about a baby on a "platter," who is "cooked but still human"; it is "cooked also with little maggots,/sewn onto it maybe by someone's mother,/the damn bitch!". Here again is the notion that death, or the suicidal impulse, is transferred from mother to child, that the body is, as she goes on to state in this poem, "killed/...caught/in the first place at birth" (167).
There are other conflations of violence and maternity in this collection. In "Christmas Eve" she addresses her mother and writes "I thought of your body/as one thinks of murder" (140); in "Flee on Your Donkey" she carries a knife, and claims "that the knife was for my mother" (103). The rage that Sexton directs toward the maternal figure in these passages illustrates what Adrienne Rich terms "the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood," a violence that is fueled by, among other things, "guilt" and "the fear of (a woman's) own power" (Of Woman Born:277). Indeed, the rage that is directed at the mother in these Sexton poems is tempered by guilt. In "Christmas Eve," the speaker cries "Mary, Mary forgive me," and in "Flee on Your Donkey," the mother is quickly "delivered," by the speaker, from the homicidal sentiment in the preceding verse (140,103). It is Sexton's power to "live or die," and this power is equated with fear, or the fearful, in the image of the dead baby and the mother who colludes with its death. The mother's experience of the "powerless responsibility for human lives" is amplified, in "Live," by the desire to negate this responsibility (Rich:277). Suicide and motherhood can not be reconciled in this poem, and the impossibility of this union is manifested in the image of a baby that is sutured with the "maggots," the seams of the speaker's suicide-desire. Sexton is able to participate candidly in the discourse of maternal violence in this passage, yet she is also able to explicate, by way of its symbolic structure, the irreconcilable difference between her maternal and suicide-desires, between life and death.

In the third stanza, Sexton returns to the present tense, and writes:

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer.
What a bargain!
There was the sun,
her yolk moving feverishly,
tumbling her prize - (168)

The image of the egg recalls and revises the maternal images of the earlier stanzas. It also recalls a recurrent theme in Sexton's poetry, that is, her repeated equation of the reproductive and creative process. In "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman," which appears in Live or Die, the poet addresses her daughter and writes: "women are born twice/...if I could have seen through my magical transparent belly,/ there would have been such a ripening within" (147). In "Live," the image of the "ripening" child is recycled, and supplanted by the sun, which signifies, in this poem, the poet's creative powers. Sexton refers to the sun, in this stanza, as a constant "purifier," an "answer" and a cherished "dream," and suggests a heliocentric, gynocentric universe, and her own/female position at its center (168). Sexton associates the sun with images of human reproduction because of its life-giving properties, and it is similarly aligned with the poet's creative powers. The life-giving role is depicted as being active and engaged; the speaker does not submit to its "feverish" power; rather, she exerts it, in a string of imagery ("Live":168). Once the speaker affirms and discovers her creative capacity, she creates a developmental litany that begins with simile and culminates in metaphor. Lovers "sprout like celery stalks" around her, she envisions a husband "as straight as a redwood," and, ultimately, a family that is a transformative orbit: "If I'm on fire they dance around it/... And if I'm ice/they simply skate on me/in little ballet costumes" (168). The speaker herself is altered through this process; she is a "killer" who becomes an "empress" with a "typewriter," she is someone who is "crazy," but "nice as a chocolate bar" (169).

The language and style of this passage anticipates Sexton's Transformations, her book of poems about fairy tales. She uses images here that are simple and quaint - a "chocolate bar,"
"little ballet costumes" - and assumes the role of the incanting narrator-witch that is adopted in the first poem in *Transformations*: "The speaker in this case/is a middle-aged witch-me" (223). Sexton refers to witches twice, in this and the following stanza, and the witch (as it often does in her poetry) acts as a kind of shorthand for her mental illness and suicidal impulse. The speaker claims that she is trusted, by her family, in spite of the "witches' gymnastics"; she states that her "dearest three" are able to "paint" this witch "pink" (169). There are corresponding transformations in this poem, then, as the speaker transforms her family, and they, in turn, become agents of transformation. The family (or love) is empowered as the motivating, transforming force, but it is the poet's art that implicitly directs this choice. The images of inscription and depiction - the typewriter, the painting - and the acts of poetic transformation suggest that it is art rather than life that is being celebrated in this poem.

"Live" may be read as a conventional fairy tale, wherein "Magic, charms, disguises and spells" are described in the narrative of the "fortunes and misfortunes of a hero (who) ...lives happily ever after" (Cuddon:258). Sexton's decision, to "live happily ever after," is directly linked to her use of these conventions; she turns her "shadow three times round," she reverses the "poison" (potion), she vows to live in spite of the "cruelty," and "the stuffed railroad cars for the ovens" (169,170). The final reference, to the concentration camps, is overtly related to her own, and to the Confessional, practice of uniting the personal and the political, but it is also related to the traditional, fairy tale image of the "ungodly witch," who is stuffed into the oven to "burn to ashes" (Grimm:263). These two contexts draw attention to the duality of fairy tales, and to Sexton's use of this particular embedded narrative. Although fairy tales are designed typically with a happy ending, this ending is usually achieved only after a series of violent
means. And the ending itself is often problematic, particularly to the female reader/writer, given the antifeminist bias of the stories themselves, and the ways in which gender is inculcated in the process of closure8. In "Live," Sexton initiates the critique of fairy-tales that culminates, later, in Transformations, by inverting their nature, and the nature of their reception. These tales reflect a system of societal truths, the poet argues, when she interfaces their images with images drawn from contemporary society and her own experience. What is artificial, conversely, is the narrative that encloses the tales: Sexton's use of fairy-tales, ultimately, signals a self-in-writing that is similarly, artificially, enclosed.

Although Sexton is ambivalent about her own "happy ending," she affirms her power as an artist in "Live," and forges a new direction for her writing. The last stanza concludes:

So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
repeating The Black Mass and all of it.
I say Live, Live because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift. (170)

This decision, as articulated here, details a developing poetics and a philosophical conceptualization of the self-in-writing, rather than the self. The litany of the "Black Mass" entails the backward-reading of biblical texts, a process that metaphorically simulates the psychoanalytic, autobiographical structure of Confessional poetry. The decision to "Live," in this context, is related to a decision to implement an evolving and immediate self-in-writing. The prophecy is confirmed in Sexton's next volume of poetry, a collection of life - and body - affirming "love poems".

The two final verses of "Live" present and restate a number of complex ideas, which are relevant to the poem and to the collection as a whole. When the speaker states "Live," she is concluding the sequence of suicide poems, and she is also terminating the sequence of maternal
violence that is threaded throughout the book. At the beginning of the final stanza, the poet describes a litter of puppies that she had intended to "abort" and "destroy," a decision she recants in favour of "love" (170). The puppies recall the image of the mother in the first stanza - "the damn bitch" - and it is with this morbid wordplay that Sexton subverts her own malice (167). The mother/dog may be viewed as the god (reversed) of the poem; Sexton was notorious for her love of reversed words and palindromes, and she often used the pseudonym "Ms.Dog". The puppies in "Live" are "Dalmatians," and with this image, Sexton gestures to another popular source, the enormously successful Disney film, 101 Dalmations, released in 1961 ("Live":169). Sexton very likely could have modelled herself, in this poem, after Cruella de Vil, the chain-smoking, glamorous, dark-haired 101 Dalmations villainess, who kidnaps dalmations in order to kill them for their coats. Sexton's campy sense of joy in "Live" - "I'm an empress./I wear an apron" - suggests her decision to "Live" (which is another quasi-palindrome for "Evil") is somewhat self-ironizing.

When Sexton states "Live, Live," she never refers to herself specifically; instead, she delivers this exhortation or spell in an effort to animate her own creation. A poem that is initially laden with images of death ("maggots") is transformed, in the end, "because of the excitable gift". Poetry, like the sun, "represents the moment (surpassing all others in the succession of celestial dynasties) when the heroic principle shines at its brightest" (Cirlot:317). Poetry is also as "immutable" and "constant" as the sun, and it is this power that Sexton praises in the poem's conclusion - the knowledge that she will live because of "the gift" (Cirlot: 320). The poet's physical body is subsumed by the body of the poetry in this conclusion, as she celebrates the eternal, the supreme transformation of the mortal self into the immortal self-in-
writing. Sexton expresses the certainty of this transformation best in her last letter to her
daughter, a letter which attests to the strength of her conviction, and conversion. She writes:

Life is not easy. It is awfully lonely. I know
that. Now you too know it - wherever you are...
talking to me. But I’ve had a good life - I wrote
unhappy - but I lived to the hilt...Talk to my poems,
and talk to your heart - I'm in both: if you need me.

(SPL: 380).

For Sexton, as for the Baroque dramatist, "the only good body is a dead one," and
throughout the drama, the "fever chart" of Live or Die, she "unhinge(es) meaning and
materiality from (her) body" and renders this body as an abstract "allegorical signifier"
(Eagleton, The Ideology: 335). The phrase, "my typewriter writes" (169), in "Live," is an acute
reminder of the inhuman and ungoverned persistence of the text as the site of its author's
recovery and renewal. It is this "eventual" process that bp Nichol locates in Craft Dinner: "you
turn the page & I am here... i remember this time is over that time the words were weighted
they are free of me i arrange them now they speak to you" (1,56).
Chapter Four

Transforming Power and Body Building in Love Poems

*Desire has shaken my mind
As wind in the mountain forests
roars through trees.*

Sappho

The ideology of love and its transforming power is not particular to Harlequin Romances ... What is particular to the Harlequin Romances is the presentation of women's experience within (a) patriarchal concept of love, ... and the presentation of the bond of paternalism as the Happy Ending to the cultural contradiction between power and intimacy.

Janet Patterson, "Consuming Passion"

...women do exist sexually, it shall be shown as a fearful social fact, textually. This inscription of woman's difference in language is *écriture féminine* or writing (the) body.

Arleen B. Dallery

In October, 1966, after a "dry spell" of several months, Sexton wrote a number of new poems, completing a quarter of a new manuscript, which later became *Love Poems* ([Self Portrait in Letters](Letters):270). Published in 1969, this collection was the most popular of all of Sexton's books with both the public and reviewers, and it marked a new direction in her writing. The subject
matter and style of her new work differed substantially from previous collections, but this shift did not please all of her critics. Sexton's editor at Oxford University Press, Jon Stallworthy, had "serious reservations" about publishing a British edition of the manuscript, and has remarked that, at that point, he "began to like (Sexton's) poems less and less" (in Middlebrook, AS:300-301). Stallworthy's "diminishing enthusiasm" for her work was related to its progressively "looser and more inflammatory" structure and nature; in his words, he felt that it began to lack the "metrical" or "musical" structure she had learned under Robert Lowell's tutelage (AS:301). Stallworthy's assessment is reminiscent of Lowell's own reflections on Sexton's career, a career he felt "went wrong," when "writing (became) too easy or too hard for her," and when her work became "meager... exaggerated...(and) embarrassing" ("AS":71).

The structure of Love Poems is irregular. The poems are contradictory variations on a theme and are not organized into either discrete sections or a linear argument. Because of this lack of structural organization and the intimacy of the poems - which are largely concerned with love, sex, and the body - the book resembles a diary. Love Poems can be conceived of as a polemical diary, or a "pillow book," a diary-form which is an often sexually intimate "rambling genre" which "incorporates many styles or points of view" (Kadar,RLW:148). It is also a polemical diary, consisting of ideas, topics and materials that Sexton has converted, through publishing, from the private to the public realm. Sexton uses imagery in the poems (particularly in "The Touch") to support the significance of this conversion. Marlene Kadar has observed that diaries are, traditionally, female genres, which have always been socially "acceptable," because "the diary carrie(s) with it the intention not to publish" (RLW:xiii). Kadar compares female diarists to the political diarists in east and central Europe; both constitute "dissident communities," she
phrase evokes the ways in which private genres can be viewed as a response to what is prohibited publically (RLW:xiii).

By retaining the generic signifiers of the private diary within a public and published text, Sexton creates, in *Love Poems*, a "transpersonal" body of work, one which encompasses both realms. Estella Lauter has used the term "transpersonal" to describe the transition Sexton begins in *Love Poems* toward a voice that is a calculated combination of the personal and the public, or im-personal. Lauter observes that Sexton's shift - from the personal to the transpersonal (post-*Love Poems*) represents an "aesthetic decision" regarding "tone," "design" and "persona" (25). Lauter also argues, citing Suzanne Juhasz, that there is a new "power" in Sexton's transpersonal work, that this voice enabled her to speak with more "boldness," and to "enter into dialogue with...extra-human figures" (25). According to Maxine Kumin, this shift in voice allowed Sexton to experiment with a number of personae, many beyond the scope of "the detritus of her life" (Intro.CP:xxx). Both Kumin and Lauter trace the origin of this shift to *Transformations*, but *Love Poems* experiments with the change in voice that comes to dominate her later work.

Although many of the love poems are explicitly directed to a lover, the speaker only addresses this lover as "you," a pronoun that is both intimate and inexact. Where male figures, such as Sexton's teacher, father and psychiatrist, were named in the earlier volumes, Sexton uses a series of impersonal titles to name men in *Love Poems*, such as "Mr.Nazi" and "Mr.Gunman," titles which anticipate her adoption of the pseudonym "Ms.Dog," and which render the male figures abstract rather than concrete subjects. The speaker, or "I," in the poems is also abstract, in contrast to Sexton's earlier work. In her previous volumes, Sexton constructs a Confessional methodology and a self-in-writing whose development is (literally, in *Live or Die*) charted, and
progressive. However, there is no sense of time, place or consensus in Love Poems; the speaker moves between subject positions, troubling the notion of self-construction by ironically comparing herself to, among other things, a "city of flesh," and "a wonder of concrete" (204).

The style and method of the poetry in Love Poems differs from Sexton’s earlier work. It contains fewer internal rhymes, and less complex metrical patterns. In several of the poems, verses are repeated in a manner that is reminiscent of Plath’s work. As Joyce Carol Oates observed in her review of this collection: "It is uncanny, as if somehow Plath were resurrected in Sexton" (144). There are echoes of Plath’s voice in Love Poems; still, this book marks Sexton’s departure from the Confessional mode as it had been defined to this point. She abandons, in this collection, the "peculiarly unrelaxed" Confessional style, which often involves the subverted use of traditional verse forms, such as the sonnet (or Berryman’s "anti-sonnet"). As Sexton begins to draw from other sources beyond "the narrow diary of (her) mind," she also abandons the conventional Confessional subjects, "the key moments of pain (rather than) pleasure" (NAMP:15). Although Sexton does address painful issues in these poems, she also examines, in Caroline King Barnard Hall’s words, "love’s violence, love’s joy," with an unprecedented emphasis on the "joy" of love and life (74).

In many ways, Love Poems recalls the "open prosody" and objectives of Beat poetry. John Clellon Holmes has noted that the Beats attempted in their work to "enmesh" the "mind, body and soul," that they believed that "poetry had the power to redeem life" (228-9). The Beats wrote the political "poems the times demanded," and they positioned the body at the center of their work (Holmes:229). This conflation of the body and the body politic, in American poetry, can be traced to Walt Whitman, whose poetry is often described as a precursor to Beat poetry.
According to Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* could not have been completed without his experiences in the Civil War; it was the war's "sights and scenes" that inspired this "autochthonic and passionate song" (in Buell: xiii). *Leaves of Grass* is a pluralist, political text, which envisions a nation, America, "resum(ing) its liberty," as its citizens sing "with open mouths their strong melodious songs" (9,11). It is also, however, a singular, autobiographical text, as Whitman "sings," in the first poem, "Of physiognomy from top to toe" and his "brain": "the Form complete" (*Leaves*:3). The union, in Whitman's work, of the "single separate person" and the "word Democratic, the word En-Masse" anticipates the Beats' attempts to locate the individual voice within a collective or cultural context (3). Allen Ginsberg's poetry, for example, evokes Whitman directly (in "A Supermarket in California") and stylistically, but he creates an alternative allegiance between self and nation in his work. In "America," Ginsberg expresses a political objection to and alienation from the dominant culture: "America, I've given you all and now I'm nothing./...America, when will we end the human war?/Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb" (31).

Ginsberg and the Beat poets aligned themselves with the counter-culture and contributed to a growing discourse in the arts, a discourse of opposition against dominant politics and ideology. The Beats equated, in Diane Di Prima's words, the "vortex of artistic creation" with the "vortex of political creation" (*Pieces*:81). *Love Poems* is connected, tangentially, to Whitman - "In Celebration of My Uterus," for example, is indebted to "I Hear America Singing" - but Sexton's text, like those of the Beats, is revisionist, and connected to counter-cultural discourse. Although *Love Poems* is primarily concerned with the personal politics of the female body and female sexuality, the final poem in the collection addresses, in part, American military activity in
Vietnam, specifically the speaker's objection to the "napalm...the death nest" (*Complete Poems*:213).

Because male-authored Beat poetry is often gender-biased - "The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!...Everyman's an angel!!" - and antifeminist, it is difficult, at first, to relate the genre to Sexton's gynocentric text (*Howl*:21)⁴. In a 1968 interview, Sexton discusses one of her "love poems," and suggests the difference between her own work and that of the Beats: "I like Allen Ginsberg very much and when he writes about the ugly vagina, I feel awful...when someone hates another person's body and somehow violates it - that's the kind of thing I mind" (*Star*:110). Like Ginsberg's, however, Sexton's poetry is, in Alicia Ostriker's words, "inescapably anatomical"; it creates discourse that opposes male-authored Beat poetry about the female body (*STL*:120) The problematical construction of the female body in male-authored Beat poetry is also redressed within the work of the Beat poets. There were many female Beat poets, including Elise Cowan, Diane Di Prima, and Sally Stern, but their work (with the exception of Di Prima's) has, according to at least one critic, "long since passed into obscurity" (Shulman:18).

In "The Beat Queens," Alix Kates Shulman discusses the "obscurity" of the work of the female Beat poets, and states that because Beat men "urged emancipation from women rather than for them," Beat women were "faced with the dilemma of yearning for acceptance in a woman-hating culture" (18). Beat women were "hopelessly compromised," in Shulman's opinion, and, ultimately, only a few autobiographies (many of which are out-of-print) remain that articulate "the predicament of being Beat and female" (Shulman:18). Diane Di Prima's poetry has been accessible, however, and a good deal of her early work - she began publishing
poetry in 1958 - provides a precedent for Sexton's examination of love and the female body in Love Poems. Di Prima also published, prior to Sexton, a series of "Sort of Love Poems," and while it is not possible to calculate an explicit connection between the two artists' work, there are distinct similarities between the form and style of Sexton's love poems and Di Prima's early work. Many of these early poems - written in the 1960s (before Sexton's Love Poems) and collected recently in Pieces of a Song (1994) - are constructed as songs of praise and celebration. One poem, entitled "Ode to Elegance," begins: "AND PRAISE THE GRACE, the elegance of body," another, entitled "I Get My Period, September 1964" begins: "How can I forgive you this blood?/which was not to flow again, but cling joyously to my womb/To grow, and become a son?" (Pieces:49,51). The latter poem is evocative of Sexton's "Menstruation at Forty" (published in 1966), which also laments a son "never acquired," and the former is comparable to Sexton's "In Celebration of My Uterus," which praises, and exalts the body: "For this thing the body needs/let me sing" ((CP:137,183).

Sexton's debt to Beat and feminist discourse about the body has never been critically acknowledged, although Sexton alludes to these influences in letters and interviews. Her chamber-rock group, "Anne Sexton and Her Kind" (formed in 1968), was clearly a Beat endeavor. Like the bongo-playing, jazz and popular music-loving Beat poets (Ginsberg has performed on at least one rock album, and often performs with a back-up band), "Sexton and Her Kind" sought, in Sexton's words, to reach the audiences of "Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin...the popular poets of the English-speaking world" (in Middlebrook, AS:305). In a 1959 letter, Sexton describes her life in the suburbs, her "new tight little world of poet friends," and observes: "I am a kind of secret beatnik hiding in the suburbs in my square house on a dull street" (SPL:70-
71). Caroline King Barnard has cited this letter as an example of the how Sexton "subscribed in conventional ways to the prevailing attitudes of a male-dominated culture" (Anne Sexton:81). But Barnard's conventional reading of Sexton ignores the critical clues that are offered in this letter: because Sexton has been relegated to the "secret" and "tight little world" of genre, her influences have been scarcely detectable.

In a 1974 interview, Sexton attempts to provide a context for her work. While discussing "Menstruation at Forty" she claims: "There was no women's lib when I was starting. As a matter of fact, it was very shocking that I wrote so personally as a woman" (Star:197). Although it is possible that she was unaware of the poetry of the Beats, Di Prima's subjective poetry existed when Sexton was "starting" her career, as did the women's movement, in 1966, when Sexton began Love Poems. Sexton's assertion highlights one of the perils of the practice and study of Confessional, or autobiographical writing; it is a form predicated on the singularity, and uniqueness of the artist.

When Love Poems was published in 1969, the American women's movement was in full force. The impact of the second-wave feminist movement on Sexton's writing at this time is difficult to assess, because the poet rarely refers to feminism in interviews, or letters, and because her work is generally not located within this movement. In the early 1970s Sexton mentions Kate Millett's Sexual Politics in a letter, and in two interviews conducted in 1974 she discusses "women's lib" to some extent (SPL:329). Her adoption of the pseudonym "Ms. Dog," a woman who "is out fighting the dollars" (CP:386) in her later books indicates, to a point, her participation in the movement, but, as Diane Wood Middlebrook has observed: "The question of whether she was a feminist always bothered Sexton, possibly because of the word's
associations with anger" (AS:365). Middlebrook’s speculation is dubious, however, because it infers something about the artist’s temperament that is not documented or supported by existing biographical materials. Sexton’s poetry of this era, however, is not immediately identifiable as feminist poetry which, at this time, usually contributed to a collective discourse about women’s difficult relationship to the social/patriarchal order. Although Sexton herself acknowledged "social criticism" in her work, her poetry is rarely anthologized as either poetry of protest or feminist poetry (in AS:365). The anthology that Robin Morgan edited in 1970, Sisterhood is Powerful, contains a selection of contemporary poems by women that articulate, in various ways, women’s objections to the "ancient contempt/the Fist that rocked the cradle/Big as God…" (Martha Shelley:568). Sexton’s work is not included, although Plath’s "The Jailor," a poem about a woman’s captivity and sexual abuse, is.

The Love Poems, which are, almost exclusively, celebratory poems about heterosexual love, are anomalous in a period when lesbian and heterosexual feminist poets were engaged in challenging, in Adrienne Rich’s words, "the institution of heterosexuality as a major buttress of male power" (Lies:17). Many of Sexton’s female contemporaries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, writers such as Margaret Atwood, Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich, and Diane Wakoski, explored, with great success, the history and structure of patriarchy, and their own roles as women within a patriarchal culture. Morgan’s poem "Monster" (1972) describes her wish that her typewriter characters were bullets, in order to "kill whatever it is in men that built this empire" and "colonized" her "very body". The violent separatism Morgan expresses in this poem characterizes, in part, the movement that Sexton was reluctant to align herself with (83).

In an interview with Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith in 1974, Sexton criticized the "women’s
lib" anthologists that selected only her "'hate men'" poems, and expressed concern that these poems only showed "one little aspect of (her)" (Star:179). By identifying feminism as a man-hating politic, Sexton reveals what it is that "always bothered" her about the movement. Sexton would never have defined herself as a separatist because she was both influenced by, and close colleagues of, many male poets, including (in addition to the Confessional poets) Anthony Hecht, C.K. Williams, and James Wright. Sexton also engaged in a number of love affairs and deeply intimate friendships with male poets; almost immediately after beginning a correspondence with Snodgrass she began addressing him as (among other affectionate apppellations) "dear passionflower tender" (SPL:41). While poems like Morgan's "Arraignment" (in Monster) - where Morgan calls for the castration and murder of Ted Hughes - tend to support second-wave feminism's man-hating status, Morgan herself addresses this notion, quite succinctly, in her work. "I am one of the 'man-haters' some have said," Morgan writes, adding, "I don't have time or patience here to say again why and how/I hate not men but what it is men do in this culture" ("Monster":83).

Sexton objected to being identified as a feminist poet, an objection which is echoed - in the context of her work's reception - in the sphere of feminist criticism. In an essay published in 1978, Jane McCabe takes a feminist "approach" to Sexton's early poetry, with some reservations. "Anne Sexton was not and never claimed to be a feminist," McCabe writes (216). "So much," McCabe observes, of Sexton's "flirtatious parading, her glamorous posing, her sexual exhibitionism - understandable and forgivable - is clearly unacceptable to a feminist's sense of the sources of her own worth" (216-17). McCabe's conception of Sexton is significant because so little critical work about Sexton's poetry existed at this time. It was not until the late
1980s that her work was revived and re-considered by feminist critics.

In her preface to *Anne Sexton*, Diane Middlebrook describes the apprehension she felt about undertaking critical and biographical work on Sexton. She writes: "Ten years ago, when I was invited...to write (the) biography, I counted myself among the people who didn’t much like Sexton’s public persona" (xx). Middlebrook, however, comes to replicate this very flamboyant and sexual persona in her introduction to the biography, when she describes Sexton’s "throaty voice," her desire to "let the crowd work up a little anticipation" (xix). Middlebrook has also commented, in another interview, that ten years ago, she would not teach Sexton’s poetry; as she researched and wrote the biography, however, she came to recognize her "distinctive achievements as an artist" (*AS*:xxi)⁶.

In her essay "Anne Sexton," Adrienne Rich also suggests that Sexton was not "in any conscious or self-defined sense a feminist," although many of her themes predate second-wave feminism, and were ultimately "validated by a collective consciousness of women" (121). In this essay, Rich recounts a revealing story about Sexton’s work:

In 1966 I helped organize a read-in against the Vietnam war, at Harvard, and asked her to participate. Famous male poets and novelists were there, reading their diatribes against McNamara, their napalm poems, their ego-poetry. Anne read - in a very quiet, vulnerable voice - "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman" -setting the first-hand image of a mother’s affirmation of her daughter against the second-hand images of death and violence... That poem is dated 1964, and it is a feminist poem. Her head was often patriarchal, but in her blood and her bones, Anne Sexton knew.

(121-122)

What is revealing in this passage is not Rich’s final backhanded compliment - which implies that Sexton is an intuitive, rather than an intellectual, artist - but her account of Sexton reading, an
account that is repeated in Middlebrook's biography (Anne Sexton). Here, Rich embellishes the same story, further commenting on how "out of kilter" Sexton's reading was, with reference to the other readings about "napalmed babies and so on" (296). She goes on to note that the poem was the "right thing" for the occasion; "It was about life and surviving" (296). The distinction Rich makes between Sexton's poem and the other, more overtly political/protest poetry is critical, as it draws attention to the varied nature of political/protest poetry. Sexton's decision to affirm life at the demonstration, or read-in, is a good analogy for the feminist methodology of Love Poems, a text which opposes misogynist readings of the female body by creating affirmative discourse.

This strategy to some extent recalls Zora Neale Hurston's decision to write, in Mary Helen Washington's words, "about the positive side of the black experience and ignore the brutal side" (17). Hurston's work, as a result, became the subject of a "ground swell of criticism that would become (her) intellectual lynching," as many critics, including Sterling Brown and Richard Wright, condemned her failure to reveal the "exploitation and terrorism of southern black life" (Washington:16). In her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston creates the biography of a black woman whose "inspiration," according to Hortense J. Spellers, "is inner-directed, rather than imposed by an outer means or force" (253). Because Hurston's work does not explicate social, or "outer means and forces," it was construed as being dangerously apolitical, and a similar interpretation is conceivable with reference to Sexton's Love Poems. Sexton's book of affirmative heterosexual love poems is, as I have already noted, strangely anomalous, particularly if one compares it to contemporary feminist texts of this period. Valerie Solanis's SCUM (Society for Cutting up Men) Manifesto, for example, was published two years before
Love Poems, and while this text is extreme, its revolutionary spirit and fury - it advocates that women overthrow all existing systems and "destroy the male sex" - is indicative of the movement’s scope and urgency (577). Women's groups - in the latter half of the 1960s - from the National Organization for Women to the New York Radical Women (to name but one radical group) were questioning and challenging issues of sexual discrimination and inequality, "re-examining...ideology, words...language itself" as "products...of male supremacist culture" (Sisterhood is:584). Love Poems, conversely, appears to accept, and function within the parameters of, this culture; it is not overtly political in an era when protest and politics were deeply enmeshed.

The question of genre, however, must be considered with reference to Sexton's, and even Hurston's writing, because both authors employed highly subjective modes of life-writing in their work. As Barbara Christian has remarked, Hurston's "radical envisioning of the self as central...as a means of exploring the self as both female and black" anticipates "the fiction of the seventies and eighties" (237). Sexton's sustained work in the area of life-writing (a genre which has only recently been defined) was also imperative, because it constituted an implicit protest, and because it also anticipates the feminist method of "writing the body," a critical and literary mode that became prominent in the late 1970s and 1980s. Madeleine Gagnon and Héléne Cixous's La Venue à l’Écriture (1977) is a good example of this mode, and it urges the female writer to "let the body flow, from the inside," in order to create a "positively reconstructed...sense of one's body" (in Ann Rosalind Jones:229,228). The shift, in contemporary feminist theory, in Mary Jacobus's words, away from "suffering," toward "pleasure" or "the freeing of repressed female desire," indicates women's developing "access
to discourse" regarding their personal and erotic desires, ideas and experiences (216,217).

Many contemporary female artists have effectively challenged the poverty of information, in literature and culture, regarding women’s sexuality. In *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), a novel "which is autobiographical in form but not in fact," Alice Munro uses the Canadian Gothic model as a way of explicating the horrific ways in which female sexuality has been misinterpreted and mystified (Munro, Preface LGW:i). In one scene, Del, the protagonist, and her friend Naomi discuss the issue of rape. "'My mother says it’s the girl’s fault,'" Naomi says, "'It’s the girl who is responsible because our sex organs are on the inside and theirs are on the outside and we can control our urges better than they can. A boy can’t help himself'" (112). Del encounters other erroneous and frightening information about her own sexuality in the course of the novel, information which contrasts with, and is negated by her own experiences and ideas. Her implied decision, at the end of the novel, to reject the Romantic, or Gothic mode of literature and employ the autobiographical form is indicative of the uses and power of this genre, as a way of confronting and dispelling myths about "the lives of girls and women".

Other contemporary female artists have critiqued the patriarchal history of women’s representation, by deconstructing this history, and re/presenting themselves. In *serpent (w)rite* (1987), Betsy Warland unravels a series of historical misrepresentations of women in "language religion and myth," and interfaces her text with an alternative "incessant story line" (16). Warland effaces the difference between her own sexuality and textuality in this book - she conflates, for example, bed "sheets" and "sheets" of paper - and creates an affirmative identification between her self and the process of self-representation. This identification is located in the "re-fusing," the "re-plotting" of women’s representation from a woman’s
perspective, a strategy which Sexton instigated in her second collection of poems, with the poem "Woman With Girdle."

This poem, which appears in *All My Pretty Ones*, can be seen as an epigraph to *Love Poems*, because it strategically anticipates the focus of the later text. The poem is written in the second person, and describes a woman slowly divesting herself of her girdle, until she is naked. The "elastic case" of the girdle encloses a "belly" "soft as pudding" that "slops," and "thighs, thick as young pigs" (70,71). With these images, Sexton evokes an anti-feminist image of the female body that underscores the social logic of the girdle. She contrasts the image of the woman with girdle with the developing image of the naked goddess, who, at the poem's conclusion, stands like "a city from the sea,/born long before Alexandria was./straightway from God" (71).

"Woman With Girdle" is about the liberation inherent in the rejection of artificial constraints, and the deforming, socially constructed notions of female beauty. It is also a poem about female sexuality. In one verse, Sexton describes pubic hair, "that amazing field/that hides your genius from your patron," and draws attention to the non-specular nature of women's sexuality. In "Fat and the Fantasy of Perfection," a feminist psychotherapist, Carol Munter, recalls her mother's girdle and writes: "Her pubic hair was visible beneath these girdles. They seemed to cover a dark, strange, frightening place". Munter adds that her mother "seemed happiest," "freed of her restraints, walking around without her clothes" (226). "Woman With Girdle" contains a similar narrative, as Sexton suggests a happiness, or an ideal beauty hidden beneath restraints or restrictions, and argues the "strange, frightening" regions of female sexuality be scrutinized, and revealed. The poem is revisionist strip-tease, or performance art;
it is reminiscent of the work of radical performance artist Annie Sprinkle, who exhibits her cervix in performances because she thinks it is "beautiful," and because "it's important to demystify women's bodies" (34). Sexton deconstructs the female body, through the image of the disappearing girdle, and reconstructs this body incrementally - foot, uterus, breast and so on - throughout Love Poems. The denuded and demystified figure that stands in her "redeeming skin" (71) at the conclusion of "Woman With Girdle" is the same transcendant figure who "ris(es) from the ashes" in Love Poems, and cries, "my sex will be transfixed!" (176). Although Love Poems marks a departure in Sexton's work, because of its affirmative nature, this earlier poem also illustrates a continuum in her poetry, a developing attempt at body-building, or enhancing the subjective definition of the poet's self and her "sex".

There are many erotic poems about women and men in Love Poems, which is a conventional theme in literature. Secular love poetry, however, is a largely male-dominated genre; with some exceptions, women did not adopt the genre until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Elaine Showalter has remarked that "all feminist criticism is in some sense revisionist, questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures" ("FCW":460). A good deal of women's writing, by extension, contains, in Showalter's words, a "revisionary imperative," as it has often both employed and questioned traditional ways of writing (460). Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence - the Sonnets from the Portuguese - is one example of secular love poetry that conforms to a traditional form, while challenging the form with the inclusion of a female narrator. Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets also employ the traditional structure and themes of the sonnet, while they often explore and restate, from a female perspective, the subjective position of the female lover. In one such sonnet, she writes: "Love, though for this
you riddle me with darts,/And drag me at your chariot till I die,-/Oh, heavy prince! Oh, panderer of hearts!-/Yet hear me tell how in their throats they lie" (Collected Sonnets:8). When women (re)write the secular love poem, they invariably attest to their struggle to revise traditional subject/object positions.

The sexual politics encoded in secular love poetry underlie the best work women have executed within the genre. Emily Dickinson's notorious letters to a certain "Master" are particularly violent treatments of the female lover. Her lurid declarations - "One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy’s bosom" (NALW:867) - illustrate and amplify "the version of male-female relationships (that) was embedded in the law and literature of Dickinson’s day" (Bennett:71). Dickinson's use of the pseudonym "Daisy," a pseudonym and symbol that Sexton often used, is very telling; it is an antiquated term for the female vagina, and its etymon, "day’s eye," refers to the sun, which is the archetypal source or center, and where Dickinson locates herself in her own narrative. While "Daisy" is subordinate to "Master" in the text, he (the unknown recipient) is mastered by her prose, as the power in her text flows like the theoretical structure of S/M, a practice that dictates "movement and the exchange of energy" (Wilson:28)\(^{10}\). Sara Teasdale (a poet whom Sexton greatly admired) complicates domination in her "love song," "Because," and writes: "Take my dreams and take my mind,/That were masterless as wind;/ And ‘Master’ shall I say to you/Since you never asked me to" (106). The majority of Sexton's love poems are also addressed to an unknown lover, and a number of them are affirmative treatments of heterosexual romance. Many of them, however, explore themes of violence, power, betrayal, loss and despair, and male power and the male gaze are scrutinized throughout. The traditional, or popular romance narrative, then, is deconstructed in Love Poems.
In "The Readers and Their Romances," Janice Radway defines the generic popular romance narrative as one which depicts love as "a gradual process," and which includes a developing love between the "hero and heroine" in a story that ends with a "happy union" between them (567). These books, according to Radway, are written and "experienced (by the readers) as a reversal of the oppression and emotional abandonment suffered by women in real life" (558).

The narrative in Love Poems, however, is inverted with regard to generic romance fiction: the book begins with a series of blissful heterosexual fictions, which are followed by poems that delve into the miserable end of the initial romance. Notwithstanding the inclusion of a lesbian love poem, "Song for a Lady," there is a heterosexual bias in Love Poems, which is a part of a larger wave, in the popular culture mainstream in the 1960s, of women's literature that contends with the sexual revolution. In Re-Making Love, authors Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs focus on the women's sexual revolution in terms of the cultural mainstream, and assess the impact of popular women writers and commentators such as Cosmopolitan editor Helen Gurley Brown, who published Sex and the Single Girl in 1962, and Betty Friedan, whose Feminine Mystique was published the following year. The authors note that the views expressed in popular literature often conflicted with radical feminist theory, as the latter tends to be more analytical about issues of sexuality and sexual freedom for women. In the 1960s, however, there was a certain commonality between feminists and "Cosmo Girls," all contributing to, in Germaine Greer's words, the "continuing dialogue between the wondering woman and the world" (Female Eunuch:22).

Sexton's work participates in contemporary feminist discourse in that it is engaged in the "feminist reclamation of sex," or the act of "consciousness raising" with regard to issues of
"genital and body awareness," and female sexuality. Sexton's subjective and explicit love poetry - paeans to breasts, a female lover and masturbation - were startling at a time when sex/body positive female-authored work about female sexuality rarely appeared. In Women On Top, Nancy Friday recalls the circumstances surrounding the publication of her best-seller, My Secret Garden, in 1973. She says that she began researching the book's subject - women's sexual fantasies - in the late 1960s, "because the subject was unbroken ground" (8). At the time, Friday notes, there was not "a single reference to women's sexual fantasies in the card catalogues at the New York Public Library, the Yale University library, or the British Museum library...not a word on the sexual imagery in the minds of half the world" (8). She also notes that even Helen Gurley Brown's "permissive" Cosmopolitan magazine published a cover story by Dr. Allan Fromme, the year My Secret Garden was published, in which he stated that "women are by and large destitute of sexual fantasy" (9). Friday "learned," as she researched her book, "the power of permission that comes from other women's voices," and Sexton's work on sex and the body, which precedes Friday's, conveys this same imperative sense of assent.

The popularity of Love Poems attests to the cultural climate of the time of its composition and publication, a time when many women readers and writers were "re-making love". While Sexton's poems intersect with contemporary feminist discourse, they also reflect the popular themes evident in a novel like Jacqueline Susann's Valley of the Dolls, published in 1966, the year Sexton began composing her book. Valley of the Dolls is a book about sexual and romantic relationships (almost exclusively) between women and men, but Susann presents these relationships as a series of misery-fraught disasters. The book is bleak and its conclusion is dismal; throughout, Susann systematically demolishes the idea of sexual and personal freedom
for women. Women's struggle for this freedom, within heterosexual relationships and in spite of considerable male reluctance, is the theme of Susann's novel. Love Poems presents a comparable view of heterosexual romance as something alternately pleasing, difficult, painful, and always complex, a strategy which is complicated by Sexton's establishment of her self at the center of her life and text, as "the key to it...the key to everything" (CP:175).

ii.

There weren't many volumes in the little walnut bookcase. I gave them a quick once-over, trying to guess which pages might compress a secret. Not Gatsby, Jane Eyre, or Pamela; such novels don't excite a youthful passion for intrigue... Maybe the poets. I tried Plath. Nothing. Then Sexton. When I riffled through the pages, something fell out. I picked it up, (it was a) Polaroid snapshot of a young man, naked and unfamiliar...

Stephen Greenleaf, Beyond Blarne -
a detective novel

and then you called me princess.
Princess!

Anne Sexton, "Us"

The epigraph to Love Poems is a quotation from W.B. Yeats:

One should say before sleeping, "I have lived many lives. I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything
that has been will be again". (172)

The phrase "many a beloved" was one of the titles Sexton proposed for Love Poems, and it, or the quotation as a whole, refers to the fluid power structure inscribed in the book's love relationships (Middlebrook, AS:298). Death and madness, which were employed as metaphoric preludes to life or rebirth in the earlier books, are supplemented by love in this collection. The book begins with a number of images of rebirth - a familiar trope in Sexton's work - but the rebirth that is described is no longer autonomous, or self-governed. Instead it is the animating hand of the male lover that is celebrated, particularly in the first three poems, as the "carpenter," "composer," and "architect" of the female subject's "resurrection" (174,175,174). The image that is evoked here - man giving life to woman - is unsettling in light of Sexton's successful efforts at self-construction in her earlier work. The work in this book is intimate and seductive (Ostriker has commented extensively on Sexton's seductive voice in her essay "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience"). The first poem, "The Touch," recalls Andrew Marvell's seduction poem, "To His Coy Mistress," and Sexton seems to be commenting on her previous (death-centered) work, through the construction of an ecstatic love affair: "The grave's a fine and private place/But none, I think, do there embrace" (NA.I:1361).

The "hunger," and desire for death that dominated Live or Die is articulated differently here, as "hunger" becomes equated with loneliness, and desire is composed as sexual desire. The first stanza of the first poem, "The Touch," employs a third-person narrative, and its description, of the hand of an "unconscious woman," stresses the urgency of the speaker's need for "something to touch/that touches back" (173). The touch of the lover's hand offers her "Life" that "not even death (can) stop," and regenerates her senses, her 'frozen' "gestures" (174). The stasis that
Sexton describes is reminiscent of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," one of the "Lucy" poems. In the Wordsworth poem, both the speaker and Lucy are sealed within an immortal slumber, and cannot experience feelings, or "human fears" (Selected Poems:115). This "slumber" is comparable to suicide, as expressed in Sexton's earlier work, for suicidal desire often functions in these early poems as a kind of living death. The "carpenter" image used in "The Touch" also recalls an analogy Sexton makes in "Wanting to Die," between suicides and carpenters, who never ask "why build" (142). The suicide/carpenter in "Wanting to Die" does not act according to her own design, rather, she employs her "tools" in accordance with the dictates of another. The carpenter in "The Touch" is the male lover, who, like the carpenter, is also employed as a means of regeneration. Although he is privileged as the agent of the speaker's regeneration, his touch and his actions function as a way of emphasizing the speaker/subject's position in the text; he acts as a catalyst in the first sequence of Love Poems, a prelude to the speaker's "life" and narrative.

The lover in the first sequence of poems in Love Poems - "The Touch," "The Kiss" and "The Breast" - is never named beyond "Darling," or "you". "He" is never gendered either, though these poems were written for a man in Sexton's life, and the omission is significant. It is significant because it underlines Sexton's reluctance to compose explicitly heterosexual poetry, and because it relates to the disembodied formlessness of the figure addressed in the poems, who acts as the invisible "architect" beyond the monumental architecture of the female subject. The figure is so inchoate that Sexton was able to show these poems to different men, on different occasions, and claim, untruthfully: "I stayed up all night writing these poems for you" (AS:257).
Erica Jong's popular and contemporary novel, *Fear of Flying* (1973), which cites one of Sexton's poems, works with a similar notion of the fictive male lover, or "impossible man" who is "nothing more than a spector of our own yearning" (101). This emphasis, on the creating, "yearning" mind of the female author, is supported by Alison Light's reading of the romance, a genre which she associates with women's "literary anorexia" (143). The production and consumption of romance novels, she argues, "makes visible an insistent search...for more than what is on offer," and functions as "a protest against, as well as a restatement of, oppression" (143). Sexton's love poems employ certain formulae of the Harlequin, or popular romance story. What is distinctive about these novels, as Ann Barr Snitow has commented, is the way in which they "reverse" "the usual relationship": "woman is subject, man object" (134). Sexton repeatedly uses this construction, and she also creates a dubious and conventional portrait of a woman who is rescued and revived by a man's touch.

This theme is conventional, archaic even, and it works in Sexton's text to signify, once more, her use of the fairy tale as embedded narrative in her work. The image of Sleeping Beauty permeates the love poem sequence, as Sexton stresses the image of the dormant speaker and her lover's opportune kiss. Her work in the collection *Transformations* signalled Sexton's familiarity with the original texts of fairy tales, and her telling of the Sleeping Beauty, or Briar Rose story, in this later collection, alludes to the violent original tale, written by Giambattista Basile in 1636. The original Briar Rose is not only kissed by her nobleman lover; she is raped, and deserted by him when he returns to his wife. The poems addressed to a male lover in *Love Poems* follow the same trajectory, as the celebrated lover of the first sequence eventually deserts the speaker, and returns to his wife.
In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses the Basile, and the Perrault *Sleeping Beauty* stories, arguing that Briar Rose's slumber, in the early tales, was an elaborate metaphor for the female adolescent's first menstrual cycle, and subsequently, her sexual maturation. The later versions of the story, which ended with the lover's kiss, neglected to describe Briar Rose's life, post-kiss, and left her sealed instead in the first moments of barely conscious "perfect femininity" (Bettelheim:236). The "perfect femininity" that Sexton inscribes in the first sequence of love poems is undercut by the poems or events that follow in the book. The complete romance narrative can therefore be seen as a prolonged (re)reading of the fairy tale, and as a movement, in Sexton's work, away from the Confessional voice. "The Touch," for example, mentions certain figures such as the speaker's sisters, and a living mother and father, details which contradict the autobiographical narrative that precedes *Love Poems*. These tentative fictional gestures anticipate Sexton's formal break with Confessionalism, beginning with *Transformations*, a title which virtually announces this shift in voice. Some of Sexton's early poems are non-confessional (such as *To Bedlam*’s "For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach"), but they were always distinctly fictional, and set apart from the clearly autobiographical, surrounding work. In *Love Poems*, as I noted earlier, Sexton begins her transition to the transpersonal voice, a voice which blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, and between the personal and the collective. The poems, however, retain many of Sexton's strongest Confessional strategies, as they travail to instate an erotic subject, or body, within the growing body of her work, and to implement, in Liz Porter Hankins' words, the "temple of her body (as) her ideological universe" (511).

The first stanza of "The Touch" is an elaborate description of the
speaker's hand:

For months my hand had been sealed off
in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railings.
Perhaps it is bruised, I thought,
and that is why they have locked it up.
But when I looked in it lay there quietly.
You could tell time by this, I thought,
like a clock, by its five knuckles
and the thin underground veins.
It lay there like an unconscious woman
fed by tubes she knew not of. (173)

Sexton uses a number of images here, and in the following stanzas, to emphasize the speaker's detachment from her hand and her sense of touch. She likens it to "an unconscious woman," making the hand function, in this image, as a metonym for the speaker. This poem reads, initially, like "The Wife's Lament," the Old English lyric poem which describes a woman who is both buried within the earth and "oflangad," "seized with longing" (Old English:250). The images of burial and the underground employed here immediately recall the way that life is described in Sexton's previous collection, Live or Die: the "borrowed... numb" existence of "suicides (who have) already betrayed the body" (166,143). These images of confinement and burial could also allude to subjective, erotic poetry, poetry which is often - like Colette's work - composed under pseudonyms and in secrecy.

In a recent Seventeen magazine article about poetry - which recommends the work of Sexton - the poet Jack Grapes is cited, urging young women to write poems based on their emotions and experiences. "The best poetry expresses the feelings that are inside of you," Grapes writes, "perhaps many that you've never dared express elsewhere" (44). The article goes on to suggest that young women make the transition from writing in their diaries to writing poetry. In support of this idea, Carolyn Forché is quoted as saying: "Keep a journal. This is an excellent way to
record what you think of the world in an informal way. And sometimes, poems grow from journal entries" (44). The idea that the respectively private and public spheres of diary writing and poetry are easily linked is a contemporary notion that is indebted to the Confessional mode. Historically, many poets have also been diarists - including Thomas Traherne, Dorothy Wordsworth and W.B. Yeats - but Confessional poetry constitutes an unprecedented conflation of the two genres. Yeats, for example, was scrupulous about distinguishing between his journals and poetry (to the extent of writing them in completely different formats), while Byron's journals were burned by his appalled literary executor after his death in 1824.

It is Sexton's sustained confessional project that best supports the bridge between the private and public spheres, in literature. In "'Life out of Art'," Alice Van Wart observes that "Historically, women were drawn to diaries because in them they were able to express themselves in times when they were not encouraged to practise other forms of expression" (Life Writing:22). Sexton's confessional poetry is similar to diary writing, in this sense, and she addresses this issue within her work.

In "The Touch," the speaker refers to her hand, which touches, but also writes, as being buried in a "tin box" - a shrewd metaphor for the female practice of diary keeping. Although both women and men keep journals, diaries are manufactured exclusively for young girls. This gender-bias is apparent in the way these diaries are marketed and designed; they are invariably decorated with the usual "feminine" detritus: hearts, flowers, ponies, ornamental print and so on. They are also invariably sold with a lock and key, signifying the ways in which young women are systematically advised to contain and control their feelings, urges and ideas. The locked books evoke the image of Pandora's box, a mythological trope that is embedded in the
very practice of diary-keeping, as is emphasized by the caveats that most girls inscribe in their diaries. In "re.reading: blatantly autobiographical - an essay in fragments," Nancy Chater includes the epigraph/warning from her adolescent diary:

Notice: If you have the nerve to read this diary without my personal permission, you are the lowest, dirtiest piece of skum (sic) in the world. This is my property and if you care about me you would respect my privacy. I just hope that if you read it that it shocks you and bothers you...I know that it is risky keeping a diary but we can’t live life on ifs...

Nancy June 19 1973, 13 years old (25)

Chater goes on to admit that she "still shake(s) at the thought of telling the truth," and illustrates, in this autobiographical essay, the empowerment implicit in the transition from the private to the public sphere. Deborah Kaplan has observed that the genre of women’s private writing (such as letters) as opposed to public genres (such as poetry) has "no intrinsic censoring features which...suppress or resolve cultural contradictions" (212). The cultural contradiction Kaplan refers to here is the "double nature of women’s cultural lives," wherein women, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "band together in order to establish a counter-universe, but ... always set it up within the frame of the masculine universe" (in Kaplan:212). Sexton addresses this contradiction in the first stanzas of "The Touch," as she attempts to delineate her own sexuality and subjectivity within a similar "frame."

Sexton merges the contradictory realms of her private and public life in "The Touch"; its first stanzas constitute a restatement and elaboration of her Confessional poetics. The merger is telegraphed in the third stanza, when the speaker (referring to the conceit of the displaced hand) states: "And all this is metaphor," a phrase which unites the created speaker and the creating
poet (173). This union is made effective here (and throughout Love Poems) with the introduction of the erotic body into the poetry, a strategy which extends the political implications of the personal. Sexton refers to a dog, in this poem, that "owns her own hunger," and it is this condition that she attempts to create for herself, as she assumes authority, the authorship of her own desires (173).

iii.

Some women shouted that there was no difference, that both were products of the pornographic imagination, which essentially objectifies women and separates their sexuality from their personalities. And other women thought there was a difference - that Miko was showing women the way they really were and not all prettied up for the camera...

Barbara Wilson, The Dog Collar Murders

But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more...

Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, epigraph to The Dog Collar Murders

The poems that follow the first sequence in Love Poems are not arranged according to theme. There are a pair of poems, however, which contrast and appear to contest the first sequence, poems which address a departed lover. These poems, "For My Lover, Returning to
His Wife," and "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman," complete and revise the narrative established in the first poems. The affair, rapturously described in the first poems, is concluded in this set, and the speaker, formerly animated by love, is diminished in the process. These are poems about power, and powerlessness, a theme which runs through many of the poems in the collection. They are also poems about the fragility of self-identity when self-identity is conceived through the gaze of another. In "The Breast," Sexton locates this issue. The speaker describes her breasts, stating: "I measured my size against movie stars./I didn't measure up. Something between/my shoulders was there. But never enough" (175). This passage appears in the context of the speaker's celebration of her breast, "the eye...the jewel," and she refutes the notion, through self-affirmation, of not "measuring up" (176). This refutation, however, is also conceived through the eyes of the lover, as the speaker presents herself as "an offering, an offering" to him (176). The disastrous end of this love affair is presaged in the initial poems with the introduction of the assessing other. The speaker's self-definition is constructed here, in part, through external sources: "movie stars," the hand and eye of the "composer," the composing lover.

In "The Nude Swim," Sexton describes an incident which emphasizes the significance of this male gaze, of the lover's surveillance. The speaker and her partner are swimming in a grotto in Italy, and in the last stanza, she states:

The walls of that grotto
were everycolour blue and
you said, "Look! Your eyes
are seacolor. Look! Your eyes
are skycolor." And my eyes
shut down as if they were
suddenly ashamed. (184)
The connection made, here, between the speaker and the world, is not uncommon in Sexton’s poetry. However, in this instance, the contrast is drawn by an observer, and as she is rendered, her eyes "shut down". Elsewhere in Love Poems, Sexton extends the image of the rendering other, and depicts herself, "laid out like paper" while her lover "draw(s) (her) like a child" (220). The image of the female speaker as a sheet of paper is revealing, in that it relates to the reversed subject/object positions articulated in the poems. The strong subject position Sexton creates for herself in the previous books is toppled in this collection, as it/she becomes subordinate to a lover, and to the theme of love. The power that Sexton confers to this lover is the power that she formerly possessed: the ability to author her self. Her discomfort with this subjective shift is apparent in the poems that describe the end of the affair, but it is not until later, in her non-confessional poetry, that Sexton is able to discuss sexual politics in a complex manner.

The love poems included here are all drawn from actual events in Sexton’s life, and the constraining, restrictive nature of truth, or factual events often inhibits confessional writing. The transcription of actual events constricts the polemical and imaginative possibilities that fiction offers, possibilities which, for example, are manifest in Sexton’s later work with religious archetypes. The loss of personal and textual liberty that is inscribed in the love poems, however, is recounted furiously in "For My Lover," "You All Know the Story," and other poems. Adrienne Rich observes, in her poem "The Phenomenology of Anger," that women’s anger is an "act of becoming conscious," and it is in Love Poems that Sexton begins to consciously express her anger at "the gender of things" (Rich, Poems S&N:202).

In "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," the speaker contrasts her own position with that
of her lover's wife with considerable animosity. The rage that is expended throughout is directed almost exclusively at the wife, who is alternately parodied and mocked as an angel of the hearth and a "bitch" (189). The poem, however, is not about two women; ultimately, it is about the male lover's perception of these women, a narrow vision that is assailed. Throughout the poem, the wife is depicted as a figment of her husband's limited imagination - she "was carefully melted down for (him)/and cast up from (his) one hundred favorite aggies" (188). The contrast between the two women is summarized in the last two stanzas:

She is so naked and singular.
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.

As for me, I am a watercolor.
I wash off.  (190)

The final stanza is set in a lighter typeface that accentuates the contrast between the "solid" woman and the ethereal woman, who vaporizes at the poem's conclusion. These stanzas indicate the lover's notion of the legitimacy of matrimony, as opposed to the less legitimate, less consequential extra-marital affair.

The images used here are designed to highlight the lover's solipsism: his marriage is a "monument" which he erects to himself. Sexton erases herself, conversely, as the subject, from her own text, as if she has been dismantled by the constructing masculine figure in the poem. Sexton returns to this trope in "You All Know the Story," when, in the last verses she describes a lover's actions toward "the other woman": "Look,/When it is over he places her,/ like a phone, back on the hook" (196): The image of the telephone "on the hook" is violent; the "hook" evokes an image of torture that is supported by the way in which the woman is silenced
by the man's gesture. Sexton's voice and being disappear in both poems, but the masculine power that is created in these poems is undermined, significantly, in the first. In the middle of "For My Lover," the speaker states, after describing the "always" wife and her "momentary" self: "I give you back your heart./I give you permission - " (188,189). The power, in this cruel and sardonic poem, is still clearly the speaker's to give. In this collection, however, Sexton is rarely self-referential about her role as the book's author. It is only in "Again and Again and Again," a poem about anger - that "come(s) back" "again and again" - that the poet makes explicit reference to her own creative powers (195). The speaker remarks, to an unspecified man, "I (will) cut up one dozen new men/and you will die somewhat,/again and again" (196). The paper-chain of men Sexton describes is revealing given the blankness and plurality of the man or men she addresses in the poems, men who are never given features, or a specific identity. The violent image of cutting acknowledges the author's creative capacity, and the image of the reduplicated "dozen men" is a complex symbol of power. The lover's identity and uniqueness are obscured in this process; he becomes a series of reflected images, recalling the narcissistic lover whose wife is a monument to, or mirror of, himself. Sexton refers to the power of writing (as well as reading) here, as the man's "death" will re-occur with each reading of the text.

In "The Break," Sexton observes that "the body is a damn hard thing to kill" (191). Although Sexton creates a narrative about a woman's increasing powerlessness in a sexual relationship, she does not "kill" her erotic body - the body that her lover is said to engender - upon his departure. There are a number of other poems in the book which affirm female sexuality and the female body, in spite of the dismal context that the romance poems provide.
In "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," the speaker is masturbating in a sad fashion, because of the "end of the affair" (198). While the poem suggests that masturbation is a lonely alternative to sex with a partner, it also describes onanism as an "annoying miracle" (198). The phrase suggests a sexual revelation that is unwelcome, but related to a developing theory of sexual autonomy. Peggy Kamuf has observed that a "Woman masturbating is to her own sexuality (in control of it, mastering it - masterbating) what the sultan is to female sexuality" (in Gallop:74). This same notion is revealed in Sexton's text as the poem plays out. In the first stanza, the speaker is "fed"; she notes that the "slippery eye," her clitoris, "is mine" (198). In the final stanza, she comments that "boys and girls" who have sex together, are "overfed," and the poem ends with the refrain: "Alone at night, I marry the bed" (199). Sexton's cynicism about the socially sanctioned state of matrimony is restated here, as she explores alternatives to traditional forms of sexual activity.

In "Song for a Lady," a poem about two female lovers, Sexton describes a union that is "sane and insane" (204). She creates this opposition in the poem in order to draw attention to the conflict between the personal and the public realms with reference to lesbian romance. The public realm is represented by images of a "minister" - rhymed at one point with "sinister" - and a "notary" (204, 205). These are figures who sanctify and certify social contracts, and their presence in the poem alludes to the fact that sexual or love relationships between women are not recognized, and rarely legitimized within the church, or legal system. Sexton redresses this heterosexist system by revising, and re-writing what is "insane" about the prevailing legal, social and religious sanctions regarding homosexuality. She creates, in contrast, an alternative "sane" realm through the transformative poetic process. As the "bad rain," that is "like a minister,"
flows against the windows, the lover supplements and assumes its theological function; she says
"novenas to (her) ankles and elbows" (204). The female lover is exalted as "a national product and power," as Sexton employs the demotic of commerce and industry in order to emphasize the value and strength that this relationship offers (204).

"Even a notary would notarize our bed," she concludes, completing the poems’s cycle of revisionist sanctification, assessment and certification (205). Sexton has re-cast traditional figures of authority and power in this poem, in an effort to imagine and create a vision of sexual autonomy for women. The tableau she invents is similar to a "fresco" that Nicole Brossard describes in "Lesbians of Lore":

one day I looked up and saw revealed to me the most beautiful fresco ever seen by women - on my lesbian word of honour. It was perfectly real, this fresco, and at the bottom of it was written: a lesbian who does not reinvent the world is in danger of disappearing  

(Al:136).

When Sexton reinvents, and becomes "me maker" ("Knee Song":205) in her work, she confronts and dispels the myth of her own disappearance as the text’s vanishing subject. Although Sexton does not inscribe a lesbian identity for herself in this "Song for a Lady," she does identify herself as a desiring element within what Adrienne Rich calls the "lesbian continuum".

There is no sense of progression in Love Poems; the poems are ordered in a haphazard way. As a whole, they accurately simulate what the Gawain poet called love’s "grief and grace," but they do not create a sustained, cohesive narrative. Sexton explores a number of contentious issues in the book, however, and her explicit and affirmative examination of the female body and female sexuality distinguishes it as an important document. As Katha Pollitt has remarked,
"thanks largely to Sexton's own influence, it is no longer shocking for women to write poems about menstruation or her uterus, or abortion - or for that matter, about erotic joy" (534). The erotic joy depicted in many of the poems is mitigated by its romantic context. Sexton acknowledges her struggle with sexual politics and power within heterosexual relationships, but never fully explores or resolves these difficulties.

The last piece in the collection, "Eighteen Days Without You," is a long poem that ends with the (re)union of the speaker and her male lover. This last happy ending is undermined, again, with the evocation of fiction and fairy-tales: "I will be soft wood and you the nail/and we will make fiery ovens for Jack Sprat" (220). The violence of this passage suggests Sexton's awareness of the violence encoded in all fairy-tale closure, a theme which she would research and embellish in her next collection. Transformations can be viewed as a blueprint for Love Poems; although it was written later, it examines and locates the ways in which romance fictions are created and propagated. Its chronological occurrence imitates the autobiographical process. As Sexton herself observed, using Kierkegaard's words: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards"15.
Chapter Five

Grimm Re-Plotting in Transformations

*Nursery fears made flesh and sinew; earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment. The beast and his carnivorous bed of bone and I, white, shaking, raw, approaching him as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction.*

Angela Carter, "The Tiger's Bride"

*It's that we want to be on the leading edge of this trash phenomenon, the everted sphere of the future, and that's why we pay particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon.*

Donald Barthelme, *Snow White*

*Transformations*, Anne Sexton's fifth collection of poems, was published in 1971. According to Diane Wood Middlebrook, the appearance at this time of experimental novels such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967) "suggested to Sexton that there was a space in literature for the sadistic spin she could give a children's story" (Middlebrook, *AS*:333). In a letter to Paul Brooks (a Houghton Mifflin editor) dated October 14, 1970, Sexton defends and explains her poems, which re-tell the Brothers Grimm fairy tales. She locates the book as being "part of (her) life's work...a kind of dalliance on the
way" (Self Portrait in Letters:326), and acknowledges that the poems are different than her previous work. They lack, she explains, "the intensity and...some of the confessional force" of the earlier poems; they are "contemporary," and they constitute an attempt to reach "outward and as always backward" (325). The poems are "contemporary" because they transform, as Louis L. Martz has observed, "tales from the Brothers Grimm into highly personal modern anecdotes," and stress the "horror...of that ancient world" with a "universal application" (47). They are also "cool" poems, as one reviewer remarked, which "turn the fairy tales into comic strips and other pop-art artifacts" (Lehmann-Haupt:147). The language of Transformations is extremely accessible, and loaded with references to popular culture. This is Sexton's first non-confessional book, but it retains (as she implies with her qualification) "some of the confessional force," because many of the subjects and themes she contends with are reminiscent of her earlier work.

The appearance of these poems was greeted with enthusiasm by critics and by Sexton's literary agent, Cindy Degener, who raved: "Anne Sexton in the Popular Culture- Whooppee" (in AS:337). Degener was able to place a number of the poems in popular magazines, such as Cosmopolitan and Playboy, which pleased Sexton, who commented: "As you say, I'm 'in', but I was never conscious of being out" (SPL:320).

In "The Gold Key," the poem which prefaces Transformations, Sexton explicates the book's poetic strategy, and alludes to the artistic climate of the time. She writes:

...this book of odd tales
which transform the Brothers Grimm.
Transform?
As if an enlarged paper clip
could be a piece of sculpture.
(And it could.) (Complete Poems:224)

Sexton's reference to an "enlarged paper clip" recalls the pop-art that emerged in the late 1960s,
the paintings and sculptures that were often isolated enlargements of every-day, domestic items, such as soup cans, brillo-pad boxes and cigarettes. Roy Lichtenstein's work provides a parallel to Sexton's work with fairy tales. Lichtenstein produced (among other things) a number of inflated True Love comic-panels in order to emphasize "how real the image seems to the public and how unreal the contrast between its physical nature and the final rendering" (Elsen:314). As Lucy Lippard has observed, "what seems to be satire" and "complacent acceptance" in pop-art, "is in fact a new way of dealing with," or reconstructing, "life and art" (84). The movement constituted the development of, in Hugh Adams' words, "a new language and conceptual basis for processing" information about society, "the world" (62). Sexton is faithful to the original Brothers Grimm text in her work, and she isolates and magnifies certain details in order to (re)present her perspective. She produces, as Karen Michaelson has argued, a "literary language" in this text, a way of confirming and troubling the notion of "consensual reality" within the fantastic genre (100-101). Because fairy tales are fantastic, they are thought to exist beyond the realm of consensual reality. Sexton's book effectively addresses the ways in which these tales are connected to, rather than estranged from, the social norm. Her work with fairy tales contributes to a substantial body of feminist criticism that seeks to examine how these tales "function to maintain the present arrangements, and how they might be rearranged or reutilized to counter the destructive tendencies of male-dominant values" (Zipes:4).

Sexton's previous books offer an argument for the necessity of self-definition in women's writing. Transformations is a counter-text which provides evidence to support this hypothesis, as she creates, with her own revisionist Legend of Good Women, a series of interpretations and caustic critiques of male-authored female characters within a social and literary context. In
Woman Hating, Andrea Dworkin observes that "we have not formed the ancient world - it has formed us"; "We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity...as real identity" (32). Sexton's work also locates female identity as it is constructed in the tales, and (re)forms this practice, through the process of criticism and revision.

It is difficult to determine the origin of popular fairy tales because of their complex oral and literary history. The tales have been traced to various points of origin; "Cinderella," for example, originates in China, and there are at least 345 "Cinderella" stories, "diffused all over Europe, Africa and Asia" (Bettelheim:245). The earliest narrators of folk tales are generally identified as women. Gianfrancesco Straporola, an Italian storyteller, claimed that his 1553 tales - The Delightful Nights - were taken from "the lips of ten young girls" (in Panati:175), while Mlle. Lhérîtier, a 17th century French author of fairy tales, refers to a tradition of story-telling "mothers and grandmothers" (in Ariès:96). A third of the Grimms' fairy tales were told to the Brothers Grimm by a nurse, "alte Maria"; the brothers were among the first to "retell the fairy tales as they had first been told by mothers and female caretakers of children" (Kolbenschlag:4). In her introduction to the Virago collection of fairy tales, Angela Carter discusses the "European convention of an archetypal female storyteller, 'Mother Goose' in English, 'Ma Mère L'Oie' in French" (x). She relates this convention to the idea of the 'old wise's tale', "a derisive label," she observes, "that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time it takes all value from it" (xi). When Sexton depicts herself, in "The Gold Key," as "a middle aged witch...my face in a book/ and my mouth wide," she is reclaiming the role of the female author/speaker of the tales (223).

The female narrator is not a feature of the Brothers Grimm tales; the narrator of their "The
Golden Key" is unidentified and the speaker's gender is not specified. The story describes a young boy discovering and opening a chest. As the chest is opened, the reader is suspended: "now we must wait awhile until the lad has looked inside the chest" (12). The Grimm tale ends with an ellipsis, while Sexton's continues after the boy's gesture: "(the key) opens up this book of odd tales" (224). The boy's discovery is supplemented by the poet's recovery of the text, the site of the tales. By reverting back to her text, with this phrase, Sexton again draws attention to her transformative powers, as well as her authorial presence in the text.

Written fairy tales are thought to originate in the East; one of the first known texts is The Thousand and One Nights, which was composed in Arabic, and translated into French in the eighteenth century (Cuddon:258). The three most popular European texts are Charles Perrault's Contes de ma mère l'Oye (1697), the Brothers Grimm's Household Tales (1812), and Hans Christian Anderson's Fairy Tales (1835). In seventeenth century France, written fairy tales were a fashionable form of recreation; the Duchesse de Choiseul remarked at this time that she found them to be "as probable as present-day history" (in Ariès:96). In Centuries of Childhood, Philip Ariès notes that this public interest in "old, half-forgotten stories of the oral tradition" reflected "a curiosity of an archaeological or ethnological nature foreshadowing the modern interest in folklore and slang" (96). The tales have persisted for a number of reasons, "from antiquarianism to ideology," and the perpetuation of these tales, over centuries, ensures the preservation of certain cultural values and ideas (Carter:ix). While the preservation of "half-forgotten" cultural artifacts is laudable, the endurance of the social messages these artifacts convey is curious, given the artifacts' archaic nature. The "Cinderella" stories, for example, have not changed, in essence, since the inception of the tale in 9th century
This story is for and about young women, and its transhistorical capacity and relevance are suspect to many feminist critics, who believe that, in Madonna Kolbenschlag's words, fairy tales "recapitulate a view of reality that is rooted in the determinism of sex-roles" (4).

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim speculates that when children listen to fairy tales, they learn to "create order out of the chaos that is (their) inner life" (75). The fairy tale, he explains, orders the "disparate and confusing aspects of the child's experience" into "opposites," and teaches him/her to "project" these elements "onto different figures" (75). There are a limited number of "different figures" in fairy tales, however, and Bettelheim makes no gender distinctions in his discussion of the child's acquisition of a "total personality" (76). It is difficult to imagine a female child acquiring a conflict-free "total personality" through the lessons of fairy tales, because female roles, in this genre, are particularly limited. In her survey of English fairy tales, Marcia K. Lieberman summarizes the ways in which females are depicted. She notes recurring "premises and patterns," which include the "wicked stepmother" and the privileging of youth and beauty (187). She also discusses the strict "associational pattern" that runs through most of the tales, wherein beauty, youth and passivity are rewarded - usually with money and romantic love, or marriage - and ugliness (which is not rewarded) is associated with "ill-temper," vanity and evil (188). Male roles are also limited, but as characters, they enjoy a fuller spectrum of activities and attributes such as heroism, courage, bravery, strength and power. Karen E. Rowe has studied the "mass popularity" of fairy tales and fictions, and noted that, as folklorists have also observed, these tales are not "mere entertainment," but "one of culture's primary mechanisms for inculcating roles and behaviors" (210).

Sexton's work in *Transformations* is part of a history of women's writing that writes, re-
writes or resists the traditional fairy tale. Two seventeenth century women writers - Mlle. Lhéritier and Mme. de Sevigne - were among the first to work in this genre (their work is not revisionist however). According to Jack Zipes, there is a "long tradition of (female-authored) tales that were printed and continue to be printed in folklore collections of various lands" (13). He also cites "feminist precedents set in the literary fairy tale tradition by the end of the nineteenth century," with the work of the Victorian writers Mary De Morgan, Mrs. Molesworth and Evelyn Scharp, who depicted women rebelling against "convention-ridden societies" (13). Sexton is one of the first twentieth century writers (in English) to critique and re-write the traditional fairy tale. After the publication of Transformations in 1971, an enormous number of female-authored books in this genre appeared - Meghan Collins's The Green Woman (1973), Tanith Lee's The Forest Princess (1974), Joanna Russ's Kittatinny (1978) and many others. Sexton's Transformations, Barthelme's Snow White and Angela Carter's The Donkey Prince (1970) are principal texts, at the forefront of this trend. Sexton's book, particularly, is distinguished by virtue of its use of poetic and critical resources. She was, according to Zipes, "one of the first women to use fairy-tales as vehicle to comment on the plight of women in a male-dominated society" (19).

ii. Cinderella

*Whether called mother, queen, stepmother, or wicked witch, she is the wicked witch, the content of nightmare, the source of terror.*

Andrea Dworkin
Rather a large package for a simple bird.

Anne Sexton, "Cinderella"

Several of the poems in Trans formations are bleak dramatic monologues which re-tell a given story from the female protagonist's or eponymous character's perspective. There are also poems in the collection which employ the third-person voice, and which are cynical treatments of the ideas presented in the original texts. Sexton's "Cinderella" poem falls into the latter category, as she uses this poem as a means of criticizing the story's dominant ideas. The poem begins with a series of anecdotes - rags to riches stories, or "diapers to Dior" - each of which concludes with the refrain "That story" (255). "You always read about it," she writes, and lists sample success stories, featuring working-class figures - a "nursemaid," a "milkman" - who achieve sudden wealth through chance, hard work or beauty and goodness (255). Sexton is commenting wryly here on one of the central myths of the American capitalist system, which is the notion that "the United States is a place where anyone, no matter what his (her) origins, no matter how poor and obscure...can rise to fame and fortune" (Tebbel:4). In literature, the work of Horatio Alger has contributed substantially to this notion, as he created, in the nineteenth century, one hundred popular novels that "urged the merits of honesty, hard work, and cheerfulness in adversity" (Bode:ix). Alger's heroes, such as Ragged Dick and Luke Larkin, are always able to conquer adversity, because they exercise these virtues, and because they are "indebted" to their "own good qualities" (Alger:280). Alger's concept of virtue rewarded is mythic in a system wherein "anyone," but not everyone can achieve "fame and fortune". Although the capitalist system is predicated on democratic principles, it is not a meritocratic system, and it is characterized by, in Anthony Gidden's words, "pronounced
inequalities in the distribution of wealth" wherein "a small minority of the population owns a ... disproportionate amount of the total wealth" (63).

Sexton's preface indicates that she considers "Cinderella" to be a Horatio Alger story for women, and her cynical tone indicates that she is sceptical of the value of this kind of story. Her scepticism is warranted, given the fact that women, as opposed to men, have experienced even greater "inequalities" with reference to the distribution of labour and wealth in America. Furthermore, the lessons for women that are inculcated in the original tale do not pertain to the virtues of hard work and integrity; instead, passivity, physical beauty and birthright are isolated as female virtues in the text. In the Brothers Grimm story, Cinderella is first described as the daughter of a rich man. Although she experiences an inconvenient reversal of fortune in the narrative's center she reclaims her status and wealth in the story's conclusion. In his structuralist analysis of "Cinderella," David Pace uses diagrams to express the story's trajectory, and explains that the tension of the story is derived from the fact that Cinderella's status (in the tale's center) and her "ascribed qualities" are not "homologous" (253). When she achieves the socioeconomic status - at the conclusion of the story - of her "evil, vain, lazy...dirty" stepsisters, the "initial imbalance ... is corrected by a transformation of status relations and justice prevails" (Pace:253). Cinderella is wealthy because of her proximity to wealthy men; her patience and delicate feet secure her social mobility. The Grimms' story, which was written in the nineteenth century, is at least credible, since women of the time had very little social or legal means toward procuring their own wealth. It is the persistence of "Cinderella" as a popular story in the twentieth century that bears examination, given the gap between Cinderella's "life" and the lives of contemporary women.
The most popular American version of "Cinderella," the Disney film version, appeared in 1949, at a time when the American public, because of the second world war, "were more interested in war films than cartoons" (Yolen:302). The film, however, was a huge success, saving the floundering Disney studio and "open(ing) the floodgates of 'Disney Cinderella' books" (Yolen:302). Disney's release of this film was well-timed, as this patriarchal tale of feminine passivity and masculine rescue was well suited to post-war America. During the war, women had joined the work force, as well as post-secondary institutions, in great numbers. When the war ended, men returned to reclaim their positions, and in the ensuing struggle gender roles were challenged and radically re-defined, to women's detriment. This period in history is Betty Friedan's point of departure in The Feminine Mystique. Friedan speculates that the anti-feminism that confronted women in business, industry and the educational system at this time "sent many women scurrying for the cover of marriage and home" (177). Disney's "Cinderella," in film and book form, is significantly different from the Brothers Grimm version. Cinderella's mother is replaced by a fairy godmother, and the violence in the tale is excised. In the Grimms' tale, the stepmother mutilates her daughters' feet so that they might be able to wear the glass slipper, a scene which is removed from the Disney story. Although the original scene is distressing, it provides a valuable link to the story's origin - the Chinese practice of footbinding - and creates a powerful image of women's painful relationship to deforming, socially constructed notions of physical beauty.

The figure of the mother, who assisted Cinderella from the grave in the original tale, was critical, as she suggested a potential matrilineal system of protection and empowerment in the tale, a system which evokes the original system of tale-telling itself. By contrast, the fairy
godmother, and the benign, bloodless conclusion of the Disney story divest the original tale of its residual feminine power and verisimilitude, and render it a fantasy that is steeped in one-dimensional ideas about gender and social roles/status. The Cinderella that Disney renders is, as Jane Yolen has observed, a "disaster"; she is "a sorry excuse for a heroine, pitiable and useless" (302). Any initiative that the original Cinderella exercised by conjuring the spirit of her powerful mother is effaced in the American tale. The mice and fairies that communicate with and assist this Cinderella do so because they choose to, and because, as the tale suggests, she has a certain commonality with the simple, diminutive creatures of the earth.

Sexton's Cinderella is based on the Brothers Grimm character, but she evokes the Disney Cinderella in her work, by rendering her in cartoon, or one-dimensional terms. She is scarcely described in Sexton's poem, and when she is depicted she is "beg(ging)," crying or languishing in her cinders (256,257). Sexton delineates other fairy-tale protagonists in similar terms. Her Snow White is a "lovely virgin" who rolls "her china-blue doll eyes open and shut," while "referring to her mirror" (225,229). Snow White's beauty, in the poem (and in the Grimms' story), is made synonymous with her virginity, an "unsoiled" state which echoes her youth, and name (224). Sexton contrasts Snow White with the figure of the Queen, who is "eaten...by age," and who attempts to devour her stepdaughter because of her own "poison" "pride" (225). Sexton sets up a series of parallels in the poem that are similar to those she employs in "The Double Image". The Queen "refer(s)" to a mirror, and the beauty of the women is contrasted in such a way that the daughter is constructed as an image of her superannuated stepmother. The relationship Sexton creates between these two women is modelled after the original story, and she pays close attention to the stepmother/daughter relationship, while downplaying the tale's
romantic trajectory and resolution. In so doing, she is illuminating what Karen E. Rowe refers to as the "generational conflict" that occurs in many fairy tales, whereby women are estranged by instances of "predatory female sexuality" and jealousy (212). The subject of aging dominates the poem, as Sexton locates how beauty, youth, and inexperience are valued in the source text. "Beauty is a simple passion," she writes, "but, oh my friends, in the end/you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes" (225). The "fire dance" refers to the queen's fate at the end of the tale - she is forced to dance in "white-hot iron clogs" until she dies - and here, Sexton equates this torture with age, what happens to everyone "in the end" (Grimm:233). Age and experience are equated with disempowerment and horror in the source text, and Sexton draws attention to the symbolic message in this equation. She emphasizes that "you will dance..." and interfaces the fates of the reader and the Queen, stressing their commonality and the odious social implications of this fate.

Evil stepmothers, stepsisters and witches are privileged throughout Transformations; Sexton adopts, as narrator, the voice of a "middle-aged witch," and she represents these characters as being active, complex and often poignant figures. In Good Bones (1992), Margaret Atwood creates a similar configuration of the evil stepmother/daughter. In a story entitled "Unpopular Gals," she writes (in the voice of the stepsister): "Life isn’t fair. Why should I be?...Everything you’ve ever wanted, I wanted also" (26,27). She concludes, in the voice of the stepmother, "I’m the plot, babe, and don’t ever forget it" (30). These characters, the unloved and evil fairy-tale "gals," compose many of Sexton's plots in Transformations, as sources of narrative identity, and as evidence of the grim (Grimms') plot to construct female beauty and power in strictly reductive terms.
The ugly/evil stepsisters and stepmother do not play a central role in Sexton's "Cinderella"; their actions are described, but they are not rendered as thinking, feeling characters. Their behaviour is summarized by the narrator - in two instances - in cynical terms. In one instance, she recounts the stepmother's actions, and states: "That's the way with stepmothers," a trite statement which implicitly critiques the convention of the evil stepmother in fairy tales (257). In another instance, the author describes one of the sister's attempts to wear the glass slipper, an attempt which is foiled when her mutilated foot begins to bleed. Amputations, Sexton observes, do not "heal up like a wish," and "blood (tells) as blood will" (258). Her use of the word "wish" suggests the terrible disparity in the tale between beautiful Cinderella and her stepsister. Cinderella's wishes are rewarded, fantastically, with opulence, and the sister's wish to wear a shoe is denied because of the (non-fantastic) technicalities of foot size.

Although Cinderella's access to wish-fulfilment is justified in the original story, by virtue of her goodness (and the comparative cruelty of the stepsisters), Sexton suggests an additional interpretation of her good fortune. The phrase "blood (tells) as blood will" evokes certain implications of class and birthright, implications which are supported by the original text, which initially emphasizes Cinderella's status as the daughter of a rich man. Her virtue and beauty are predicated, in the tale, on this status, and the stepsisters, conversely, are never identified in these terms. They are not connected to a father or a husband in the tale, and their lack of any known lineage only aggravates their morally suspect characters. In this sense, they are like the strangers in Jane Austen novels, a milieu where disconnection - from established families or space - is regarded with suspicion, and trepidation.

Sexton's critique of the notion of birthright is reserved for Cinderella, and the parody of
Cinderella in this poem is conceived in terms of race. She is first described as a "maid," who "walk(s) around looking like Al Jolson," and later she is seen crying "forth like a gospel singer" to the spirit of her mother (256, 257). The use of similes in these phrases supports the image of Cinderella passing as a woman of colour, an image which Sexton underscores by presenting her in "cinder face" (257). The "maid" and the "gospel singer" are conventional roles - in white mainstream culture - played by, and composed for, black actors/characters, and Sexton's use of simile, as well as her evocation of the white minstrel, Al Jolson, troubles the process of representation. In her (re)presentation of this fairy tale character, Sexton implies that the original story creates a connection between race and circumstance, that Cinderella's debased condition, throughout the tale, is somehow inexorably intertwined with the appearance of her ash-dusted face. By presenting her own Cinderella as a minstrel, Sexton creates a critical distance between the signifier (Cinderella in blackface) and the sign (the black woman Cinderella impersonates in the poem) and in doing so, draws attention to the way race is constructed in fairy tales. In his work on "stereotypes, distortion and anti-humanism" in classical fairy tales, Robert Moore comments that the tales are "implicitly racist," "because they often equate beauty and virtue with the colour white and ugliness with the colour black" (in Zipes:6). Sexton is also questioning the implicit racism of the tales by colour-coding her work so that it ironically reduplicates the colour system in the original texts. "Snow White" and "Cinderella" may be conceived as a compound critique, which functions within the poems, as the white/black regions in both texts are highlighted and opposed as instances of how the original tales colour-code imagery toward the generation of racist ideology.

Sexton's creation of a minstrel-protagonist is not without precedent in Confessional poetry.
Plath, on occasion, employed images of passing (a black idiom which refers to "passing" for another race) and race-appropriation in her work; in "Thalidomide" she describes a "Negro, masked like a white," while in "The Jailer," her narrator's antagonist "pretend(s)" she is "a negress with pink paws" (Collected Poems:252,226). Many of Berryman's "Dream Songs" feature a speaker who is sometimes known as "Mr Bones," a "blackt-out man" who speaks in minstrel dialect (DS:24). The Confessional poets, no doubt, were attracted to the suggestiveness of passing and/or minstrelry because of the duplicity (authenticity and deception) that underlies their endeavour(s). The idea of impersonation that is central to passing and minstrelsy, is also germane to the confessional process, which is the process of converting the self into the self-in-writing. By illuminating the gap between the self and the represented self, Sexton has created, throughout her work, a developing discourse on the politics of representation. Her depiction of Cinderella as minstrel is closely connected to her work with gender and representation, as minstrelry provides an analogy for the social construction of gender. The Cinderella Sexton creates is an impersonator, just as the original Cinderella is a woman whose femininity or sex role is male-authored and conceived of in socially prescriptive terms.

In the first stanza of Sexton's account of the Cinderella story, she describes Cinderella planting a tree, where a white dove appears to grant her wishes. She concludes the stanza: "The bird is important, my dears, so heed him" (256). The bird appears to represent Cinderella's mother, and the speaker asserts herself here not only as the story's teller, but as its interpreter. By gendering the bird as "him," Sexton encodes it with a symbolic message that contradicts the logical structure of the story. In the story and poem, Cinderella prays or cries to her deceased mother (who promised to look after her from beyond), and the bird responds, instantly, to her
pleas. Sexton disrupts the simple, immediate relationship between mother and daughter by creating an intermediate element - in the figure of the bird - and as such, disrupts the female system of power this relationship suggests. Her caveat, "the bird is important," indicates Sexton is aware of the significance of this disruption, and points to her intention to isolate the bird as an iconic message in the text. The bird incorporates central ideas from the original text, but it also conveys messages, within Sexton's text, as she imbes it with significance and meaning. It is a suggestive symbol because it is a creature capable of flying, of quickly transcending its environment. Its dove-whiteness conveys traditional fairy tale notions of purity and goodness, and its benevolent relationship to Cinderella - which signified a maternal link in the original text - is problematized in the poem. Fairy tale stepmothers/mothers and daughters are often estranged through hostility, jealousy or death, a convention Sexton gestures to by making the bird a divisive agent. Sexton also suggests, through her severance of the immediate mother-daughter relationship in the poem, a critique of the way sex roles are culturally transmitted.

If Cinderella’s passivity and neutrality are inherited from the figure of the mother - the mother who insists that Cinderella’s dependency is perpetuated at a supernatural level - then Sexton is deconstructing a relationship that perpetuates these characteristics, and denying the notion of biology being equivalent to destiny. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses the perpetuation of the "Cinderella myth," and observes: "How, indeed, could the...myth not keep all its validity?...Parents still raise their daughter with a view to marriage rather than to furthering her personal development" (127). She also notes the significance of the Prince Charming figure, who elevates Cinderella to "a caste superior to her own, a miracle that could not be bought by the labour of her lifetime" (127). By gendering, as a male, the wish-fulfilling
bird (the bird that is implicitly female in the source-text), Sexton creates an alternative logic that is truly faithful to the original text. Men are the most powerful figures in the Cinderella story; they have the most access to wealth and social power. It is the father and the prince, then, who can fulfil Cinderella's wishes, or deprive her of them.

Sexton's sardonic take on the "Cinderella" story is most clearly evident in the poem's conclusion. After recounting the prince's discovery of Cinderella, whose foot fits the glass shoe "like a love letter into its envelope," and the mutilation of the stepsisters (whose eyes are pecked out by the dove), Sexton writes:

Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
never arguing over the timing of an egg,
ever telling the same story twice,
ever getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for all eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That story. (258)

The references to page and text that dominate the conclusion of the poem - the love letter, the "pasted" smiles, and the Bobbsey Twins books - support the level of portraiture that Sexton sustains in the poem. Her one-dimensional heroine is bereft of substance; by asserting Cinderella's textuality - with these images - Sexton suggests that it is Cinderella as story/text that she is telling. Cinderella is compared or transformed to text in this passage, because, like the transcendent dove, she is a textual cipher that conveys and carries a fixed element of the story's meaning. Cinderella is made static and unchanging because the femininity she exhibits is passive, immobile, and the message it conveys is historically static, as witnessed by the constancy and persistence of the tale. Sexton does not revise, but reveals Cinderella's meaning.
and removes herself (as narrator) from the text, with the phrases "they say" and (the repeated) "That story". She rejects her own identification, as narrator, with Cinderella, the agent or medium of the tale's message, signaling, with this withdrawal, her refusal to align herself with the romantic closure of the original text, a closure which does not admit the eventualities of life after marriage, the "middle-aged spread," the "diapers," the "dust". Sexton seals her Cinderella (and Prince Charming) in a "museum case" "for all eternity," an image which recalls Snow White's glass coffin, and which again attests to the stasis encoded in the original tale, and numerous re-tellings.

Sexton's use of images of preservation recalls the way that gender is constructed in the classical fairy tale. Women, in these tales, are ideological fossils, suspended in the amber of a femininity that is characterized by stillness, slumber and youth. They are less women than dolls, an image which Sexton often uses in her previous collections. In "Self in 1958," she portrays herself as "a plaster doll" in "a doll's house"; in "Live," she recounts dressing herself "like somebody's doll" (CP:155,167). These poems form part of the complex self-portrait that evolves throughout Sexton's work, and serve to emphasize the idea that doll-like artifice is symptomatic of a life lived according to socially constructed ideas, or ideals of feminine identity. "Perfection is terrible," Sylvia Plath observes in "The Munich Mannequins," "it cannot have children" (CP:262), a sentiment which Sexton seems to share in her writing, when she attempts, in Francoise Lionnet's words, "to excavate those elements of the female self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood" (Life Lines:261).

Cinderella, conversely, cannot be excavated, or extricated from these myths because she is both a participant in and a representation of the way myths are constructed and disseminated.
Sexton's telling of the Grimms' "Cinderella" tale is dismissive and arch. The source-text, in the poem, is "That story," a reductive phrase which undermines the stock nature of the original narrative, as it suggests a story that is entirely too familiar and threadbare. Sexton also removes any vestiges of drama from the original tale in her re-telling. Cinderella is drawn as a histrionic paper doll, and the violence enacted on the stepsisters is neutralized through simile. The foot amputations are deemed "simpl(e)" gestures, and their empty eye sockets are compared to benign domestic objects, "soup spoons" (257,258). Similarly, the drama of female cruelty and revenge that is played out in the original text is understated in Sexton's poem; it becomes an account of a romantic episode we "all know" (256). The narrator's prosaic account of the story's romantic dénouement, the ball - "These events repeated themselves for three days" - and emphasis on the tale's familiarity - "So she went (to the ball). Which is no surprise" - underlines and implicitly criticizes the story's formulaic romantic trajectory (257). Earlier in the poem, the ball, the site of romantic mystery in the original tale, is referred to as a "marriage market," a term which supplements the romance narrative with the conjunction of marriage and commerce (256). Sexton's prince is a "shoe salesman," engaged in a corporate transaction with Cinderella, and the romantic plot itself, by inference, is rigidly contractual, comprised of terms and conditions. The central elements of the tale are dismissed or reduced to a reformulation of their generic context. "Cinderella" is a fantasy story, and Sexton alters what is fantastic in the story by revealing its romantic plotting, plotting that has its basis in consensual and conventional social realism. Here, she exhibits her pop-artist sensibility, by faithfully rendering a literary commonplace, the fantastic/romantic plot, within a pragmatic, realist generic context.

Robert Hughes has argued that Andy Warhol's composition of domestic objects/
commonplaces, and their "harsh, cold parody of ad-mass appeal" provoked a way of seeing these images, "to a point where a void is seen to yawn beneath the discourse of promotion" (AAM: 46). It is not the object, Hughes observes, but the public's gaze that is assailed in Warhol's work - what is parodied is "the way mass media replace the act of reading with that of scanning" (52). Sexton also forcefully re-directs the reader's gaze in her poem, as narrator. Because her numerous textual interventions are explicit directives, the reader cannot become lost in the fantasy, when s/he is being led through its practical construction. Although Sexton is dismissive of the story's events and messages, she is not dismissive of its social/historical context and effects. Her dismissal is rhetorical; "That story" is clearly potent, given its immediate familiarity. It is that familiarity that Sexton addresses by confronting her readers' relationship to the text, as an adult, and by offering, as narrator, a reformulation of its meaning.

In the Brothers Grimm's "The Golden Key," a child discovers a key that "opens" the text and its stories, a detail which is significantly altered in Sexton's "The Gold Key". The key, in her text, is not offered to a child, but to three people, aged twenty-two, fifty-six and sixteen. She berates these adults, and asks if they are "comatose," "undersea," if they have "forgotten" the tales/"dreams" they learned as "child(ren)" (223). She offers them, the reader(s), some "answers," in the form of the key, an interpretative tool which opens the chest/text, and exposes "its secrets," the messages it conveys about gender, sex roles, race, class, and morality (223, 224). Sexton asks, by offering a revisionist text and a "key" to its subtext, that readers take an active role in (re)membering and transforming the original texts - "it is not enough to read," she writes - and the lessons inculcated therein (223).
iii: Sleeping Beauty

... and my hand pressed over my mouth to keep my insides from lurching all over the seat. I memorize this patch of sunlight so I don't have to know what my daddy is doing to me.

Karen Fogg, "Orange Popsicles"

9.1 Silence. The Sixth Gate. Years of silence. Silence wrapped around life like a cocoon. I learn to live in a world where nothing is as it seems.

Elly Danica, Don't: A Woman's Word

Sexton's "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)," the poem that concludes Transformations, is not, in the manner of "Cinderella," an arch, sardonic text. It does employ and recount the plot of the original Grimm tale (which is derived from a similar tale by Charles Perrault), and reiterates many of the ideas expressed in "Cinderella" about the way gender is constructed in the Grimms' tales. It is, however, a structurally experimental text, which provides a complex and unique revision of the original tale's ideas, as well as its structure and plot. The narrative voice is fluid in Sexton's text; she employs both the first and third person voice in order to create a doubled narrative that inscribes not only the narrator's subjectivity, but the subjectivity of Sleeping Beauty herself (a narrative opportunity that was not extended to Cinderella). The dominant theme of the poem is father-daughter incest, a theme which Sexton explores from a Confessional perspective in The Book of Folly, the book that follows Transformations. It is significant that
Sexton's first substantial treatment of this theme appears in her only explicitly non-confessional book. The ancient societal taboos that enshroud the act and subject of incest are even more compelling than those which surround suicide. In *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud discusses tribal clans that are named and guided by specific totems. The totem is, he explains, "the tribal ancestor of the clan, as well as its tutelary spirit and protector; it sends oracles and...spares its children" (17). The members of each clan, or totem, are thought to be "consanguinely related" to each other, and "incest dread" prevails: there is a "strong" connection between exogamy and totemism (22, 20). Incest dread, or the incest taboo, in tribal groups, exists in conjunction with the recognition of a "dangerous" and instructive spirit-totem, who acts, in part, to organize a collective and protective relationship among its adherents. In "Sleeping Beauty," Sexton sets up a functional system of totemism and taboo, by articulating the incest dilemma she perceives in the tale, and by composing herself, as narrator, as the "tutelary" figure who locates this dilemma and organizes a response to its (hidden) occurrence in the text. Her work with incest bears a strategic resemblance to her work with the theme of suicide, as she seeks to assail the silence that is endemic to taboo, by creating and generating discourse about these subjects.

Diane Middlebrook refers - in *Anne Sexton* - to Sexton's interest in Freud's work, noting that the poet had read Freud's theories on hysteria, the superego, and the Oedipus complex (53,55). Sexton's work with the Oedipus story is a dominant theme in Sexton's art, which is well documented by Diana Hume George in *Oedipus Anne*. George has also examined the "transpersonal" work in *Transformations* in terms of its connection to the earlier, personal poetry. In "How We Danced: Anne Sexton on Fathers and Daughters," George discusses "Sleeping Beauty" and its relationship to the collected poems, and considers it as a part of
a sustained "pattern" in the poet's work, a pattern she refers to as a "structural outline for the psychic biography of a gender" (411). Although "Sleeping Beauty" is the first poem that is explicitly about father-daughter rape, George traces poems, throughout the earlier books, that intimate and suggest this theme. She observes that the poem "Cripples and Other Stories," from Live or Die, which recounts the relationship between a female patient and male analyst, conflates the figure of the analyst with the father, in order to illuminate what is implicitly incestuous in the psychoanalytic process, and the process of transference (418-419). Sexton continues her investigation of the psychoanalytic process in "Sleeping Beauty," complicating the role of the analyst, in an effort to address traditional psychoanalytical ideas about fathers and daughters and the Oedipal conflict.

The poem begins: "Consider/a girl who keeps slipping off,/her arms as limp as old carrots" (290). Here, Sexton adopts the voice of the analyst/lecturer, and signals that she is "consider(ing)" and presenting Briar Rose as a case study. Freud's lectures were, according to Angela Richards, rarely "rhetorical"; he usually adopted a tone of "quiet...even intimate conversation" (Introductory Lectures:32). According to Richards, Freud employed a non-"authoritarian" voice in order to encourage audience participation, a technique which was "an extension of an essential feature of the technique of psychoanalysis itself" (33). Sexton's poem, and confessional poetry, by extension, may be seen as a model for the lecture/analysis, as its intimate admissions are framed within a formal structure, and directed toward an implied listener. While Sexton's earlier work posits the speaker as the analysand, the speaker in this poem is clearly the analyst. As the analyst/narrator, Sexton is re-presenting a Freudian scenario, and she gestures to this doubled interpretive perspective in the first stanza. Briar Rose
is depicted as "slipping off" "into the hypnotist’s trance”; she is seen regressing, with a hypnotist/analyst’s assistance. She regresses, in the "time machine," and becomes an infant, a "doll child" on her father’s knee; "that kind of voyage," the narrator states, that is "rank as honeysuckle" (290, 291).

Juliet Mitchell has described the psychoanalyst as someone who, "at one level," "hear(s) and retell(s) histories," and "make(s) a new history" in the process (426). Sexton employs the methodology that Mitchell describes in the first stanza of the poem, and doubles it, in order to critique the analytical retelling - the hypnotist’s method - and to examine its meaning. The phrase "rank as honeysuckle" bears a double meaning that simulates the doubling of the analyst in the poem, evoking both sweet profusion and unpleasant, sensual excess. It provides a loaded symbol for the process of analysis, or the interpreting analyst, who may either cultivate or corrupt the patient’s growth, or narrative. The corruption inherent in the hypnotist’s analysis is signified by a series of sexualized images. Briar Rose is asked to sit on her father’s lap, in exchange for a "root," and the honeysuckle that symbolizes her "voyage" is a flower that is characterized by long, tubular, phallic blossoms (291). Sexton sexualizes these images to convey a sense of the impropriety and risk involved in the male analyst’s adoption of the (in this scenario) suspect, paternal role, through transference. By creating a female narrator/analyst, she creates an interactive model that precludes transference (the female analyst can not "act" as father), and generates a critical retelling of both the incest story and its conventional retelling.

Conventional Freudian accounts or interpretations of father-daughter rape are derived from Freud’s lectures on this subject. In "The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms," he claims that many women/girls produce seduction fantasies regarding their fathers (or other male members
of their families) in order to "screen the auto-erotic of (their) sexual activity" (417). "Father figures" are regularly featured as "the seducer" in these fantasies, he claims, and "there can be no doubt either of the imaginary nature of the accusation or of the motive that has led to it" (417). Although Freud acknowledged that some accusations are "real," his theory is predicated on the illusory, fantastic nature of women and girls' accounts of sexual abuse. Contemporary feminist critics have commented on the patriarchal and erroneous construction of Freud's retelling of father-daughter rape, which features a series of blameless fathers and delusional daughters. In Father-Daughter Rape, Elizabeth Ward observes that Freud's theories have perpetuated a system of denial with regard to incest survivors, that Freud's "position of disbelief" has contributed substantially to a "mythology of rape ideology" wherein the victim is located and blamed as the suspect (107).

The actual statistical occurrence of incest in America alone is, as Vincent J. Fontana has observed, "staggering"; in 1982, for example, 56,607 "substantiated cases of (incestuous) sexual abuse of children" were reported by the American Humane Society in Denver, Colorado (Incest:1). Fontana also reports that the subject of incest has only recently "received...more attention," with more victims "coming forward," and experts in the field altering their perception of the issue. "Not so long ago," he notes, "highly respected psychologists believed that incest was only in the minds of the children" (9). It is commonly believed now that "few children lie about this subject," that "the victim is never to blame," and "that it is important that the victim tell somebody" (Fontana:9). Many accounts of father-daughter rape emphasize silence. Fathers frame their actions as "our little secret," and daughters' accounts are met with outraged disbelief or denial within the family, and sometimes within the legal and medical communities"11.
Historically, women have been silent about incestuous sexual violence because they have been systemically silenced, a dilemma which Elly Danica articulates in her autobiographical account of her father's extreme sexual violence. She writes about the "years of silence" and "fear" she experienced, and states:

There is something wrong with me. Everyone tells me. The world is not how you imagined it to be. You've imagined everything. Your pain is imaginary. You are imaginary. You are crazy. (70)

Don't is Danica's textual resistance against the "years of silence" and abuse; as Janice Williamson has observed, "the textualization of (Danica's) body is less objectification than an 'objectification' which restores agency to her being" (LW:145). Sexton's work also operates as an act of critical and artistic resistance, as it assails silence with the act of speaking, and assists in the feminist project of "hearing" (in Elizabeth Ward's terms) the victim/survivor, and rejecting the traditional psychoanalytical and societal construction of father-daughter rape as an "imaginary" act.

Is a triangle in any way more "true" than a couple?

It is Derrida's contention that, for psychoanalysis, the answer to that question is yes. The triangle becomes the magical, Oedipal figure that explains the functioning of human desire.


They are using our skulls as ashtrays

Diane Wakoski
Sexton begins "Sleeping Beauty" with the language of psychoanalysis, in order to create a discursive and interpretive space for the case study or narrative which follows. She goes on to recount the familiar details of the fairy tale, and incorporates, in this narrative, many of the concerns and issues that are addressed throughout Transformations. The relationship between Briar Rose and her father, the King, is triangulated in the poem, to include the figure of the thirteenth fairy, and Sexton uses these figures as referents, as indicators of the way sexuality and gender are composed in the Grimms' tale(s). The thirteenth fairy, who is excluded from "the grand event," has "eyes burnt by cigarettes," and her uterus is "an empty teacup" (291).

The image of the "burnt" eyes is repeated in the poem, in another description of the fairy, who "eats betrayal like a slice of meat" (293). In the original tale, the fairy, or "Wise Woman" is depicted as a fearful character, with talon-like nails, and a voice that sounds like "a spoon scraping a pan" (126). Sexton creates a fairy who is more defeated than fearful, but she echoes the domestic image of the spoon and pan with the image of the uterus-teacup. This image is evocative of the "Cinderella" simile - the stepsisters with hollowed eyes "like soup spoons" - and there are a number of connections, throughout the poems in Transformations, between women, violence and domestic objects. The "Maiden Without Hands" has an eye socket that is a proposed ashtray; the "insane" daughter in "Iron Hans" is "as still as furniture," and Mother Gothel (in "Rapunzel") has a shrunken heart "the size of a pin" (250, 249). These images convey Sexton's idea, first expressed in "Housewife" (All My Pretty Ones), that "Some women marry houses./It's another kind of skin" (77). In "Housewife," "the men enter" the house, the "fleshy mother," "by force"; Sexton suggests here, and in Transformations, that women are relegated, and confined to traditional domestic roles and identities (77). She further suggests,
by employing the language of the Grimms, that these roles are created through language. By
identifying the semiotic link between women and the domestic sphere in the original text(s), she
identifies the symbolic relationship that is fostered there. She encodes her images with violence
to suggest the prescriptive nature of female roles, and her use of utilitarian objects - spoons,
ashtays, furniture - creates the sense that these roles are useful to a patriarchal text/society.

The image of the uterus-teacup is also related to another strategic series of connections that
Sexton draws in the poems between women and consumption. In a letter to Philip Legler, dated
May 19th, 1970, Sexton commented that her "transformations" were filled with "food images";
"but what could be more directly food," she asks, "than cooking the kids and finally the wicked
lady" (SPL:317). Food, or eating, is, as Diane Wood Middlebrook has observed, "a major
source of symbolism" in the text (AS:333). Sexton's assessment of the origin of her imagery is
just, as the original tales present repeated images of women as consumers, and as objects of
consumption. Two women are often contrasted in the tales in this manner: in "Snow White,"
the stepmother seeks to devour her daughter; in "Sweet Rampion," or "Rapunzel," the roles are
symbolically cast: in this tale a mother longs to taste rampion, and names her daughter after the
forbidden vegetable. In "Hansel and Gretel," the cannibal witch occupies both positions; she
attempts to eat the eponymous children, and is stuffed into an oven with pastry, and burned to
death.

Margaret Atwood explores the relationship between women and consumerism in The Edible
Woman (which was written in 1965) and uses a number of embedded fairy tale narratives to,
in Sharon Rose Wilson's words "satirize contemporary culture" and "reveal (her protagonist's)
recognition of societal cannibalism" ("FTC":79). Atwood's Marian is tormented by the thought
of being consumed by the social roles that are presented to her in a series of mock-epic and mock-Gothic vignettes; she retreats from the prescriptive feast by narrowing, and ultimately ceasing her own consumption, an anorexic process that is reversed in the novel's final "parody of ritual cannibalism" (Onley, in Wilson:87). Sexton's thirteenth fairy is presented in similar terms: she has been excluded, by the King, from the "grand event" or feast, a plot detail which immediately precedes the description of her barren uterus, the empty, non-utilitarian vessel. Her relationship to Briar Rose is constructed in terms of this exclusion; she attempts to murder her, because she is, like Snow White, or Rampion, the object/image of youth. Her attempt to kill Briar Rose resembles the cannibalistic efforts of fairy tale mothers to replicate the manner in which youth and beauty are commodified within a patriarchal culture. Their efforts are vilified in the original tales, but Sexton presents Briar Rose as a character who recognizes her own fate through the figure, or image of the fairy. When she tries to sleep, she sees the fairy "eating) betrayal," and recognizes her own destiny within the fairy tale cosmos.

When Briar Rose describes her insomnia, she addresses her words to the King: "Father, I must not dream" (293). She sleeps alone ("never in the prince's presence"), and with the assistance of "knock-out drops"; when she dreams, or tries to sleep, she imagines or "know(s) that brutal place/where (she) lie(s) down with cattle prods" (293). The "brutal place" is the site of her enchantment, where she was condemned to sleep for a hundred years. Bettelhein has characterized this sleep as a protracted instance of flawless femininity, an idea which Sexton utilizes in "The Touch," in Love Poems (Enchantment:236). In "Sleeping Beauty," she further explores the implications of the sleep, or enchantment, a fairy tale convention that is best illustrated in the Grimms' "Snow White," with the morbid image of the seductive, dead body.
of Snow White in a glass coffin. The thirteenth fairy condemns Briar Rose to death, a "curse" which is "kind of eras(ed)" or "mitigated" by the twelfth fairy, and changed to a "hundred-year sleep" (Sexton, CP: 291). Sexton suggests, in this poem, that there is no difference between the two states. The haunting presence of the thirteenth fairy is evidence, which Briar Rose recognizes that her own obsolescence is reified in this figure, and that she will, as Sexton predicts in "Snow White," come to "dance the fire dance in iron shoes". Briar Rose is differentiated, by the poet, from Sexton's Cinderella and Snow White, because she is a speaker in the poem, and because she recognizes, and attests to her subjectivity. It is she who recognizes, before the narrative reverts to the third person voice, that she is old, far older than she appears to be: she states, "I'm ninety/and think I'm dying" (293). She compares sleep to a medically imposed unconsciousness; she wears "tubes like earrings," and is "all shot up with Novacain"; she is numb, and doesn't "flinch" at pain (294). "This trance girl," the narrator interjects, "is yours to do with" (294). Here, Sexton embellishes the idea that Briar Rose's similes and metaphors suggest, that is, her sleep replicates her enchantment, and her enchantment, in turn, replicates the process of regression, in psychoanalysis. In regression therapy, the patient is, as Briar Rose states in the poem, "forced backward" and "forced forward"; she lives and relives experiences outside the realm of her own criticality and interpretation.

Briar Rose recognizes how her appearance belies her experience, emotions and thoughts, and Sexton employs this terrible contrast as evidence of the Grimm's/society's way of privileging youth, beauty and passivity, as exclusively feminine models. Briar Rose is depicted as a kind of perverse medical experiment in the poem; the medical imagery that is encoded in the sleep
descriptions suggests how forcefully and prescriptively these attributes are imposed on female characters. By framing the sleep descriptions in the discourse of psychoanalysis - with the illustrative case study, the helpless "trance girl" - Sexton is also casting aspersions on medical/psychoanalytical models of femininity. The "Father"/analyst who asks the female analysand to dream, and regress, is asking her to reduplicate the passivity she experienced during the initial crisis, under his masculine direction. If the therapy involves transference, the analyst adopts the role of the analysand's father, and Sexton highlights the danger of this process by creating an incest narrative within the original Grimm narrative. In the poem's final stanza, she clarifies the terms of her imagery, regarding the King and his "rank" solicitousness, and locates his role in Briar Rose's enchantment. On two occasions in the poem, Briar Rose is depicted awakening from her enchantment - courtesy of the Prince's kiss - and crying "Daddy! Daddy!," as she comes "out of prison" (293, 294). Her consciousness, in the poem, is initiated with this sexual gesture: her eyes "spring open" only when she is "kissed...on the mouth" (294).

Sexton sexualizes the figure of the father when she incorporates him into this scenario; in the original tale, Briar Rose is silent when the "spell (is) broken" (Grimm:130). The figure of the analyst is also sexualized, by inference, when Sexton writes that the "trance girl" will awake when "you" kiss her (294). The "you" in this proposition is the unspecified analyst figure, the "hypnotist" who hypnotizes Briar Rose in the first stanza, so that she is, as Sexton observes, "yours to do with" (294). It is Briar Rose's powerlessness that is highlighted throughout the poem, in conjunction with the power of the analyst, whose therapy functions as an uncritical mirror-reflection of the analysand's crisis.

This crisis is related in the final stanza, where Sexton recounts the father-daughter rape.
Earlier in the poem, the rape is intimated, through imagery and suggestive references. The King is drawn, throughout the poem, in terms of his "rank" and pervasive "odor," or presence, and his power is also emphasized, when he is seen controlling Briar Rose's environment through supernatural powers: "He fastened the moon up/with a safety pin/to give her perpetual light" (292). His supernatural powers are emphasized while the fairy's powers are de-emphasized in Sexton's narrative. In the original tale, the fairy coerces Briar Rose into using a spinning wheel which pricks her finger, and fulfils the fairy's curse. In Sexton's poem, the fairy is not complicit in this incident; she writes: "On her fifteenth birthday/she pricked her finger/on a charred spinning wheel," excluding the fairy's presence (292). She embellishes the father's power because, in the context of the incest narrative, he has a vested interest in maintaining his daughter's enchantment. He is also isolated as a figure of power, in contrast to the powerless fairy and daughter, since he represents the patriarchal interests and ideology of the original tale.

The Grimms idealize the dormant Briar Rose as a feminine "auto-icon"; in Elisabeth Bronfen's words, she, like Snow White, "performs the apotheosis of one of the central positions ascribed to Woman in western culture; namely that the 'surveyed' feminine body is meant to confirm the power of the masculine gaze" (102). The fairy, conversely, is non-specular; Sexton excludes her from the text, for the most part, in order to illustrate her exclusion from the King's feast, or gaze. The King is given the power to preserve his daughter's youth and beauty as he represents the fantastic conceit in the original text, the masculine/authorial desire to preserve women's adolescence, a desire which is realized in the figure of Briar Rose. By revealing what is fetishistic in the Grimms' portrayal of Briar Rose, Sexton is able to address the issue of sexual ownership inscribed in the original text. Briar Rose's consciousness and responsiveness in the
tale are predicated on aggressive sexual contact; this sexual contract is, in turn, predicated on masculine sexual ownership. She is, Sexton observes, "passed hand to hand" in the tale, and moves passively from her father's to the Prince's domain in accordance to their active desires.

The King in the original tale sleeps while Briar Rose sleeps, but he is animated in Sexton's narrative. Like Rappaccini in Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," he hovers over his daughter as if she were an "experiment," "the offspring of his science" (Hawthorne: 208). In "What's in a Fairy Tale?," Martha M. Houle discusses Louis Marin's studies of fairy tales, and focuses on his location of "the collaboration of simulacrum and secret" in fairy tales. She describes, in Baudrillard's terms, the "collaboration" or the "trompe d'oeil" in fairy tales as "the inverted secret of nonexistence at the foundations of reality" (349). Sexton is engaged in this kind of critical "play," when she alters the plotting and narrative details of the original tales, for her alterations intimate what is embedded, "secret(ly)" within these texts. The King is made a more complex figure in "Sleeping Beauty" because Sexton, like Marin (in Le Portrait du Roi), is attempting "to discover and analyze the mechanisms that create the great spectacle of absolute power" (Houle:349). He is made a spectacle in the poem as he is seen exercising an authority and "absolute power" that is uncontested in the original text. His actions are scrutinized, early in the poem, when he is seen biting "the hem of (Briar Rose's) gown" each night, "to keep her safe," a near-cannibalistic and sexual image which Sexton employs, early in the poem, to suggest his possessive, desirous feelings toward his daughter. This suggestion is made explicit in the final stanza, which alternates between the first and third person voice. The first person voice of Briar Rose dominates the stanza; she inquires: "Daddy?," a word which is repeated in the poem to signal her awakening. In this stanza, a different kind of awakening is signalled; "Daddy?" is
posed as an interrogative, and she is questioning her father's position, in relation to her enchantment. She recalls her sleep and recounts her father,

    drunkenly bent over (her) bed,
    circling the abyss like a shark,
    my father thick upon (her)
    like some sleeping jellyfish. (294)

The jellyfish, a sea creature equipped with stinging tentacles and a tube-shaped mouth, is both a phallic image and an image that, like the shark, evokes danger and injury. These images contribute to the violence of this passage, and to Briar Rose's intimation of her rape and violation at her father's hands. She calls this incident "another kind of prison," "not the prince at all," and here she articulates two dilemmas: her passive movement in the tale, from "hand to hand," and her inability to sleep (294). When the narrator comments, in the poem's conclusion, "What voyage is this, little girl?/This coming out of prison?/God help -/this life after death?," she is referring to the way that sleep and death are constructed in the tale. Briar Rose's awakening, which symbolises rebirth and closure in the original tale, is troubled in Sexton's text. Sexton creates, with Briar Rose, a tragic protagonist, who, like Hamlet, is confronted with impossible alternatives. Her life and the sleep she retreats to are "prison(s)" because her "rest" is not "silent": both are corrupted and shaped by the conditions of her enchantment.

The series of questions the narrator poses at the end of the poem serve to question the closure of the original text, and confound its happy ending. The incest narrative Sexton creates in this poem dramatically confirms the passivity, and helplessness of the Grimms' Sleeping Beauty. "Sleeping Beauty" is a critical poem because, despite its genre, the literary fantastic, it offers accurate and salient information about father-daughter rape, a secret act that is epidemic and rarely discussed, in either life or art. The poem may be seen as a metaphor for the
occurrence and recurrence of this act in society, for Sexton draws this narrative, as feminist interpreter, from the secret and silent recesses of the original tale's benign apparencies.

"The Moss of His Skin," which appears in To Bedlam, like "Sleeping Beauty," also examines father-daughter rape. The subject of "The Moss of His Skin" (described in the epigraph) is the ancient Arabian practice of burying daughters alive beside their dead fathers. The poem may also be seen as an incest-narrative, which, like "Sleeping Beauty," investigates the hidden sexual dynamic in mythical/historical father-daughter relationships (the daughters were buried as sacrifices to the goddesses). Sexton uses images of revulsion, secrecy, and shame in "The Moss of His Skin" to sexualize the father-daughter relationship. The father is "fat" and "strange," and the daughter "pretend(s)" that "Allah will not see" how she "hold(s)" her father (27). The image of burial is a strong symbol for how sexual violence and taboo are perpetuated: "It was only important," Sexton writes, "not to talk" (26).

"The Death of the Fathers," which appears in The Book of Folly (1972), is a first person account of a father who molestes and abuses his daughter. It is, as Diane Middlebrook has noted, a "revisionary look over her past," and it constitutes a "broken taboo" in her work (AS:344). Clearly, her work with "The Moss of His Skin" and "Sleeping Beauty" facilitated this break. "The Papa and Mama Dance" (in Love Poems), which, according to Sexton, is "about (brother-sister) incest" is more oblique; when she taught it in a poetry course, her students "didn't get it" (in Middlebrook, AS:286). Sexton's treatments of father-daughter rape are not merely acts of "confessional courage" (to employ Lerner's term), but deeply political attempts to give voice and textual, discursive space to women's experiences of sexual violence. Sexual violence, Nicole Brossard writes, "doesn't end with the act. It imprisons us in a space of fear, a space of shame,
a space of self-negation" (Introduction: Don't:1). It is a supreme act of self-affirmation, then, to articulate the experience, and the shame and fear it imposes, and to assert, as an author, "resistance," "courage," and the idea that "'hope' concerns us all" (Brossard:2).
Chapter Six

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

Of course, every intelligent believer may learn to say that whatever is meant by God, God transcends both sex and gender, but our present symbol system works by giving pride of place to male-related appellation and metaphor, since males are godlike procreators. Not surprisingly, this is also expressed in some familiar analogies, such as that men are to women as culture is to nature; or woman is to man as the created, natural world is to God (reconsider Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty).

Ann Loades

I die (who would believe it?)
at the hands of what I love best.
What is it puts me to death?
The very love I profess.

Thus, with deadly poison
I keep my life alive:
the very death I live
is the life of which I die.

Still, take courage, heart:
when torture becomes so sweet,
whatever may be my lot,
from love I'll not retreat.

Sor Juana, "Divine Love"

Christianity holds at its core a symbol which has for its content the individual way of life of a man, the Son of Man, and that it even regards this individuation process as the incarnation and revelation of God himself. Hence, the development of the self acquires a significance whose full
implications have hardly begun to be appreciated, because too much attention
to external blocks the way to immediate inner experience.

C.G. Jung, The Undiscovered Self

Mary Magdalene has become a great favorite with painters and poets and various
interpreters of the Gospels who prefer to think of Jesus as a lusty, broad-minded man of the
world.

Manfred Barthel

I think of Mary ... I wonder what she felt ... I wish Mary had kept a diary ... and put down her
thoughts. The birth seems to be told too often in the same words and the early life of Jesus...all
like a fable that no one quite believes or is sure of. Where can [one] read about Mary? ... it is
the poet in me that wants to know.

Anne Sexton, Letter to Brother Dennis Farrell, December 26, 1962

In the period between June, 1972 and October, 1974, Anne Sexton completed three books
of poems: The Book of Folly (1972), The Death Notebooks (1974), and The Awful Rowing
Toward God (1975) (SPL:350). These books reflect, as Kathleen L. Nichols has observed,
Sexton's "growing awareness of the imminence of death," as well as her "increasing absorption
with...a private, self-contained mythology of God and self" (165). Lois Ames and Linda Gray
Sexton have also commented on Sexton's "new-found faith" in this period; in Anne Sexton: A
Self Portrait in Letters, they describe her increased religious studies, her communication, at this
time, with a church curate in Dedham, Patricia Handloss, and her "success(ful)" creation of "her
own private God" (350). Although religion is a persistent theme throughout Sexton's previous
collections, these three books constitute a sustained critical and confessional examination of
Christian doctrine and faith.

The first stage of this examination - which begins with The Book of Folly - is critical. In
"The Jesus Papers," a sequence which appears in this volume, Sexton creates a series of revisionist parables about Christ and Mary, parables which function as a commentary on the way that gender is constructed in the New Testament. These poems recall Sexton's work with Grimms' fairy tales; she uses the New Testament as a source-text and transforms it, in order to illuminate its messages about gender. Kurt Vonnegut uses a similar revisionist strategy in Slaughterhouse Five, a book which influenced Transformations (Middlebrook, AS:331).

Vonnegut's Kilgore Trout writes a science fiction book entitled The Gospel from Outer Space, in which a group of space aliens rewrite the Gospels - because of the "slipshod storytelling" -and offer a new Gospel as "a gift to Earth" (108, 109). Sexton's work with the figure of Mary can also be seen as a critique of the Bible's "slipshod storytelling". Women's experience, as Rosemary Radford Ruether has argued, has been "shut out of ... theological reflection in the past" (112). "Not only have women been excluded from shaping and interpreting the (theological) tradition from their own experience," Ruether observes, "but the tradition has been shaped and interpreted against them" (112). Sexton articulates this dilemma in "The Jesus Papers" by representing biblical women and herself (as "The Author of the Jesus Papers") in the poem in terms of their subordinate relationship to Jesus, God and the biblical text. "The Jesus Papers" poses a question about women's relationship to Christianity, and their representation within the text of the Bible. Sexton responds to this question in the two later collections of poems, by offering, like Vonnegut's aliens, a Gospel of women's inner space, and experience.

In "Jesus Suckles," the first poem in the sequence, Jesus, in the first-person voice, recounts his relationship with Mary. The poem begins with the image of Christ at his mother's breast:

Mary, your great
white apples make me glad.
I feel your heart work its machine and I doze like a fly. (Collected Poems: 337)

In this first stanza, Jesus composes a number of similes and metaphors that describe himself and Mary; she is a "lily," his "wife," "the sea," "the salt," "every fish of importance" (337). Conversely, he is the "bee" inside the lily, a "jelly-baby" (with his "wife"), a boy in a boat on the sea (337). He empowers Mary with his language, as he recounts his own, infant, pre-linguistic being, and his "glad," dependent relationship with her. These images also serve to sexualize the relationship between Mary and Christ, explicitly (Mary as "wife"), and cryptically ("boy in the boat" is an obscure term for the vagina).

Sexton begins the sequence with the image of the Madonna and child because of its iconographic familiarity and significance. Mary is most commonly rendered at two stages of Christ's life: his infancy and death. In both stages, he is depicted lying in her arms, and her image often flanks his in depictions of his crucifixion. In the Renaissance, images of the Madonna and child flourished, and she is usually depicted with her eyes averted, as the Christ child gazes directly toward the spectator. In the Netherlandish painter Dieric Bouts's "Madonna and Child," the Virgin's exposed nipple is the painting's focal point. Mary, with her eyes downcast, offers her breast to her child, whose own eyes are open, and, again, spectator-directed. This painting provides a good example of Mary's conventional iconographic role as the silent nurturer of Christ. In The Legends of the Madonna, Anna Jameson summarizes conventional images of the Virgin and child enthroned:

...the Mother adores her child. This is properly the Madre Pia ... He lies extended on her knee, and she looks down on him with hands folded in prayer; or she places her hand under his foot, an attitude which originally implied his sovereignty and superiority...Sometimes the Child looks
up at his mother's face, with his finger on his lip,
expressing the Verbum Sum, 'I am the Word.' (68-69)

Medieval theologians believed that there was a constant, non-verbal "communion" between Christ and Mary, a communion which Sexton's Jesus attempts to convey in the first stanza of "Jesus Suckles" (Jameson:280). Mary is given primacy over Christ; his relationship to her is that of a pilot-fish, or remora; his existence is secondary to, and subsumed within, hers. Sexton describes a similar mother-son relationship in "Menstruation at Forty" (Live or Die), a poem in which she imagines a son, "never acquired" (137). In this poem, the speaker imagines the prospect of bearing a child "whose genitals (she) fear(s)," and concludes with an elegaic passage, an image of the mother and (imagined) son. She addresses him as "my carrot, my cabbage": "I would have possessed you before all women,/calling your name,/calling you mine" (138). It is this initial "possession" that is elegized, an instant of maternal power that is mitigated within the poem, when the mother figure also depicts herself "waiting always for (him) on the porch," when he is grown (138). The shifting power-relationship between possessing mother and "feared" son in "Menstruation at Forty" is reiterated in "Jesus Suckles". Sexton composes, in Catherine Belsey's term, a "hierarchy of discourses" in this poem, by creating a "privileged discourse - Christ's - which places as subordinate all the discourses that are literally or figuratively between inverted commas" (70). Mary's voice is absent from the text, but her changing representation is dictated by the changing perspective of the Christ-narrator, who comes to cast her role in increasingly subordinate terms.

In the second stanza, Jesus qualifies and restates his initial assessment:

No. No.
All lies.
I am small
and you hold me.  
You give me milk  
and we are the same  
and I am glad.  (337)

The rapturous and integral connection that is fostered in the first stanza is undermined somewhat. Although Jesus retains his initial "glad(ness)," he qualifies this condition by asserting the equality, the "same(ness)" of their relationship, in order to recast the dependence he asserted in the first stanza. The figure of Mary in this passage is transformed; she becomes the pictorial Madonna, whose iconographic role is strictly associated with her nurturing of the infant Christ. His reference to "lies" suggests the primacy of his subjectivity, that Mary's story is his to tell; Sexton casts Christ in the act of revision in order to suggest the authorial revisions manifest in the act(s) of telling and retelling the Christ story. She treats the Bible as a text that requires transformation, a decision founded in her desire to reconcile belief and need. "Need is not quite belief," Sexton writes in "With Mercy for the Greedy" (All My Pretty Ones), a sentiment that she further explores in "The Jesus Papers" (62). The epigraph to the "Jesus Papers," "God is not mocked except by believers," exemplifies Sexton's desire to reconcile her belief with(in) the Christian church, and in doctrines that contradict her own construction, throughout her poems, of a woman-centered system (337). She accomplishes this, initially, by exposing the impoverished roles of women in the New Testament, and ultimately, by constructing a "Mariology" to supplement the Christology that is troubled throughout "The Jesus Papers" (Hampson:73)

In the third and final stanza of the poem, Jesus utters his final, terse revision:

    No. No.  
    All lies.  
    I am a truck. I run everything.
I own you. (338)

In "Herr God, Herr Lucifer, Anger, Violence, and Polarization," Alicia Ostriker discusses this poem as an account of male adolescence. The progressive stanzas illustrate, first, that "the blissful female connection that generates metaphor must be sacrificed" (Ostriker:159). Sexton "locates" the boy's "oedipal crisis" "in his infancy, Ostriker argues, as a forethought of things to come" (159). "When attached to the female," Ostriker notes, "(Christ's) imagination lives; when detached, it dies" (159). She also points out that Christ does not speak again in the first-person in Sexton's sequence until the poem "Jesus Dies," which illustrates his ultimate detachment, or "differentiation from Mary" (159).

Sexton's gradual diminishment of Mary in the poem is similar to feminist critiques of Christian myth. Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) provides a powerful contemporary argument for the historical revision of Mary and of women's roles in the Bible. Mary's biblical role, she argues, is structured according to "refined confinement" (86). Christian and post-Christian myth was, in Daly's terms, comprised of an "androcentric invasion of the gynocentric realm," and a "total erasure/elimination of female presence," achieved by the conceptualization of a male divine son, conceived "without even the vestigial presence of the Virgin Mother" (87). "Jesus Suckles" forwards a similar postulate, as it illustrates a Mary who is a fictional construct, subject to revision, and reduction within an androcentric narrative.

In "The Division of Parts" (*To Bedlam*), Sexton forges a connection between the biblical Mary and her own mother, "my Mary Gray" (42). In this poem Sexton replaces the image, the "grotesque metaphor" of Christ, with the image of the "brave ghost," her mother (46). Sexton also conflates Mary (her) mother, and Mary, the mother of God, in the poem, creating a
confessional deity, a woman who is her mother in life ("My lady of my first words") and spirit ("you come ... to make me your inheritor") (46). Sexton's "prayer" in "For the Year of the Insane" (Live or Die) is also predicated on a belief in Mary, the "fragile mother," and the rosary she describes - the "silver Christ" - to her, as an "unbeliever," is a remote icon (131).

Sexton's revisionist Christianity is scattered throughout the collected poems; Mary, Mary Magdalene and flying nuns are called upon as sources of faith and redemption, while the figure of Christ is troubled as a result of his otherness, his alien presence in a personal, gynocentric spiritual realm. Christ, like the fictive child in "Menstruation at Forty," is a stranger, the stranger "whose genitals" she "fear(s)". Christ's genitals are used here to signify not only his maleness/divorcement from the gynocentric cosmos, but also his mortality - his life, as a man, on earth. Sexton addresses Christ's maleness in relentlessly secularized and sexualized terms in "The Jesus Papers". In "Jesus Awake" and "Jesus Asleep," Sexton explores Christ's sexual desires in order to examine what these desires signify in his mortal and divine relationships with women, and to indicate how these desires further estrange the figures/personas of Christ and Mary.

There are a number of Marys in the New Testament, including the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, the disciple Mary, who was the wife or daughter of James the Younger, and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, who washed and anointed Jesus's feet on one occasion, and "wiped his feet with her hair" (in Barthel: 316). Sexton conflates this collective (of Marys) in her treatment of Christ's sexual desires, a treatment which is separated into two sections. In "Jesus Awake," Sexton sets Christ's adolescence in the 1970s: "the year/of the How to Sex Book...(and) the Sensuous Man and Woman" (338). This particular periodization is well-chosen,
given the popularity of the revised Christ story in the late 1960s and early 1970s - as witnessed by the musicals *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* - and the climate of sexual revolution that peaked during this same period. Sexton depicts Christ in the act of celibate "fasting," in the midst of a "great sexual swell" (338). This "swell" symbolizes adolescence, a time of sexual awakening that Sexton likens, with great wit, to the sexual revolution, a revolution which has been critiqued by many feminists as "a revolution designed for male pleasure only" (Thompson:296).

In "Jesus Awake," Jesus's penis is "sewn onto Him like a medal," oblivious to his "sorrow" (338). Sexton employs the image of the medal/penis to illustrate its function on Christ's body; she renders it as an obscured relic - mortal evidence of his immortality - a contradiction in terms which signifies the division and conflict consecrated in the figure of the man-god. She concludes the poem by describing Jesus as a "great house/with no people,/no plans" (338). The description further illuminates the (imagined) temptation of Christ - to participate in sexuality and reproduction - a fantasy which Nikos Kazantzakis also explores in *The Last Temptation* (1988) when he envisions Christ choosing a life in which "the joys of the body (are) not sinful" (460).

Sexton's isolation of Christ's penis as an "arched," non-utilitarian "medal" is further designed to celebrate the breasts or body of Mary, a body that functions integrally, in Sexton's poetry and in classical iconography, as a source of "glad(ness)" and bliss, or integral nourishment.

"Jesus Asleep," the poem which follows "Jesus Awake," is constructed as a rereading of the previous poem: his sleep signifies his unconsciousness, the unconscious desires that belie his "fasting," or steadfast celibate life. When Christ dreams in Sexton's poem, he "desire(s)" Mary as his "penis (sings) like a dog" (338). He turns "sharply" from these dreams; dreams, as the
palindrome "dog" suggests, which are the inverse thoughts of "god(s)" (338). Christ's "sore need," however, provokes him to carve a Pieta, "With his penis like a chisel," a statue which replicates his dying: "He carved this death./He was persistent...It was important to have only one desire" (339).

Jesus is represented here in the now familiar act of artistic transformation, as he transforms his sexual desires into an object/icon, and alters their trajectory, Sexton too is transforming the trajectory of the Christ story, by suggesting that Christ's destiny, his "one (divine) desire," might be complicated by mortal desires. The poem emphasizes Christ's mortality by depicting him as the author/creator of his destiny, and suggests that his mortal desires are sublimated, necessarily, in the fulfillment of his prescribed fate. The conflict Christ articulates in Matthew:26, verse 39 -"O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (HB:21) - is same the conflict that Sexton addresses in this poem, in the contradictory image of the artist who is both creator and created, who resists and accepts this proposition, and articulates the "creative tension between transcendence and immanence" (Tong:45). Sexton's evocation of the sculptor also draws attention to the act of representation, in the original biblical text, and the ways in which it is re-told in sermons, texts and church doctrine. Jesus is Mary's architect in "Jesus Asleep": he re-composes their relationship, although "He had not known Mary" (Sexton,CP:339). Mary is virtually without voice in the Bible, and therefore may be interpreted, variously, by anyone. She and Christ are, as Sexton notes, "united" in Christ's death. He becomes her "centerpiece," a domestic image that highlights her interiorized and ancillary role in his death and life (339).

When Sexton writes that Jesus "desire(s) Mary," she seems to be referring to his mother,
as she also refers to the Piéta he erects to supplement this desire. Employing a number of Freudian ideas, Sexton creates a complex Oedipal nexus in this poem, with God (the Father), Mary and Jesus comprising the Oedipal triangle. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud asserts that in dreams of penises, sexually repressed thoughts or images are often "transposed from a lower to an upper part of the body" (422). He also notes that genitals are often transposed as faces or less "objectionable" regions in dreams, or in "the symbolism of unconscious thinking" (422). Sexton appears to be playing with this Freudian notion of transposition in "Jesus Asleep," when she renders Jesus transposing/transforming, or utilizing his penis to create a less "objectionable" version of his "sore need" (Sexton:339). In the Freudian Oedipal scenario, the male child’s "special affection" for his mother conflicts with his feelings for his father, who is the "rival" in this triangle (ILP:243). The Oedipal drama that Sexton creates here springs from her examination of Christ’s relationship to Mary, and to his own crisis: "to have only one desire" (339). Ernest Jones, in his study of Freud’s life and work, discusses "birth trauma" in relation to the Oedipus complex (422). Those "shipwreck(ed)" in this complex," Jones writes, may be individuals who have "brought to the world an organization specially sensitive to trauma" (422). These are the precise terms in which Sexton describes Christ’s dilemma, to "live or die" - he proceeds to his death or destiny, naughtily, "breathing water through His gills" (339). Mary and God are complex figures in the poem, who signify Christ’s polarized position, respectively, within the "organization" of his "family," and life. Sexton sexualizes Christ’s struggle in order to divide the figures of Mary and God in terms of the conflicting relationship they share with Christ. Mary’s earthly role as Christ’s intimate is, necessarily, in conflict with God’s role in willing Christ’s death (or removal from the earth), and transcendence. Jesus is
seen turning "sharply away from that play" in "Jesus Asleep," the play being the intimacy and physical desire he is also seen rejecting in "Jesus Suckles" (339).

"Jesus Asleep" is, in one sense, a reclamation of Mary and of all the living Marys that Christ rejected in his trajectory toward destiny. In the poem's conclusion, Sexton writes:

and because He had not known Mary
they were united at His death,
the cross to the woman,
in a final embrace,
poised forever
like a centerpiece. (339)

Here Sexton suggests that the cross is for women to bear (an image that recalls Mary/women flattened by the Christian "truck" in "Jesus Suckles"), and gestures to the stasis of the classical iconography of the Virgin and her son, who are "poised forever" in silence, without movement. Mary's limited role in Christ's adult life is also evoked here with the phrase "because he had not known Mary," and the image of the "centerpiece" further clarifies the organizational, familial schism implied in the poem's Oedipal drama. Two discrete households become apparent in this poem: the household of God, where Jesus resides, and the domestic household, where Mary resides. The centerpiece (which is a decorative table ornament) is representative of Mary's own ornamental, iconographical posture with relation to Christ, and her role in Christ's drama. Sexton asserts this idea again in "Jesus Unborn," when she refers to Mary as a "dog" (again, an inverted god), and depicts her at the crucifixion watching Christ, knowing he will be "remembered," while she is "cover(ed)" (by Christ), her "lifetime up" and "shut" "into this dump-faced day" (344). Mary's domestic realm is ultimately displaced by Jesus as well. In "Jesus Cooks," it is he who operates effortlessly in this domain, in his "chef's hat," and with his "spoons, "forks," and "invisible dishes" (341).

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"Jesus Asleep," however, is also Sexton's reclamation of Christ, or rather, an attempt to reconcile the image and being of Christ with her own sense of herself as an artist and "believer". In "Contemporary Reasons for a Single Jesus," William E. Phipps composes a list of potential reasons for Christ's celibacy. In his first argument, "Marriage is a Distraction," he argues that "individual creativity demands the suppression of the sexual instinct," and notes, further (via "an articulate married woman"), that "The crucifixion was the culminating focus of his life force" (139). Sexton's "Jesus Asleep" contradicts Phipps's theory, as her Christ does not suppress his "sexual instinct"; rather, he sorrowfully acknowledges "His need", or sexual desire, and transforms it into art. The statue Christ creates in the poem also represents the "culminating focus of his life" in an act that is reminiscent of Michaelangelo's composition of the Sistine Ceiling, an arduous task that he "viewed as ... a penance in which the ardor of his creative labors would expiate his sinful guilt" (Elsen:146).

Sexton's recognition of Christ as an artist is significant given the poem's context in her own "awful rowing" toward faith. Sexton's religious work, in The Book of Folly and the two books that follow, is also transformative: she proceeds with the statement that she is a "believer" (in the epigraph) and goes on to revise, reform and re-compose that belief. Sexton's own conflict, as an artist and critic, is a conflict between faith and reason; she desires belief, but may only compose it in terms that are reasonable to her experience as a woman, and her position as a commentator on the status of women. By intimating a connection between herself and Christ Sexton is approaching the strategy she will come to employ in the later books, where she envisions herself as a revisionist deity.

Sexton insistently secularizes and humanizes Christ in "The Jesus Papers". His death is "a
personal matter”; in heaven (according to Lazurus) "there (is) no change" (343,342). She accentuates Christ’s humanity both to further her own (problematic) relationship and connection with him, and to explore and compare his life on earth with hers. In "Consorting with Angels" (Live or Die), Sexton observes: "I’m no more a woman/than Christ was a man" (112). It is this poem that best anticipates the poet’s focused examination of her relationship with Christ, as it is her (continued) contention that it is the poet’s task to reformulate "common gender" and "final aspect," and to reorganize "the world of reason," of doctrine, through the transformative powers of poetry ("Consorting":112).

In Whither Womankind?, a treatment of "The Humanity of Women," Robert Kress discusses the incident in John 8:1-11, where Jesus intervenes when a woman "caught in the very act of adultery" is being publicly stoned (64). Jesus "expends himself," according to Kress’s antifeminist logic, by saving this "lowly female sinner"(64). There is no doubt, Daphne Hampson has observed, "that Jesus was personally kind to women"; however, she notes, "There is no positive evidence that Jesus saw anything wrong with the sexism of his day" (88). In "Jesus Raises Up the Harlot," Sexton creates a narrative to contradict the kind of interpretation Kress engages in. Furthermore, her narrative supports Hampson’s contention that Jesus’s kindness (in this incident) is not evidence of his feminist politics.

Sexton is, in fact, condemnatory in this poem. She creates a fairy tale narrative (in the manner of her previous Transformations) that functions as an implicit critique of traditional interpretations of the stoning incident. Sexton’s protagonist is a guileless "sweet redheaded harlot," whose "delicate body clothed in red" is being bloodied by "the townspeople" (339). Images of redness are repeated and stressed here in order to convey the townspeople’s image of
the woman as an aggregate of sin; she is not only a sinner but the complete embodiment of sin. Jesus decides in the poem "to/exhume her like a mortician," and he "lance(s)" her "terrible sickness," by inserting his thumbs in her breasts and drawing milk from "those two boils of whoredom" (340). The "harlot" is then seen as being resurrected, following "Jesus around like a puppy," and becoming his "pet" (340). She states that Jesus's actions make her "feel/like a little girl again when she had a father"; she "know(s) she owe(s) Jesus a life./as sure-fire as a trump card" (340).

Sexton's retelling of this biblical story bears a disquieting resemblance to her work with "Sleeping Beauty". Sexton reads the story of Jesus and the Harlot as romance: this incident resembles the paradigmatic plotting of romance and fairy tales, where bold men (saviours) are commonly depicted rescuing hapless women. The psychoanalytical resonances of Sexton's "Sleeping Beauty" are also present. Jesus is seen as a healer/doctor who sexualizes his treatment of his "patient," while the "harlot" is seen in the throes of transference, as she recreates Jesus as her beloved father who once "brushed the dirt from her eye" (340). The diminutive images - "pet," "little girl," "puppy" - are also calculated to stress women's historical status as "lowly," subservient figures. These images are assembled and re-stated in the poem's conclusion - in the reference to the "trump card" - which is a card in a hand or a suit that ranks higher than other suits. Sexton draws upon this card-playing terminology as a way of asserting, once more, that women in the New Testament are ranked lower than men in the hierarchy, and she will use this card conceit once more in the last poem of The Awful Rowing Toward God, in an account of own her game-playing, hierarchical relationship with God.

The sexualized relationship between Jesus and the "harlot" not only recalls "Sleeping
Beauty," but also "Jesus Asleep". In both poems Sexton emphasizes the undercurrent of eroticism she perceives in both psychoanalysis (with regard to transference and the male analyst/female analysand) and Jesus's relationship with his followers and with women during his life. The erotic element of women's devotion to Christ has been documented in a variety of contemporary sources, sources which rely primarily on the formal devotional relationship between Christ and his female adherents. As Simone de Beauvoir observes in _The Second Sex_, "The Catholic religion, among others, exerts a most confused influence upon the young girl" (271). The young girl, like the female saints and disciples, kneels before the "gaze of God and the angels: a masculine gaze," and may experience the similarities (which have often been noted in biblical scholarship) between "erotic language and mystical language spoken by women" (271). De Beauvoir cites St. Theresa of Avila's writings about Christ, which recount "the inexpressible kiss of (His) mouth," and her longing to "become the prey of (His) love" (273). Ron Hansen's novel _Mariette in Ecstasy_ (1991), which is based on the spiritual autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, explores the dynamic of Christian women's passion for Christ. In an 1992 interview with Kevin Connolly, Hansen remarks that this passion often "edge(es) over into romanticism," and may be related to "sexual frustration" (25). He also argues, citing one of the nuns he interviewed, that "God doesn't condemn our bodies" and that women like Mariette, who writes love letters to Jesus, are "consecrating their sexuality and giving it to Christ" (25).

There is clearly a historical/textual link between Christ and his female adherents, one which is steeped in the conventions of romance. Catholic nuns - who are brides of Christ - wear wedding rings in certain orders, and Sor Juana, the Mexican nun and poet, has expressed, very eloquently, that "A pure love, however distant, eschewing all unseemliness, may feel whatever
the most profane might feel" (37). It is the conflation of eros and agape that Sexton is exploring in those of her poems that deal with Christ's relationships with women in his life, a conflation that is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's non-secular poetry. In "Wild Nights," for example, Dickinson creates a synthesis of the secular sentiments of the first stanza: "Wild nights!/Were I with thee/Wild nights should be/Our luxury!," with the non-secular sentiments of the last stanza: "Rowing in Eden-/Ah, the sea!/Might I but moor-Tonight-/In Thee!" (FH:32). The shift in capitals - "thee" to "Thee" - provides the poem with a sense of the movement between secular and sacred love, and a fluid exchange between erotic expressions in these realms.

Sexton, however, is also critiquing the sexualized relationship many women experience with Christ. It is a relationship which the authors of Re-Making Love, Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, have characterized as being reminiscent of S/M; many women who love Christ, they claim, are "committed to the idea of submission" (156). The authors cite Marabel Morgan's The Total Woman, a popular book in 1973, which advocated wifely submission in the service of Christ. They also discuss a Christian woman who once remarked to sociologist Joanne Young Nawn, that she preferred to "snuggle up under Jesus's love in bed" (157). If eros is expressed as submission, as it is in "Jesus Raises Up the Harlot," it clearly confounds Sexton's project (exhibited throughout her poetry) to reclaim and affirm both women's sexuality, and their power to assert this sexuality in their own terms, and as their own subjects.

The "Harlot"-"puppy" is a member of Sexton's poetic gallery of deluded, or mis-treated women (such as Snow White, or Cinderella) who have participated in the myth of male power, in order to achieve their own salvation. The notion of Jesus as a lover is not uncommon in Christian theory; in "The Ethic of God as Mother, Lover and Friend," Sallie McFague discusses
non-agapic love between the devotee and Christ, that is based on a "fellow feeling" and "sympathetic identification" with Christ (as "the lover of the world") and his suffering (268, 269). It is this sense of Christ as "lover of the world" that is manifest in Sexton's work, as she attempts to identify Christ's mortality and pain in relation to her own, and to entangle him as a poetic figure, within the confessional drama of her personal search for redemption.

In the final poem in the sequence, "The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks," which Diane Middlebrook has referred to as an unsuccessful conclusion to the series (she claims it "limps to [its] ending) Sexton asserts her status as the author of the preceding parables (AS:353). The poem is a dream sequence, and Middlebrook is correct in her suggestion that the poem does not respond to the "rigorous questions" the previous poems pose. "Was she unnerved by the outcome of her...questions about what import Christianity held for women?," she queries, a question which underlines what is occasionally unnerving about Middlebrook's biography (353). As a biographer, Middlebrook is forced to conjecture about certain of Sexton's motivations, often speculating that Sexton is motivated by fear, an assumption which undermines and misreads a good deal of Sexton's work and intentions. The concluding verses of "The Author" are indeed oblique, but the questions Sexton poses, I maintain, are meant to be left unanswered. Sexton suggests, by posing, rather than answering questions, that the "import that Christianity (holds) for women" necessarily varies, that these questions are better answered by individual women. Her conclusion does not "limp"; rather, it (in the manner of Yeats's "rough beast") "Slouches towards Bethlehem," toward an interpretive site that is striated with "respon(ses)" (Yeats:100).

Sexton does, through the use of metaphor, suggest a number of provocative ideas about
women and Christianity in "The Author". This poem can and should be construed as Sexton's own Revelation, in which she prophesies, or looks forwards, in the manner of autobiography, by reading (her dream) backwards. In the dream, the narrator milks a cow, "waiting for the moon juice," "the white mother," but instead, its udders cover her with "blood" and "shame" (344,345). God then speaks to the narrator of the poem, and asks her to bake a "gingerbread lady" in her oven, an image drawn from fairy tales which refers, ominously, to the destruction of "evil" fairy tale women by oven and flame. The poem concludes:

When the cow gives blood  
and the Christ is born  
we must all eat sacrifices.  
We must all eat beautiful women. (345)

The fairy tale image of consumption is re-adopted here, to illustrate the ways in which women have commonly been linked to, or depicted as, food. The image of eating "sacrifices" also relates to the act of transubstantiation, an act that is described earlier in the poem when the cow delivers blood instead of milk to the narrator. The "white mother" and the "women" who are consumed, or transformed, when Christ is born, illustrate the Communion wafer; the body of Christ that subsumes or supplants (biblical) women. Sexton is rejecting the idea that Christ's transformed body is an adequate supplement, an idea that is supported by the final verse: "We must all eat beautiful women."

This verse is, on one level, a harsh directive from God. It may also be read as the poet's insistence that we, as women, accept ourselves and our biblical mothers, in the act of Communion. In this sense, then, the blood and shame that the narrator is "covered" with may be re-interpreted as a directive from the poet to devour and denounce the blood-shame (linked to historical taboos in many religions regarding women's menstrual cycles), and continue to re-
invent ourselves, to draw, miraculously, from the "well," the "hollow water" of our historical/biblical representations ("The Author of the Jesus Papers":345). Finally, Sexton subverts fairy tale depictions of evil women by insisting that we "must eat" or re-claim and discover the "beautiful women," our "sacrifice(d)" creators, and restrict or revise our acceptance of communion. In La Bâtarde (1965), Violette Leduc recounts a similar refusal, when she describes an occasion of erotic love between herself and a woman, Aline, a love she "lost," when she refused to "swallow the body of Christ". In Leduc’s autobiography, Aline represents what is absent, what is lost, when Christ, singular and masculine, is devoured or confirmed (78).

ii.

*It's something like Shinto...one of its...sensible tenets is that gods are travellers, gypsies, moving from one place to another, taking up residence here and there but never staying long. Like lightning, you don't know where one will strike next, and nothing is unworthy to be the house of a god - a stone, a plant, a tree...*

Mary Flanagan, "Wild Garlic"

*I could not find myself; how much less, then, could I find God.*

St Augustine, *Confessions*

*I am fully aware The Death Notebooks will get bad reviews even if they were the Song of Solomon. It's the time for me to be cut down in this poetry world.*

Anne Sexton, letter to Cindy Degener (February 7, 1974)
In a letter dated November 17, 1970, Sexton writes that she is reading Joan Didion's work, and planning to borrow and read Maxine Kumin's copy of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) (*SPL*:329). There is no further evidence - in her letters and biography - of any feminist reading, but in 1972, Sexton began referring to herself as Ms.Dog, an appellation derived from her unpublished poem sequence "Dog-God" (in Middlebrook, *AS*:362). Many feminists in this period were challenging and resisting traditional Christian orthodoxy: Carol Christ, Mary Daly, Naomi Goldberg, Miriam Simos ("Starhawk") and others were engaged in the rejection of God, and the reclamation of the Goddess, a figure who represented, in Carol Christ's words, "a new naming of women's power, women's bodies, women's feeling of connection to nature, and women's bonds with each other" (in Wilson-Kastner:22). Problems with the patriarchal structure and doctrines of Christianity and the Church have been articulated by many feminist commentators. In "I Desire Her with My Whole Heart," Janet Morley writes that as a Christian, it is a "devotional necessity" for her to refer to God as "She," and that she experienced a conflict between the "masculine language" of prayer and her own "experience (as) a woman in society," which led her to feel "creaturely and 'other' in (her) relation to God" (158). Sexton's religious pilgrimage/critique is not dissimilar to the work of other radical, revisionist feminists. In *The Death Notebooks* and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, she attempts to re-invent herself and God as a way of stressing her "power" and her "bonds" to biblical women, and to women who were also struggling to reconcile their feminism with their Christian faith.

Critical reviews of *The Death Notebooks* were "uniformly poor" (Gray Sexton, Ames *SPL*:361); her religious work was perceived by Helen Vendler as "masochistic" "dreams and hallucinations" ("Malevolent":35). Sexton's decision to publish a series of books about God and
Jesus at this period was curiously timed, given the tenor of radical feminism at this time, and the attempts of feminists to reject and re-gender these figures altogether. Sexton too, was engaged in this project, but she approaches her critique differently. Unlike the critic who articulates problematic issues and urges reform, Sexton, as a poet (an "unacknowledged legislator of the world"), literally re-forms these issues through her transformative language, and within the alternative textual realm where transformation/change is actualized.

The Death Notebooks commences with "Gods," a poem which formally instigates Sexton's search for an acceptable god or belief system in her life. The poem begins: "Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods/She began looking in the sky - /expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch./ No one" (349). The poet continues her quest throughout the poem, seeking "God" in/through "the great poet," many churches, locations ("the Pyramids"), and "learned books," but is continually thwarted in her efforts: the poet "belches in her face"; the books "sp(i)t print back at her" (349). The angel Sexton seeks is an icon-amalgam, not unlike the fish-woman-Christ she creates in "Consorting with Angels". Sexton's angel is not gendered, but its "blue crotch" recalls the Virgin's vestments, which in turn evoke a deity with female genitals. Sexton finally finds "the gods of the world" hidden in her bathroom, and cries "At last!", and "lock(s) the door" (3-49). It is with this initial poem that Sexton sets out the terms and cartography of her pilgrimage. The poet's search, for a god, or higher power, will be an interiorized, individualized process. When God rejects her, in "The Fury of God's Goodbye," he stalks from her "room," and leaves her, "a forsaken explorer" who has "lost" her "map" (374, 375).

The "map" Sexton creates, throughout this collection, is like a pirate's map; she delineates,
in the poems where her hidden, or private faith is located, a belief system which she has individually inscribed. Gaston Bachelard illuminates this poetic methodology in "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside" when he refers to the "solitary room" of the poet as a "dreamer's cell," "a solid framework for secret being" (228). There are a number of poems in The Death Notebooks that deal with Christian figures, and religion, and it is in the one "Ms. Dog" poem, "Hurry Up Please It's Time," that Sexton interpolates her ideas and reflections on her relationship with Christianity in the greatest detail. As Richard E. Morton has noted, the poem is "a full analysis of Sexton's religious beliefs at this place in her oeuvre" (110).

"Hurry Up Please It's Time" is also, in many ways, a bad poem. Its loose, disconnected form and language isolate it as a probable source for a good deal of the criticism of Sexton's work at this time. Katha Pollitt and Joyce Carol Oates, for example, have commented on the "flaccid" and "haphazard" structure of the poetry in Sexton's last two books, comments which reflect the poet's altered form of composition at this time. Once a meticulous writer, who executed many drafts for each poem, she came to virtually abandon revision altogether. Even Sexton herself admitted that some of her poems, or "instincts" were "damned bad" (Star:200); Pollitt's lament, however, for the paucity of "gems" ("Awful Rowing":316) in Sexton's later writing, provoked Diane Middlebrook to pose a provocative question about the function of these poems within the Complete Poems. In "Poet of Weird Abundance," she states:

...the appearance of (the Complete Poems) presents an opportunity to pose questions about a writer whose entire body of work is the necessary critical context. How are the gems related to the surrounding poems? Is the un-gemlike work inferior as art, or does it represent different artistic goals? (320)

Sexton's "different artistic goals" are reflected in the manner in which she composed both The
Death Notebooks and The Awful Rowing, poems composed, in Sexton's words, in "a seizure of inspiration" and terrible urgency; The Death Notebooks was originally designed as a posthumous collection (Star:190)\textsuperscript{13}.

"Hurry Up Please It's Time" is a discursive poem that reflects an altered sensibility in Sexton's writing. Rather than one unifying narrative voice, there are a series of voices in the poem, while the mechanics of rhyme, meter, and voice are also abandoned in favour of an informal discourse about women, the self, and God. By christening herself "Ms.Dog," Sexton invents herself as an ad hoc preacher who sermonizes through poetry. A priest, Father Dunn, who met with Sexton on two occasions, referred to her typewriter as her "altar," and her poems as her "prayers" (Star:190). Sexton appears to have embraced this sentiment, for in "Hurry Up Please It's Time," and other poems, she depicts herself (in her last confessional/personal transformation) as both Christian adherent and God herself, and it is in these roles that she writes poems that are (omni)powering - prayers, or psalms, which, like David's 22nd psalm, exert "the power of the dog" (HB:365).

"Hurry Up Please It's Time" takes its title from "A Game of Chess," or Section Two of The Waste Land. Sandra Gilbert has deemed Sexton's poem "tiresomely Eliotian, without the impersonal terseness and bite of Eliot" ("On TDN":165). Much of Sexton's later work is derivative; "Hurry Up," for example, owes much not only to T.S. Eliot, but to John Berryman (this latter influence will become clear later in the analysis of this poem). While "Hurry Up" is indebted to Eliot, with specific reference to its Eliotian use of fragmented stanzas and overlapping voices, the passage from which the poem is derived is uniquely significant for Sexton's text. In Eliot's pub setting, the characters discuss women's issues; they speak of
inducing miscarriage, aging, and the marginal role of the childless wife. It is line 164, which Vivien Eliot is said to have contributed, which has the speaker question: "What you get married for if you don’t want children?" (SP:57). The women’s discussion ceases at this point, and another voice hurries the patrons with the (repeated) phrase, "HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME". This voice is intrusive and other-worldly, signifying, in Sexton’s poem, the suppression of female discourse and response (57). The question posited by Eliot’s speaker is suspended; the female figures are not given the space to reply to the question’s maddening logic. The pains and potential death (of the mother) inscribed in childbirth are described in Eliot’s poem (in the conclusive comment, "What you get married for..") as being an inevitable element of the marriage contract.

In "Power, Sexuality, and Intimacy," Muriel Dimen comments that "For every woman - heterosexual, lesbian, young, old - sexuality is inextricably entangled with reproductivity, in other words, with procreation, relatedness, and sociality as felt and socially instituted" (43). Ecumenical doctrine, too, has forged for women a historical and doctrinal link between marriage and childbirth, or between sexuality and reproduction, a dictate which Sexton challenges when she proclaims in "Is It True?": "Bless all women/who want to remake their own likeness/but not every day" (447). By attempting to decode such paradigms as marriage = children, Sexton is also attempting to unsettle the dialectical opposition encoded in ideas about sexual difference.

The first stanza of "Hurry Up" is curiously repellent in its use of such childish euphemisms as "crapper," "my little cunny," and "wee-wee" (385). Sexton’s use of language at this point appears to be a calculated attempt to replicate the language/essence of childhood, in the manner of James Joyce’s depiction of Stephen Dedalus’s formative speech in A Portrait of the Artist as
a Young Man. Sexton did, in fact, refer in interviews to some of her poems as being "Molly Bloomish" (Williams:99). The language also replicates the sense of loathing (found in many religions), about women's bodies and (reproductive) functions. As Rosemarie Tong has observed, Augustine instructed that "a man may love his wife's spiritual nature (but) he should despise all her bodily functions as wife and mother" (101). Sexton's regression to the voice of a child represents her attempt to formulate an inchoate space early in the poem. Her language reproduces the experience described; when she notes that boys "wee-wee funny," and that she "wee-wee(s) like a squaw," she is expressing a literal recognition of gender difference (385). Sexton's observation seems particularly relevant now, when (anti) feminist commentators like Camille Paglia are critiquing women's urination - "(she) merely waters the ground she stands on" - and praising men's ability to urinate in "an arc of transcendence." (21). Sexton creates a similar version of Paglia's maxim, that to "piss on is to criticize" (21), when she creates for herself a "pen(is)" she can use to "piss in God's eye" (385). Sexton's recognition of gender difference is subtly paralleled with a biblical, or historical recognition of creational difference. "Not all the books in the world will change that," she explains, "that" being the fact that women's "trouble" is ontological in nature (385). Sexton then observes that she has "swallowed an orange, being woman," and, conversely, man has "swallowed a ruler" (385). These images - the "orange" and "ruler" - are evocative yet obscure; they are code-words, representing the inner logic of the idiosyncratic cosmology Sexton creates in the poem, and any discussion of their meaning is, necessarily, speculative.

The ruler may be seen as a symbol of power; it is not only an autocratic image, but one which refers to the ability to measure and define. It is a phallic and logocentric symbol of an
irrefutable and absolute entity. The orange, however, is more complex, if we are to look beyond its association with the forbidden fruit. Oranges, which may be seen as a lush circular symbol of women's sexuality (evoking breasts and the vagina) are ubiquitous in Sexton's poetry. Their colour evokes the sun, another image which Sexton uses frequently as a vivid symbol of passion. She also uses the image of the orange elsewhere in this collection. In the psalm sequence "O Ye Tongues," the poet praises "that daughter (who) must build her own city and fill it with her/own oranges, her own words," and the woman who has "swallowed a bagful of oranges" (412,408). Words and oranges are also combined in "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," when Sexton describes "dressing" her "awkward bowl," her life, with the "skin" of "an orange" (34-35). There is a subtle and amusing reference to Confessional poetry in this description, a form of autobiographical writing which may be seen as the act of decorating life's pulp with the beauty of poetic language. The swallowed orange is also alluded to here, as the fruit is meant to intimate the silent or unspoken truths which are "dressed" in language. The ruler and orange are interfaced to suggest (as "For John" suggests) on the one hand a history of women's words and, on the other, a history of male restriction, authority, and measurement/assessment with regard to these words.

Having realized the futility of looking outwards in "Gods," Sexton sustains an interior, inward journey throughout the rest of her work with "gods" in "Hurry Up". The introspective journey is indicative of her struggle with faith, for, having travelled to the immutable fact of gender difference, she is unable to reconcile the male God with the female subject. Her stance in the poem is that of the dog in the manger; she is a transmogrified she-God, a position which is, in itself, fluctuating. "Ms.Dog" is only one of the allegorical figures Sexton employs in her
writing; on other occasions, she has adopted the pseudonyms "Mrs Death," "Mrs Sarcasm," and "Mrs Doppelganger". The naming of these figures serves simultaneously to formalize and familiarize them, which creates, in turn, a dramatic gallery of others. The speaker's singularity is highlighted in this drama, yet she is also de-personalized by virtue of her participation in the drama as "Mrs Sexton," "Anne," and "Ms. Dog". Sexton's dislocation of herself as speaker is crucial to her later poetry, and her developing interest in a complex, compounded personal subject. By creating an allegorical landscape, a kind of modern Everywoman, Sexton is also creating a universal context for her speaker and self. Just as Everyman's journey moved, inevitably, toward death, Ms. Dog's exploration, in "Hurry Up," concludes with the knowledge that "the kingdom/however queer./will come" (395).

Everyman's pilgrimage toward faith, which is similar to that of (the Pearl poet's) Jonah's pilgrimage, is grounded in conflict. What is objectionable to most aspiring penitents is the apparent impossibility of reconciling mortality with the demands of the immortal. In the fourth stanza of "Hurry Up," Sexton, like one of Langland's groaning, personified sins, contrasts her position with that of the interrogator, God:

Interrogator:
What can you say of your last seven days?

Anne:
They were tired.

Interrogator:
One day is enough to perfect a man.

Anne:
I watered and fed the plant. (386)
In this dialogue Sexton alludes to the huge gap between her own creative powers and those of her scrutinizing God. She also refers, once more, to gender difference, which began, fundamentally, with Adam and Eve. The statement "One day is enough to perfect a man" is a wry slight, regarding the simple manufacturing of "man". It also refers to creation as well as perfection itself as a male-centered virtue. The creator and his creation are entwined in the act of perfection, or, similarly, completion (Eve is, as Rosemarie Tong has noted, "a radically incomplete being") and it is this complicity that Sexton challenges in "Anne"'s response (Tong:100). By watering and feeding the plant, Sexton adopts the posture of Eve, who is closely associated with plant and floral life in Paradise Lost. Although Milton's Adam and Eve are both connected to their paradise-bower, Eve is singled out, like Persephone, on many occasions, as being intricately connected with the plant-life around her. In Book Five, she is seen preparing a feast for Adam and Raphael, "crush(ing)," "temper(ing)" berries and fruits, and "strew(ing)" the "ground/With Rose and Odors from the shrub unfum’d" (310:11.345-349). She is a Narcissus figure whose gaze is directed toward, and reflected back from, her natural environment, and she is a nurturer and homemaker, whose actions (in Milton) delineate conventional ideas about women's roles and natures.

When Sexton, or "Anne," nurtures her plants, she intimates not only domestic activity, or care-taking, but a different image of growth and progress. The growth of the plant is linked to her personal growth and movement away from the censorious God figure, an idea which is also paralleled in Book Nine of Paradise Lost, when Eve decides, with Adam's "permission" (l.336), to go about her tasks "Alone, without exterior help sustain’d" (l.378) and make her solitary way to the "Tree," with "a greater store of fruit untoucht" (l.621) (387,386,392). It is this solitary
journey that Sexton replicates, when she opposes closure - "perfect(ion)" - and stresses her own/women's (she refers to Eve's female descendants, in "Rats Live on No Evil Star" as "us cursed ones falling out") need for continuity, or the search for "a greater store of fruit (oranges/words) untoucht" (The Death Notebooks:360).

The opposition between closure and continuity is but one of a series of oppositions in this text which pertain to gender, theology and the act of writing. In her essay "The Hungry Beast Rowing Toward God," Kathleen L. Nichols suggests that Sexton views the male and female as "conflicting forces that have created the dissociative problem of a sexually restricted identity" (167). Kate Millet provides support for this interpretation when she argues, in Sexual Politics, that the construction of Eve in the "tale of Adam and Eve" precipitated the "connection of women, sex and sin" as a "fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought thereafter" (75). Sexton's transformative methodology subverts restrictions, as she is engaged in re-writing the original tale. God created woman, she writes in "Two Hands" (The Awful Rowing), "And this was no sin./It was as it was meant to be" (421). Sexton's exploration of sexual difference works to locate and empower the image of a limited female, who is, like Christ, "prisoned in (her) body/until the triumph (comes)" ("Two Hands":421). Sexton also empowers the act of procreation in her religious (and other) work and links it, both literally and intellectually to the advancement of the species, and the spectrum of discourse. In this matrix, immortality becomes aligned with the female, whose body/text evolves, independently of its creator.

In addition to the narrative "I," "Anne" and "Ms.Dog," there is another persona in "Hurry Up": an unnamed speaker who addresses the figure "Skeezix". Skeezix is a reference to a cartoon character, whose life, from abandoned child to grandfather, was chronicled in the comic
The voice that speaks to Skeeziw is most likely his long-time love Nina, whom he later married. The interplay between "Nina" and Skeeziw is minimal in the poem, and the two exchanges that occur recall childhood experiences. It is the female figure who speaks, however, not her silent and rapt counterpart. She says to him, at one point (in a mock-reference to *Wuthering Heights*) "Skeeziw, you are me," and in this verse (which occurs early in the poem) she is ironically alluding to sameness between women and men, and how this sameness is distorted, diverted, when Skeeziw "grow(s) a beard" (385).

Sexton's choice of an orphan figure is interesting, in light of the personal "distancing" that occurs in "Hurry Up," a strategy which, in Eliot's terms, requires a "separation between the person who suffers and the mind that creates" (George, *Oedipus Anne*:93). The poet herself is an orphan in her text, as she has lost the "map," the means of finding her Father or Mother, at this stage in her quest. The reduction of the male to silent cartoon figure is provocative, for it exemplifies the virtual exclusion of male discourse from the text. The image of male and female cartoon characters also refers to the social construction of gender, which is, ultimately, one-dimensional and impoverished.

The "Ms.Dog" passages are used frequently in "Hurry Up" and "Is it True?," and they are related to a variety of Sexton's personae and postures. At times, she makes the same unfortunate use of the minstrel idiom that Berryman employs in his "Mr. Bones" sequences in *The Dream Songs*. In "Is it True?," an isolated stanza reads:

Ms. Dog,
Why is you so evil?
It climbed into me.
It didn't mean to. (448)

Unlike "Ms.Dog," Berryman's "Mr.Bones" was a sustained alter-ego, and Sexton uses this
idiom to a different end. Her fascination with gospel song and sermon is evident in her longer prayer/psalm sequences, and it is the cadence and rhythm of "dialect" which, to her, assist in replicating the passionate speaking voice. The following passage best illustrates Sexton's attempts at oration:

you hungry mother,
you spleen baby!
Them angels gonna be cut down like wheat.
Them songs gonna be sliced with a razor.
("Hurry Up":389)

Like the informal segments of speech in The Waste Land, passages such as these attempt to oppose the formality of poetic language with a "raw" and vernacular discourse. The effect of this opposition is striking, for the text's meaning becomes an object of parallax, subject to different narrative perspectives. Sexton began each of her poetry readings with the poem "Her Kind," to illustrate to her audience that her confessional poems are complex narratives, which are related to herself and "her kind," that is, any number of women or female personae. Her experiments with compound voice poetry, in "Hurry Up" and "Is it True?" illustrate her desire to emphasize, further, the multiplicity of voice, context and meaning inscribed in her confessional work. "O Ye Tongues," the sequence that concludes The Death Notebooks, is Sexton's most accomplished work as an orator and praise-maker; it is in this sequence that she discovers her own oratorical voice, a voice which originates in "Hurry Up".

In the middle stanzas of "Hurry Up," Sexton describes herself having come "a long way," "to peel off (her) clothes," and "sunbathe nude" before "the indifferent sky" (391,390). One small stanza reads: "Oh body, be glad./You are glad goods," a phrase she utters as she offers her naked body as a sacrifice to the sun, which is gendered as female, as a "blonde"
"honesuckle mama" (391). Here, the images of the orange and the sun intersect, as glorious images of female beauty and divinity. As the fearless sunbather, Sexton is "clothed in gold air with/one dozen halos glistening on (her) skin" (391). Sexton is celebrating her body in these stanzas, as she did in several of the Love Poems, but in this poem, the male gaze (that is criticized explicitly in "The Nude Swim") is conspicuously absent. She is observed now only by the female gendered sun, and a female observer, "Mrs. Sewal," who draws her curtains closed, who does not intrude or "witness" her (390, 391). The poet's religious sunbathing in these last stanzas exhibits her developing pantheistic sensibility regarding a God who is intimately connected with each element of the universe.

In "The Fury of Cocks" (Death Notebooks), Sexton depicts a man and woman making love and observes: "When they fuck they are God...When they snore they are God."; "All the cocks of the world are God/blooming...into the sweet blood of woman" (369). God, to Sexton, is a shifting, mutable entity, who may be embodied in virtually anything, or anyone; still, her "Fury of Cocks" illustrates her attempt to revise the patriarchal God as someone/something that "bloom(s)," or is subsumed within the female believer. This revisionist tactic is made clear in "Hurry Up," when the narrator remarks, at one point, "I am dissecting the dictionary./I am God, la de dah" (386). Here, she relates her work as an artist to her role as God, as a way of concretizing the connection between herself as creator and God the Creator. Sexton's glib assumption of the role of God exhibits the ease with which positions of power and creation may be adopted in the realm of art; "Hurry Up" is Sexton's Magnificat, in which she magnifies and exalts her own "strength," "imagination" and (parallel) ability to "regard" and "bless" herself, and female artists: the "(hand)maidens" (HB:39, Luke:11.46-55).
It is in this spirit that the poet gives unashamed, naked praise to herself, her God (who is, necessarily, never defined), and her parishioners/readers, in "O Ye Tongues". This sequence is modeled after the eighteenth century poet Christopher Smart's Jubilate Agno; specifically, she appears to be referring to the "My Cat Jeoffry" section of the poem. Smart, a "scholar" poet and "wit" became, at a certain point in his life, "seized by a religious mania," and a compulsive desire to pray everywhere; he was eventually considered to be a "public nuisance," and confined to a "private madhouse," where he began writing, among other works, Jubilate Agno, a "personal Testament or book of worship" (NAEL/2:2454,2455). Smart appears in "O Ye Tongues" as "Christopher," and he appears to have been a personal and literary model for Sexton. The structure of his "personal Testament" is employed in Sexton's sequence, and his sudden "seiz(ure)" of "religious mania" resembles Sexton's own self-described "seizure of inspiration," which prompted her religious poetry. Finally, his confinement to an institution because of this quickening inspiration must have inspired a sense of empathy in Sexton (she refers to him as her "imaginary brother" and "twin" in the poem), who has suggested, in her poetry, that madness and isolation (within an institution) precipitated her development as an artist (401). The praises in "O Ye Tongues" resemble Smart's playful and subversive work with theology in Jubilate Agno (which includes the passages in which he praises the divinity and faith of his cat Jeoffry). Sexton's praises also constitute attempts to preach joy and hope, and to remodel the world in her own image(s).

The influence of Dame Julian of Norwich (1342-?) is also felt in Sexton's sequence. Julian of Norwich's A Book of Showings is based on a series of mystical revelations she experienced during a "near-fatal illness," and these revelations are marked, according to Sandra Gilbert and
Susan Gubar, by their "brilliant transformations of images drawn from everyday experiences" (NALW:15). Sexton also draws on everyday experiences, and her text is filled with references to popular culture/commodities - Cannon towels, Jack Daniels, John F.Kennedy - a practice the poet began with Trans formations. Although it is a poem of praise, revelation and hope, "O Ye Tongues" is infiltrated with a sense of the narrator/poet's imminent death, emphasizing the testamentary quality of the poems. The First Psalm is a list of directives that are joyous and resplendent with images of beauty: "Let there be seasons so that miracles will fill our drinking/glass with runny gold" (397). In the Second Psalm, the narrator writes prayers, each of which begins "For I pray". The prayers are still hopeful and life-sustaining, but the tenor shifts at the penultimate verse when Sexton writes (in the only instance of third person voice): "For she prays that she will not cringe at the death hole" (399). The Psalm concludes: "For I pray God will digest me," an image that is revived in the Fourth Psalm when she writes of herself and "Christopher": "For we swallow magic and we deliver Anne" (403).

Sexton's notion of the poet as the consumer/creator of magic is not uncommon in her poetry. In "the Black Art" (All My Pretty Ones) she writes that when a female and male poet marry, it is precarious: "There is too much food and no one left over/to eat up all the weird abundance" (89). The food/magic is the poet's communion, a method of transubstantiation in which "poison" is made "sweet" ("O Ye":403). Sexton's prayer to God, that he digest her, is her prayer, as revisionist believer, that God will accept her communion, and also "swallow" her "magic," her individualized, transformative words of prayer and faith. In the Tenth Psalm, "Anne" prays for her daughters, and for all daughters who must "master the mountain" and "build (their) own cit(ies)" (412). The poem concludes with a mystical vision of God protecting her and
"Christopher," as well as her "pretty ones," her daughters, as they lay in their "quiet blood" (412,413). This God, who is "large as a sunlamp," laughs and generates warmth upon those praised, and "therefore (they) did not cringe at the death hole" (413).

"O Ye Tongues" provides a very moving and sanguine conclusion to The Death Notebooks, for it is a testament, in many ways, to Sexton’s life-work, as a poet who insistently inscribes and demands that women, that all suffering people, be given the space and voice to speak and find sanctuary, and absolution within "the altitude of words" ("O Ye" :411).

iii.

Ye, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...

Psalm 23: A Psalm of David

Yet a time may come when a poet or any person
Having a long life behind (her), pleasure and sorrow,
But feeble now and expensive to (her) country
And on the point of no longer being able to make a decision
May fancy Life comes to (her) with love and says:
We are friends enough now for me to give you death...

Stevie Smith, "Exeat"

I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
I wol have monei, wolle, chese and whete

Chaucer, Prologue: "The Pardoner’s Tale"

The Awful Rowing Toward God was the last collection of poetry that Sexton completed and
revised; it was in galley-form at the time of her suicide on October 4, 1974 (SPL:379). The collection is, as the title suggests, with its play on the word "awful," an account of the poet's final, terrible pilgrimage toward God. The first poem, "Rowing," is referred to as a "story," and it concludes with the verse: "The story ends with me still rowing" (418). The book begins, then, with the poet's insistence that her quest will not be completed, or closed, that it is a circular process: her "still rowing" suggests that she will continue to pose questions, rather than answer them. There is a statement in one of Sexton's epigraphs, taken from Henry David Thoreau, that exemplifies the duality encoded in the poet's "awful" search. "There are two ways to victory," Thoreau writes, "to strive bravely, or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned" (in Sexton, CP:416). In The Awful Rowing, Sexton chooses both to "strive bravely" and to "yield," and it is in the gap between these states that she composes her reconciliation with, and estrangement from, God. In "Is it True?" which (like "Hurry Up") is another long, fractured and experimental text, Sexton again attempts to create an ideological relationship between herself, Jesus and God, and ultimately, her final destiny. In this, her final "Ms.Dog" poem, she makes her last and most lucid attempt to (re)address gender, theology, and feminist discourse, to contend with her faith, and offer God an irrefutable "trump card".

In a 1966 interview, Sexton discusses the idea of "truth" in her poetry, and states that truth is what she is "hunting for" when she writes; this truth, she adds, "might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one" (Star:74). Sexton goes on to say that while her confessional poetry may be truthful, it may "not be the truth of (her) experience" (75). "Then again," she adds "if you say that you lie, you can get away with telling the awful truth" (75). "Is it True?" is posed as a question because it is a poem in which Sexton is "hunting" to discover a schism
between her own confessions and their semiotic companion, truth. Truth, in this poem, is an elusive entity that assumes a variety of "factual," "poetic," "awful" and ideological positions. The poem, like "Hurry Up," is indebted to *The Waste Land*; Sexton employs fragments of voice and song and chants, fragments which Eliot employed as "pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which might be joined if certain spiritual conditions were met" (*NAMP* :447). The "twit twit twit" (59) and "weialala leia" (61) of the "Fire Sermon" are echoed, in a whimsical, postmodernist way in the "Ms. Dog" poems, with Sexton's breaks and bursts of "la de dah" and "toot toot tootsy" and "Hare Krishna" (387,447). Sexton is, however, attempting to assemble a similar "jigsaw puzzle" in her work, by presenting pieces of spirituality, and allowing the reader to seek his/her own "conditions," or truth, in the puzzle. The poem is written as a sermon and its speaker proclaims a number of blessings upon all creation. In this respect, Sexton plays "Ms. Dog" to the hilt, having abandoned the apologia, or repeated litany (in "Hurry Up") of "Forgive us, Father, for we know not" (385,390,392,394). Although this poem is more *apogee* (with reference to the narrator's ascendance to female deity/preacher) than apology, there is still a sense in the text of the narrator's connectedness with the Christian God, and with Christ, in particular. The phrase "Forgive us, Father..." is, in another sense, an appropriation of Christ's dying words, and Sexton continues to ally herself with the figure of the mortal Christ in this poem, as she did, with great qualification, in "The Jesus Papers".

Jesus, with his "eggful of miracles,/his awful death," is, like Christopher Smart, another "twin," or "imaginary brother" to Sexton in this poem (454). The conflict that she perceives in Christ's dualism as mortal and immortal provides the tension inherent in the poet's own religious explorations. As a woman who reproduces, and as a poet whose work is
immortal/enduring, she is, as Delmore Schwartz allegedly wrote (in a letter to Saul Bellow), not a natural, but "a supernatural being" (Bellow:336). Sexton's efforts to humanize Jesus underline her efforts to align herself with the earthly God, the God who, like herself, is enmeshed within the process of temporal existence.

References to food are endemic in Sexton's poetry: they work as critical and strategic images in Transformations, and in her "Ms.Dog" poems. In "Is it True?," she offers a cryptic explanation of both her persona and her materialistic method:

I have,
for some time,
called myself,
Ms. Dog.
Why?
Because I am almost animal
and yet the animal I lost most-
that animal is near to God,
but lost from Him.
Do you understand? (452)

This final question, like the title of the poem, is posed to the reader, and left unanswered. The verses, however, constitute her most explicit explanation of her "Ms.Dog" persona: as a woman she is near to God but "lost from Him"; she cannot find herself (as she explained in "Gods") in the Scriptures, Gospels, or Church, and in order to come "near(er)" to Him, she takes a feminist, inverted position as the "animal" Dog - God transposed. In the "Ms.Dog" poems, Sexton uses food to create a metaphysical ideal in her work, a union of the animal, or corporeal, with the sublime. This strategy recalls Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," in which he explains these poets' extraordinary approach to spirituality and existence. He writes:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary (wo)man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The
latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter, or with the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (NAEL/2:2305)

Sexton's stress on food is linked to a variety of meditative and physical experiences. She also employs the association between women and food to form a crucible in which she merges many other explicitly female associations. These associations are related, essentially, to her vision of life and God, a vision which is harmonious and conjoined. Erica Jong notes of Sexton's religious writings:

> She was a woman - and her images (even of God) were kitchen images, plain aluminum utensils to serve the Lord. Pyrex casseroles to simmer the Holy Spirit. (How To Save: 164)

The references to food in "Hurry Up" are largely related to physical existence. Sometimes they are gratuitous, for as Sexton herself notes of her "hieroglyphics": "No language is perfect" (452). She makes, in "Hurry Up" a few awkward, Ginsberg-esque allusions to the association between American patriotism and food: "Peanut butter" she writes "is the American food./We all eat it, being patriotic" (386). She makes this dubious political statement in order to connect the image of food with (in this case) conspicuous consumption. And it is consumption that engages the poet, in terms of its relation to survival, sensuality and Original Sin. Since Sexton’s connections are female-oriented (the one male character in "Hurry Up" suffers from indigestion) her agenda clearly involves the historical union of woman, or Eve, with consumption, or food.

In her essay, "Eve Was Framed," Annie Fursland notes the indelible record of "Eve the evil" (15). "We need to revalue ourselves," Fursland writes, "supporting each other in our refusal to be blamed, framed or shamed any longer" (26). Fursland’s evocation of shame refers to the compounded repercussions of Eve’s act, and, specifically, to the religious and historical
recognition of the female body (and its functions) as a source of "shame".

Women's bodily shame and suffering are related to the construction of ascetic systems that serve to repress sensual indulgence. Sexton evokes the teleological argument inscribed in the Book of Genesis in her abundant food metaphors and images. In "Hurry Up," she writes: "If someone hands you a candy wrapper,/ you take it to the book binder," suggesting the sensual indulgence encoded in her work. She also compares the act of birth to a popping out of "jelly rolls," and calls her kitchen a (her) "heart." Sexton goes on to offer her kitchen oxygen, to "mother the mother," a nurturing image that is repeated in another poem, where cocoa is described as "that warm brown mama" ("The Ambition Bird," Death Notebooks:299). These images act to disengage the union of maternity and great pain, and Sexton's pointed stating and re-stating of food items act as a subversive sub-text, one which celebrates consumption, and implicitly, the female consumer, who states simply, without shame: "I am cramming in the sugar" (386).

Sexton's food (sub)text also constitutes a contemplation of an existence which is mundane and obstructive. The profusion of food images accentuates and elevates the sensuality of eating; Sexton is insisting upon her right to sanctify herself without fasting (as a holy anorectic), or denial. However, these images also serve to highlight the unchanging, mundane necessity of eating. The "objectification" of food, as Tamar Selby has noted, turns eating into "a compulsive activity" (288). She writes: "A woman who eats mechanically...views herself as an object who goes through life just trying to survive" (228). "The cup of coffee is growing and growing," Sexton writes in "Hurry Up," an image which suggests ceaseless routine (388). The issue of survival is crucial to any understanding of Sexton's canon, as her conflicting desire to live or
die is consecrated, in part, in her ambivalent view of eating. Eating clearly ensures survival, and consequently, forestalls death. Food, or the preparation of food, is also historically a part of the female’s private sector. The telescoping of the woman’s domain in Sexton’s work exposes the powerlessness that is often associated with this realm; in her poetry, the home becomes an enclosure, and physical obstacle. It is also, alternately, a poetic space, or contemplative temple: Sexton is never conclusive about the meaning of her/the private sector; her arguments fluctuate, in order to encompass multiple perspectives. The narrator of "Hurry Up" says of her home life at one point, "La de dah,/it’s all routine," and then immediately insinuates an embedded danger in this routine. She writes that there are "wars," yet "the sausages are still fried"; she expresses her unawareness of the outside world, wanting to "talk to God," while cancer is potentially "oozing through the radio" (393). In certain passages, the private domain takes on the attributes of a prison, or the institution where Sexton once made moccasins in order to ward off mental illness ("You, Doctor Martin":3). Her desire to consume is opposed by her desire to cease consuming, to annihilate an existence in which "hunger" is a "mud" to be "scrape(d) off" (451). The scraping off of mud, le visqueux in Jean Paul Sartre’s terminology, becomes an act of existentialist salvation. Sexton’s poetry of anguish and despair is easily ratified in existentialist terms, for her poetry itself is an act of will, to action, to "Live, Live" ("Live":170).

The question Sexton poses - "Is it True?" - is one of faith. Sexton concludes the poem having decided that she "can only imagine that it is true/that Jesus comes" (454), yet she completes her "awful rowing" with a description of being beaten at cards by her laughing, "Dearest dealer," God ("The Rowing Endeth":474). Sexton’s God, states Joyce Carol Oates (who is extremely ambivalent in her regard of Sexton’s later religious work), is "masculine;
being masculine he is necessarily outside her - far away, inaccessible in this life" ("On The Awful":172). It is not God however, with whom Sexton aligns herself with, but Christ, the struggling human God, who occupies the text of "Is it True?," as a Jesus who "squeeze(3) out of the Gideon, down to the bar for some pretzels and a beer" (447). It is this God Sexton sees, in her standard culinary conceit, "in a blaze of butter... soiled with (her) sour tears" (454). This Christ is comparable to herself, the transforming poet, who transubstantiates fried eggs into "saint's eyes" (451), and who states, upon awakening: "hail mary coffee toast" ("Hurry Up:392). It is not only Christ's mortality that interests Sexton, but his magical acts, acts which she associates with cooking, and with words. In keeping with the Levi-Straussian catch-phrase of the Confessional poets - poetry is either "raw" or "cooked" - Sexton composes a deity, who, like "an assembly-line baker man," feeds/informs the multitudes ("Jesus Cooks":341).

Having associated herself with a selectively constructed Christ, the narrator then blessings her audience/readers, or followers. Notably, she blesses men, in careful conjunction with their relationship with women:

Let me now praise
the male of the species,...
Let me praise men for eating the apple
and finding woman
like a big brain of coral. (447)

Her praise of woman continues, when she blesses her "brain cells" and "the apple she married" (447). Man's association with and embodiment of the apple is a good example of Sexton's revisionist strategy. The "Ms.Dog" poems, unlike her earlier religious poems, are not "Mariologies"; they are Christologies, but they are still completely engaged in feminist reclamation and Christian revision, and they emerge from the female interpretive methodology
Sexton develops in the work preceding these poems. Her rewriting of history allows her to create new gender identities, whereby the male is associated with the apple/Original Sin, and the female is connected with the orange, with brains of protean coral, and with creation, the "liquid sun" ("Hurry Up:392). By detaching herself and woman from the legend of the apple, Sexton secularizes and modifies the idea of women's sin, as being unrelated to Original Sin: "not...you understand./just something I ate" ("Is it True?":447).

"The desire for a clearly confirmed past," Adrienne Rich writes in Of Woman Born, arises from "the search for a tradition of female power," and this (theological) search is ongoing in Sexton's religious poetry (Rich:85). Rich also observes that this "intense" search seeks to subvert the "root of powerlessness" that "female biology" has become (85). Sexton's reconstruction of the myths arising from female consumption creates an autobiographical context for the poet, and for all women. It is the nature of autobiography, as Shari Benstock has claimed, to "reveal the impossibility of its own dream" (11). For, as she explains, "what begins on the premise of self knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premise of its own construction" (11). Sexton's long-time interest in palindromes is most strategically reflected in her creation of the pseudonym "Ms.Dog". "Dog" is not a palindrome in the strictest sense of the term, but it may be viewed as such in the context of feminist autobiography. Sexton's conflation of body and soul is grounded in her appellation, and her mystic, transforming revision of history and self is similarly symbolized in the fiction of the mutated deity/beast.

Sexton's "Ms.Dog" poems exemplify the ongoing process of her confessions, a process which doesn't cease, even when the "rowing endeth". The poet's search for faith and power is evident everywhere in Sexton's poetry, a search which is very nearly realized in "Hurry Up
Please It's Time," and "Is it True?". By proclaiming the magnitude of her creative powers - "I am God" - she also amplifies the power of words, which are to Sexton, quintessentially female in the context of her work. Her poems are not definitive statements or treatises by any means, but they do offer a number of radical speculations regarding gender and theology, and the spiritual roles of women in society, Christianity, and the non-secular realm. Maxine Kumin has suggested that Sexton's quest to reconcile herself, as female subject, with God, reduced her to "a ravaged and obsessed poet" who fought to "put the jigsaw pieces of the puzzle together into a coherence that would save her" (Introduction, CP:xxxii). And while she did not achieve this salvation in life, it is important to note that her work, her "poetic truths," are successful and valuable documents/texts, which are not diminished by the "ravaged" state of the poet herself. Sexton was able to achieve a curious coherence in her later religious writing, one which located a God who is evident nowhere but perceived everywhere, in the "godhead of the table," or the "chapel of eggs" ("Welcome Morning," Awful Rowing:455). The seeming randomness of her poetic discourse is replicated in Sexton's love of God's "wild card," the "untameable" and inscrutable mystery of faith and salvation ("The Rowing Endeth":474). God cheats in the card game that concludes "The Rowing Endeth," but she laughs with him, at "the Absurd," and "lucky love" (474). Diana Hume George has commented that the conclusion to this poem has been perceived by many readers as "an unfortunate capitulation to paternity" ("Island":182). She goes on to argue that this is the only Sexton poem in which God appears in "his negatively characterized and patriarchal character," and that this God bears little resemblance to the "heterodox and polymorphous" God who populates the rest of Sexton's religious poems (182). Finally, Hume George adds, in order to debunk the idea of "unfortunate capitulation":

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...the ocean rower (in the poem) is a woman traveling to land through sea. The island of the father-god rises from the ocean of the mother-goddess. Squirrel Island in its salty sea is not only the father; her journey is through both mythic imagos... Only a selective reading leaves Anne Sexton in the ambiguous embrace of the father-god. She resides in his island arms, but they are both surrounded and enfolded by the mother sea. (182,183)

Ultimately, Sexton's religious poetry achieves the immortality its mortal creator anguished over, assured by her generation of words, and life within the words. She leaves her rowing, her canon, without selecting a decisive religious methodology or belief system. Instead, she engenders her poetic, theological cosmos with possibilities, questions and challenges which may be adopted by any woman who also feels the need to explore her own relationship with faith. Sexton genders the universe, and populates it with these women, and the women before them, leaving us with an alternative Gospel/cosmos, one that is left open, without closure, one where there is still space to explore, seek, and enter.

In the last letter she wrote to her daughter, Sexton emphasized how imperative it is to be "your own woman," to be able to communicate through other women's words and ideas, and "find" yourself in this manner (SPL:380). "Weak and disabled," Sexton "dream(ed) of virtue," sought a unique redemption and grace, and was, ultimately, (in her words), her "own woman" (Camus:177).
Conclusion

Reading My Own Life With Loathing: The Final Poems

Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. In itself weariness has something sickening about it.

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

But there are poems (of Plath's)...that are hard to penetrate in their morbid secretiveness... These were not resolved by artistic process, and often seem to call for biographical rather than poetic explanations.

M.L. Rosenthal, "Other Confessional Poets"

In addition to two complete volumes, the final poetry collected in Anne Sexton's Complete Poems includes six previously unpublished poems. A large section of one of the volumes entitled "Letters to Dr. Y" was composed between 1960 and 1970, and Sexton "reserved" these poems for publication after her death (Gray Sexton, Complete Poems:559). Richard E. Morton has observed that the "bibliographic history" of Anne Sexton's final poems "makes them a coda for her writing," poems "supplementary to," rather than "contemporary with the other collections" (130). This distinction is important, because the poetry gathered in these volumes is, in Morton's words, "marked more by recapitulation and repetition than by novelty or fresh insight" (130). Sexton's final poems are largely unoriginal and - in the context of the Complete Poems - inferior.
Many of them unsuccessfully repeat and recapitulate ideas and images from the earlier work. For example, the image Sexton uses to describe her mother’s double-masectomy in "The Double Image" - "They carved her sweet hills out/And still I couldn’t answer" - is horribly recapitulated in "Demon" (45 Mercy Street): "Mother, cancer blossoming on her/Best & Co. tits" (38, 550). The final poems are also derivative. Sexton once cautioned Sylvia Plath on this point, saying that if Plath wasn’t "careful" she would "out Roethke Roethke" (Star: 10). Indeed, Sexton almost out Plaths Plath in the final poems, and often uses the repeated words, phrases and images of Nazism that characterize the Ariel poems. In "The Stand-Ins" (which appears in 45 Mercy Street) - one of the many Plath-influenced poems in Sexton’s final work - a man stands by a "neon swastika" and turns on "an oven/an oven, an oven, an oven" (CP:526). Another poem features a man whose chin is "ever stubborn," "ever Nazi" (514) while "The Surgeon" (in Words For Dr. Y) uses a phrase from Plath’s "Daddy" - "the rack and the screw" and substitutes "Jack, oh Big Jack" for Plath’s "Daddy, daddy" (583). All of these poems demonstrate how unsuccessfully Sexton employs the idioms, images and meter of Ariel.

Sexton’s final poems received very little critical notice, and are difficult to assess. Qualitatively, they are very different from the work which precedes them. They were not revised according to Sexton’s standards, rather, they have been edited, organized and altered by Linda Gray Sexton, who edited the Complete Poems. More significantly, these poems were not discussed and edited among the colleagues and editors to whom Sexton always presented her work. Therefore, in order to examine these poems, Gray Sexton’s editorial strategies must also be examined. While Gray Sexton’s work on the final poems is substantial, her description of this work in the brief prefaces (in the Complete Poems) is terse, and lacks detail. Gray Sexton
describes her tasks as an editor, but she does not detail the manner in which her work was executed, nor the criteria used to edit and shape the manuscripts.

While these final poems are, for the most part, "damned bad" (to use Sexton's descriptive phrase), they are illuminating (Star:200). In a 1974 interview, Sexton discusses the merit of "new poems," stating that while they may not be "as good as the early ones," they still provide a "document" of one's "inner and outer...life" (Star: 187). The final poems are a harrowing document of the inner and outer life of a woman who is suicidal and tortured by self-loathing and fear. In Sexton's previous collections, particularly the first three volumes, she writes intimately about suicidal desire and self-loathing, but there is a corresponding desire, expressed in the poetry, to recover and survive. Sexton's return to themes of despair and self-injury in the final poems is violently contradictory and confounding, given the poet's previous work through these themes toward recovery and survival. What is also baffling about the final poems is their randomness. Though they are neatly ordered into specific sections, these sections represent a jumble of ideas - ranging from animals in a zoo to horoscope listings - none of which conform to any recognizable methodology.

There is virtually no biographical or autobiographical work available which sheds light on Sexton's motivation for writing these poems or on her influences, ideas or strategies at this time. Sexton kept journals throughout her life (which Middlebrook quotes from in the biography), but they have never been published. When I asked Linda Gray Sexton, in October, 1994, if she intended to publish Sexton's journals, she said no, claiming that they were not substantial enough. Because the final poems document a life of profound misery, and intimate a drastic shift in Sexton's poetics, a discussion of this work would be appropriate to and best explored within
a biographical context. Unfortunately, Diane Wood Middlebrook concludes her literary biography with only a cursory examination of the last years and last poems of Anne Sexton. It is possible that Middlebrook is being protective of Sexton by not recounting the torturous details of her later years, however such an attitude is inconsistent with the rest of the biography which describes, among other things, Sexton molesting her daughter, and lapsing into hideous and violent episodes of substance abuse.

Sexton’s "disintegration," during the last year of her life, is documented in greater detail in Linda Gray Sexton’s memoir (172). Gray Sexton recounts her mother’s "increasing desperation" and deep depression, but does not discuss the poetry written after The Awful Rowing (177). Searching for Mercy Street is a memoir, not a literary biography, and a discussion of Sexton’s final poems is more Middlebrook’s, than Gray-Sexton’s, concern. Middlebrook’s decision to limit her discussion of the circumstances surrounding the composition of the final poems has significant consequences for the Sexton scholar: a detailed account of these circumstances would, at least, provide a context for these poems. It seems clear that Sexton would not have published these poems in their present state, and in order to examine this work, a pluralistic critical methodology must be developed. Three objects of study arise from this later work - a hermeneutic of the poetry, the editorial/biographical issues, and the autobiographical questions the poetry poses. A plural, as opposed to a synthetic, approach, ideally, would accommodate each of these concerns.

ii.

In truth I'm a little sad.

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Anne Sexton, Letter to Brian Sweeney, April 25, 1974

Yet we are angry with Anne Sexton for killing herself, partly because she is the same poet who wrote with such commitment and intensity of the delight of being alive.

Diana Hume George

Sexton’s last two manuscripts of poetry, 45 Mercy Street (1976) and Words For Dr. Y (1978) were (with The Awful Rowing Toward God) published posthumously. In The Complete Poems, editor Linda Gray Sexton notes that Sexton neither edited nor revised either of the manuscripts, although she had started revisions on Mercy Street at the time of her death. The poems in both manuscripts were written at various points in Sexton’s life. Mercy Street and the poems in the second section of Dr.Y were written between 1971 and 1974. The poems in the first section of Dr.Y were written between 1960 and 1970, while she was working on her first five collections. Gray Sexton transcribed, edited, and selected the poems which would appear in the final manuscripts, omitting several poems (Gray Sexton does not indicate how many) from 45 Mercy Street "because of their highly personal content, and the pain their publication would bring to individuals still living" (CP:480).

When sections of Plath’s journals began appearing in print in 1977, editor Ted Hughes (Plath’s estranged husband) used a similar rationale when he excised large sections from the journals because of their "personal nature" and because of their "frequently unjust" "description(s) of neighbours and friends" (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams:13). Hughes also misplaced one of Plath’s journals and destroyed another, and in his essay "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals," he observes that in losing them the world had also "lost a valuable appendix to
all that later writing" (153). Hughes's editing of Plath's work has created an enormous controversy, and a number of feminist critics have discussed how Plath's journals, letters and poetry have been misrepresented because of Hughes's censorious editorial hand 2. Although Hughes's editing of Plath's Collected Poems is problematic, his editorial work, on this project, is both thorough and respectful. He selected her best work (what Plath referred to as "book poems"), and consulted closely with another editor, Judith Kroll (CP:14). Hughes arranged the text chronologically, and according to "phases" in her career; separated her juvenilia from the other work; and included detailed notes about the composition of the poetry (CP:15). This collection received the Pulitzer Prize, a testament, in part, to Hughes's thoughtful editing.

Sexton's Complete Poems, then, raises a crucial question about Gray-Sexton's efficacy as an editor - because the posthumous work is so clearly inferior, and lacks context, authorial and co-editing, it would have been far more appropriate to publish this volume as Collected rather than Complete Poems. Reviewers of the Complete Poems invariably cite both the second-rate quality of the posthumous work, and question Gray-Sexton's decision to publish this work. In a New Nation review, Katha Pollitt notes the "grotesque and seamless solipsism" of the posthumous work (537); in her essay, "Inventory of Loss," Kate Green discusses the "unevenness" of 45 Mercy Street, and suggests the book "lacks editing" (88). "Had she chosen to stay alive," Green observes, "Sexton and her editors may have cleared out certain poems and lines which seem inaccessible" (88). Joyce Carol Oates is particularly fierce on the subject of the posthumous poems. In the New York Times Book Review, she states that the poems are "almost without exception haphazard and sketchy, swinging from self-pity to a mordant bravado" (3,37). Oates also draws attention to Gray-Sexton's (and Lois Ames's) poor handling of Self-
Portrait in Letters, a volume which, in her opinion, "does a disservice to its subject," and lends little to readers' understanding of the significance of Sexton's epistolary relationships. A "judicious Selected Poems," Oates argues, would have been a far more appropriate editorial choice, one "which might have rescued poems of surpassing beauty and power from qualification - or outright contamination - by less distinguished poems" (37).

The editing of Sexton's work, however, has never been closely scrutinized. Neither Gray Sexton nor Diane Wood Middlebrook, who have access to all of Sexton's papers, have described how Sexton's manuscripts have been altered by the omission of "certain poems" (CP:480). Hughes (who also edited Plath's Collected Poems) excised several poems from the original Ariel manuscript, poems which were not collected until the Collected Poems was published in 1981, almost twenty years after the publication of Ariel in 1965. The omitted poems contain images of violence and sexual terrorism - "The Jailer," for example, describes a woman's rape and torture - and these poems alter the tenor of the Ariel manuscript considerably. Hughes has claimed that he altered the original manuscript because "the violent contradictory feelings expressed in (the poems) might prove hard for the reading public to take" (Introduction, CP:15). Other commentators have drawn attention to the self-serving and destructive nature of Hughes' editing; Marjorie Perloff, for example, has observed that the suppressed poems may be read as powerful indictments of Hughes himself (304-5). Hughes, as Nancy Milford has argued, is too "deeply implicated" in Plath's life to be an effective biographer or editor (31).

Gray Sexton, Sexton's daughter, is also deeply implicated in her mother's life, but her efficacy as an editor has never been contested. Because poems have been omitted from Sexton's final manuscripts, and because these manuscripts have been reconstructed by an editor, the final
collections of poetry are best viewed as collaborations. When an editor reconstructs a manuscript, s/he works with a notion of what constitutes a "good text" (Rosengarten, cited in Johnston:3). Editing, as Nancy Johnston has noted, is a "subjective and culturally codified" process, one which represents "a compromise between sets of ideologies and poetics" (1). Gray Sexton never accounts for her own production of a good, less "personal" text of Sexton's poetry in any detail and readers/critics examining the final poems are confronted by texts that may or may not have been compromised. Gray Sexton, by her own account, altered the shape of Sexton's manuscripts, organized and omitted some of the poems, and "decipher(ed)" words and phrases composed by an almost illegible hand (CP:480). What she does not recount is to what extent her editorial actions altered the original manuscripts; the original texts and Gray Sexton's "good text" are seamlessly interfaced through the questionable process of invisible editorial stitching.

In her preface to Words For Dr. Y, Gray Sexton describes her editing work as involving "only a process of selection," since Sexton revised this manuscript more carefully than the poems in 45 Mercy Street or the last six poems. She maintains that while she considers both manuscripts to be intact, she "deleted" a number of poems (from Dr. Y) because she felt they "would not add to the reader's understanding of Anne's poetry or life" (560). Gray Sexton's decision, regarding what would "add to" an "understanding" of Sexton's life and art is her editorial prerogative, but it is an editorial decision which requires some elaboration, given that neither she, nor Middlebrook, offer readers a way of understanding the appearance of Sexton's final poetry. Middlebrook's book does describe Sexton's deteriorating mental health (toward the end of her life) as well as a series of suicide attempts, which culminated in her
successful attempt on October 4th, 1974. Sexton killed herself by carbon-monoxide poisoning, and Middlebrook recounts the death scene in strangely poetic, speculative terms. Middlebrook writes: "death was going to feel something like an embrace, like falling asleep in familiar arms" (397). The biographer's prose in this passage is odd. Earlier in the biography, Middlebrook is quite harsh in her assessment of the poem "Sylvia's Death," in which Sexton writes, addressing Plath, "Thief! -How did you crawl into,/crawl down alone/into the death I wanted badly and for so long" (126). Middlebrook claims that Plath's death drew Sexton into "the stagnant pond of her old obsession with ritualized self-destruction," and that "Sylvia's Death" is a "spurious" poem: "self-pity posing as grief" (200). The biographer's romantic vision of Sexton's last moments, however, not only mutes and sweetens the event, it characterizes death (which Sexton calls, in "Sylvia's Death," "our boy") in - by her own reckoning - "spurious" terms. In describing Sexton's memorial service, Middlebrook devotes most of her attention to Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov's remarks about Sexton's inability to distinguish between "creativity and self-destruction," remarks which they used as a caveat for "we who are alive" (Levertov, in AS:397).

This final rendering of Sexton, as a poor role model and a woman who could not extricate her life from her art, supports one of Middlebrook's earliest conceptions of Sexton. In an October, 1991 CBC Radio interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Middlebrook detailed her objections to the "Sexton persona," and explained why she undertook the biography in spite of these objections. The opportunity to write the biography was "a fabulous project," Middlebrook said, and writing it was a "moral education" which helped her explore her aversion to Sexton. She went on to say that Sexton's "hysterical personality really gave (her) the creeps," and that she
"disapproved" of Sexton, initially, "disapproved of the fact that she'd committed suicide". Although Middlebrook claims to have worked through her own "antifeminist biases" - biases which were based in part on Sexton's flamboyantly "female" persona - the biography's conclusion does very little to temper Middlebrook's (or Rich's, or Levertov's) construction of Sexton as a woman artist who embodied the dangerous notion that "creative women always kill themselves" (Middlebrook, CBC Radio, 1991).

In my introduction I suggested that Middlebrook conceptualizes Sexton in the biography as an artist who was transformed by her writing, a transformation that is treated, by the biographer, as something occurring independently of Sexton's agency or desire. In her interview with Wachtel, Middlebrook offers a similar interpretation of Sexton's decision to terminate her life. She noted that Sexton could no longer "revise" her work toward the end of her life, that she knew she was "not the poet she had been," and suggested this was the poet's central motive for suicide. In the biography, Middlebrook also cites Sexton's diminishing mental health and acute alcoholism as contributing factors, and the final chapter is devoted primarily to an account of Sexton's spiral into depression and substance abuse. Although many of these speculations are credible, Middlebrook's claim that the writing, once again, determined the course of the poet's fate is theoretically unsound, all the more so because the biography does not take the final poetry into account.

In Middlebrook's assessment, Sexton's wrote "meaningful" poetry until the end of 1972, a view which excludes the three posthumously published volumes (CBC Radio, 1991). Although Middlebrook refers, in *Anne Sexton*, to the *Awful Rowing* on several occasions, there are very few references to anything later. This omission is especially disquieting given the biographer's
assertion that this later poetry provides evidence of both Sexton's diminishing powers as an artist and her diminishing will to live. At one point Middlebrook does offer a portrait of Sexton struggling with her work, a portrait which, like the suicide scene, is fraught with dubious speculation. Middlebrook notes that Sexton wrote almost every day in 1974, adding that: "Deep down, Sexton knew these were no more poems than the senile ravings of an old woman were conversation" (395).

Biography is, necessarily, a genre which interfaces fact and fiction. Like the Confessional poet, the biographer must, in Sexton's words, "With used furniture...make a tree" ("The Black Art," CP:88). This particular invention of Middlebrook's, however, collapses within its own context, since she offers no evidence from the poetry to support this conjecture. Her analogy - Sexton's writing and the "senile ravings of an old woman" - is curiously chosen, as Sexton likely did consider these "ravings" to be "conversation," if her poem "Old" is any indication.

In this thesis, like Middlebrook, I have restricted my discussion of Sexton's work to those books of poetry she had completed and thoroughly revised. The biography ends when Sexton dies, but it is not clear whether Middlebrook does not comment on the posthumous work because it is not part of Sexton's life proper, or because it is inferior. Middlebrook's book is, however, a literary biography, a form which provides a good deal of contextual and critical information about the poetry, yet this form is abandoned when the poet's "meaningful" work is thought to have ended. Even given the fact that the poems are unsuccessful in the context of the work which precedes them, it would be useful, from a biographical or a critical perspective, to have access to information regarding the poet's germane ideas, ambitions, and the composition of the work. Middlebrook is given to the construction of personae in her work, in a way that recalls
Sexton's "signature poem," "Her Kind". The three subject positions that Sexton creates in this poem - the housewife, the "possessed witch" and the ancient suicide - are replicated, without irony, in the biography. Sexton is first viewed through the biographical lens as having transformed from "housewife into poet". As Anne Sexton draws to its end, Sexton transforms, once more, into a "raving...old woman," a plot-line which is more appropriate to fiction than biography.

Middlebrook's final chapter, which traces the events of Sexton's life in 1974, is entitled "Posthumous Performances," a title which gestures toward the final volumes without actually discussing them. Because the last year of Sexton's life is the subject of this chapter, the title is unsettling; it is as though her life ended when she ceased to compose "meaningful" work. The final poetry appears to have been quite meaningful; it is virtually riddled with images of fear and self-loathing, images which should have great significance to a biographer. In her preface to 45 Mercy Street, Gray Sexton suggests (as she does elsewhere) that the poems in this collection are autobiographical: they "chart...the events of (Sexton's) life from 1971 through 1974" (CP:479). Sexton did not order the manuscript, but Gray Sexton's arrangement of the work highlights its Confessional nature. And Mercy Street, in part, signals Sexton's return to the Confessional mode. Except for those in the section entitled "Bestiary U.S.A.," the poems are highly subjective treatments of the themes which dominated the early collections - despair, mental illness, loss and suicide. Gray Sexton titled the first of the four sections "Beginning the Hegira," signifying, in her words, the beginning of a "journey" from a "dangerous environment" to a "highly desirable destination" (CP:481). The title also reveals an editorial effort to structure the poetry in a way that recalls the formal, linear structure of Sexton's first three collections.
There is, however, one critical distinction between the poems in this volume and the work in the first three books (and even *The Awful Rowing*). While the earlier collections all end, in Sexton’s words, with Sexton “still rowing,” the “highly desirable destination” in the later work, has become death (“Rowing,” [CP]:418).

Sexton’s early Confessional work about suicide is marked by a tension between the speaker’s will to live and her will to die, a tension which is played out, and resolved in “Live,” the poem which concludes *Live or Die*. Afterwards, Sexton turned to other personal and artistic struggles. It is almost as though “Live” constituted a strict contract. Throughout her work, she adhered to the terms she outlines in her epigraph to this volume: “Live or die, but don’t poison everything” ([CP]:94). The appearance of these final poems then is artistically significant. Because there is an autobiographical pact between the self and the self-in-writing in Confessional poetry, Sexton’s early suicide-writing may be read differently from the work of John Berryman and Sylvia Plath (the two other Confessional poets who wrote about suicide) because, up to that point, she had survived. While Plath and Berryman died as they predicted in their writing, Sexton vanquished her suicide-desire in her work, and lived. Sexton’s final poetry underlines the need for new critical ways of discussing not only these last volumes but their relationship to the rest of the work. Clearly, they prove to be a conundrum to a disapproving biographer or for a biographer intent on consistent portraiture. The final poems do confound the sense of progress in the collected poems; they provide both a sharp contrast and an untidy coda to the very tidy narrative set out in the earlier volumes.
ii.

_The dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive._

Julia Kristeva, _Black Sun_

...the appearance of a complete poems presents an opportunity to pose questions about a writer whose entire body of work is the necessary critical context. How are the gems related to the surrounding poems? Is the un-gemlike work inferior as art, or does it represent different artistic goals?

Diane Wood Middlebrook, "Poet of Weird Abundance"

Sexton asked her husband for a divorce in February, 1973, an action which she would come to view as a "mistake" (SPL:349,350). The remaining year-and-a-half of her life was fraught with bouts of severe depression and a number of suicide attempts. Sexton also worked assiduously on her poetry during this period, producing a great deal of work - in her own words - in "a frenzy of despair and hope" (SPL:350). Her despair is catalogued in the biography, and it is replicated in the poetry. Although Middlebrook does not acknowledge the ways in which Sexton’s life and art intersected in this period, her biography can be seen as a companion-piece to the final poems. In the "Posthumous Performances" chapter, Middlebrook describes one of Sexton’s suicide attempts, in which she waded into the Charles River in a red dress, swallowing pills and looking at her psychiatrist’s office. The episode is dramatized in a poem in _Mercy Street_, "Killing the Love," a poem about life being "over," in which Sexton writes: "I'll wear red for a burning./I'll look at the Charles very carefully,/...And the cars will go by" (530). Other poems in both posthumous volumes acutely characterize the state of mental anguish that Middlebrook lays out in the biography. What the biography does not do, however, is convey Sexton’s own sense of her mental illness, on which point these late poems are unquestionably
helpful.

Middlebrook's biography created a considerable controversy because she employed transcripts of Sexton's psychiatric sessions in her research and writing. In her own defense, she includes in the biography a foreword by Sexton's psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, who claims that because "Anne never stopped recognizing the importance that her poetry might play in the lives of her readers," she "would have wanted to share this (the psychiatric) process" (xvii). If Orne's claim is true, then Middlebrook's indifference to Sexton's final poetry becomes particularly suspect. These poems were composed, in Sexton's terms, in despair and hope; the poet's evocation of "hope" (in addition to her diligent work) suggests that the poetry provided an attempt to banish the despair it narrates.

The appearance of Mercy Street and Dr. Y in the Complete Poems highlights what is incomplete or missing from this work: Sexton's previous volumes are each carefully organized and polished, and, collectively, function as a fluid, changing discourse. Her return to the Confessional mode in the last two volumes represents a disconcerting shift; issues which were previously examined in progressive terms are now examined regressively. Ultimately, Sexton's final poems are disconcerting because they recall, but do not revise her earlier Confessional practices, and because they are not, like the earlier work, directed toward recovery.

In Chapters Two and Three, I discuss the imperative of recovery in the work of the Confessional poets, and in popular accounts of mental illness. Plath's Ariel and Bell Jar were organized to conclude with images of recovery; John Berryman's final work, a novel, was entitled Recovery, and Sexton's "Live" signalled the end of the hegira which began in Bedlam. In Plath's case, however, Hughes re-ordered the Ariel poems after her death, and placed the
poem "Words" - where words are described as being "dry and riderless" - at the end of the volume. The placement of the poem "Words" and the poem itself suggests that the author has failed to recover, as does the fact that Berryman's *Recovery* was never completed. Sexton's final poems describe a state of mental illness and sense of loss so profound that it appears to preclude recovery. The sense of acute self-loathing that dominates these poems also intimates destruction; the healthy mind and body that is so carefully constructed in the previous volumes is systematically demolished in the final poems.

The appearance of these final poems in the bland context of the collected poems accentuates what is drastically absent from the extant critical and biographical Sexton scholarship. The poems relentlessly depict a woman who is tortured with self-hatred, a "drunken rat" (537), with an "oily life" (483), and a "little death" (498); a "misshapen udder" (497), who is "unhuman" (528). Images of self-loathing dominate the poems, as do loathsome images of the body - a "demon" who "farts and giggles" (551), a moth "oozing a...drop of urine" (516). In one poem, the speaker melts her teeth with matches, and drinks green blood from her slit wrists (528). Other comparable images appear in the poems which refer to or directly treat the Holocaust. The poems that recall Plath's work in *Ariel* are less political discourse than they are a discourse of repulsion. Nazis, gas chambers and the "infectious Jew" within the speaker appear randomly in the poems; in one hideous poem from the final set of six, "Uses," Sexton attempts to speak in the voice of a Holocaust survivor. "Uses" is a good example of the erratic direction of Sexton's final work - the images she uses, and the theme chosen are inappropriate, repellent and badly executed:
Papa died in the gas chamber, 
slipping blue as an undressed minnow, 
gulping in the shower to wash the Jew off him. 
Mama died in the medical experiments, 
they had stuffed a pig into her womb 
and the pig died, and after she lost her vision, 
she lost her heart stuffing. (610)

Later in the poem the speaker tells of how she later became enamoured of American soldiers, 
"even the G.I. who said "Jew pig," a statement which, when added to the poem's violent 
imagery, evokes a sense of internalized (self) hatred (610).

Sexton used repulsive images as a deliberate tactic throughout her earlier work, but these 
images were always used in service of the themes of the individual poems. Conversely, the 
images in the final work appear to be in service of, in Sexton's words, "reading (her) own life 
with loathing". There are moments in the final work which are simply dreadful - "I flee. I 
flee/I block my ears and eat salami" - and innumerous verses and images are virtually lifted 
from the earlier collections (541). Sexton captures this strange sense of self-repetitiveness very 
well in the poem "45 Mercy Street," when she recounts walking "and being twenty-eight, or is 
it forty-five?" (482). This confusion evokes both the speaker's and the poet's inability to 
distinguish between her early and late life/work. Sexton began writing at age twenty-eight, and 
died when she was forty-five, and while her image of temporal confusion suggests a circularity 
in her work as a whole, it suggests, more strongly, that the artist has capitulated and that she 
has acknowledged her (unsuccessful) return to the ideas and images of her more accomplished 
work.

The strongest and most recurring theme in the final poems is death. While some of the poems 
express yearning - "Still I yearn./A first home./A place to take a first baby to" - the yearning
that is expressed can not be requited (597). The word "pretend" recurs in the poems; the speaker "pretend(s)" that she will not get divorced, that all is "certain and good" (599).

Longing and pretence are undermined by the ubiquitous image of death, which Sexton constructs as being imminent and inevitable: "Death sits with his key in my lock," she writes, "Not one day is taken for granted". She writes of "unravel(ing)" her past and walking into the sea, of denying her body, "that is not my body, not my body," and becoming a daisy "blowing in the wind like a piece of sun" (609, 604). While these images can be seen to foretell Sexton’s suicide, they also create a distinction between the self and the self-in-writing. The body in the poems does not die, it is fluid and changeable, "all butter and pearl" (604). The death that is desired in the poems "will be the end" of the poet’s "fear" and "fear of dying," but the poet in the poems lives on: "and we will/never die, not one of us, we’ll go on" (587, 586). In one of the horoscope poems, several dead and living writers are depicted emerging from books and conversing and interacting with each other as the speaker "concentrate(s)" (599). It is in this peculiar company that Sexton situates herself in these final poems; as an artist, she is aware of her posthumous existence, and aware of the living text that survives the death of the author.

When Middlebrook ends her literary biography with Sexton’s death without examining the final poems, she betrays Sexton’s sensible belief that the poet is in her poems, that she may be consulted there (Self-Portrait in Letters:380). While these final poems are substandard, as Middlebrook herself has suggested, it is important to examine this work not as a collection of "inferior...art," but as evidence of the artist’s "artistic goals". To date, unfortunately, no one, including Middlebrook, has illuminated the artistic goals Sexton was attempting to realize in her final poems. In "Talking to Sheep," Sexton provides an overview of her career as an
autobiographical poet, "confessing, confessing/through the wire of hell" (484). She describes confession as a "compulsion," and writes that although she "denied" her work was autobiographical, it is not "fiction"; it recounts the life of someone "close enough," in any case, "to wear (her) nose" (484, 485). The poem is a poem of "shame" and self-deprecation; the events of her life are referred to as a "latrine" of "details" while it is the "populace" crying "Me too, Me too" that determines her "fate" (484).

Laurence Lerner uses a locution from Derrida's Of Grammatology - the self "under erasure" - to describe Sexton's writing, a notion which Sexton confirms in "Talking to Sheep". The gap between Sexton's self and her self-in-writing must always be scrutinized, in order to assess the function and efficacy of her work. It is, precisely, the self-recognition of the "populace" of readers that confirms what is personal and pluralistic in Sexton's work. Further, the readers who cry "Me too" confirm what is deeply political in a poetry that laboured to uncover and expose buried issues and experiences in women's lives, and in the lives of those who, like Sexton, struggled with despair, mental illness and suicide-desire.

In "'Something Special for Someone': Anne Sexton's Fan Letters from Women," Janet E. Luedtke discusses the fan letters collected in Sexton's archive (at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, in Austin, Texas). There are 869 items in this file - thirteen folders of letters - and over two-thirds of the letters are from women. This fan-mail supports, in Luedtke's words, "the contention...that Sexton wrote from and for a distinctly-female...community" (166). The letters provide, she argues, "the ideal antiphon for Sexton's confessional poems" (168). Luedtke also observes that these fan-letters "constitute an early form of feminist criticism and literary theory". By "the end of Sexton's life", Luedtke notes, "the private confidences of
women like Sexton’s fans had coalesced into a public feminist criticism” (174,173). The letters, ultimately, exhibit the powerful effect Sexton’s personal poetry had on women, and how easily many women could identify with her private struggles. As one fan writes - in a poem entitled "To the Poet of Loveness" - "Typed sheets accompanied our resurrection/With a vague recollection of worthiness" (in "'Something Special':181).

Patricia Hill Collins has written extensively about the inestimable value of women’s personal testimonies - in criticism and fiction - testimonies which act to recover women’s histories, and forge a comprehensive and collective discourse. Sexton’s final testimony is not well-composed or sanguine. It is, however, a significant testimony or testament to a life and life’s work that could not conform to the kind of fairy tale trajectory she successfully mocked in her work on this genre. Sexton’s final poems are comparable to her earlier work in one important way; they insist that a woman’s story, however distressing, may and must be told.

Suicide, as Sexton once remarked, is antithetical to the poem; "horribly unlike Bach," as Berryman observed, and future biographers and scholars must be willing to recognize what is both conjoined and distinct in this (apparently) paradoxical union (Delusions, Etc.:53). In "Love Letter Written in a Burning Building," the last poem Sexton wrote, she states: "I wear a mask in order to write my last words," a premonitory statement that also accurately describes how her last words and poems, their "hopeful eternity" has been concealed and disguised by editorial and biographical mechanisms (613). In this poem, Sexton uses love as a metaphor for poetry, stating that while things "melt" and die - "the nightgowns are already shredding" - writing persists: "well, the sheets have turned to gold" (614). She also expresses a desire to "tell the whole story," a story which remains to be told, and which will only emerge when further,
more complex and explicit (auto)biographical materials are produced (614).
Notes

Introduction

1. The Faber Book of 20th Century Women’s Poetry, for example, does not include Sexton’s work. Editor Fleur Adcock explains why she excluded her in her introduction to the anthology: "...in the past I read her work with sympathy, but now it strikes me as excessively derivative...and repellently self-indulgent" (13). (London: Faber, 1987).


3. This review of Plath’s poetry, written by Philip Marchand, appeared in the Toronto Star on September 30th, 1989.

4. Sexton's "world," or period is personally familiar to Middlebrook; her archives are extensive and accessible (they reside at the University of Texas, at Austin), and Middlebrook had complete access to Sexton’s private archives/papers as well.

5. I discuss this point many times in the thesis, that Sexton maintained and wrote about the ways in which poetry ("the excitable gift") determined her decision to live. See my discussion of "Live," in Chapter Three.

6. Middlebrook is careful to say in her preface (to the biography) that she attempted, in her work, "to avoid the perspective of a pathography" (xx).


8. What is central, for example, to theories contesting the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays is (in the words of a critic who believes that Edward de Vere was "Shakespeare") "the inadequacy of the Stratford man". Critics in the de Vere camp note Shakespeare’s lack of a rigorous formal education, and claim that a man who worked in a butcher’s shop, and grew up in a home "devoid of books and of a literary atmosphere" could not have possibly "blossomed out as one of England’s greatest men of letters" (John Quincy Adams, cited in Tom Bethell’s "The Case for Oxford," The Atlantic, October, 1991, 42-61, p.50).

and Female Creativity (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1990). In her discussion of Emily Dickinson, Bennett uses the words "mask" and "pathetic creature," and she cites Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who refer to Dickinson as a "poser," and question how she was able to compose her poetry (42-43).

10. The second section of Diane Middlebrook's Anne Sexton is entitled "Housewife into Poet". She published an article with the same title in The New England Quarterly, in December, 1983 (Vol. LVI, Number 4, 483-503).

11. Autobiographical or confessional poetry, is a substantial genre with poetic roots in non-secular writing, lyrical and Romantic poetry, and a great deal of the subjective poetry of the twentieth century (preceding Confessional poetry). A Confessional poet can, theoretically, write confessional poems - Anne Sexton's post- Live or Die work, for example, is not Confessional, but confessional. Confessional poetry, however, is simultaneously, Confessional and autobiographical (confessional). See Chapter One for a working definition of the characteristics of Confessional poetry.

12. In my second and third chapters I discuss institutionalization and suicide as female-gendered themes in Sexton's poetry, and discuss how she treated these themes as representing distinctly female regions of desire and creation.

13. These books are discussed in my conclusion, and treated, in part, as evidence of her diminishing creative powers.

14. See: Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 1992), Elisabeth Bronfen's compelling examination of how death and femininity have been historically linked through recurring aesthetic images.


16. As Maxine Kumin observes in her introduction to Anne Sexton's Complete Poems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), Sexton wrote about "taboo" issues related to women's experiences "at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry" (xxxiv).
Chapter One

1. Mental illness is a recurring theme in Confessional poetry. Hyatt H. Waggoner observes that the Confessional poets, unlike the outward-road-looking Beats, looked "inward" in their writing, "to the depths of their psychic torture" (565). In The American Moment, Geoffrey Thurley observes that "the nervous breakdown" provided the structure for the entire Confessional "oeuvre" (London: Edwin Arnold, 1977:86). Confessional poetry contains a Laingian element, as mental illness is configured, in the poetry, as a reflection of the troubled period the poets occupy. In my second chapter I discuss the ways in which Plath and Sexton gender their descriptions of mental illness and institutionalization in order to produce social critique. For a discussion of R.D. Laing and The Divided Self see Elaine Showalter's The Female Malady, pp 226-228.

2. Both of these quotations are taken from Editor Ann Charter's introduction to The Beat Reader. Charten quotes the phrases "cool and beat" and "bop visions" from a March, 1958 Esquire article (xxi), and quotes the phrase "bearded cats and kits" from an April, 1958 Look Magazine article (xxii).

3. Waggoner is quoting James Dickey, who remarked that he found Modernism "suspect" because it did not encourage a "communion" between poet and reader (563).


5. Roethke produced a number of "madhouse" poems, and poems about despair or "Dolor"; he also wrote about mental breakdown before the Confessional poets - see: "Theodore Roethke" in Ramakrishnan's Crisis and Confession (24-97). Because he employed these themes, he is sometimes considered to be a Confessional poet, but I agree with Phillips' assessment of Roethke, and believe that his work is not as insistently, characteristically Confessional as the work of Berryman, Lowell, Plath, Sexton and Snodgrass. The term "Confessional poet" is flexible; Lerner includes Adrienne Rich (in addition to the five poets I have named) on his list of Confessional poets, which is odd, given that her work does not conform to the characteristics (of Confessional poetry) he lists.

6. There are, of course, a great deal of articles and books exist about the individual Confessional poets, and there are also a number of texts about American poetry and poetic genres and practices that are valuable, including Waggoner's American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present; Michael Burns's "Confession as Sacrament" (in Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton (Ed.Frances Bixler, 130-137), and other essays I have cited in my references.
7. In "A Supermarket in California," Ginsberg salutes Whitman, his Beat-mentor: "Where are we going, Walt Whitman?...Ah, dear father, greybeard, lonely old courage teacher" (Howl:23,4).

8. Phillips quotes disdainfully from a John Wieners poem about oral sex between men as an example of poetry that "shock(s)" more than it "illumin(ates)" (16). A great deal of Beat poetry is written by and about homosexual and bisexual men, poetry which Phillips ignores in his assessment of confessional literature. Phillips does discuss Ginsberg, but he ignores the many other Beat writers in his rather wide assessment of confession, an omission which, in conjunction with his prudish distaste for Wieners' work, is indicative of his conservatism as a critic. Alvarez is similarly conservative, when he dismisses protest poems and songs of the 1960's as a lot of solipsistic nonsense ("Modernism":11).

9. I discuss this kind of assessment of Sexton's poetry in my introduction, and cite Helen Vendler as a critic who has worked with the idea of Sexton as inept diarist, in her article "Malevolent Flippancy".

10. Unlike the other Confessional poets, Sexton avoids the adoption of the voice or experiences of "the other" in her writing. Plath evokes images of Jewish and Japanese women, and women of colour in her poetry in order to signify her concern with contemporary political issues, while Sexton avoids this kind of "subtle larceny" (Steiner, "Dying is an Art":218). In her posthumously published poetry, Sexton does occasionally adopt the voice of and images of "the other" in poems that are more recognizably "political". Since Sexton never finished revising this work, it is unclear what ultimate plans she had for this highly Plath-esque work.
Chapter Two

1. Jacqueline Rose discusses the image of the fig tree in the *Bell Jar*, in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, and suggests that this image is grounded in racial discourse, that it "signifies not plurality but difference, and the difference not of the sexes, but of race" (204).

2. Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is an excellent example of the theme of breakdown and recovery in women’s writing of this period, with regard to the function of the "golden", unifying, notebook in the text.

3. Plath’s description - in *The Bell Jar* - of Esther’s image in the mirror (after her suicide attempt) is also evocative of the image of Frankenstein’s monster. Plath describes a person/creature who is "sallow yellow" in complexion, who is "supernatural in appearance," and whose face "crack(s) into a grin" (185). In *Frankenstein*, the monster is described as having "yellow skin" (42), and he also stares at his creator "while a grin wrinkle(s) his cheeks" (43).

4. Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) is a novel about shock treatment and institutionalization. As Elaine Showalter has observed, Kesey presents "shock treatment as a feminizing therapy"; she also observes that his novel (in addition to the other male-authored novels of shock therapy of the period, which include *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Caretaker*) present "an instructive contrast to ... female condemnations of psychiatric power" (*The Female Malady*: 218). John Berryman’s *Recovery* (1973) is optimistically recovery-oriented, but significantly unfinished.

5. Plath also used the image of the bee in her poetry; in her cycle of "bee poems", in *Ariel*, she uses this image as a symbol of female autonomy and power.

6. Orne’s role as Sexton’s therapist and mentor is discussed at length in Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton*. Orne also writes the foreward to this text.


8. See: Interview with Anne Sexton and Harry Moore in *No Evil Star* (Anne Sexton: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose), Ed. Steven E. Colburn, pages 41-69, for her discussion of New Testament images in "The Division of Parts". Other *King Lear* references may be observed in the poem’s first verses: "Mother, my Mary Gray/once resident of Gloucester" (*Complete Poems*:42), and in the verses: "I am one third/of your
Chapter Three

1. A. Alvarez also includes a list of artist-suicides in *The Savage God*.


3. See: Fred Cutter’s *Art and the Wish to Die*, for an extensive examination of themes of self-injury in visual art.

4. In *Suicide* (New York: Scribner’s, 1972), Jacques Choron distinguishes between "active" and "passive" means of suicide, and notes that many women employ "active" or "violent" means of death, which is, he notes, "surprising ... given their greater abhorrence of disfigurement" (39). In *Why People Kill Themselves* (Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Books, 1972), David Lester claims that women use "less lethal" (42) means of death, and the term "imperfect means" (with regard to women’s methods of suicide) is employed in *Suicide: A Statistical Study*, New York: Ronald Press, 1965.


6. The *True Confessions* call for submissions appears in random issues, approximately once a year.

7. In a number of interviews, Atwood mentions submitting stories to *True Confessions* (or *True Romance*) and having them rejected.

Chapter Four

1. Sexton began to use Plath's poetic diction and voice, in this and her later books, is more likely because of her close readings of Plath's work, after Plath's death in 1963. One of the most striking instances of Plath's influence occurs in Sexton's "Barefoot". The verses: "The surf's a narcotic, calling out, I am, I am, I am" are lifted almost verbatim from The Bell Jar, a novel which, according to Diane Middlebrook, Sexton read and re-read (AS:200). The scene, in The Bell Jar, occurs after Esther unsuccessfully tries to drown herself in the ocean. Plath writes: "I thought I would swim out until I was too tired to swim back. As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears. I am I am I am" (167). Plath uses this same phrase in the poem "Suicide off Egg Rock" (1959: "And his blood beating the old tattoo/I am, I am, I am..." (Collected Poems:115).

2. This quotation is taken from Ellmann and O'Clair's introduction to The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (14). This introduction provides an excellent overview of the significant trends in twentieth century American poetry. In the cited passage, the authors are discussing the influence of William Carlos Williams' "open prosody" (and by extension, Pound's vers libre), with reference to the Beat poets.

3. I discuss the connection between Whitman and the Beat poets in my first chapter, and many critics, including Ellmann and O'Clair, and John Clellon Holmes - in Passionate Opinions: The Cultural Essays, V.III, make a similar connection. Ginsberg makes direct reference to Whitman in his poetry, which I also mention in my first chapter.

4. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's discussion of "Contemporary Images of Women" in contemporary literature in The Norton Anthology of Literature By Women. Their survey of literature of the 1960's, written by men, provides a good overview of the prevalent themes of antifeminism and misogyny in this period.

5. See: Rats Live on No Evil Star, edited by Steven E. Colburn, which contains a selection of interviews with Sexton, at different stages in her career. In one interview, with Gregory Fitz Gerald, she discusses "women's lib," with some reservation.

6. In an October 13th/1991 interview with Eleanor Wachtel, for the CBC radio show "Writers and Company," Middlebrook again states that she disliked Sexton's "persona" when she embarked on the biography project. I spoke with Middlebrook the same month, and she said at that time that she had not taught Sexton in her women's poetry courses, and had only come to "love" her, as she worked on the biography.

7. Jane Austen has also been criticized for not acknowledging, in her novels, the political and social climate of her time. As Tony Tanner writes: "It is indeed possible to call its (Pride and Prejudice) relevance to the society of the time into question, for during a decade in which Napoleon was effectively engaging, if not transforming, Europe, Jane
Austen composed a novel in which the most important events are the fact that a man changes his manners and a young lady changes her mind" (Introduction, Pride and Prejudice. Middlesex: Penguin, 1983. 7-43. p.7. Ultimately, the effect of the creation of this "young lady" and the novelist herself, with regard to the history and development of women's literature, testifies to what is deeply political about the act of woman writing woman.

8. This quotation is taken from Joy Parks' description of Warland's work, which is cited on the cover of serpent (w)rite.

9. See The Norton Anthology of Literature By Women, for an example of an anthology that illustrates how few women, prior to the nineteenth century, wrote and published secular love poetry, and contrast this number with the innumerable male poets who worked with this genre. Men, as Gilbert and Gubar have observed, were conventionally identified (until the recent century) as "the speaking subject" in English literature (NAW:58). Women poets, like Aphra Behn in the seventeenth century, did write erotic and explicit love poetry, but there is no sustained tradition of women working with this genre. As Middlebrook notes in Anne Sexton, Love Poems was received with excitement, because "Women hadn't published such sexually explicit poems in English for a couple of centuries" (297).

10. See Barbara Wilson's The Dog Collar Murders, for her complex discussion of S/M. She presents many different perspectives on this practice in the novel. The cited passage appears on page 28.

11. See "Up From the Valley of the Dolls: The Origins of the Sexual Revolution" in Re-Making Love. The authors are cited here (page 71), and their discussion of feminists' contribution to the sexual revolution is insightful, as is their charitable consideration of the realm of popular fiction and criticism.

12. In Anne Sexton, Middlebrook notes that Sexton wrote many of the love poems for her psychiatrist, "Dr. Zweizung," with whom she was having a "passionate love affair" (258).


14. It is only relatively recently that gays and lesbians have been recognized by the law and church with reference to marriage, and this recognition is restricted and rare, and still subject to horrendous contention.


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Chapter Five

1. Sexton was uneasy about placing her poem in Playboy's "Ribald Classics" series. She wrote to Cindy Degener: It worries me a little to be published in Playboy. They exploit women, and now I've got a hand in it" (SPL:320).

2. Claus Oldenburg and Andy Warhol are two artists who produced sculpture-enlargements of domestic objects in this period. Oldenburg produced a series of soft sculptures of items such as cigarette ends and hamburgers; Warhol produced the Brillo-pad box, and paintings of soup cans.

3. Jack Zipes has commented extensively on the roles of women in fairy tales, and in his introduction to Don't Bet on the Prince he refers to a great number of feminist critics who have written work in this genre. There are also a number of feminist essays included in this anthology.

4. In The Legend of Good Women (written between 1372 and 1386), Chaucer recounts the legends of a number of infamous literary/historical women, such as Thisbe, Cleopatra and Dido. He retells their stories, as Sexton does in Transformations, in order to revise the ways in which they are traditionally viewed. His narrative voice is alternately ironic, and sympathetic, and the text as a whole is ultimately a commentary on the anti-feminist tradition that produces and perpetuates the notions of "good" and "bad" women.

5. This information (about the three most popular European fairy tale texts) is taken from J.A. Cuddon's A Dictionary of Literary Terms.

6. See Zipes' introduction to Don't Bet on the Prince, page 12, for a long list of contemporary female-authored revisionary fairy tales.

7. Many commentators on "Cinderella" have noted the connection between the shoe-sequence in the tale, and the Chinese practice of footbinding. See: Mary Daly's Gym/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, Pages 151-152.

8. In Austen's Emma there are a number of examples of the conflict between the known and the unknown, where Highbury (and its homes and families) are known, and the unknown is the mysterious and suspicious realm beyond Highbury. Frank Churchill's departure from Highbury, for a haircut, is treated as a deeply suspect action, and when Harriet Smith is left unattended, she is immediately assailed by a group of marauding, wandering gypsies.

9. "Passing" and white minstrelry are, of course, distinctly different traditions. I use the term/act of "passing" (which the black novelists Nella Larsen and James Weldon Johnson have explored in their work) to denote Sexton's very Confessional attempt to
signify a masquerade that is politically motivated. Her Cinderella is "passing" as a woman in the poem; she represents an idea or image of Woman that the Grimms construct, in their efforts to present an idealised (but unacceptable, in Sexton's text) representation of her gender.


11. In Father-Daughter Rape, Elizabeth Ward includes a series of personal accounts of father-daughter rape, written by women. These stories testify to the occurrence and degree of denial within families, and (often) within the medical/legal community.

12. Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" is a retelling of the Cenci story, a true story of father-daughter rape which occurred in 1599, which Percy Shelley adapted (with Mary Shelley's assistance) in his play, The Cenci (1819,1821).
Chapter Six

1. In "Jesus the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost" (The Awful Rowing:456-457), "Jesus" also speaks to his mother, Mary, in romantic terms, and asks: "Oh, mother./marry me,/before the gulls take me out the door." (456) He asks to be married to a "goddess", and to be "born again/into something true." (456,457) Here Sexton illustrates, again, her notion of Christ’s mortal longings, as well as his longing to claim, or reclaim Mary as an active parent, or as his personal saviour.

2. In Latin, the word "infant" means, literally, "without speech".

3. For a brief overview of iconographic images of Mary and Christ, see Albert Elsen’s The Purposes of Art, Peter and Linda Murray’s Art of the Renaissance (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), and Anna Jameson’s Legends of the Madonna. In Theology and Feminism, Daphne Hampson draws an interesting parallel between classical images of Isis (with an infant on her lap) and similar images of the Virgin Mary (100).

4. Daly’s notion of Christian and Post-Christian myth’s erasure of the presence of Mary from her divine son is not completely sound. Medieval theologians, for example, viewed depictions of Christ as a fully formed homonculus (at birth) as being heretical, and the conventional image of Christ at Mary’s breast (which I discuss in this chapter) also confirms Mary’s critical role in her infant’s development.

5. In the poem "Madonna" (The Death Notebooks:356), Sexton refers to her own mother, outright, as "Madonna".

6. For a masculinist perspective/overview of the sexual revolution of the 1960’s, see Gay Talese’s Thy Neighbour’s Wife (New York: Dell, 1981). See also The 60s Without Apology, for a number of essays, from a variety of perspectives, on the same topic.


8. The language/texts of contemporary male mystics were also loaded with sexualized imagery; I have referred to female mystics here in order to locate a tradition of female discourse which interfaces mystical and sexual desire/experiences.

9. See Chapter Four, for another example of Middlebrook’s assumptions about Sexton’s politics. In this chapter I refer to what Middlebrook describes as Sexton’s "fear" of feminism’s associations with "anger".

10. See in Patricia Wilson Kastner’s Faith Feminism and the Christ "A Feminist Critique:
Humanity, Deity and the Christ" (11-38) for a thorough examination of revisionist feminist theologians/critics.

For further research on the subject of female critics work with/against Christianity, see: Matilda Joslyn Gage's *Woman, Church and State: The Original Expose of Male Collaboration Against the Female Sex* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1980), and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* and "The Looking Glass Society" in *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (189-193).


In her correspondence, Sexton invariably referred to *The Death Notebooks* as the project she would work on until she died (SPL:326). However, once she had completed the collection, she referred to it, to her agent, as "the beginning of a 'new life" (351).

The image/idea of Eve as Narcissus is based on one of Mary Nyquist's lectures on *Paradise Lost*, which she delivered in a graduate course entitled *Feminist Discourse*, in 1988-89.

Trees are gendered, as masculine, in *Paradise Lost*. See Book Five, ll.214-219.


See Chapter Two for a development of the relationship Sexton draws, in her poetry, between madness, art and recovery.

The name Christopher means "Christ-bearer," and this meaning has special significance, with reference to Sexton's religious poetry. Sexton uses images - in relation to Christ - of transportation ("awful rowing"), endurance (the double-meaning encoded in the word "awful"), and birth (which I discuss in this chapter). In "Jesus Walking," Sexton writes: "To pray, Jesus knew, /is to be a man carrying a man" (384). In Sexton's psalm-sequence *O Ye Tongues*, "Christopher," her companion, nurtures her, and places her into a "neat package" (CP:408). The image of the package suggests that the speaker - "Anne" - is carried or borne by Christopher, and also suggests that Sexton, in keeping with her revisionist strategies, fashions herself after Christ in this sequence.

See Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random House, 1991) for a detailed analysis of the ways in which women's sensual appetites have been historically and
culturally repressed.
Conclusion

1. Because the last poems (in the Complete Poems) number only six, when I refer to the final poems in this chapter, I am referring to the volumes 45 Mercy Street and Words For Dr. Y.

2. For a detailed account and assessment of Hughes’s editing of Plath’s work see Jacqueline Rose’s The Haunting of Sylvia Plath. Hughes was opposed to this book and referred to some of Rose’s interpretations as "grounds for homicide".

3. Sexton’s poem "Old," which appears in All My Pretty Ones, is written in the voice of an old woman facing death. In the poem, the speaker slips into a dream-like confusion; she slips fluidly into the past and narrates an incident - picking blueberries with her sister - in the present tense. The speaker resists the present, for "in a dream you’re never eighty," and in this eloquent poem, Sexton clearly exhibits a moving sense that the "senile ravings" of an old woman are, indeed, "conversation".

4. I refer to Sexton’s speaker - in the third stanza of "Our Kind" - as an "ancient suicide" because the stanza is about an impending, exultant suicide/death, and (as I note in Chapter Two) the images of the stanza explicitly refer to the Salem witch trials.

5. Biographical accounts of the end of Plath’s life are also affected by the destruction of her last two diaries. Nancy Milford has commented that Plath’s autobiographical writing (and by extension, the extant biographical writing) is seriously undermined due to the "crucial missing material" (Review: The Journals of Sylvia Plath:32).

6. There is another sequence in the final volumes, "Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems" (Words For Dr. Y) which is, like Bestiary U.S.A, a formal exercise in structure. These poems, however, use a confessional voice to narrate the horoscope epigraphs which head each poem (Sexton was a Scorpio, born in November, and refers to herself as a Scorpio "death bitch" in one poem [CP:592]). There are also some poems, like "Uses," which are written in the first-person voice, and which are not autobiographical. These poems are exceptions in the manuscripts, and are thematically linked to the manuscripts as a whole.

7. Berryman is cited in one of the horoscope poems - "The high ones, Berryman said, die, die, die" - a statement which evokes (in conjunction with other references in the poems to suicide-colleagues such as Plath) a sense of an in-group (of doomed "high ones") that includes Sexton (601).

8. The phrase "reading my own life with loathing," is derived from the epigraph Sexton uses for the "Horoscope Poems": it is a quotation by Pushkin: "And reading my own life with loathing, I tremble and curse" (CP:591).
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