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Climbing Out of Oneself: Anne Sexton's Transformative Poetic Journey

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"Language is poetry, maybe? But not all language is poetry. Nor is all poetry language."

– Anne Sexton

"Poetry is not an expression of the party line. It's that time of night, lying in bed, thinking what you really think, making the private world public, that's what the poet does."

– Allen Ginsberg

Anne Sexton, 1967

Abstract

Anne Sexton's poetry frequently explored intensely personal experiences and taboo topics, such as madness, suicide, abortion, female body and sexuality, etc., challenging cultural and poetic norms of propriety of her time and attracting controversy. Commonly classified as a confessional poet, Sexton often drew heavy criticism for her open verse, frequently being labeled as narcissistic, self-indulgent, and even vulgar. Such dismissals of her poetic stature have since been amended mainly by developments in feminist literary criticism, which has experienced remarkable growth since the 1970s. Sexton is now more and more regarded as a pathbreaker in women's poetry, and her work has been explored from various viewpoints about the cultural, political, and literary climate of the time in which she wrote. This thesis follows major works in feminist thought and feminist literary criticism to argue that Sexton's poetry was not merely confessional but profoundly involved with important issues related to women's position in society. The study was grounded in literary analysis, focusing on the content of Sexton's poems rather than their formal characteristics and seeking to link Sexton's intimate poems to broader, universal female experiences. The limited number of poems discussed was selected from Sexton's entire body of work, mainly focusing on less critically recognized poems from her later volumes. The thesis is divided into four chapters, examining different aspects of Sexton's work, including her role in the literary tradition, her outspoken poetic voice, her exploration of the female body and sexuality, and her portrayals of womanhood within a patriarchal context. The study reveals that Sexton used her poetry to express discontent with and draw attention to critical issues women faced under the constraints of a patriarchal society, in which their existence was reduced to the occupation of a housewife and mother. Rather than allowing her voice to be censored, Sexton remained outspoken about such issues as the significance of speaking about women's experiences, women's bodily autonomy, sexuality, imprisoning societal expectations leading to illness and self-destructiveness, and the trappings of a system designed to punish any sign of defiance. The thesis concludes that exploring Sexton's poetry as art instead of a documentary, avoiding a biography-seeking lens in the analysis of her poems, remains of utmost importance to comprehend the extent to which she revolutionized the poetic world and contributed to legitimizing women's experiences as appropriate and vital literary subjects.

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Introduction

> *"The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet."*
>
> – Ralph Waldo Emerson

What is poetry? More importantly, what is good poetry? And who is the poet? These questions, however trivial they may seem in the grand scheme of things, have relentlessly occupied the great minds virtually since the beginning of thought. From Ancient Greek philosophers, through Renaissance thinkers, neoclassic and romantic critics, and all the way to modern critics and poets alike, it cannot be said that the general consensus has been reached and that these questions have been answered with definitive authority. Perhaps, as Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests in his famous essay, *The Poet*, each epoch introduces new and fresh ingredients into the recipe for poetry and thus requires new and fresh ways of inspecting, defining, and assessing the quality, adequacy, and artfulness of the new poetry and poets. Even then, the inspections, the definitions, and the assessments may vary greatly from critic to critic and from person to person. How are we, then, to truly know how to separate the poetic wheat from the chaff is another crucial question debated among critics and poets for centuries. Answering this and the previous questions must ultimately be approached with apprehension, as it demands a thorough investigation of many, often contradictory, critical aspects, as well as of one's personal viewpoints of these matters. Whichever view we might stand behind, I believe it is safe to say that, at last, we can all agree that the purpose of poetry is to provoke a feeling in the reader. It could be said that there is no more adequate feeling caused by poetry than that of discomfort since it is discomfort that usually reveals certain truths hidden beneath the surface.

"The poet knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, 'with the flower of the mind'; not with the intellect," said Ralph Waldo Emerson in the aforementioned essay (Emerson, 1883, p. 30). One of the poetic modes that spoke most wildly and consequently spread the plague of discomfort and discontent in the domain of literary criticism of the 1950s was the so-called "confessional poetry," a term first craftily used by Macha Louis Rosenthal to describe Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959. Rosenthal labeled

this new mode of poetry as "impure art, magnificently stated but unpleasantly egocentric" (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 110), and this label stuck to the "confessional school" for a long while. One of the representatives of this school, a woman poet, Anne Sexton, caused quite a sensation and discomfort upon her arrival on the poetic scene. Often critically adorned with the epithets "narcissistic," "self-indulgent," "too revealing," and "embarrassing," yet also proclaimed as "courageous," "candid," and "insightful," her poetry was paradoxically both refused the status of "good" poetry and acclaimed with the highest rank by being awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1967. The reasons for both reactions were essentially the same – her wild, seemingly autobiographical, or more precisely personal, subject matters, such as insanity, hospitalization in the asylum, and various themes pertinent to woman's bodily, mental, and spiritual existence and the intensity with which she continued to pursue these preoccupations in her poetic production.

With such novel and rather indelicate subjects, not only did her poetry raise critical eyebrows, but it might be said that it also set a precedent in poetry, and more specifically, women's poetry of and beyond her time. Never before have such controversial topics as madness, female body and sexuality, abortion, menstruation, and suicidal impulse been featured so prominently in poetry, and even less so initiated by a woman's hand. Moreover, the rawness of emotion and autobiographical involvement of this new poetry transgressed heavily on the Eliotic concept of poetic depersonalization and universality, and not everyone was ready to embrace this transition towards the personal. Naturally, critics, poets, and readers alike responded differently to her new verse, and while some hailed it as a breakthrough in modern poetry, others saw it as a breakdown of the poetic tradition and a literal breakdown of the poet on paper.

In *Writing Like a Woman*, Alicia Ostriker said that "Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to," being easily filed under "N for Narcissist" (Ostriker, 1983, p. 59) and condemned for her lack of reticence. While this is most certainly true, much effort has been put forward, by Ostriker herself as well, to mend this broken and fragmented view of Sexton and her art, despite their frequent unwillingness to bestow her with the title of "fine artist" (Ostriker, 1983, p. 61). In Sexton's defense, most tried to disprove the unconditionally autobiographical note of her poetry, showing how the label "confessional" only rippled the surface of the lake, making the depths of her poetic expression impervious to bystander's gaze and thus impossible to surface as impersonal and universal, which were characteristics so cherished among literary critics of the time. Furthermore, separating the art from the artist posed another delicate issue, as the two seemed far too intertwined to distinguish between,

especially after the artist's self-inflicted death. Nevertheless, when Anne Sexton committed suicide on October 4, 1974, the woman of that name died, yet the poet lived on. The archetype of the mad poet drawn to death could not be further away from Sexton. As she often emphasized, becoming a poet kept her at a distance from madness and the death wish she nourished in her pre-poetry-writing days, at least for a while. Now, with half a century of temporal distance between her death and the present day, what becomes a necessity is to start looking at Sexton's poetry from a different angle altogether, without feeling the need to defend it from the charges of confession, narcissism, or excessiveness and without equating it with an expression of her illness and suicidality.

Interest in Sexton's life, death, and poetry does not abate even to this day. The past few decades have seen a significant endeavor to move the discussions about confessional poetry in general and about Sexton's poetics in a direction that is more focused on the historical, political, and literary contexts surrounding its creation. Several critics, such as Diane Wood Middlebrook (1998), Deborah Nelson (2013), and Adam Beardsworth (2022), have demonstrated the importance of the Cold War politics of containment and the constraints of domestic life when it comes to the development of Sexton's confessional poetics. Others, such as Jeanne Braham (1995) and Jo Gill (2007), have explored the complex connections between genre and gender and how they interact in a repressive, patriarchal society, challenging the "confessional" and "truth-telling" tasks. Furthermore, feminist literary criticism that bloomed in the years after Sexton's death started raising awareness of "the double bind of the woman poet," as Suzanne Juhasz called it, because "[i]f she is 'woman,' she must fail as 'poet'; 'poet,' she must fail as 'woman'" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 3). The conundrum of the "woman poet," raised already by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), was further addressed by numerous women poets and critics, such as Adrienne Rich (1972, 1979), Alicia Ostriker (1983, 1986), and Hélène Cixous (1976), providing insight into peculiarities of woman's writing stemming from the tensions surrounding her struggle to see "with fresh eyes" (Rich, 1972, p. 18), to "put herself into the text by her own movement" (Cixous, 1976, p. 875), and to "steal the language" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 211). These works, although not always directly addressing Sexton, bear significance in reading and interpreting Sexton's poetry, as I would argue that she had often intuitively rather than deliberately come to write in distinctly female and even feminist mode and language, predating the aforementioned discussions on women's writing with a practical rather than theoretical demonstration of its power. Although several critics have acknowledged Sexton's preoccupation with female themes, the problem of transcending these themes from personal confessions to universal records of female experience, often excluded itself from the

universal male experience, has received scant attention in the research literature. It is this aspect of Anne Sexton's poetry and her outward look that this thesis sets out to explore.

The central thesis of this thesis is that Anne Sexton's poetry can be viewed as a transformative and performative journey that surpasses mere self-reflection and self-indulgence. In his review of Anne Sexton's third volume, *Live or Die*, Thomas P. McDonnell compared her poetry to "a journey in and out of the various dark" (McDonnell, 1978, p. 132), and his observation raises two critical points. Firstly, his use of the word "journey" seems to acknowledge the progressiveness and transformative aspect of Sexton's poetry without insisting on the ascending or descending direction of that progress. Secondly, by pointing out the "various dark" of her subject matter, he seems to transcend the debate on the appropriateness or value of the topics she explored, restoring her poetry to its ideational rather than autobiographical aspect, setting aside the looming question of her "inward look that society scorns" (Sexton, 1999, p. 5) and recognizing that she "looks outward, too" (McDonnell, 1978, p. 133). In the same vein, I would like to argue that Sexton's work represents a conscious attempt to move beyond introspection, transforming her profoundly personal experiences into universal themes that resonate with broader audiences, especially resonating with the universal female experience. In the following chapters, this study aims to examine how Sexton's poetic journey can be seen as a process of self-extrication, a process of climbing out of oneself, where the act of writing becomes a performative escape from the confines of her own identity, allowing her to craft a more expansive and universally applicable narrative.

The objective of the present study is not to present Sexton's poetry as feminist or to intend to extricate it from its confessional yoke, as neither of the two would be entirely possible or even desirable. Rather, following extensive previous critical and theoretical observations on poetry, confessional poetry, women's writing, feminism, and finally, Sexton herself, this study seeks to explore the transformations of Sexton the poet and her poetry, investigating and connecting her poems through several dominant themes that revolve around womanhood and selfhood. These tropes can be detected throughout her whole opus, yet may be most powerfully detached from her personally in her fifth volume, Transformations, which, as its title suggests, transforms Brothers Grimm's fairy tales into grotesquely satirical and sometimes twistedly macabre, contemporary social commentary which does not guarantee a happily ever after. The blend of personal and universal in the way these transformations appear on paper struck me as ingenious upon first reading, and the connection with her earlier and later poetry became apparent soon after. Although a complete discussion of various topics Sexton dissects in her poetry, as well as of the numerous poems in which she repeats the same ones, lies well beyond

the scope of my exploration, I hope that my analysis can contribute to casting a new light on Anne Sexton's poetics and draw attention to thematic, if not formal, ingenuity of some of her later and less critically acclaimed poems. My goal is to "fasten a new skin" (Sexton, 1999, p. 35) around some of her signature poems, but my primary focus is on her poems that escaped much notice so far and how they connect with her writing and general themes.

My interest in this topic developed from curiosity about the way women writers undertook issues related to female experience in their writing, especially in poetry, a strict literary discipline denied to women for so long. When it was time to select a topic for my master's thesis, I focused on American women poets of the late 1950s and 1960s. Anne Sexton emerged as the most compelling choice among the various poets I considered for several reasons. Having never before read poetry like hers, least of all written by a woman, I must confess that, at first, its openness made me a bit uncomfortable. Reading her biography also contributed to a somewhat tainted first impression of her poetry. Yet, though it may seem contradictory to the previous statement, Sexton's poetry elicited a profound sense of recognition and identification within me despite its intensely personal nature. This led me to question the accuracy of its confessional label and autobiographical significance. My initial impulse to sort through her poetry as some document of her life was soon abandoned, proving to be not only unproductive but altogether pointless. My interest turned toward exploring her poetry from a contextual point of view – not focusing on her biography, but on the "biography" of the time she lived in, which, I suspected, must have had a formative effect on how and what she wrote. This led me to believe that exploring her work alone would be the perfect topic not only because of her subject matter but also because my interest in her lifework went beyond the more extensively covered interests in her confessionalism and comparative analysis of her poetry with that of Sylvia Plath, for instance. My initial hypothesis was that her fifth volume, *Transformations* (1971), which seemed, at first, most remote from her "confessional" style, would be most important in presenting her work as social commentary. However, in the course of intense reading and writing, I realized that the major themes she explores in transforming the fairy tales are equally, if not more, present in her other poems, even those most intensely autobiographical. Although the fairy tales kept a vital place in my thesis, my focus switched to demonstrating how her poetry as a whole, including the autobiographical poems, still transcends the boundaries of her private life and needs not be examined only through the lens of "confessional" or "autobiographical" documentation. Her journey as a poet, marked by searching for the key to merging the personal and the universal in her poetry, seems to stand outside the labeling possibilities and reflects the complex interplay between identity, art, and

expression. Hopefully, this exploration deepens the understanding of her work and its unprecedented value in appropriating and legitimizing the topics related to female experiences as appropriate and important literary subjects.

The research methodology of this thesis is grounded in literary analysis, supported by historical and theoretical frameworks. The study focuses on a comprehensive examination of Anne Sexton's entire body of work, including both widely recognized and lesser-studied poems. This study avoids, as much as possible, a biographical reading of Sexton's poetry, opting to interpret her work through a historical and cultural lens, especially related to women's position in society and literary establishment. Key texts from feminist thought and feminist literary criticism, such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986) and *Writing Like a Woman* (1983), guide the analysis. Additionally, essays, reviews, and works explicitly discussing Sexton's poetics, like *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics* (1978), edited by J. D. McClatchy, and Jo Gill's *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (2007), inform the study's framework, as well as Anne Sexton's observations about life, society, and her poetry that are available in her interviews.

The analysis is content-focused, avoiding formal critiques of poetic structure and instead emphasizing thematic connections between Sexton's personal and less personal poems. By doing so, the study highlights Sexton as a poet whose work, even in its most "confessional" moments, extends beyond self-exhibition to explore larger, universally resonant themes of women's experiences. Due to the breadth of Sexton's work, the research is limited to selected poems, combining those intensely autobiographical with those less autobiographical, demonstrating how Sexton's poetry always tends to reveal more than just her personal experience, ultimately showing Sexton as a poet, not a patient, and her writing as poetry, not as a case study.

The thesis is composed of four chapters. Chapter One is dedicated to exploring Anne Sexton's role within the broader context of literary tradition, women's writing, and the confessional poetry she was often associated with. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part focuses on Western literary tradition and literary criticism. The second part discusses confessional poetry, its development, representatives, and reception, as well as the historical background, both literary and political, in which it came to existence. The third part engages with the issue of women's writing, illuminating a few of the most significantly debated matters regarding how and why it might or might not differ from men's writing and whether it deserves different criteria for evaluation and interpretation. The final part situates Anne Sexton's poetics

within this discussion, considering this entanglement of genre and gender but also taking note of her distinctive journey into poetry.

Chapter Two examines how Sexton's poetry, often criticized for being too personal or self-centered, responds to and critiques the societal constraints imposed on women. It attempts to show how Sexton's poetry can be viewed as an act of breaking the silence around taboo subjects, using her life as a means to explore universal themes and provide social and political commentary. Although Sexton did not affiliate herself with feminists, the chapter demonstrates how her work indirectly engages with feminist discourse, originating from a discontent with the silencing order that defines women's experiences as insignificant, largely reminiscent of Carol Hanisch's famous claim that "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1970, p. 76). The chapter discusses some of Sexton's poems that seem to speak about her writing as a means of social commentary rather than just confessions. The offered interpretations aspire to show that Sexton wrote with a clear goal – to express her dissatisfaction and establish a new order, to express truths beyond those related to her own experience, and to transcend the boundaries of self by climbing out of herself or at least attempting to.

Chapter Three focuses on depictions of the female body and sexuality in Anne Sexton's poetry. The relevant details of the works of feminist literary critics, such as Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, are presented briefly, emphasizing the importance of women writers reclaiming their bodies and voices in literature. The analysis of Sexton's poems loosely follows Ostriker's (1986) observations that women poets often expressed three attitudes toward their bodies in their poetry: a rejection of the body as fragmented, vulnerable, and weak; ambivalence toward the beauty as an imposed societal norm; and the celebration of the female body, often through imagery connected to nature. As all three modes can be identified in Sexton's poetry, the chapter explores how her poems challenge patriarchal objectification and silencing of women's bodies, offering not only the sights of oppression but also the redefining vision of female identity and experience.

Finally, chapter Four is dedicated to different depictions of womanhood in Sexton's poetry, especially her explorations of the imprisoning effects of the socially imposed role of a housewife on the woman's psyche. The chapter explores Sexton's quest for identity through poetry, which is marked by her desire to connect with others through her particular experiences, a characteristic feature of women's writing, according to theorists like Judith Kegan Gardiner and Alicia Ostriker. Analyzing a scope of poems from her entire oeuvre, the goal is to demonstrate that Sexton's poetry had, from the beginning, been women-oriented, in a sense

that it presented a critique of the confining and dehumanizing effects of domesticity, which leads to sickness of spirit and body. Sexton uses the imagery of the house and domestic settings as a symbol of a cage without a possibility of escape. Any attempt to flee or reclaim her power makes a woman "deformed" and thus ostracized and feared in the eyes of society – she becomes mad or a witch. The chapter explores how Sexton presents these stages of womanhood and how they connect to and impact the world outside.

To conclude, this thesis deals with Anne Sexton as a woman poet who was not "a victim of an era in which it has become easy to dramatize self-indulgence" (Spacks, 1978, p. 188) but "a victim of the American Dream" (Kevles, 1998, p. 309), which, for American women of the mid-twentieth-century was actually a nightmare. In my analyses, I attempt to demonstrate how Sexton was not merely emotionally overindulgent but rather outspoken about the nightmare she lived as a woman, which was, indeed, a reflection of "the crisis in woman's identity" (Friedan, 1964, p. 62) of the time. Sexton's quest for self-definition in poetry was also a quest for a redefinition of womanhood in general, which I studied through the lens of her poetry, her interviews, and the studies about women's writing and the feminist movement, only occasionally referring to her personal life. Unrestrained, unapologetic, and, most importantly, never dull, Anne Sexton transformed more than her occupation as a housewife when she boldly stepped onto the American literary stage in 1960. She transformed the whole face of American women's poetry of the time and set the scene for the women poets to come. Continuing to be one of the most outspoken voices in modern American poetry, it seems that, after all, there remains a strong fascination with and admiration for her "weird abundance" (Sexton, 1999, p. 89).

1. In the Midst of Things: Anne Sexton's Place in the Poetic Tradition

"It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."

– Oscar Wilde

"... in the future literature would consist of what people actually wrote rather than what they tried to deceive other people into thinking they wrote."

– Allen Ginsberg

"Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement."

– Hélène Cixous

"So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to be said to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite in comparison."

– Virginia Woolf

"Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital," states Oscar Wilde in the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the same text in which he famously proclaims that "[a]ll art is useless" (Wilde, 2003, p. 2). While it might be utterly futile to discuss the utility of art, it is generally agreed that the success of an artist, and by extension the success of their art, relies on their capacity to cross the temporal and spatial boundaries and to evoke a wide range of both critical and non-critical responses. Anne Sexton's art, it might be said, meets both criteria. Her poetry traveled the world both in reading and translation, and she has received and continues to receive critical literary attention. Numerous attempts at reading her poetry from different angles have occurred over the years, praising and condemning it. It is this ability of her poetry to remain significantly open to fresh perspectives and flexible to new interpretations that makes her poetic journey such an enticing field of

inquiry. Yet, to start examining the work of a particular artist, one must immerse oneself in wider areas of inquiry and acknowledge the broader contexts surrounding or even bypassing the artist in question. This is because, as T. S. Eliot noted concerning poetic creation, reaching new conclusions inevitably involves keeping in touch with the past to appreciate and challenge the existing definitions, readings, and interpretations. Thus, the first chapter wishes to provide a brief outline of poetic tradition and critical thought, as well as historical and political tides that guided literary developments, situating Anne Sexton in the broader scholarly and historical context.

1.1 Tracing the Poetic Threads: Shifts and Turns in Literary Tradition

With the fairly recent surge of technological developments, it may seem that the humanistic sciences have gone out of favor or are, at least, a field of research that does not grant a gratifying spot on the scale of scholarly importance. Literature especially may appear as a field of pointless inquiry on the surface, yet it has consistently occupied a pivotal role in human culture for centuries. Valued and condemned for its ability to encapsulate and reveal the complexities of human experiences, emotions, ideals, and thoughts through evocative language and form, poetry and the criticism of poetry have been a focal theme in philosophical and literary discourse from ancient times to the present day. To even attempt to make the briefest of summaries of this vast discourse would pose a significant challenge, but a short overview of most formative views and ideas might better illuminate the issues this thesis attempts to explore.

To start from the very beginning, in Ancient Greece, Plato famously proposed that poetry and poets be banished from the ideal society, which stemmed from his belief that poetry, being twice removed from reality and truth, would lead people astray from reason onto the path of emotion. Though radical, his proposal may be interpreted as a sign of poetry's potential as a powerful and dangerous instrument in human possession. Perhaps even more importantly, it reveals two aspects of poetry that shall remain focal in future discussions: poetry's truth-telling and truth-representing potential and its power to evoke emotional rather than rational responses, perhaps both from the poet and the reader. Plato's student, Aristotle, acknowledged this potential and, contrary to his teacher, argued that poetry represents universal truths and thus must be regarded as a higher form of art that engages with catharsis and emotional purging. As Michael L. Storey (2003) summarizes in his essay "Criticism from Plato to Eliot," "[p]oetry

for Aristotle is both *poiesis* and *mimesis*, making and imitating" (Storey, 2003, p. 4327). Regarding the poet as a maker, as someone who not only imitates what is but also makes what could be, Aristotle defends the poets as conveyors of deeper truths. Furthermore, his ideas about catharsis, which involves the emotional reactions of the audience to the tragedy at play, leaving them morally refined, justifies poetry's potential to provoke emotional responses as a way to make "the audience better human beings" (Storey, 2003, p. 4327). His observations in *Poetics* not only provided a rejection of Plato's condemnation of poetry but also contributed to laying the foundation for literary criticism, showing "the possibility of establishing a general theory by which poetry can be analyzed and evaluated on poetic grounds, rather than on the philosophical, moral, or social grounds used by Plato" (Storey, 2003, p. 4327).

Over the centuries, this view has evolved, with poets and critics alike exploring the aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, and moral dimensions of poetry. The form and the content often became the center of discussions, causing a dispute among many thinkers on which of the two carried the prevailing significance. Similarly, form-mongering and regularization of all features of poetry have come to play an important role in many critical schools. While during the Renaissance poetry was valued for its "religious and moral teachings" (Storey, 2003, p. 4329), the preoccupation with poetry's aesthetic qualities also started to grow as the classic works of Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and others were rediscovered, which led to strong insistence on a strict poetic form, especially common in the literary thought of Neoclassic critics in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although some of them, such as John Dryden and Samuel Johnson, went against the current and showed flexibility in critical views of poetry, the prevailing stream of neoclassic critics viewed poetry in strictly formalistic terms. Characterized by a respect for tradition, a focus on structure and order, and a belief in the didactic and moral capacity of poetry, neoclassical literary criticism emphasized decorum and propriety as central tenets of poetic creation, advising against excessive emotionalism.

A noteworthy departure from the neoclassical ideals and previous literary tradition was marked by Romanticism. Drifting away from the neoclassical concern "with the mimetic relationship of poetry to the nature or reality that it imitates and with the pragmatic relationship of poetry to its audience," the Romantic critics prioritized "the expressive relationship of the poet to poetry" (Storey, 2003, p. 4334). The emphasis on emotion, imagination, and subjective experience, with the poet in the center of attention, contrasted sharply with the neoclassical emphasis on reason, order, and the imitation of classical models. This shift in poetic and critical perspective could signify a turning point in the discussion of poetry, as it is generally accepted as a precursor to the confessional poetry of the 1950s. Allen Ginsberg's description of poetry

as “a rhythmic articulation of feeling” (Clark, 1967, p. 289) cannot but remind one of William Wordsworth’s proclamation of poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (quoted in Brett & Jones, 1991, p. 237) in the Preface of *Lyrical Ballads*. Most significantly, celebrating individualism and the poet’s unique vision and personal perspective as crucial for the poetic creation, Romantic poets rejected the rigid forms and conventions of classic poetry and endorsed experimentation with new forms and styles. Such a break from neoclassical decorum allowed for greater innovation and expression of the poet’s inner world and established a new paradigm for literary expression.

This revolutionary understanding of poetry and elevation of poets to visionaries or prophets notwithstanding, the Romantic ideas about and emphasis on emotion and individualism are not to be confused with these concepts in confessional poetry of the twentieth century. Contrary to how it may appear, Romantics did not exactly advocate for the rampant expression of unrestrained emotions. Wordsworth’s definition of poetry presupposes that the emotional outburst that is to create the poem should originate “from emotion recollected in tranquillity” (quoted in Brett & Jones, 1991, p. 251), thus clarifying the separation of raw and refined feeling, the latter of which is the prerequisite for the poet to begin writing. On the question of individualism, in his letters, John Keats writes that the “poetical Character itself […] has no self—It is everything and nothing—It has no character” and that a poet, chameleon-like, “is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body” (Keats, 1891, p. 184). Therefore, while the Romantic poets are often associated with the fascination for intense emotion and individualism, their approach was far more nuanced than a mere indulgence in unrestrained emotional expression or self-centeredness. Wordsworth’s insistence on the necessity of “emotion recollected in tranquillity” underscores the importance of reflection and refinement in poetry writing. Similarly, Keats’s impression of a poet as being devoid of a fixed identity, being almost impersonal, appears to challenge the notion of the Romantic poet as an isolated, self-absorbed figure. These ideas reveal that Romanticism called for a disciplined engagement with emotion and a flexible conception of a poet as an individual.

Despite drastic changes that mark each historical era, it may be observed that however diversified, the landscape of poetic criticism tends to swing like a pendulum, always keeping a segment of the previous thought, upon which it upgrades and builds its own while rejecting another. While most literary criticism covered so far originated in Britain, American schools certainly did not remain silent in this burgeoning field. In the twentieth century, the American literary scene abounded with diversity, encompassing modern formalist approaches and

postmodern critiques that questioned traditional narratives and embraced fragmentation and ambiguity. This is not surprising as the twentieth century can be viewed as a personification of change, turmoil, and radical progress in many scientific, technological, and medical fields, as well as schools of thought. Furthermore, the United States started to emerge as a strong leading force in this progress, making enormous contributions to major developments in society.

As noted by J. T. Newcomb (2015) in his essay "The Emergence of 'The New Poetry'," due to these changing societal conditions, especially due to growing technological and communicational advancements, at the beginning of the twentieth century "poetry in the United States underwent a serious crisis" (Newcomb, 2015, p. 11) that led to a period of self-doubt, skepticism, and futility among aspiring poets. Yet this crisis did not signify a stagnation of American poetry and critical thought. On the contrary, the uncertainty and self-doubt experienced by young writers during this time ultimately played a crucial role in reshaping American poetry "by asserting key modernist qualities such as irony, skepticism, and rebelliousness as foundational to poetry in the twentieth century rather than as merely impious and inhibiting, as genteel culture had taken them to be" (Newcomb, 2015, p. 13). Modernist thought brought another major shift in literary criticism, and while there were many differing and important voices from the very beginning of modernism, one proved particularly important for the direction of poetic development in the decades to come.

T. S. Eliot rose as an influential poet and literary critic in the early twentieth century. One of his most renowned essays, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," from 1919 redefined poetic tradition and the poet's role, shaping the next generations of poets and critics in modern literary criticism. In this essay, Eliot reexamines the concept of "tradition" by highlighting the vital role of history in both writing and interpreting poetry, and he asserts that poetry should be fundamentally "impersonal," i.e., that it should be completely detached from the personality of the poet.

Eliot's conception of tradition revolves around what he calls the "historical sense" which "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (Eliot, 1982, p. 37). According to Eliot, past literary works constitute an order that is continuously reordered by the emergence of "the really new" (Eliot, 1982, p. 37) works that can only be valued by their ability to withstand the test of partaking in the formation of tradition. This perspective, wherein "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past," (Eliot, 1982, p. 37) demands that a poet possess a comprehensive knowledge of literary history and that they continue expanding this knowledge throughout their life. Hence, he concludes, "[t]he progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual

extinction of personality" (Eliot, 1982, p. 39), as this awareness of the past eliminates the poet's personality from the poetry, making the poet a mere conduit for expression.

Through a now well-known metaphor of a catalyst, by which he emphasizes art's similarity to science in its depersonalized state, Eliot compares a mature poet's mind to platinum which, when combined with sulfur dioxide and oxygen expediates the reaction of these substances which then, and only then, create sulfurous acid. Just like platinum which, acting like a catalyst, helps a reaction take place without being altered by it, a poet's mind should absorb different experiences, ideas, and emotions to produce something novel without being affected by them and without letting their own personality or emotions dominate the final poem. Hence, according to Eliot, genuine art is detached from the artist's personal life and is instead the result of a heightened ability to synthesize and combine elements – a skill that comes from the poet's rigorous study and vast knowledge. Correspondingly, a poet is not to seek "new emotions" (Eliot, 1982, p. 42); a poet is to elevate everyday emotions into feelings beyond those emotions through a poetic transformation that will allow the poet to suck the nectar from emotions known and unknown to him/her. With this concluding thought, Eliot flings an arrow into the center of the Romantic idea that poetry is "emotion recollected in tranquillity," popularized by Wordsworth. He argues that this phrase is inaccurate because, rather than simply remembering feelings in a calm state, poetry involves a deep concentration of numerous experiences, many of which might not even seem significant to an ordinary person. This concentration happens unconsciously, without deliberate effort, and while poetry writing also mandates awareness and intentionality, the mistakes a bad poet makes are to be "unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious," which only makes the poet "personal" (Eliot, 1982, p. 42). Finally, Eliot declares, "[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot, 1982, p. 42), making a distinct movement away from what he saw as the excesses of Romanticism.

Nevertheless, although Eliot's assertion that poetry should be a detachment from personality sprang from his indictment of Romantic poetry's superfluity, many scholars have remarked continuity between Eliot's ideas and those of the Romantics. His "impersonal poet," it may be noted, bears quite a resemblance to Keats's "chameleon poet" (Keats, 1891, p. 184). However, Eliot's argument that critical attention should shift from the poet to poetry itself profoundly influenced poetic creation and literary criticism for decades to come, solidifying *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, despite criticism, as one of the foundational texts in modern literary criticism.

1.2 From Private to Public: Poetry in the Act of Confession

By the middle decades of the twentieth century, the so-called New Criticism set prevailing standards in American literary criticism. The formalist principles of American New Criticism were largely informed by T. S. Eliot's influential essays and critical theories. Eliot's insistence on turning the attention to the text itself and his insistence on the impersonality of poetry were cornerstones of New Criticism, whose focus was primarily on the formal elements of the text, such as structure, imagery, and language. Also following Eliot's insistence on literary tradition, New Critics often analyzed texts in the context of their relation to earlier works, highlighting the continuity and evolution of literary forms. Nevertheless, the middle of the century saw the eruption of new rebellious and bold literary movements as part of a broader reaction against an amalgamation of historical, political, and social changes. Following two world wars, the Great Depression, and the onset of the Cold War, many felt dissatisfied with the increasing pressures of the restrictive cultural norms of the time, and in literature, this dissatisfaction gave birth to two distinct, yet somewhat connected, literary movements – the Beat Generation and confessional poetry. While these movements differed greatly in thematic and stylistic approaches, both can be regarded as a significant rejection of and departure from the impersonal and formalist traditions of earlier poetry. Thus, there was some overlap and mutual influence between them. For example, one of the central Beatnik poets, Allen Ginsberg, was influenced by and influenced confessional poets in his turn. Most significantly, both movements contributed to a broadening of subject matter and poetic styles in the literary environment, encouraging a more candid and direct approach to writing and opening the literary scene to dynamic and versatile forms of expression and a multitude of voices and styles. However, at the time of their emergence and even later, the shockingly straightforward and revealing character of this new poetry disrupted the equilibrium of New Criticism and provoked harsh criticism.

W. D. Snodgrass is now widely regarded as the original confessional poet as his debut poetry collection *Heart's Needle* from 1959 seems to have inaugurated the autobiographically packed and emotionally raw mode of poetry that soon became known as "confessional." Yet the term "confessional poetry" was first assigned to Robert Lowell, an already established poet within the formalist tradition. When his *Life Studies* were published in 1959, drastically different from Lowell's previous poetry and probably due to Snodgrass's influence, Macha Louis Rosenthal was the first to pronounce the poems as "the most naked kind of confession"

(Rosenthal, 1991, p. 109) in his review. The term, he later commented in his book *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II*, "came naturally to [his] mind" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 25) while reviewing Lowell's volume because of the "way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 26). In the 1959 review, he characterized Lowell's new collection of poems as "rather shameful" (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 109) revelations of the poet's private familial, marital, and psychological life without which "he cannot breathe […] however rank they may be" (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 110). Labeling the poems as "unpleasantly egocentric" (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 110), Rosenthal concludes the review by leaving it to time to decide their capacity to be classified as "great art" even though he concedes that they are "inescapably encompassing art" (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 113).

True to his words, with some time in between, though pointing to *Life Studies*' "nearly exhibitionistic aspect" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 34) and the limitations of the work's "stripped-down quality" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 61), Rosenthal conceded to Lowell's prowess as a skilled poet in his consequent evaluation of post-World War II poetry. He dedicated almost a third of the book to confessional poetry and its representative poets, Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, now generally agreed on as the four main confessional poets, and Theodore Roethke and John Berryman. While he kept some reservations about confessional poets, he also advised that they should, after all, be read "as artists" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 131). To describe the confessional mode and some of its drawbacks, he writes:

> Confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering. The suffering is generally "unbearable" because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia. Indeed, the psychological condition of most of the confessional poets has long been the subject of common literary discussion – one cannot say gossip exactly, for their problems and confinements in hospitals are quite often the specific subjects of their poems. It is not enough, however, to relegate the matter to the province of the mentally disturbed. A heightened sensitivity to the human predicament in general […] has led to a sharper sense, as a by-product perhaps, of the pain of existence under even 'normal' conditions. Sentimentality, self-dramatization, and the assumption that universal feelings are the private property of the poet himself as a uniquely seismographic instrument are among the manifest dangers of this situation. (Rosenthal, 1967, pp. 130, 131)

Rosenthal's study represents one of the first attempts at defining this rather new mode of poetic expression, thus inevitably setting the tone for many future critical and theoretical writings about confessional poetry and poets. Even though his intention was not to reduce it to

"the province of the mentally disturbed," his definition of confessional poetry as "a poetry of suffering" inextricable from the "psychological condition" left a mark in many subsequent reviews and studies. For instance, Deborah Nelson (2013) relates confessional poetry to "a mentally unstable poet in an act of self-exposure" (Nelson, 2013, p. 31), and Michael Thurston writes that "[c]onfessional poets are crazy" (Thurston, 2015, p. 143). Anguish, perversion, guilt, shame, narcissism, exhibitionism, taboo, nakedness, rawness – these are just some of the keywords that appear in various readings. This is not to say that these writings were aimed at condemning confessional poetry nor that these keywords are entirely out of context. On the contrary, both Nelson (2013) and Thurston (2015) provide a significant departure from these definitions, which I shall return to shortly. Rather, what becomes noticeable in many of the writings about confessional poetry is the overwhelming need to relate it, or even equate it, to the poets' madness, which often leads to overly autobiographical definitions of the whole genre.

The two papers mentioned above, however, do much more than that. Besides providing a concise summary of the genre's development and critical appraisal, they also focus on certain aspects that frame it. Nelson (2013) specifically focuses on the concept of privacy within the confessional genre, placing it within the historical context of the Cold War era. She highlights how the poets' exploration of private experiences resonated with the broader societal concerns about surveillance, autonomy, and the changing dynamics of privacy in American culture during that time. Additionally, she discusses the gendered dimensions of privacy, especially concerning the body, noting how "confessional poets had explored the body and used it to comment on and define the nature of privacy for men and women" (Nelson, 2013, p. 40). Thurston, in turn, explores how Freudian psychoanalysis played an important role in shaping the poetic texts of confessional poets, rather than just mirroring their psychoses and experiences of institutionalization. Most importantly, both works touch upon two crucial issues in analyses of confessional poetry: its broader cultural impact and the resistance to the label "confessional."

One of the major concerns Rosenthal expressed about confessional poetry, in this case concerning Lowell's *Life Studies*, can be deduced from his comment that,

> [t]hough assimilating to himself, through the identification of private with public suffering, the problems of the age, he [Lowell] pays little attention to the lives of ordinary men and women who may either experience the same things with as much meaning but in different form or, possibly, offer alternative possibilities if regarded with sufficient empathy. (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 54)

He seems doubtful that the excessively introspective, self-centered, and private accounts abundant in the confessional mode could relate to the common experience. Coupled with many critics' complaints about the disintegration of the formal elements of the confessional poem, raising the issue of "the esthetic possibilities of raw confession in poetry" (Spacks, 1978, p. 186), the status of confessional poetry as poetry at all was at stake, as it seemed to fail to fulfill the Horatian demands of poetry to not only instruct by applying to life but also to delight through its formal beauty. Addressing these "charges" against confessional poetry, both Nelson (2013) and Thurston (2015) drew attention to the fact that confessional poetry not only reflected the poets' private struggles but also engaged with broader cultural issues of the postwar era, thus influencing discussions around privacy, gender dynamics, the impact of societal norms on individual subjectivity, and the poet's role in addressing personal and societal issues.

Furthermore, both these papers remarked on the confessional poets' general dissatisfaction with the label "confessional." As Nelson (2013) observes, "no confessional poet imagined him or herself to be part of a movement. The poets never congregated *as* the confessional poets; they almost universally disliked the term as it applied to their own work" (Nelson, 2013, p. 32, italics in the original). Similarly, Thurston confirms that confessional poets, although perhaps crazy themselves, "were not crazy about the label 'confessional'" (Thurston, 2015, 144), which led to discussions on alternative descriptors like "Freudian lyric" or "psychoanalytic poetics" (Thurston, 2015, 145), none of which took root. When asked about the term, Snodgrass said he "hated it because it suggested either that you were writing something religious and were confessing something of that sort, or that you were writing bedroom memoirs" (Holladay, 2009). His exasperation with the tag "confessional," besides its rejection, also reveals two main issues both poets and critics connected with the term: first, its religious connotation of guilt, which almost equates poetry with seeking absolution from sin, and second, its dismissal of the genre as trivial, unrefined, and possibly crass. But despite the protests, the label "confessional" remained firmly glued to its targets, and since it seemed impossible to remove, perhaps it needed to be somehow redefined.

Although these and other recent writings tend to increasingly lean toward the defense of confessional poetry, it must be noted that many earlier reviews and studies did the same. The danger of the overly limiting implications of Rosenthal's naming the genre "confessional" was noticed quite early and the attempts at redefining it ensued not long after. Probably one of the earliest and most ardent reconsiderations of the confessional genre can be found in Robert S. Phillips's *The Confessional Poets* from 1973. From our vantage point more than fifty years

later, this study still stands out as one of the defining works about confessional poetry without holding a prejudice against it. Moreover, right from the start, it dismantles several objections against confessional poetry already mentioned.

Firstly, Phillips (1973) points to the fact that what was labeled as confessional poetry in the late 1950s and viewed as a disturbance of decorum in literary tradition was not an innovation after all. Rather, it could be seen as an emulation of the long tradition of confessional art that can be traced back to the cavemen and their wall paintings of animal hunt which they believed would ensure the beasts to truly be slayed. In a sense, this view paints confessional poetry not as the horrible literary abomination of a beast to be killed, but as "a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed" (Phillips, 1973, p. 2).

Secondly, Phillips (1973) stated the need for readers to discard the perspective that there are "inherently poetic or unpoetic materials" (Phillips, 1973, p. xii), justifying the often debated new topics of confessional poetry in the context of the changed world and experiences brought by these changes. He says:

> Because the world has changed, the men and women writing today write a changed poetry. Multiple marriages and miscarriages, war atrocities and suicides can now be seen as just as valid subjects for the poet as, say, an imperfect rose or a perfect lady. (Phillips, 1973, p. xiii)

Abandoning the need to define what the appropriate subjects of poetry are allowed Phillips (1973) to acknowledge them in a larger context of the world and to see the poets not as exhibitionists, not as raving lunatics focused solely on their madness, suffering, and horrid existence, but as providers of "a heightened perception of the way we really live here and now" (Phillips, 1973, p. xiii). Although he still insisted on confessional poetry's "need to confess," thus retaining this widely held view, he did describe the writing as "an ego-centered, though not an egocentric, act" (Phillips, 1973, p. 8), which set a completely different tone for the discussion.

Finally, his insights led to important observations about the potential for the universality of confessional poetry. "Confession can wear thin. The human voice can become a whine" (Phillips, 1973, p. 16), Phillips admits. Yet for all its thinness and whining at its worst, "[i]n the best confessional writing, transcendence of the personal arises from the human particulars recounted by the poet, rather than from design" (Phillips, 1973, p. 16). It is the content, finally, that reveals the universal in these poems, as much as it discloses the personal struggle of the poet. It is because of these reflections and because of his detailed characterization of

confessional poetry's subject matter and its significance, main features, language, form, and context, along with his comprehensive commentary on particular confessional poets' poetics that his study (re)defined confessional poetry and confessional poets, influencing many future examinations of it.

A final valuable contribution to the assessment of confessional poetry that seems important to mention came from Diane Wood Middlebrook's essay "What Was Confessional Poetry?" from 1998. Besides stating that the term "confessional," rather than being a definitive descriptor of certain poets, was "more properly applied to certain poems published in a handful of books that appeared between 1959–1966" (Middlebrook, 1998, p. 635), the significance of her essay can also be ascribed to her observation of a more universal and more critical application of the term. She writes:

> *Confession* has a double meaning, however. On the one hand, confession is an act of expiation for sins, one that restores the shriven person to membership in a community of the like-minded. Contemporary reviewers explained confessional poems as acts of self-accusation performed in public by poets as a way of accounting for their nonconformism to American ideals. […] But an older usage links confession to a quite different meaning: the public avowal of a point of view, as in the confession of faith. The faith affirmed in confessional poetry is Freudian, secular, and critical. (Middlebrook, 1998, p. 648, italics in the original)

By drawing attention to this other meaning of the word "confession," something that was missing from other studies, Middlebrook (1998) challenged the narrow interpretations of the genre, freeing it from the strictures of a confessional box it had been enclosed in. Her meticulous exploration of a deep connection between this mode of writing and the specific cultural atmosphere of the Cold War era and the explosion of mass media shows how confessional poets' look inward was indeed also a look outward, a sort of participation "in the concerns with social hygiene that inflected popular culture" (Middlebrook, 1998, p. 647). Thus, she provides a new paradigm for reading and interpreting confessional poetry, one that looks at a confession more as an active declaration of the state of things, and less as a passive admission of sins.

I have ventured so far into the topic of confessional poetry, stating some of its controversies and issues as presented by the major influences in my research, without providing a clear definition of this genre. Most defined it descriptively, as the poetry of suffering, self-exposure, mad poets, and even madder taboo topics, as startling, even appalling and unpoetic, and, at best, therapeutic, candid, and revolutionary. Strangely, viewed from different points of

view, it could be said that all of it is true and that none of it is true, yet we would still lack the definition to capture all these contradictions. Confessional poetry was neither impersonal, as Eliot insisted, nor did it stem from calm recollection of feelings, as Wordsworth would have it. It seems to have originated from the midst of emotional turbulence, like "huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience […] dished up for midnight listeners" (National Book Foundation, n.d.), as Robert Lowell described it in his 1960 National Book Award acceptance speech. As such, it seemed to escape definitions, at least any complimentary ones.

Perhaps the best definition could be extracted from Allen Ginsberg's interview for *The Paris Review* in which he muses about the "hypocrisy of literature," which he ascribes to the demand of "formal literature […] to be different from … in subject, in diction, and even in organization, from our quotidian inspired lives" (Clark, 1967, p. 288). For the problem of literature to be solved, Ginsberg suggests writers should talk to their Muse in the same way they would to themselves or to their friends. In other words, "[i]t's the ability to commit to writing, to *write*, the same way that you … are! […] there should be no distinction between what we write down, and what we really know, to begin with" (Clark, 1967, pp. 288, 289, italics in the original). These words could perhaps be the most fitting definition of confessional poetry, whose representative poets were "determined not to lie in verse" (Phillips, 1973, p. 1), and to write the way they were and about those matters they knew most intimately.

Regardless of its definitions, confessional poetry was and still is an important literary movement, although by the mid-1970s, its strength was all but depleted, and it started to morph into other movements and styles. Despite lasting for merely longer than a decade, all of the works cited above show that confessional poetry inscribed itself firmly into the literary tradition by challenging the established literary norms and paving the way for generations of new poets and movements, inspiring fierce debates in literary circles about its value and interpretation that are still relevant today. I believe it would be safe to say that, despite disrupting the depersonalized poetry of Eliot's ideal, confessional poetry has stood the "test of its value" (Eliot, 1982, p. 38) by fitting in so relentlessly even when pronounced unfit for "high art," whatever that may be.

1.3 Writing Like a Woman: A Journey Through Feminist Literary Criticism

Having traced the contours of a literary history largely shaped by male voices, shifting the focus to the other side, to the voices marginalized, overlooked, or silenced within this tradition becomes essential. In any case, discussing the work of Anne Sexton would be impossible without at least a brief consideration not only of the genre assigned to her writing but also of her place in the tradition of women's writing and feminist literary criticism, often relegated to the periphery.

The rise of feminist literary criticism began in the 1970s but its roots can be traced back to works such as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which argued for women's intellectual freedom and the need for women writers to have their own space, both literally and figuratively, to create literature. As one of the seminal feminist texts that explores the relationship between women and writing, *A Room of One's Own* focuses on the material and social conditions necessary for women to produce literature. Its central thesis, that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 1935, p. 6), starts a discussion on several factors that have historically obstructed women's ability to write with the same freedom as men if they were able to write at all. The essay, composed of six parts that originated from lectures Woolf gave at women's colleges at Cambridge University, is a blend of personal remarks, fictional elements, and critical analysis addressing the challenges women face in writing: lack of independence, privacy, and financial stability; exclusion from education and lack of opportunities; societal norms, power dynamics, and patriarchal dominance; the psychological and emotional toll of societal expectations and gender biases on women's creative potential; and the impact of discouragement and negative criticism are only a few she mentions.

Inadvertently, *A Room of One's Own* could be described as one of the first intersectional analyses of women's place within modern society's power structures. The question of women and fiction expands onto a much more pressing question of women and their everyday existence. All of the factors she recognizes as preventing women's voices from participating in the creative process are interrelated and entangled, and they do not only oppress the woman writer but women in general. But to go back to the woman writer specifically, the simple statement that women need money and their own space to write becomes a complex examination of why it is so and the reasons are plentiful. A woman writer, we might imagine, is quite similar to "a cat without a tail" Woolf describes – "a queer animal, quaint rather than beautiful" (Woolf, 1935, p. 20). Like this poor tailless cat, a woman writer lacks something –

she lacks the means, time, and space to be a writer; she lacks freedom of choice to be a writer because societal norms see her in different roles, domestic roles of a wife and a mother; even when she is a writer, she lacks freedom of expression as a woman because "there was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually" (Woolf, 1935, p. 82). Woolf's curiosity about whether the cat was born without a tail or had lost it somehow later in life seems to anticipate, metaphorically, the long discussion of the woman's condition of multiple deprivations and the deconstruction of the origins of that condition.

Patriarchy is at the root of this condition. In a Foucauldian sense, the relationship between knowledge and power is clearly invoked in her observations about the scientific studies written by men about women's "mental, moral, and physical inferiority" (Woolf, 1935, p. 48), studies she renders "worthless scientifically" because "[t]hey had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth" (Woolf, 1935, p. 49). Woolf (1935) writes:

> Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. […] Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. […] The looking-glass vision is of supreme importance because it changes the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system. Take it away and men die, like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine. (Woolf, 1935, pp. 53, 54)

Keeping women inferior for the sake of preserving their own superiority, as Woolf (1935) explains, gives men a sense of power. This power transfers to writing, too, not only at the most basic level of education and material means, such as money and space, but also at the immaterial level of the world's attitude toward one's writing. And the world was hostile toward women who wrote and the products of their writing.

Similarly to Eliot, Woolf (1935) emphasized the importance of literary tradition, "[f]or masterpieces are not single and solitary births" (Woolf, 1935, p. 98). Yet for women writers, the tradition is predominantly male literary tradition. There were female writers, of course, but they could scarcely have provided a separate, specifically female tradition. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth (1991) said that his goal was "to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them […] in a selection of *language really used by men*" (quoted in Brett & Jones, 1991, p. 236, my emphasis). He also declared that a poet is "a

man speaking to *men*" (Brett & Jones, 1991, p. 245, my emphasis). In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot (1982) wrote that the poet's mind "may partly or exclusively operate upon the *experience* of the *man* himself" (Eliot, 1982, p. 40, my emphasis). These are only a few examples but they show the main issues. Literature was written mostly by men for other men in a language controlled by men and suitable to express experiences deemed appropriate by men. Thus, it was not only an issue of lack of tradition, but also an issue of language and content that challenged women's entrance into literature.

Woolf (1935) was also aware of this as she wrote:

> But whatever effect discouragement and criticism had upon [women's] writing […] that was unimportant compared with the other difficulty which faced them […] when they came to set their thoughts on paper—that is that they had *no tradition* behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure. […] The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully. The ape is too distant to be sedulous. Perhaps the first thing she would find, setting pen to paper, was that there was *no common sentence* ready for her use. (Woolf, 1935, p. 58, 114, my emphasis)

The "common sentence" Woolf (1935) mentioned and later elaborated on can only be connected to the use of language, and language belonged to men in an authoritative way prohibited to women. This inevitably took a toll on women writers, who were expected to follow the masculine writing standards but could never seem to reach them. The insecurities, restrictions, criticism, discouragement, anger, and resentment – all of it made the woman's writing flawed because "she was thinking of something other than the thing itself" while writing and "altered her values in deference to the opinions of others" (Woolf, 1935, pp. 111, 112). Only Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, according to Woolf (1935), succeeded in "hold[ing] fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking" and "wrote as women write, not as men write" (Woolf, 1935, p. 112). This, then, leads to one of the most important arguments of her essay, which is that women must utilize their female force of creativity which "differs greatly from the creative power of men" because "[i]t would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men" (Woolf, 1935, p. 132). Furthermore, Woolf (1935) stresses that women must disregard the prevalent masculine values of what constitutes appropriate or significant subject matters because women writers necessarily must occupy their

writing with their own experiences, with "the accumulation of unrecorded life" (Woolf, 1935, p. 135).

However, Woolf (1935) thought that the best writing, male or female, was that which surpassed the question of sex and achieved androgyny, as she described it. She wrote that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. […] It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman" (Woolf, 1935, pp. 156, 157). Not far from Eliot's notions about the impersonality of writing, this insistence on writing from a distance from one's own sex was later if not directly criticized then transformed and modified to allow for women writing as women who cannot forget that they are indeed women. For instance, commenting on this, Simone de Beauvoir decided that Woolf herself wrote in a perceivably female manner and that women are meant to do so because "from within … only a woman can write what it is to feel as a woman, to be a woman" (Jardine, 1993, p. 46). Likewise, Ostriker (1983), acknowledging the imbalance of power between men and women, also argued the stronger and freer women writers become, "the more they will, for the time being, write like women; and the more they write like women, the stronger they will become" (Ostriker, 1983, p. 147).

Nonetheless, Woolf's essay is a powerful invocation to women to take the pen in their hands and "write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast" (Woolf, 1935, p. 164). It resounds with a deliberately restrained, yet confident, and hopeful, if slightly irritated, and at times sarcastic, voice that remained especially resonant and relevant throughout the twentieth century's women's writing and the establishment of feminist literary criticism, as well as for the feminist movement. Countless works developed following, directly or indirectly, the premises of *A Room of One's Own*. Others had no deliberate connection to it, yet expressed nearly identical ideas and concerns.

The publication of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963 is often credited with officially marking the beginning of the women's liberation movement and was thus of monumental importance. Through extensive research, interviews, and analysis, Friedan examines the pervasive dissatisfaction experienced by many middle-class American women in the 1950s and early 1960s, referring to this widespread unhappiness as "the problem that has no name" (Friedan, 1964, p. 11). This nameless problem of the suburban American housewife of the 1950s remains similar to the problem of Woolf's woman who aspires to be a writer – women were told that

> their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater

destiny than to glory in their own femininity. [...] They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. (Friedan, 1964, p. 11)

Similarly, Woolf noticed "the narrowness of life that was imposed upon" a woman (Woolf, 1935, p. 102); exposed the absurdity of statements such as John Langdon Davies's "that when children cease to be altogether desirable, women cease to be altogether necessary" (Woolf, 1935, p. 168); and asserted that the woman poet "who never wrote a word [...] lives [...] in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed" (Woolf, 1935, p. 171). These observations show the same tendency to restrict women to domestic roles, to deprive them of agency to fulfill their potential in other fields even though "women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity" (Woolf, 1935, p. 125).

Following the liberating era of the 1940s, during which career-focused American women sought to live "a life of their own" (Friedan, 1964, p. 32) – an image that was also widely portrayed in women's magazines at the time – a sudden setback took place in the 1950s, with American women becoming increasingly marriage-oriented. The image of the American woman had changed completely once again, and her "world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home" (Friedan, 1964, p. 38). The portrayal of the mid-twentieth-century American woman showed complacency with the "Occupation: housewife" (Friedan, 1964, p. 37) and disdain for the "career woman." Friedan exposes and critiques this society- and media-operated glorification of domesticity and discouragement of women from pursuing education, careers, and personal ambitions. She argued that this idealized image of femininity, "the feminine mystique [...] grafted onto old prejudices and comfortable conventions which so easily give the past a stranglehold on the future" (Friedan, 1964, p. 37), trapped women in unfulfilling lives, stifling their potential and leading to a sense of emptiness and frustration. Behind this frustration is an unvoiced yet pressing question, a demand even: "Is this all there is to life for a woman today?" (Friedan, 1964, p. 133)

Women certainly wanted more, and Friedan's book ignited the spark of the women's movement and triggered writing about this "unspoken" and "buried" (Friedan, 1964, p. 11) problem. Even though it was focused predominantly on white, middle-class suburban women, *The Feminine Mystique* set off an avalanche of organizations, groups, and feminist texts aimed

at promoting equal rights for women. Friedan herself was the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) founded in 1966, whose statement of purpose from 1967 proposes that "women, first and foremost, are human beings, who, like all other people in our society, must have the chance to develop their fullest potential" (Keetley & Pettegrew, 2005, p. 16), a statement so close to the main argument of Woolf's essay that one might wonder if we have not traveled back through time. As a "Statement of Radical Women" by a group of Chicago women lists, complete equality of educational and job opportunities, bodily autonomy, reexamination of the family dynamics, and fight against male domination were some of the demands women had (Keetley & Pettegrew, 2005, pp. 17, 18). Furthermore, mass media, playing a similar role to stereotypical representations of women in male writing Woolf (1935) denounced, was condemned "for perpetuating the stereotype of women as always in an auxiliary position to men, being no more than mothers, wives or sexual objects" (Keetley & Pettegrew, 2005, p. 17). In 1967, NOW formed The New York Committee on Image, which campaigned "for the inclusion of images of women which reflect, and thus encourage the active participation of women in all fields of American society" (Keetley & Pettegrew, 2005, p. 375). The list could go on and on, but what concerns this thesis more is the part literature played in this struggle for change and liberation.

Literature has always had a great role in society, both shaping and being shaped by it. The significance of women's writing was thus acknowledged early in the second-wave feminist movement. Issues that Virginia Woolf was concerned with in 1929 surfaced again with a renewed urgency. In 1972, Adrienne Rich's influential essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," was published. A seminal work in feminist literary criticism, it addresses the necessity of "[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" as "an act of survival" and as a way of examining the text as a sign of "how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see – and therefore live – afresh" (Rich, 1972, p. 19). Re-vision is not just about reinterpreting the past but about creating a new understanding of women's relationship with language, literary conventions, and narrative structures. It is a way of seeing anew "not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over [women]" (Rich, 1972, p. 20). Largely inspired by Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Rich's essay goes a step further by acknowledging, rather than condoning, the role of anger in the re-vision process, concluding that women "would be failing each other as writers and as women, if [they] neglected or denied what is negative, regressive, or Sisyphean in [their] inwardness" (Rich, 1972, p. 26). Therefore, Rich (1972) urges women

to reclaim and reshape literature through their own sense of self and to encourage a new tradition in which “women can no longer be primarily mothers and muses for men” (Rich, 1972, p. 26).

Moreover, in the *Foreword* to her collection of essays, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979), Rich (1979) emphasizes that feminism has “a long feminist tradition, both oral and written, a tradition which has built on itself over and over, recovering essential elements even when those have been strangled or wiped out” (Rich, 1979b, p. 11), which is a proof of perpetual attempts throughout history to silence and devalue women’s efforts for independence and freedom of expression. Similarly, in her 1979 commencement speech at Smith College named “What Does a Woman Need to Know?” Rich questions the reaches of the male-oriented educational system which cannot offer women enough knowledge on the peculiarities of their condition and how “seemingly natural states of being, like heterosexuality, like motherhood, have been enforced and institutionalized to deprive [them] of power” (Rich, 1997, p. 45). In a peroration, which undoubtedly owes much in style as well as in intended message to Woolf’s conclusion of *A Room of One’s Own*, Rich calls the young women to turn to their ancestresses and learn their history, to become aware of power relations and dangers of tokenisms, and to support each other in their recognition “of the yet unexplored resources and transformative power of women” (Rich, 1997, p. 45), acknowledging that most of what they need to know must, after all, be self-learned.

Other contributions followed. Although coming from a different cultural context, Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” from 1975 may be described as a similar call for women to reclaim their voices through what she terms *écriture féminine* or “women’s writing” (Cixous, 1976, p. 875). Like Rich before her, and Woolf before that, Cixous (1976) deconstructs how patriarchy had obscured women’s voices from writing, “where woman has never *her* turn to speak,” which is “all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, […] the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous, 1976, p. 880, italics in the original). However, contrary to Woolf (1935), Cixous (1976) does not shy away from the idea of women thinking of their sex in writing. Quite the opposite, since writing is of such importance, a woman must place herself into it by herself, she must write from her own experience, from her own body, Cixous (1976) emphasizes, not only to reclaim her body but to finally take her opportunity to speak and inscribe her voice into history. Most importantly, in addressing the language, Cixous (1976) insists that women, who have for so long existed “‘within’ the discourse of man,” must “dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it [theirs], containing

it, taking it in [their] own mouth, biting that tongue with [their] very own teeth to invent for [themselves] a language to get inside of" (Cixous, 1976, p. 888). Playing with the French verb *voler* and its double meaning – *to fly* and *to steal* – Cixous foregrounds the creation of new, female, forms of writing that break away from "the language of men and their grammar" by stealing the language not "in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to 'fly'" (Cixous, 1976, p. 888).

Not everyone concurred with this idea. In a 1977 interview with Alice Jardine, Simone de Beauvoir stated that there was "something false in this search for a purely feminine writing style" (Jardine, 1993, p. 42). "Women simply have to steal the instrument; they don't have to break it" (Jardine, 1993, p. 42), she explained, arguing that the language of the male literary tradition had to be cleansed from masculine preconceptions and repurposed to serve women's writing, thus, it had to be used *differently* but it should not be a *different* language in itself. That said, the question of language and defining women's writing by its own standards became of essential importance in feminist literary criticism regardless of the side one took in the debate.

By this time, women had long returned to their "original impulse […] to poetry" (Woolf, 1935, p. 99), as Woolf hoped they would, and many studies were dedicated specifically to it. Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986) was particularly influential for its examination of the development and the peculiarities of women's poetry in the twentieth century. As the title suggests, partially inspired by the debate previously mentioned, namely whether a distinctly female language exists, the study seems to offer a view that is more inclined toward Simone de Beauvoir's idea of "stealing the language," or as Ostriker (1986) puts it, of "a vigorous and varied invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 211). Ostriker (1986) identifies major themes and strategies in women's poetry, such as the search for female identity, the exploration of the body and sexuality, and the violent expressions challenging traditional power structures. She highlighted how women poets use subversion, irony, and revisionist mythmaking to express their unique experiences and perspectives, creating a distinctly female literary tradition.

But even before Ostriker's study, attempts had been made to define the new women's poetry. In *Naked and Fiery Forms* (1976), Suzanne Juhasz also examined the new tradition of women's poetry "wrought slowly through the century with pain and with daring" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 205), characterized by its candid, personal, individual, engaged, and dedicated voice. It was new because it spoke "in the voice of women, rather than in pseudo-male or neuter voice" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 1), which was significant as it showed that women were finally finding their own voices, self-confidence, and their identity beyond the assigned roles of "someone's

daughter, wife, mother" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 2). Her study of the new tradition in women's poetry revealed ways in which women poets confronted "the double bind" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 3) of being women and poets, changing the face of literature and their place in it.

All these studies expressed the urgency of evaluating this new tradition in new ways, with "a compensatory program of study and reflection" (Andersen, 1978, p. 6). Masculine standards in literary criticism were still prevalent and, according to them, women poets were continually relegated to the status of inferiority. As Ostriker (1986) pointed out, "originality has never protected the woman poet from the condescension of critics, and the terms of depreciation remain remarkably fixed despite changes in literary fashions" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 4). The problem, it appears, was not the writing but the critique, which was gender-biased. Like many others, in her 1978 essay "Feminist Criticism and the Concept of the Poetic Persona," Marilyn R. Farwell cast doubt on the possibility of androgynous criticism, giving prominence to a cultural context in feminist criticism, also stressed by Annis Pratt, which recognizes that, besides the text, psychological, sociological, and historical contexts surrounding the author's experience act "as a reflection of the situation of women" (Pratt, 1978, p. 12) and acknowledges that "sexual identity is itself a context that can differentiate styles, structures, and perspectives in literature" (Farwell, 1978, p. 141). Thus, female and male poetic voices necessarily differ greatly, and the concept of the poetic persona, based on Eliotic male values of objectivity and impersonality, therefore devaluing female sensibility, cannot be used to evaluate women's poetry. Women's poetic voices, she noted, are closer to the poetic persona in poetry; they are more likely to speak from the personal "I" and to merge "the self that suffers and the mind that creates" (Farwell, 1978, p. 151). Considering these differences, Farwell (1978) expressed the need for feminist criticism to acknowledge these values as part of a female poetic voice since New Criticism could not. As Margret Andersen also observed, feminist criticism should assist "women to recognize themselves, to find their position on a territory which used to be exclusively male, to surface, to survive" and "to do away with 'phallic criticism'" (Andersen, 1978, p. 8), which excluded women's experiences from the universal, thus making them trivial and inconsequential. The point was to make it known, as Ostriker (1986) realized herself, that what was "believed to be 'universal' was only partial" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 2).

Whether we agree or disagree with some of the concepts and ideas briefly presented in these essays and studies, one thing is beyond doubt: in the course of twentieth century, women were "bearing [themselves]" (Rich, 1972, p. 25) into literature, especially into poetry, and this birth was most certainly accompanied by a cry for change, a cry for "women poets to be the equals of men" (Rich, 1972, p. 21) but with liberty to remove, not protective but hindering,

"asbestos gloves" (Rich, 1972, p. 22) and embrace all those burning topics with their bare hands.

1.4 Anne Sexton: "Two-Thirds Too Large to Fit"

There have been numerous studies on women's writing since the 1980s and both feminism and feminist literary criticism have changed by now to be more inclusive and diverse. The overview above was primarily focused on works that had marked the beginnings of feminist thought and that had closely examined women's poetry, especially of the 1960s and 1970s, thus the period in which Anne Sexton wrote. They were meant to show that women had a twofold struggle to reserve their place within the literary tradition in that they not only had to fight for their right to write but also for their right to write in their own way without emulating male writers. Written in "a time of awakening consciousness" (Rich, 1972, p. 18), these works are in themselves signs of and further calls for awakening.

As Lisa Sewell noted in a chapter on "Feminist Poetries" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*, the rise of the women's liberation movement and writings such as Rich's "When We Dead Awaken," have inspired a dramatic surge in "the number of women writing, publishing, and receiving recognition for their poetry" (Sewell, 2013, p. 109) since the 1970s and many women poets started to focus on themes and issues that predominantly impact women. The feminist poetry that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, she further states, was influenced by "modes of expression and ideologies that informed contemporaneous movements such as confessional poetry, the Beats, and the Black Arts movement" (Sewell, 2013, p. 110) and characterized by intentional merging of personal experience with broader societal issues. Similarly, Ostriker (1986) underscored that the women's movement was present in poetry as well as in society, "antedating and to some extent inspiring contemporary feminism in its more political branches, while in turn being fueled by feminist thought and action and its creation of more conscious and courageous readers" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 8).

I believe this becomes important when assessing the work of Anne Sexton, who seems to be one of those artists best observed from some temporal distance, as is often the case with artists who break the established molds in any way. Anne Sexton, it would appear, broke a few. She wrote deeply personal poems, in a profoundly female voice, not hesitating to touch the flaming materials from which women poets before her mostly recoiled in horror. Most interestingly, at the time she started writing, there was no feminist literary criticism to judge her poetry through a different lens until much later. She was viewed and reviewed as a member

of the confessional poets at the time, yet many have written against this simplification since then.

What makes Anne Sexton's arrival on the poetic stage and her poetic success rather fascinating is the fact that Anne Sexton was technically not a "trained" poet. She could even be described as an anomaly in the world of poets, who were, and still are, usually highly educated and well-versed in various fields of study. However, Anne Sexton was the very image of Betty Friedan's suburban housewife, complete with the characteristic unhappiness. Anne Sexton did not go to college. She married at twenty and by the age of twenty-eight, she had had two daughters and a mental breakdown, followed by a suicide attempt. She started writing poetry as a form of therapy, following her psychiatrist's suggestion based on her high creativity score on a Rorschach test. Although this lack of college education, as Diane Wood Middlebrook remarked in her controversial biography of Anne Sexton's life, often "contributed to her feelings of inadequacy" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. xiii), it also unburdened her of the weight of "the ideology of white male supremacy" (Rich, 1997, p. 46) and of the long masculine tradition of poetry that Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath had to reject in their writing consciously. Even without formal training, or with very little training through poetry workshops she attended at the beginning of her career, Anne Sexton was most certainly a poet, proving that individual talent can and should sometimes overpower tradition. Yet her refusal to "self-sacrifice" (Eliot, 1982, p. 39), to surrender herself as she was at the time, as Eliot phrased it, to the imposed norms of being and writing, only meant a harsher reception.

At the beginning of Sexton's career, in some of the reviews of her books, the same anger Virginia Woolf detected in the old professor's writing about women's inferiority can be observed. When Anne Sexton's first volume *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* appeared a year after *Life Studies* in 1960, James Dickey admonished her writing "for its easy, A-student, superficially exact 'differentness' and its straining to make contrivance and artificiality appear natural" and for its lack of "concentration, and above all the profound, individual linguistic suggestibility and accuracy that poems must have to be good" (Dickey, 1978, p. 118). There was no question here about the artistic potential of her poetry, as was Rosenthal's curtsy to Lowell. In a review of her third volume *Live or Die* (1966), for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, Charles Gullans similarly declared her poems "not poems at all," saying: "Either this is the poetry of a monstrous self-indulgence, in which case it is despicable; or it is documentation of a neurosis, in which case to pretend to speak of it as literature at all is simply silly" (Gullans, 1978, p. 131). It seems that they were judging not merely the confessional mode but particularly a confession of the woman poet as even more inappropriate and alien.

Of course, there were positive reviews, too. Yet in many of these, there seems to be a preoccupation with tracking her poetic gift and separating it from her subject matter, in Carruth's words, drawing "the line between art and documentary" (Carruth, 1978, p. 130), to prove her value as a poet, which often meant proving that her personal spoke to the universal experience that Joyce Carol Oates claimed Sexton "yearned for [...] but [...] could not reach" (Oates, 1978, p. 171). Thus, the problem with many of the studies about her perhaps lies in the need to define her and her writing as definitively something or other. These efforts often focus on extricating the autobiography from fiction, criticizing the form or the content, or labeling the artist rather than her art. What was rarely acknowledged until much later, in works such as Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), was that women's poetry in general shared a lot with the confessional not because it was concerned with the autobiographical but because it concerned the untapped territory of a woman's experience. This experience has been largely omitted or written from a male's perspective in literature so when it started overflowing in women's voices it naturally disrupted the existing notions of what was literary and poetic.

Thus, the distance may be viewed as almost a requisite. From this distance, the context becomes much clearer and it might be observed that Anne Sexton lived and wrote in an unapologetically female style in a time when sexism and misogyny in life and literary criticism were still very much in existence. It was a time of "the feminine mystique" and clear gender roles, where "good women" were dedicated wives and mothers. It was also a time when universal experience was equivalent to male experience, and when women poets were considered inferior to male poets. In a memoir *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*, Kathleen Spivack (2012) remembers how Lowell "always rated the women, including Elizabeth Bishop, as 'minor,'" (Spivack, 2012, p. 122). It was a time when the word "feminist" was associated with anger, "the fear of feminism prevailing in the scholarly and academic world" (Rich, 1979a, p. 14), and when "'career woman' has become a dirty word" (Friedan, 1964, p. 60). It was, finally, a time of changes, uncertainties, and important movements that unsettled all spheres of life, and the anxieties of the time inevitably had to infiltrate the literature too. Therefore, Anne Sexton's writing cannot be called *only* confessional. It must be taken as an amalgamation of clashing personal and societal experiences and circumstances which, combined in her writing, indeed caused, to use Hélène Cixous's wording, "harrowing explosions" (Cixous, 1976, p. 879). Before Rich's "When We Dead Awaken" and Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa," Sexton's poetry was often an act of re-vision and of "inscrib[ing] the breath of the whole

woman" (Cixous, 1976, p. 881) in writing, doubly transgressing the norms of decorum, as a woman and as a poet, and paving the way for future women poets, feminist or not.

Perhaps the best way to approach Anne Sexton's writing is to disregard the issue of labeling her altogether. Anne Sexton did not particularly enjoy any labels during her life. As Middlebrook (1991) reported, when asked to define her writing, Anne Sexton refused to be labeled as "academic," "beatnik," "confessional," or "feminist." She simply declared that she "tr[ies] to write true to life" and that she "ha[s] always first tried to be human but the voice is a woman's and was from the beginning, intimate and female" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 365). With this in mind, we may regard her poetry, as Allen Ginsberg said, as no different from what she *really* knew. Once, she even said that she "started to write about [herself] because it was something [she] knew well" (quoted in Gill, 2007, p. 31). But perhaps what Anne Sexton really knew was the condition of the mid-twentieth-century American woman "trapped in a squirrel cage" (Friedan, 1964, p. 23), with all the nuances of that existence, including madness, self-destructiveness, and questioning of the roles of motherhood, daughterhood, and womanhood in general. She also knew how to tap into that experience and turn it into poetry that resonated and still resonates with many. Perhaps best of all, she knew what she wanted to write about and did not budge despite harsh criticism and discouragement. Finally, as she hinted in the 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton knew that true poetry needed more than to comply with formal obligations; it required a distinct voice and the courage "to take the chance on being a fool" (Kevles, 1998, p. 314). She remarked that:

> It's a very simple thing to write with rhyme and with rhythmic beat – those things anyone can do nowadays; everyone is quite accomplished at that. The point, the hard thing, is to get the true voice of the poem, to make each poem an individual thing, give it the stamp of your own voice, and at the same time to make it singular. (Kevles, 1998, p. 328)

Anne Sexton's poetry is undeniably charged, in both meanings of the verb, with a strong female voice expressing most often "women's secrets that do not […] get told" (Bogan, 1978, p. 126), which in the time of her writing was considered foolish. Yet her poetry cannot be classified so easily because of the wish to "make each poem an individual thing," as she phrased it. In many cases, she succeeded in this, which does sometimes give a chaotic, almost schizophrenic, note to her writing, yet it also makes it impossible to describe her work, as the editors of *Woman as Writer* from 1978 suggested, "as one long suicide note" (Webber & Grumman, 1978, p. 115), or as strictly autobiographical or "confessional," terms which brought a lot of confusion in interpreting her poetry. While her own life often inspired her poems, many

other imagined lives inspired it, too. Thus, perhaps, May Swenson's observation that her "true and terrible poems are potential snapshots of any of our lives these days" (Swenson, 1978, p. 124) may be taken as most appropriate in describing Anne Sexton's poetry and its significance.

To this, I would add that Anne Sexton's life and poetry were characterized by transformations. From the very beginning, she transformed from a housewife into a poet, a feat which also transformed her self-destructive tendencies into a creative outpouring that, as she often claimed, saved her life, or rather, transformed it, just like she transformed her raw experiences into art that extends its touch to others. Throughout her career as a poet, her poetry constantly changed shape, shifting from tight form to free verse, from intrapersonal to interpersonal, from confessional to mythic. Anne Sexton went through several metamorphoses, too. She was not only a poet; she also tried her hand as a playwright and performed her poetry to music with her band *Anne Sexton and Her Kind*. Performance is pivotal in understanding Anne Sexton, as she ultimately did perform, in life and poetry, a significant role, even if it was, as she sometimes thought, the role of the fool nobody else wanted to play. In any case, it may be argued that, in her own words, she was "two-thirds too large to fit" (Sexton, 1999, p. 404) any boxes. I hope this thesis will succeed in showing some of her transformations and how, in themselves, they are an "excitable gift" (Sexton, 1999, p. 168).

2. Speaking Up: Daring to Break the Silence

"But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it."

– from *Introduction to Poetry* by Billy Collins

"The poet is a liar who always speaks the truth."

– Jean Cocteau

"So what makes me feel as though I belong here out in this world is not the teacher, not the mother, not the lover, but what goes on in my mind when I am writing. Then I belong here and then all of the things that are disparate and irreconcilable can be useful. I can do the traditional things that writers always say they do, which is to make order out of chaos."

– Toni Morrison

"When I speak to you about myself, I am speaking to you about yourself. How is it you don't see that?"

– Victor Hugo

Anne Sexton wrote profusely, so profusely indeed that it would be difficult even to summarize all the different themes that found a way into her poetry. In some of her poems, there is undeniably too much of her life. In some others, there is much less or none at all. Yet even in those poems saturated with personal drama – deaths of her parents, hospitalizations, suicide attempts, love affairs, marriage, and children, among others – it could be said that there is a part of that experience speaking to many outside herself. However, these were the matters rarely spoken about. Even today, they would cause a sense of shame, guilt, and anxiety; thus, they are swept under the rug. Hence, when all of these and even more "appalling, but courageous" (Swenson, 1978, p. 122) materials emerged in poetry, especially in a woman's poetry in the 1960s, uncensored, raw, and painfully explicit, they had to be ascribed to the individual psyche and the whole genre of confessional poetry was often deprecated as "beautiful but useless" (Freeman, 2011, p. 80), as Glenn Freeman indicated in his essay "Confessional Poetry and National Identity: John Berryman's Self as Nation." Yet, as was already discussed, and as Freeman (2011) further underscored, the confessional mode

developed as a reaction to changes in mid-twentieth-century American society, providing poets with an effective way to engage in sociopolitical commentary.

In the same manner, even the most outrageously "confessional" poems by Anne Sexton often derive from the largely unvoiced but, nevertheless, common human experience. Many would attest (if not confess) to complicated relationships with their parents and with their own children; many a wife and a mother would confirm the sense of exasperation with these roles; and many would admit, though reluctantly, the duplicity that lurks in all of us. This chapter sets out to explore some of the common experiences Anne Sexton wrote about through some of the most autobiographically imbued of her poems, trying to look at them from a different angle. The goal, as I already stated, is not to prove or disprove the autobiographical details. Many have stumbled into that trap, trying to identify the people she wrote about, which was largely pointless and confusing. Needless to say, in some cases, her poems are much easier to understand when placed in the context of her life, yet even without it, they do not appear enigmatic to the point that they could not be read individually as pieces of art that attest to their larger significance and involvement with the world outside "the narrow diary of [the artist's] mind" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34). Thus, my goal is to explore her work as a work of a poet who was aware of her role as a poet and of the learning value of her writing.

2.1 "A Radical Discontent": Poetry Commanding Order

In a "Foreword" to *Compelling Confessions: The Politics of Personal Disclosure* (2011), Deborah H. Holdstein suggested that the word "confessional" has frequently been laden with sexist connotations and employed in criticism "to dismiss poetry – particularly that of women, notably Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath" as a demonstration of "weakness, 'femininity'" (Holdstein, 2011, pp. 16, 17). This, she proposed, could have been the reason why John Berryman invented a fictional character, Henry, in *Dream Songs* and cautioned readers not to identify Henry with himself, the poet. In the same book, in the chapter on Barryman mentioned above, Freeman (2011) argued that his poetry is proof that "the autobiographical and the imaginary can coexist within a poem to serve important rhetorical and political ends" (Freeman, 2011, p. 76). He contends that Berryman transmutes his life in a way that makes "autobiographical details […] a means and not an end" (Freeman, 2011, p. 78). The lyrical subject thus surpasses the representation of the poet's real life, pushing beyond and challenging the boundaries of that life. This is because the poet's goal is not to disclose the secret self but to discover the self, which allows both the autobiographical and imaginary selves to coexist in

the poem. Thus, as Freeman (2011) illustrated, while the poems create "an illusion of an authentic self, […] the self is ultimately fragmented and elusive" (Freeman, 2011, p. 84). As a result, the confessional poem presents the ever-expanding notion of the self as intertwined with others and serves as a social or political critique rather than just personal therapy.

This description could easily also be applied to Sexton's poetry if we reconsider what exactly is considered political. Sexton's poetry rarely journeyed into politics in the same way perhaps Berryman's and Lowell's used to do, though in many poems she is a keen observer of the sociopolitical climate. Still, as Carol Hanisch underscored in her 1970 essay "The Personal is Political," women's "personal problems are political problems" and talking about them forces one to "take off the rose-colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim [one's] life really is as a woman" (Hanisch, 1970, p. 76). The premise of Hanisch's (1970) essay that an individual's personal experiences are closely related to their place within power dynamics was not new – similar ideas of the impact of unequal power relations on the individual had been expressed in C. Wright Mills's 1959 *The Sociological Imagination*, and Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* attributed women's discontent with the domesticity to their societal status – yet it popularized the statement that "the personal is political" and encouraged new discussions. Hanisch's (1970) reminder to women of the movement to "listen to what so-called apolitical women have to say" because "there are things in [their] consciousness […] that are as valid as any political consciousness" (Hanisch, 1970, pp. 77, 78) is particularly important as it indicates the need to widen the scopes of feminist and political thought. In this sense, we might agree that Anne Sexton was apolitical but still contributed with her writing to a sociopolitical commentary of her time in the rising debates on women's position and rights.

This is not to present Sexton as a feminist. On the contrary, as Middlebrook (1991) remarked, it seemed that the "question of whether she was a feminist bothered Sexton, possibly because of the word's associations with anger" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 365). Rather, it offers an answer to Freeman's (2011) question of how to "read a life through the text without reducing one to the other" (Freeman, 2011, p. 85). The answer is to read Sexton's poetry as statements rather than confessions, as her exploration of the ever-elusive selfhood which, in a sense, becomes a reflection of the larger national identity – a portrait of mid-twentieth-century American womanhood. In most of her interviews, she indeed insisted on this.

In the 1968 interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton said that her "poetry is often more advanced, in terms of [her] unconscious, than [she] [is]" (Kevles, 1998, p. 312). Although this referred to her idea that poetry "milks the unconscious" (Kevles, 1998, p. 312), that is, that it feeds off of images, metaphors, and perceptions the poet is not consciously aware of, it also

speaks to how the reader might respond to her poetry as something more than herself. In an earlier interview with Patricia Marx, from 1965, Sexton said that poetry "should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt" (Marx, 1978, p. 32). To further explain this, as well as Kafka's quote that literature "should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us" (Sexton, 1999, p. 48) she put as an epigraph to her *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton said:

> I think we go along very complacently and are brainwashed with all kinds of pablum, advertisements every minute, the sameness of supermarkets, everything – it's not only the modern world, even trees become trite – and we need something to shock us, to make us become more aware. (Marx, 1978, p. 32)

Thus, if the purpose of her poetry is to raise awareness of something, it must inevitably be something widely neglected, and something that speaks to another enough to cause emotional disturbance. Otherwise, how could it hurt? A mere spectacle of the poet's self could cause shock, disgust, disapproval, or anger; yet for it to hurt, it would have to transcend the poet herself. Poetry, thus, acts as a means of searching for deeper truths; it becomes a conduit for ordering things, for transforming the chaos of the inner world into something "sensible, and real," something that allows the poet to be "more in touch with things" (Marx, 1978, p. 32).

This idea of order is expressed most clearly in one of her most famous poems "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further." Many have written about and interpreted this poem, as it is one of the most important in expressing Sexton's stance on her poetics. Moreover, it shows her in the act of confrontation and rebellion against the male censor, her first teacher, John Holmes. As Middlebrook (1985) observed in "'I Tapped My Own Head': The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton," "Holmes measured Sexton's work by the literary standards and conventions of an older generation" (Middlebrook, 1985, p. 195), but his critique also reflects many others of the time. His critique of Sexton's manuscript for her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, inspired the poem. Beginning with: "Not that it was beautiful, / but that, in the end, there was / a certain sense of order there; / something worth learning / in that narrow diary of my mind" (Sexton, 1999, p. 32), the poem reads as a response, defense, and a sort of critique of Holmes's critique in a sense. As cited in Middlebrook (1985), Holmes's letter read:

> I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital. [...] I am uneasy [...] that what looks like a brilliant beginning might turn out to be so self-centered and so narrowed a diary that it would be clinical only.
>
> Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experience seems to me very selfish – all a forcing others to listen to you, and nothing given the listeners, nothing

> that teaches them or helps them. [...] It bothers me that you use poetry this way. It's all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? [...]
>
> Don't publish it in a book. You'll certainly outgrow it, and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now. [8 February 1959] (quoted in Middlebrook, 1985, p. 203)

Middlebrook (1985) argued that Sexton's response through a poem stemmed from the realization that Holmes's intention was not to critique her manuscript but to censor it altogether. Consequently, her poem served as "a defense not only of her manuscript but of a whole genre of poetry that would come to be called 'confessional'" (Middlebrook, 1985, p. 203). Ostriker (1986) added that the poem "insists that personal truth is also transpersonal" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 205). Going even further, Jo Gill in *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (2007) ascribed the real significance of the poem to "its exemplification of how confession functions, rather than in its defense of what it reveals" (Gill, 2007, p. 47), which will be explored later.

What could be added, perhaps, is the significance of the multiple meanings of the word "order." Besides its obvious meaning indicating that something is "arranged in its correct place" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), that is, opposite of being in a mess, the word also means "a social or political system" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), that is, the structure and organization of a society or the world. In a much later poem titled "February 3rd," published posthumously in *Poems 1971–1973*, Sexton wrote:

My ideas are a curse.
They spring from a radical discontent
with the awful order of things.
I play clown. I play carpenter. I play nurse.
I play witch. Each like an advertisement
for change. My husband always plays King
and is continually shopping in his head for a queen
when only clown, carpenter, nurse, witch can be seen.
(Sexton, 1999, p. 593)

Prefacing the poem is a short statement, like a reminder to self: "Your own ideas may be too fanciful to be practical" (Sexton, 1999, p. 593), which may explain why the lyrical subject would consider her ideas "a curse." Since the mysterious ideas are not exactly named throughout the poem, we must assume that the focus is not on them but on where they come from – a place of "a radical discontent with the awful order of things."

This order is undoubtedly connected with the woman's position in society and the expectations she has to meet. What society expected of a woman, as Friedan (1964) suggested, was "the heroine's victory over Mephistopheles," the devil that appears as her aspiration for a career, endangering the heroine's marriage and motherhood, and "the devil inside the heroine herself, the dream of independence, the discontent of spirit, and even the feeling of a separate identity" (Friedan, 1964, p. 40). This can be seen in the way the husband of the poem, who plays the role of the King, expects the woman to comply with her role of his Queen, a beautiful but mostly powerless role, while she constantly refuses to, playing the roles of a clown, carpenter, nurse, and witch instead. Moreover, assuming these roles is not a purposeless task. It is "an advertisement for change," thus it appears to carry a tone of activism combined with mockery of the influence television had in creating the image she advertises against in the first place.

Regarding the roles – namely, the clown, the carpenter, the nurse, and the witch – they seem to suggest the plurality of a woman's identity, her desire to exist as a separate individual, and to be more than the King's Queen. Yet the implications may be darker than they seem at first. As Polly C. Williams, one of Sexton's students, reminisced, two days before she committed suicide, during her last class at Boston University[1] on October 2, 1974, Sexton commented that she "[had] to let [herself] be a fool, and say any damn thing that […] appears and blurt it out" (quoted in Williams, 1978, p. 101). The clown could thus represent the role of a poet as a fool, a poet that says it all, as Sexton described herself. In "Wanting to Die," Sexton writes that "suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*. / They never ask *why build*" (Sexton, 1999, p. 138, italics in the original). In the fifth part of "The Death Baby," titled *Max*, she writes: "Max and I / two immoderate sisters, / two immoderate writers, / two burdeners, / made a pact. / To beat death down with a stick. / To take over. / To build our death like carpenters" (Sexton, 1999, p. 355). Finally, in "The Death King," she begins with: "I hired a carpenter / to build my coffin" (Sexton, 1999, p. 585). The metaphor of the carpenter, then, as Gill (2007) pointed out, clearly represents a "death-seeker or suicide" (Gill, 2007, p. 183), therefore it may be understood as a depiction of the self-destructive impulse of the sick part of the psyche – the madness itself.

Quite enigmatically, the role of the nurse could be one of Sexton's "trick[s] of words" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 82). On the surface, the role of the nurse could be interpreted

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[1] Anne Sexton started teaching creative writing at Boston University in June 1969. She was appointed as a full professor in 1972.

in its literal meaning – as someone who provides care, medical or motherly care, to others. Yet, in entomology, the word "nurse" also signifies "a sexually imperfect member of a community of bees, ants, etc., which cares for the larvae" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Knowing how pervasive metaphors of bees are in Sexton's writing, this may be a cunning strategy to blur the boundaries between two similar but distinct roles, a motherly role of a nurser implicit in the woman's role, and a desire to nurse ambition and creativity. As Gill (2007) noted, in Sexton's poetry concerning language, the bee serves as a recurring metaphor to capture the dual nature of language – "the simultaneously functional and destructive, purposive and erratic nature of language" (Gill, 2007, p. 155). Therefore, the nurse might be understood in terms of a nurse bee who is in charge of the larvae, which are the words, or the process of creation, in itself characterized by "inspiration and burn-out, volatility and vulnerability, desire and necessity" (Gill, 2007, p. 162).

Last but not least, the role of the witch, which will be elaborated more thoroughly in the last chapter, represents one of Sexton's most symbolic motives in exploring a woman's identity and social position. Sexton's witches, who are also defined as her "kind," embody the outsider – the woman who refuses to conform to societal expectations. Playing the witch is thus playing the role of the rebel, which may also indicate repercussions from the outside world that has little tolerance for women who refuse to fit neatly into prescribed roles and openly reject the "order of things" however awful it may be.

The roles are symbolic of Sexton's sense of selfhood, yet through them, Sexton also addresses the reader, indeed performing them "like an advertisement for change" (Sexton, 1999, p. 593). She calls for a change of "the order of things," in which society mandates, in Friedan's (1964) words, "the disappearance of the heroine altogether, as a separate self and the subject of her own story," and in which the husband – the King – expects that "the woman has no independent self to hide even in guilt; she exists only for and through her husband and children" (Friedan, 1964, p. 41). Therefore, when Sexton wrote in "For John," that "there was / a certain sense of order there; / something worth learning / in the narrow diary of my mind" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34), perhaps it was not only a way to make sense of, to order, the emotional mess of a mind caught in its fragmentation but also a way to establish a new order of things, a new world, inside and outside poetry, which would welcome, rather than censor, the lesson she was ready to offer.

There is discontent in "For John," too. It appears to be contained, though, within Sexton's head, that is, indeed, made of glass and inverted. Gill (2007) pointed out that "the inverted glass bowl discloses whatever lies within it" (Gill, 2007, p. 52), and that is perfectly

true. Yet Sexton's statement that "it is a small thing / to rage in your own bowl" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34) raises another important question. Does the bowl also trap inside and if so, what does it trap? On the one hand, we could say that the raging is a matter of little significance because the bowl limits it to the triviality of self, in other words, because the bowl traps the strictly private rage. Yet, since Sexton insists that there is a lesson to be learned from her rage, perhaps we could also imagine how the inverted glass bowl, like a means of censorship, traps the sound of her rage and renders it inaudible. Like a burning candle covered with a glass, the bowl extinguishes the cries of discontent.

However, Sexton is aware that even though this rage was private at first, it then became "more than myself; / it was you, or your house – or your kitchen" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34). It may be significant to note that, when this realization, quite similar to Hanisch's (1970) conclusion that "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1970, p. 76), takes place, she is holding the bowl in her hands "with all its cracked stars shining / like a complicated lie" (Sexton, 1999, pp. 34, 35). It might not be so, but if we imagine that she removed the bowl so that it is no longer inverted over her head but in her hands, this removal of the bowl from her head may be interpreted as a refusal to be silenced and convinced that her rage is not also the rage of another. With the bowl in her hands, on display, as if calling the world to see, we may as well imagine the now audible raging as a Banshee's scream foretelling the end of "the awful order of things" (Sexton, 1999, p. 595).

Her bowl is indeed there to show what is within – the broken shimmering stars – all the fragmented parts of herself, perhaps, the clown, the carpenter, the nurse, the witch. It is the female self that refuses to be predefined; the self whose sense of wholeness can only result from being allowed "to create, to make order, to be an emotional, full human being" (Marx, 1978, p. 36). However, the bowl also reflects what is outside – "my kitchen, your kitchen / my face, your face" (Sexton, 1999, p. 35). It reflects the other through self, and the self through the other, as if to show the interconnectedness between them disturbed only by fear "like an invisible veil between us all" (Sexton, 1999, p. 35) – her fear of telling and the world's fear of listening. Nevertheless, it seems that, from the very beginning, Anne Sexton conquered this fear and removed the rose-tinted glasses, or even better, the inverted glass bowl, from her head to confront the harsh reality of her existence, of a woman's existence. Like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, Sexton, with her "awkward bowl" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34) instead of a shimmering eye, was ready to hold Holmes and anyone else, even despite their will, despite their fear, until she shared her story through poetry that rebelled against the old and commanded a new order.

2.2 “A Complicated Lie”: Truth, Lies, and Deceit

In her reflections on Sexton as a teacher, Polly C. Williams described her classes as “[t]hought-provoking, stimulating, candid, supportive – but *not* academic” (Williams, 1978, p. 97, italics in the original). Williams attributed this to Sexton’s tendency to focus less on form and technical aspects of poetry, emphasizing, instead, the importance of ideas and emotions in her teaching. Sexton prioritized discussing *why* a poet should write over instructing on *how* to write. One of her primary expectations was “that a poem should be able to stand alone – no explanations and certainly no apologies” (Williams, 1978, p. 97), and one of the crucial lessons she imparted to her students was “the idea that every poem was part of one great poem” (Williams, 1978, p. 100). Facing young students often under the influence of traditional poetic expression, Sexton frequently downplayed her role as the teacher, demanding that her students actively participate in the class and urging them to challenge anything they disagreed with.

The description of what and how Sexton taught seems to correspond with the way she perceived poetry and how she wrote. The idea that poems should be able to stand on their own and still contribute to a larger, universal poem applies well to Sexton’s work and how she repeatedly returned to the same themes often with a new or a slightly changed perspective. A sense of correspondence can be traced between her earlier and later poetry, whether thematically or through similar metaphors and expressions pointing to each other. Her writing is at times reminiscent of the way Ginsberg imagined the writing process of an epic poem concerned with historical and political themes – gathering “whatever floated into one’s personal field of consciousness and contact […] to compose like […] basketweaving out of those materials […] by a process of association” (Clark, 1967, p. 318). Sexton often spoke of her writing as a process of word association and extracting images from the unconscious, a technique that, as Middlebrook (1991) wrote, “proved valuable at her desk, and later still in the classroom” (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 64).

Challenging or daring, however, ranks high among the descriptors that could be applied to Sexton’s poetry. Most of her poems pose a challenge – to see, to hear, to feel the unspoken, or directly challenge – herself, the reader, the family, and life in its entirety. If her poetry were a game of truth or dare, Sexton would more likely be envisioned as performing a “dare” than telling the truth in the sense that she dares the reader to reassess the meanings of truth. In the interview with Marx, Sexton presented a paradox about truth. She explained that “to really get at the truth of something is the poem, not the poet” and that when she is writing she is “hunting for the truth” (Marx, 1978, p. 34). Yet this truth could be a poetic truth rather than a factual

one, because, as she believed, behind every experience or action, there lies a deeper, hidden truth. Thus, Sexton suggested, poetry might be viewed as a form of evasion, a movement beyond "the literal fact of a poem" (Marx, 1978, p. 35), as it depends on how one defines truth. She concluded:

> You can say that there is truth in this, but it might not be the truth of my experience. Then again, if you say that you lie, you can get away with telling the awful truth. That's why it's an evasion. The poem counts for more than your life. (Marx, 1978, p. 35)

Imprisoned in the label "confessional," Sexton's poetry was swarmed by critics who, trying to forcibly extract the truth – the autobiographical truth of her poems – often left a sting instead of a kiss. Yet, what becomes clear from *Anne Sexton: A Biography* is the extent to which "strategic untruthfulness" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 279), as Middlebrook (1991) termed it, played a role in Anne Sexton's life and poetry. Thus, to search for the confession in her poetry is to search for a chimera; and to seek the truth and nothing but the truth, is to forget how elusive the concept of truth truly can be. Friedrich Nietzsche's musings on truth and lies in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* may come to mind as a perfect explanation of the truth conundrum:

> Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.
>
> We still do not yet know where the drive for truth comes from. For so far we have heard only of the duty which society imposes in order to exist: to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors. (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 117)

Thus, paradoxically, since being truthful means using shared conventions, truth is, in a sense, a collective agreement, in his words, "[lying] with the herd" (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 117), a kind of lying that everyone accepts and participates in.

In this sense, what critics may have initially found (or searched for) in Sexton's writing was the opposite of the collective truth, that is, the opposite of the unconsciously internalized lie. Her metaphors, being far from conventional, broke the "fixed, canonical, and binding" (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 117) order of human relations and exposed another truth, distancing her from the herd. Yet, since they had broken the mold, so to speak, they could not be perceived as the collectively accepted truth. Hence the need to assign them another value – either to label them entirely as a confession, where they would remain truthful but on an individual, transgressive level, or to pronounce them as lies and discard the threat of them challenging the societal cohesion. This would, again paradoxically, bring us to the conclusion that, since the

socially constructed truth is a collective lie, her poetry, socially perceived as a lie, could actually be *the* truth. This is particularly fascinating because Sexton's favorite paradox, as Middlebrook (1991) stated, was that "in poetry, truth is a lie is a truth" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 258).

At any rate, when Sexton's poetry is concerned, we might say that the truth, insofar as there is one, is, in fact, "like a complicated lie" (Sexton, 1999, p. 35). It is, after all, a lie, because, as Sexton emphasized, "the poem counts for more than your life" (Marx, 1978, p. 35), ergo, it extends beyond the poet's experience and life to include the experience of another. However, the lie is complicated because it allows the poet to "get away with telling the awful truth" (Marx, 1978, p. 35), although it is not necessarily always the truth of the poet's experience. Sexton's oeuvre is heavily saturated with poems exploring poetry's capacity for truth-telling and the poet's ability to escape the boundaries of the self. These poems, sometimes admittedly convoluted and swerving into painfully impenetrable metaphors, still reveal important insights about Sexton's unabating persistence in writing like a woman and for women.

"Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall," from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, is one of the earliest poems to present poets as liars – "I said, the poets are there / I hear them singing and lying / around their round table / and around me still" (Sexton, 1999, p. 18). The lyrical subject, who is, indeed, the old woman from the title, wishes she could "sing [her] songs with the liars / and [her] lies with all the singers" (Sexton, 1999, p. 18). Yet she cannot because, as we find out, she is dead. The "wreath / made of a corpse's hair, / framed in glass on the wall / as old as old is able / to be and be remembered still" is made of her hair, and the "pewter urn / pinned to the tavern wall" (Sexton, 1999, p. 18) probably contains her ashes. It seems unclear whether her portrait is truly hung there or if we are to imagine it through the poem. If we are, we might imagine her as Virginia Woolf imagined Shakespeare's sister, whom she named Judith, as an illustration of the obstacles a woman "caught and tangled" (Woolf, 1935, p. 73) in her body would face pursuing the arts in Shakespeare's time, even with the same talent and genius as Shakespeare's. Woolf argued that, even though women were deprived of all means of nurturing their creativity, "genius of a sort must have existed" (Woolf, 1935, p. 73) among them.

In a way, Sexton paints a similar portrait of the old woman. Although we know that the poem (or a song) is taking place in some tavern, the scenes depicted are scenes of domesticity. The poem starts with "Oh down at the tavern / the children are singing / around their round table / and around me still" (Sexton, 1999, p. 18). Children are not usually expected to be in a

tavern, yet they are there, singing. Since the poets are also "singing and lying / around their round table / and around me still" (Sexton, 1999, p. 18), we might assume that the woman was present at the tavern during her life as she is now, *still*, in her death. Finally, we are informed that the "[p]oets are sitting in my kitchen" underneath her "dusty face" (Sexton, 1999, p. 19), presumably either her portrait or the urn holding her ashes. The kitchen, a recurring trope in Sexton's writing, is also unusual in the context of a tavern, completely disrupting the boundaries between the private and the public. The images of the poem, showing both children and the poets singing in the kitchen in the presence of the woman, who, we might guess, could be a tavern keeper, but also a wife and a mother, shows the woman's role – she is the mother of poets, yet never a poet herself.

Furthermore, the word "tavern," rather archaic, conjures a picture of a medieval tavern filled with bards and their music and poetry, which fits with the repeated hint that the old woman's portrait, real or imaginary, is "as old as old is able / to be and be remembered still" (Sexton, 1999, p. 18). In fact, the whole poem bears similarity to a medieval tune, especially in its opening and closing stanza, as if the old woman finally freed her voice and sang herself into a song, singing her auto-portrait into existence. Although we cannot see her, we can hear her voice – a voice of the poet never given a chance to be articulated, muffled, like many others perhaps, by children, kitchens, and loud songs of male poets. Finally able to sing, she wonders: "Why do these poets lie?" (Sexton, 1999, p. 19). The question remains unanswered and raises other questions. Does "these poets" refer to all poets or just male ones? And what do they lie about?

Perhaps a part of the answer can be found in another of Sexton's poems from her second volume *All My Pretty Ones*. In "The Black Art," we are presented with a difference between how women and men write. While "a woman who writes feels too much, / those trances and portents," "a man who writes knows too much, / such spells and fetiches" (Sexton, 1999, p. 88). Therefore, in creation, the woman "thinks she can warn the stars" and she is "essentially a spy," while the man, who "with used furniture [...] makes a tree [...] is essentially a crook" (Sexton, 1999, p. 88). At first glance, these verses seem to point to discussions about differences in women's and men's writing, in which women's writing is characterized as overly sentimental and subjective, while men's writing is reason-driven and objective. As Farwell (1978) illustrated, the gender bias in literature and theory, according to which masculine qualities are prioritized, resulted in the elevation of male poetic voices at the expense of diminishing the value of female ones. Consequently, poetry is valued as "an objective craft and not the expression of personal feelings or attitudes" (Farwell, 1978, p. 145). In this light, the

poem may be interpreted as a sort of defense of the woman's writing, as the male poet's objective, knowledgeable writing seems to be crookery.

However, it must be noted that this is only a superficial interpretation. In the interview with Marx, when prompted to comment on the poem's implication that women are emotional and men reasonable beings, Sexton replied she "was lying a little bit" (Marx, 1978, p. 36) in the poem and she negated that she was of that opinion. "It is in that same poem I said a writer is essentially a crook, and we're quite together in that, the male and female" (Marx, 1978, pp. 36, 37), she commented, adding how there are both rational female poets and overemotional male poets. Her response, rather than the poem, thus confirms how the poet truly is a liar – either she lies or her poetry does – yet it also opens some space for returning to the poem to try to spy the overlooked meaning and read it in a new way.

At a second glance, we may notice that we might have been blinded by the emphasis on the binary oppositions between "feel" and "know," between "spy" and "crook," missing, perhaps, the bigger picture. We might notice that what the woman feels are "trances and portents," as if she were a prophet, there to "warn the stars" (Sexton, 1999, p. 88). Her vision is thus bound to her inner, unconscious states, as she has to dissociate from herself and fall into a trance, yet it ventures beyond herself, as a premonition of the future, a warning she must convey. As Middlebrook (1991) revealed by conveying the testimony of Sexton's psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, Sexton herself was prone to "states of dissociation, which she called trances" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 44). Writing itself may have also been, for Sexton, a trance-like state filled with prophecies and premonitions.

The man, on the other hand, knows "spells and fetiches." Spells and spell casting, which we are most likely to connect with a woman, more precisely, with a witch, are surprisingly attached to a man. If we interpret it as a sort of ability to control someone, we may see why that is so. Spells and fetiches, a sexual desire for and fixation with an object, body part, or action, become a power-wielding tool that can exert control over representation, especially by objectifying women. Thus, the male poet might be a crook because his rational side makes him unaware of the bias of his knowledge. On the other hand, the woman is a spy, a little bit like the portrait of the old woman from the tavern, secretly observing the poets without them knowing, wishing to be "down at the tavern / where the *prophets* are singing" (Sexton, 1999, p. 19, my emphasis). Being a spy, the woman poet is also a critical, rather than just emotional, observer of the buried and unspoken secrets. The political implication of the word "spy" as a government employee tasked to obtain and reveal information on an enemy cannot escape our attention either, as it points, again, to the political imperative of women writing about their

experiences and revealing "terrible confessions" (Sexton, 1999, p. 89) the world seems disgusted by. If they are crooks as well, if women poets also lie, as Sexton commented, it might be said that the truth of their poetry, in Middlebrook's words, still "rests not in [its] factuality but in [its] emotional credibility" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 58).

Just as she emphasized in her teaching, Sexton also tried to shift the focus toward ideas and emotions in her poetry, toward answering the question of *why* write instead of dealing with justifying the content or form and how they relate to her all the time. Why Sexton wrote is certainly a challenging question to answer, but it seems fair to say that it was rather to expose life than to expose herself, rather to protest than to confess. Perhaps tired of having to keep extricating herself from her poetry, and her poetry from herself, in her fifth volume, *Transformations* (1971), Sexton seemingly "breaks the confined circle […] of the purely personal" (Ostriker, 1983, p. 64) by transforming the fairy tales by brothers Grimm into a kind of contemporary social commentary, "working her way backwards to the immediacy of her personal vision" (Lehmann-Haupt, 1978, p. 148), as Christopher Lehmann-Haupt observed in his review of the volume. However, the whole volume repeats most of the same themes Sexton had already written about and continued writing about after *Transformations*, but with a twist of connecting them with the fairy tales in order to cure "the raw disasters" (Lehmann-Haupt, 1978, p. 148) with art. Although I am inclined to disagree that Sexton's previous volumes lacked artistry, I agree the poems in *Transformations* are incredibly ingenious in their way of articulating her "personal vision" (Lehmann-Haupt, 1978, p. 148) in a more accessible and, to some, agreeable, format.

One of the poems from *Transformations* may answer the question of why write. "Red Riding Hood" starts with the assertion that "many are the deceivers" (Sexton, 1999, p. 267), providing a long list of people, including herself, who pass through life performing an identity, rather than truly living as themselves, deceiving and being deceived, whether maliciously or not. The author herself, as she revealed, performs a persona of a woman who is "[q]uite collected at cocktail parties," while inside, she is "undergoing open-heart surgery" (Sexton, 1999, p. 269). The wolf from this well-known fairy tale is also one of the deceivers; he is "a strange deception" indeed – "a wolf dressed in frills, / a kind of transvestite" (Sexton, 1999, p. 270). At the end of the story, the huntsman, the grandmother, and Red Riding Hood stuff the wolf's belly with stones and he dies when he wakes up and tries to escape.

"Killed by his own weight. / Many a deception ends on such a note" (Sexton, 1999, p. 272), stands as a forensic report of the cause of death, which carries sinister implications for all the deceivers, not just the wolf. It could be understood as a warning, a kind of punishment

for deceiving. It could also indicate the pressure of having to deceive and to maintain the deception, to hide oneself behind a mask, to keep all those secrets inside, like stones sewn inside the wolf's belly, weighing one down until the weight pulls one under and drowns her. This is anyone's world, a man's, a woman's, yet, as a woman, Sexton might have been more inclined to think about the woman's experience – even the wolf "appeared to be in his ninth month" (Sexton, 1999, p. 271) when he eats the grandma and Red Riding Hood – and the woman's experience of the era, as Friedan (1964) described it, was dismal at best.

Brainwashed by the television and women's magazines to believe their destiny was to "live according to the feminine mystique" (Friedan, 1964, p. 243) as a suburban housewife and nothing else, women were experiencing a crisis of identity. Deprived of any ambition, any promise of the future, the woman was deceived, stuffed with a rock-solid "picture of a half-life" (Friedan, 1964, p. 60). She was also a deceiver, hiding her discontent, pretending the problem did not exist, believing it was only within her. To restore the woman's identity, feminists "had to prove that woman was not a passive, empty mirror, not a frilly, useless decoration, not a mindless animal, not a thing to be disposed of by others, incapable of a voice in her own existence" (Friedan, 1964, p. 73). The woman had to be exorcised of the weight of this image, and perhaps one of the ways to achieve this was to rip the stitches and remove the weight.

So, why write? Sexton once explained that "'one writes of oneself … in order to invite in' and 'to find the way, out through experience'" (quoted in Gill, 2007, p. 41). Writing most frankly about all the terrible and intimate experiences, provoking thoughts and urges, and a maddening sense of entrapment cannot only be seen as a road of no return into the extravagancies of self-indulgence. It is also "an advertisement / for change" (Sexton, 1999, p. 595), a new image showing the consequences of the depersonalization of the woman to the point of self-destructiveness. Undeniably, these are not subject matters every pen would dare to put on paper. As Sexton enigmatically wrote, "[n]ot all knives are for stabbing the exposed belly" (Sexton, 1999, p. 268), but hers was, and it was out there to perform "a kind of caesarian section" (Sexton, 1999, p. 272) of a woman's life, extracting the heavy stones, one by one.

2.3 "Unpick the Lock of Your Bones": Finding a Way Out of Oneself

To conclude the debate about Sexton's writing as something more than a self-centered tragedy without larger significance, I would like to present several of her poems, most from her later volumes – her last volumes published during her life, *The Death Notebooks* (1974),

and *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), published posthumously – which are saturated with images of imprisonment, locked doors, and searching for a key that would unlock them and allow one to escape. As if in response to the many objections to her writing as a form of release, as John Holmes suggested, with nothing to offer the readers but "a spectacle of someone experiencing release" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1985, p. 203), many of these later poems stand, again, like a complex explanation of her pursuit of breaking the silence and gaining the power to speak up.

The break into the mythical that many have identified in Sexton's writing from *Transformations* onward, a fascination with "hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 216), was identified by Ostriker (1986) as one of the characteristic strategies "of exploring and attempting to transform the self and the culture" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 11) in women's writing, which she called "revisionist mythmaking" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 11). Tapping into such material, as Sexton tapped into Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, bestows the author with "a double power. […] Because it is in the public domain, it confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes 'merely' of the private self" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 213). Writing in itself, and writing freely, was a source of power for many women, before and after Sexton, and in her case, it might be said it was a source of power for herself, as well as a way of empowering others.

Although I use this source reluctantly as it feels like an invasion of her privacy, I could not but notice that in one of her sessions with Dr. Orne, who recorded most of his sessions with Sexton as a strategy to help her cope with her memory issues, Sexton said that she "never felt powerful," and that during her childhood she "was a nothing crouching in the closet," reading fairy tales, which "was power, magic power" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 401). This was in 1961, at the beginning of her career. In 1962, in a letter to Brother Dennis,[2] Sexton wrote:

> I confess to an extraordinary ambition myself … I want my poems to be better than anyone else's. […] and now the reader […] finds the poems a 'gift' … So perhaps this ambition to be 'the best' and 'to give the most' though it starts inward goes out and from you and from me and spreads out its roots in other people. So, after all, forget the original motive …And please note how much easier it is for the poet for people think poets are in touch with some mystical power and they endow us with qualities we do

[2] Brother Dennis Farrell – a fictitious name given to one of Sexton's fans, a monk from California, with whom Sexton kept correspondence after he wrote her a fan letter not long after her first volume, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Taken from Middlebrook, 1991, p. 182.

not possess and love us for words that we only wrote for ambition and not for love. (Sexton, 1977, pp. 152, 153)

As Margaret Atwood wrote in her poem "Spelling": "A word after a word / after a word is power" (Atwood, 1982, p. 64). The power to express herself in poetry, the ambition to pursue a career as a poet, and the freedom to transplant herself through her words into other people's lives, to gift them with awareness of themselves must have played a role in Anne Sexton's writing, as well as the need to demonstrate through her writing that she was conscious of her role.

In the interview with Marx, she commented that perhaps "modern woman is more conscious now, more thinking" (Marx, 1978, p. 37) and that compared to European women, American women are freer to raise their voices. "I like to speak up," (Marx, 1978, p. 37), she concluded, and this can be detected in her poetry even more strongly, perhaps, than the desire to confess. Bearing in mind the second meaning of the word confession Middlebrook (1998) pointed out, that it is also a public expression of one's opinions, it might be more accurate to interpret her poetry as a declaration of her viewpoints. Considering also how little power women had at that time and how profoundly silenced their voices were, it can be viewed as a means of maintaining control not just over her writing but also over how she wanted it to be defined and as she wrote in the letter above, she was convinced that whether she wrote from personal experience or not, her poetry "[spread] out its roots in other people" (Sexton, 1977, pp. 152, 153), that is, succeeds in unlocking the door to the outside world.

Locked doors and lost keys seemed to have fascinated Sexton starting from *Transformations*. In "The Gold Key," the opening poem of the volume which introduces Sexton as the narrator of fairy tales, "a middle-aged witch" (Sexton, 1999, p. 223), she presents a sixteen-year-old boy, who "wants some answers" and is actually "each of us" (Sexton, 1999, p. 223). The boy finds "a gold key" (Sexton, 1999, p. 223), which opens her book of transformed fairy tales, apparently there to provide the sought answers, which indeed they do. Gill (2007) argued that the images of the lock and key "represent a metaphor for language – for the necessary link between signifier and signified, word and referent, poem and truth" (Gill, 2007, p. 160). She further contended that the key provides possibilities rather than definite answers, suggesting rather than solving the riddle. This, Gill (2007) held, reflected Sexton's skepticism about language's capacity to serve as a key to insight or comprehension. To her, the poems from *Transformations* and poems such as "Locked Doors" from *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, which I will return to soon, can be interpreted "as palimpsests of the Pandora's

box myth and of the fairy tale 'Bluebeard,' with its prohibition against unlocking the door which obscures Bluebeard's murderous secrets" (Gill, 2007, 161).

However, there might be a way to interpret these metaphors in a different light. As already mentioned, Sexton's poetry at the time it was being published often attracted excessive attention for all the wrong reasons – autobiographical details and taboo topics related to the female body, sexuality, psyche, etc. Rosenthal (1967) attested that even though "Anne Sexton's poetry seldom explicitly includes the cultural criticism of Lowell's or Sylvia Plath's, […] it is not entirely without it" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 133). Yet his definition of "cultural criticism" seems narrowed down to observations about the institutions and how patients were handled, without digging deeper into the implicit messages, such as connecting the individual woman to many others. A similar narrowness of view followed much of the critique of her writing. When asked by Kevles (1998) to respond to some people's curiosity about how she could write about herself, "completely ignoring the great issues of the times, like the Vietnam war or the civil rights crisis" (Kevles, 1998, p. 336), Sexton responded:

> People have to find out who they are before they can confront national issues. The fact that I seldom write about public issues in no way reflects my personal opinion. […] I write about human emotions; I write about interior events, not historical ones. […] I think many of my poems about the individual who is dispossessed, who must play slave, who cries 'Freedom now,' 'Power now,' are about the human experience of being black in this world. A black emotion can be a white emotion. It is a crisis for the individual as well as the nation. (Kevles, 1998, pp. 336, 337)

The emphasis on personal drama and truth-detecting drew attention away from the implicit socially, politically, and culturally relevant issues she spoke about through her poetry. The fact that women's issues were among "the great issues" of her time seemed to escape notice, although Sexton seemed to have tried to explain that in her response. The volumes that followed seem to show a certain urgency to respond to these "accusations."

"O Ye Tongues," a sequence of ten psalms that closes *The Death Notebooks* (1974), is usually explored for its religious connotations. As Middlebrook (1991) explained, Sexton adopted the form of this poem from 'Jubilate Agno,' written by Christopher Smart, "the eighteenth-century poet […] who was considered insane and was hospitalized for extensive periods because of a compulsion to public prayer" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 353). Combining the first-person "I" and the third-person "Anne," and preserving Smart's alternations of "Let" and "For" parts, the poem is a complex piece open to endless interpretation. Psalms that appeared especially significant to me, however, are *Sixth Psalm*, *Eight Psalm*, and *Tenth Psalm*.

The *Sixth Psalm* offers a picture of America through various ordinary, working-class individuals scattered across the country. The vignettes she presents seem to capture different aspects of American life – hardworking, mundane, and often unnoticed. Yet, Anne, the central figure, remains detached from this reality:

> For America is a land of Commies and Prohibitionists but
> *Anne does not see it. Anne is locked in*. The Trotskyites *don't see her*. The Republicans have never tweaked her chin *for she is not there*. Anne hides inside folding and unfolding rose after rose. She has no one. She has Christopher. They sit in their room pinching the dolls' noses, poking the dolls' eyes. One time they gave a doll a ride in a fuzzy slipper but that was too far, too far wasn't it. Anne did not dare. She put the slipper with the doll inside it as in a car right into the closet and pushed the door shut. (Sexton, 1999, pp. 405, 406, my emphasis)

This twist is significant for several reasons. Firstly, that Anne as the subject of the poem is oblivious to what happens around her while Anne, the poet writing about Anne, is aware of it, is paradoxical. It shows duplicity, and dissociation in a sense, inability or even unwillingness to connect with the world outside, despite being aware of it, until the inner world is explored. In other words, this might emphasize Sexton's view that one has to "find out who they are before they can confront national issues" (Kevles, 1998, p. 336). Secondly, Anne in the poem is not only unseeing, she is also unseen. This indicates the woman's position in society – invisible, unheard, and unasked for opinion. As Friedan (1964) wrote, when she began writing for women's magazines in the 1950s, it was unquestioningly assumed by editors and writers alike "that women were not interested in politics, life outside the United States, national issues, art, science, ideas, adventure, education, or even their own communities, except where they could be sold through their emotions as wives and mothers" (Friedan, 1964, p. 44). Thus, Anne of the poem, already predefined by the cultural and political view of herself as a mindless creature, must be both ignorant and ignored, although Anne, the author, by merely writing about this, proves that she is not. Finally, the wording that Anne is "locked in" plays with several notions associated with the verb – trapped physically, mentally, or both in a place, mental state, or an unchanging situation. Playing with dolls, daring not to venture outside, the American woman is infantilized to the point of uselessness. Life is passing her by, "[f]or America is only this room … there is no useful activity. / For America only your dolls are cheerful" (Sexton, 1999, p. 406).

The *Seventh Psalm* returns to the last verse of the sixth to negate it: “No. No. The woman is cheerful, she smiles at her stomach” (Sexton, 1999, p. 408). The whole psalm is a sort of celebration of the woman’s powerful and complex role in life: the roles of a mother and a wife – “her room carries the little people” / “she has / outlived the penises of her teens to come here, to the married / harbor” (Sexton, 1999, p. 408) – but also her connection to nature and almost mythical sources of power – “for she is the dangerous hills and many a climber will be lost / on such a passage” / “for she is a magnitude, she is many” / “for she is nourished by darkness” (Sexton, 1999, 408). The room no longer seems like a place of imprisonment “for she is seeing the end of her confinement now and is waiting / like a stone for the waters” (Sexton, 1999, p. 409), and this change may stem from the realization of the complexity of women’s existence, of the “multitude” within her, and the way out through it.

The *Tenth Psalm* seems to confirm this. Quite climatically,

[…] Anne sees that she must climb her own mountain.
For as she eats wisdom like the halves of a pear she puts one
foot in front of the other. She climbs the dark wing.
[…]
For I am not locked up.
For I am placing fist over fist on rock and plunging into the
Altitude of words. The silence of words. (Sexton, 1999, p. 411)

We witness Anne’s journey of growth and self-discovery, but we also witness the merging of Anne, the subject, and Anne, the poet, Anne the “I” announcing that she is not “locked up” anymore, slightly altering the verb phrase, signaling, this time, the physicality of the imprisonment, whether it refers to the asylum or the house. Anne is not the only one on the path of growth. Her daughter “grows to a woman” and she “starts up her own mountain (not being locked / in)” (Sexton, 1999, p. 412). Perhaps by climbing the mountain of self and escaping the prison she was locked in, Anne ensured that future generations, including her daughter, avoid being locked in too. The point, it seems, is to unlock the woman inside and let her out into the world.

However, the escape is not easy by any means. *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), published posthumously, abounds in poems filled with desperate attempts of the poet to climb out of oneself only to realize that it might be impossible. In “The Poet of Ignorance,” Sexton writes:

Perhaps I am no one.
True, I have a body

and I cannot escape from it.
I would like to fly out of my head,
but that is out of the question.
It is written on the tablet of destiny
that I am stuck here in this human form. (Sexton, 1999, p. 434)

Scarily reminiscent of Freud's anatomy-as-destiny theory, Sexton confronts the critique of her writing as narcissistic with a simple, yet effective, image of a woman locked in her body, trying to escape it, yet being arrested by the destiny her form sets before her. This experience alone, which would, as Ostriker (1986) rightly noticed, be "dismissed as self-absorbed, private, escapist, nonuniversal" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 6) just because it was a woman's, reflects the woman's condition and the woman poet's condition simultaneously – the struggle to reveal the former without diving deep into the latter.

"Riding the Elevator into the Sky" and "Locked Doors" appear to be connected by a similar thread of thought. "Riding the Elevator into the Sky" begins like this:

As the fireman said:
Don't book a room over the fifth floor
in any hotel in New York.
They have ladders that will reach further
but no one will climb them.
As the New York *Times* said:
The elevator always seeks out
the floor of the fire
and automatically opens
and won't shut.
These are the warnings
that you must forget
if you're climbing out of yourself.
If you're going to smash into the sky. (Sexton, 1999, pp. 426, 427)

"Climbing out of [oneself]," as it appears, comes with a warning; it implies a certain danger, a threat of being burned alive without hope for salvation since the firemen will not climb the stairs past the fifth floor. Yet Sexton disregards these warnings, climbing out of herself, like climbing the mountain. Although she claims to have "gone past / the fifth floor" numerous times, "only once / [had] [she] gone all the way up" (Sexton, 1999, p. 427). As she ascends higher and higher, surreal and symbolic scenes reveal themselves to her, representing different

layers of experience, knowledge, and perception. At the highest floor, though, she finds “a very large key, / that opens something – / some useful door – / somewhere – / up there” (Sexton, 1999, p. 427). The reader and the poet, it seems, are left in a state of uncertainty about what the key opens, hinting at the elusive nature of understanding.

Nevertheless, we are not left wondering for too long. “Locked Doors” may provide some answers. Commencing on a rather idyllic note, picturing angels and heaven, a place with no tears, the vision quickly turns into a nightmarish specter:

However, there is a locked room up there
with an iron door that can't be opened.
It has all your bad dreams in it.
It is hell.
Some say the devil locks the door
from the inside.
Some say the angels lock it from
the outside.
The people inside have no water
and are never allowed to touch.
They crack like macadam.
They are mute.
They do not cry help
except inside
where their hearts are covered with grubs. (Sexton, 1999, p. 43)

As Gill (2007) suggested, this certainly is “a place of cruelty where physical contact is prohibited or punished, […] a place of repression […] and finally, of death” (Gill, 2007, p. 161). Where our viewpoints seem to depart, though, is the ending part of the poem. Sexton writes: “I would like to unlock that door, / turn the rusty key / and hold each fallen one in my arms / but I cannot, I cannot. / I can only sit here on earth / at my place at the table” (Sexton, 1999, p. 443). To Gill (2007), this signifies the failure of the speaker to “reach the imprisoned, the repressed, and the unresponsive through language” (Gill, 2007, p. 161), illustrating that possessing the key and the desire to use it does not ensure successful communication. However, were we to assume that the found key from the previous poem was the one that would open these locked doors, it might also indicate the speaker's own imprisonment behind the door of her house – sitting at her “place at the table,” unable, at long last, to fully climb out of herself and cross the threshold into the prison of another. Yet this inability is not caused by the

egocentric desire to see only the self. Rather, it shows the socially imposed image of the woman who must know her place and remain within the boundaries of her domestic role, largely locked up in muteness herself. Therefore, she must first address herself to reach the others.

As a final gift to the imprisoned, Sexton offers a piece of advice in the very next poem, "The Wall":

For all you who are going,
and there are many who are climbing their pain,
[…]
for those many I say,
awkwardly, clumsily,
take off your life like trousers,
your shoes, your underwear,
then take off your flesh,
unpick the lock of your bones.
In other words
take off the wall
that separates you from God. (Sexton, 1999, p. 446)

Finally, it would appear, to surface into the light, to climb out of oneself, one first has to dive in, dissecting each part of self, unpeeling the layers, until one can "unpick the lock" dividing her from herself and the other. Although many have suspected that Sexton never succeeded in surfacing, remaining forever "trapped within her specific, private self" (Oates, 1978, p. 171), her constant voyaging in and out of herself through her poetry suggests that she did manage to climb high enough to peep over the fence into the world outside, enough to dare to break the silence.

3. Fleeing the Cage: Nooks and Crannies of the Female Body

"And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it."

– Hélène Cixous

"At the point where language falls away
from the hot bones, at the point
where the rock breaks open and darkness
flows out of it like blood, at
the melting point of granite
when the bones know
they are hollow & the word
splits & doubles & speaks
the truth & the body
itself becomes a mouth."

– from *Spelling* by Margaret Atwood

"The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project."

– Simone de Beauvoir

"Oh body, be glad.
You are good goods."

– from *Hurry Up Please It's Time* by Anne Sexton

Although Sexton never affiliated herself with the feminists, as Rich (1979) said, "she did some things ahead of the rebirth of the feminist movement" (Rich, 1979a, p. 121). Despite creating and publishing under the watchful eye of male-dominated literary criticism, and long before topics such as abortion, masturbation, menopause, and other experiences related to the female body and sexuality were acknowledged even by women, Sexton wrote about them openly. Known for her raw and unflinching exploration of personal experiences, Sexton's poetry challenged traditional notions of poetry and what constituted appropriate poetic subject matter. With her daring inscription of the woman's body in her poems, whether she explored its weakness, different cages it is entrapped in, or celebrated it and female sexuality for its wonders, Sexton fearlessly tackled taboo subjects related to women's experiences, inviting readers to confront the complexities of identity, sexuality, and societal expectations. Her poetry

unlocked the doors to redefining literary standards and unleashed women's writing from the cage of propriety defined by masculine literary criticism.

This chapter explores Sexton's poetry that presents the female body from different perspectives, revealing the damaging consequences of the long-lasting imprisonment of women in silence and obedience, exploring the psychological impact of societal beauty standards and aging, and also providing alternative images of womanhood that celebrate the female body for its transformative power.

3.1 "The Body is Dumb, the Body is Meat": The Prison of the Female Body

The concerns about the woman's image in literature can be traced as early as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, in which she observed that the woman inscribed in fiction and poetry by a man's hand – "very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater" (Woolf, 1935, p. 65) – differs significantly from a real woman and her experience. "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant" (Woolf, 1935, p. 66), Woolf wrote, pointing out the absence of woman from history and her complete powerlessness in matters of her own body, life, and destiny. Rich (1972) reiterated this through her experience as a poet burdened with male poetic tradition, which she wished to fit into and emulate for a long time. As she exemplified, "there were all those poems about women, written by men: it seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women frequently inhabited them" (Rich, 1972, p. 21).

While male poets enjoyed the privilege of exploiting the woman's body in their own writing, when faced with it in women's poetry, male readership and critics alike "tend[ed] to be made uncomfortable by women's body imagery, to feel that it is inartistic, and to take it as evidence of the writer's shallowness, narcissism, and unseemly aggressiveness" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 92). Yet, "the release of anatomy" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 91), as Ostriker (1986) called it, was an inevitable move in women's writing. Cixous (1976), along with other French feminists, insisted even more radically on women "writ[ing] through their bodies" about all their unspoken female experiences:

> about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright. A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor –

> once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language. (Cixous, 1976, p. 885)

Being more "in body" (Cixous, 1976, p. 886) than men, female bodies in women's writing become not only its subject but also a means of transcending traditional norms and creating a new "impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (Cixous, 1976, p. 886). As something denied women for so long and objectified by men in their writing, body, for Cixous (1976), was central in redefining, de-fetishizing, and reclaiming oneself for oneself, in writing as in life.

As already mentioned, Cixous's ideas have drawn as much support as criticism, yet either way, they reverberated loudly in feminist literary criticism. As Molly Hite observed in "Writing – And Reading – The Body: Female Sexuality and Recent Feminist Fiction" (1988), the woman's body was "traditionally a subject about which male authors have written with eloquence, fervor, and a certain proprietary confidence" (Hite, 1988, p. 121). The appropriation of their own bodies by women writers, inspired by feminist thought and French feminist writing, like Cixous's, thus appeared as a transgression against mainstream literary conventions by dismantling patriarchal representations of women as passive or merely biological entities and revealing the limitations and contradictions of these constructs. Similarly, in "(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism" (1985), Susan Rubin Suleiman emphasized the political significance "the question of women's bodies and women's sexuality" had "for the relations of power and control that govern society – and for literature, or the production of verbal constructs that in some ways reflect and, in some ways, help to create those relations" (Suleiman, 1985, p. 44). As Suleiman noted, women had long been objectified through the male gaze and needed to reclaim themselves as subjects. Literature, the place in which the silent and obscure position women had been forced into for far too long, seemed like the logical place to start. The change called for the invention of "both a new poetics and a new politics, based on women's reclaiming what had always been theirs but had been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it" (Suleiman, 1985, p. 44).

Thus, the female body indeed had a significant role in defining women's writing and became a powerful symbol in reclaiming control over women's self-representation in literature. Nevertheless, it becomes essential to differentiate between an eroticized female body and a functional female body in women's poetry. Both exist, but they bear different connotations and offer separate images from those that men's poems about the female body do. Women wrote

about their bodies in distinct modes. Ostriker (1986) described some of the characteristic ways in which women reacted to the female body in poetry – rejecting the body, often exploring its fragmentation; showing ambivalence toward the body, exploring the binding of social norms on the female body; and celebrating the body through "revisionist metaphor" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 108), redirecting the meanings of the body from the traditional male dichotomy of "woman as desired and dreaded Other" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 108).

Yet, long before these discussions, the female body and sexuality were among some of the topics Sexton became known for writing about, and one of the reasons why, as Rich (1979) claimed, she could be seen as a forerunner, in a sense, of the feminist movement in writing. When Sexton's second volume, *All My Pretty Ones,* was published in 1962, James Dickey, continuing the tradition after his first condescending review of her first volume, wrote that "[i]t would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience, as though this made the writing more real" (Dickey, 1988, p. 106). In a review for *Harper's*, Louis Simpson also criticized Sexton's next volume, *Live or Die*: "Her previous books were interesting, but now mere self-dramatization has grown a habit. A poem titled 'Menstruation at Forty' was the straw that broke this camel's back" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 264). Dickey's and Simpson's aversion largely reflected society's disgust with the intricacies of female bodies and sexuality from a woman's perspective. It seemed to show the rejection of the transgression of women writing themselves instead of being written by men.

On the other side of the front, some women critics and poets also shared the view of the inadequacy of her writing. Elizabeth Bishop, in a letter to Lowell upon reading Sexton's first book, commented that "there is all the difference in the world, I'm afraid, between her [Sexton's] kind of egocentricity that is simply that, and yours that has been […] made intensely interesting, and painfully applicable to every reader" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 125). Nevertheless, many women responded enthusiastically to Sexton's writing, like Erica Jong, who "warmly acknowledged the crucial support she received from Sexton's example" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 365). Middlebrook (1991) anticipated the importance of women's responses to the new women writers, such as Plath and Sexton, divided between condemnation of such poetry as morbidly self-preoccupied or liberatingly candid. As she asserted, this was a time for women critics and poets to decide "which kind of reader to be, for gender would always be perceived as salient in their case" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 364).

If it is to be judged by later developments in feminist literary criticism, Sexton's poetry, although she was not, in Woolf's words, an "arrant feminist" (Woolf, 1935, p. 53), broke the

existing norms and played a role in deconstructing the male gaze and retrieving the female body from it. Although, as Jane McCabe pointed out in "'A Woman Who Writes': A Feminist Approach to the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton," "Sexton's flirtatious parading, her glamorous posing, her sexual exhibitionism […] is clearly unacceptable to a feminist's sense of the sources of her own value" (McCabe, 1978, pp. 216, 217), her poetry, especially "confessional" about those "miniscule-immense" fragments of female bodies and sexuality Cixous (1976) talked about, revealed much about the greater problems of the time, or simply, as Phillips (1973) put it, about "the various states of womanhood" (Phillips, 1973, p. 83). To counter Dickey's accusations, for all practical purposes, we might say that Sexton's insistence on "bodily experience," which was certainly more than just "pathetic and disgusting," indeed made her "writing more real" (Dickey, 1988, p. 106), in a sense that it introduced a woman as a part of the universal experience rather than a marginalized object. Confessional mode, then, it could be said, provided a pulpit rather than a confessional box for such bold writing, and Sexton, most likely, manipulated the mode and transformed it for her purposes.

In the interview with Kevles (1998), asked about Simpson's critique of her poem "Menstruation at Forty" and about male critics, Sexton responded:

> I talk of the life-death cycle of the body. Well, women tell time by the body. They are like clocks. They are always fastened to the earth, listening for its small animal noises. Sexuality is one of the most normal parts of life. True, I get a little uptight when Normal Mailer writes that he screws a woman anally. I like Allen Ginsberg very much, and when he writes about the ugly vagina, I feel awful. That kind of thing doesn't appeal to me. So I have my limitations, too. […] But when someone hates another person's body and somehow violates it – that's the kind of thing I mind. (Kevles, 1998, pp. 335, 336)

In most cases, Sexton's comments on her writing demonstrate the intellectual lucidity and intensity of her awareness of the woman's condition. In the response above, it is as if she raised a counter question: Were women to silently absorb and be absorbed by the images men have to offer about them? Exposing the hatred and violation of the female body against her wish to speak freely about the natural course of a woman's life shows simultaneously the irony of being charged with transgression, while it was men who were crossing the boundaries, and her resolve not to succumb to criticism.

Much later, in a 1974 interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, without naming Simpson, Sexton commented that

> [t]here was no women's lib, when I was starting. As a matter of fact, it was very shocking that I wrote so personally about a woman. I wrote a certain poem called

> "Menstruation at Forty," […] and a very fine critic made some very disparaging remark that was such a good put-down to the poem! But if we'd had women's lib, there would have been an awful lot of letters coming in to *Harper's* magazine. That remark, "Really, what is this talk of menstruation? You don't *use* words like that." (Fitz Gerald, 1978, p. 82, italics in the original)

The choice of sentences she remembered from the critique is quite telling. It would appear that the disapproval was directed toward the *use of words* rather than toward the content of the poem. In fact, the poem, as Sexton continued to explain in the interview, was about the child she wanted but never had, the realization coming with the onset of her menstruation. Yet, it is as if the critique had already formed itself from the title alone – the word "menstruation" defining the poem as inartistic and shameful right from the beginning. I suspect that many other of Sexton's poems about the female body were judged in the same way based on the vocabulary, "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" and "In Celebration of My Uterus," both from *Love Poems*, being among them. Again, reclaiming the freedom of expression, the freedom to *use words* in whichever way one wanted to, was to shift the center of power, regaining some control over one's life, and "[s]ocially or intellectually, a free woman [was] a dangerous woman" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 93). Therefore, many objections to Sexton's overly exhibitionistic, personal, and body-obsessed writing often reflected a much broader context than just her writing. After all, as she indicated in the interview with Marx, a woman's body had already been dragged through male poetry, sometimes in far from flattering words, so it should not have been a big deal for her, the owner of that body, to inscribe her meanings to it, too.

Indeed, she unquestionably achieved that. Tracing the body in Sexton's poems is an exhausting yet rather rewarding task, as it is virtually everywhere. It reveals how profoundly she engaged with the topic and how significantly connected to the body women are. All three modes of writing about the body Ostriker (1986) illustrated – despising the body, reassessing its oppressors, and praising it – are present in Sexton's poetry. Poems like "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), "The Operation" (*All My Pretty Ones*), "The Sickness unto Death" (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*), and "Hornet" (*45 Mercy Street*), among many others, show the vulnerability, fragmentation, and anguish of the female body and can be identified as poems of rejection of the flesh, as Ostriker (1986) described them, often "paradigmatic of women's position in male society" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 98). As she further noted, there was "a subgenre of poems in which a woman's flesh and blood are manipulated by a condescending doctor figure" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 98). Sexton's "Unknown

Girl in the Maternity Ward" and "The Operation" fit this category. The lines: "The doctors are enamel. They want to know / the facts" (Sexton, 1999, p. 24) and "But the doctors return to scold / me" (Sexton, 1999, p. 25) in "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," along with the lines: "I come to this white office, its sterile sheet, / its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath / while I, who must, allow the glove its *oily rape*, / to hear the almost *mighty doctor* over me" (Sexton, 1999, p. 56, my emphasis) and "Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat" (Sexton, 1999, p. 57) from "The Operation" indicate the ruthlessness with which female privacy and female bodies are invaded by the doctor's inquiry for facts and his glove's "oily rape." As Melanie Waters proposed in "Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry," the woman's flesh in such poems "is offered up for the reader's scrutiny, mirroring (and in some cases anticipating) the debates about sexuality, reproduction, violence and objectification that dominated feminist thought in the latter half of the twentieth century" (Waters, 2015, p. 385).

The subsequent detachment from the body, rejection of the body, and its complete transformation into "a piece of meat" can be detected in "The Sickness unto Death." In it, we find out that "God went out of my fingers. / They became stone. My body became a side of mutton / and despair roamed the slaughterhouse" (Sexton, 1999, p. 441). The body is not only objectified, as a literal piece of meat hanging in the slaughterhouse, butchered and on display; it is also petrified ("God went out of my fingers. / They became stone"). This image is critical, as several critics have found Sexton's use of hands and fingers in many of her poems as significant symbols. In *Oedipus Anne*, Diana Hume George stated that "[h]ands remained synecdoches for self throughout Sexton's canon" (George, 1987, p. 64), while Gill (2007) countered this by claiming that hands, fingers, and arms are "a synecdoche for writing" (Gill, 2007, p. 101). Perhaps a compromise might be reached if we interpreted the imagery of hands and fingers as a synecdoche for writing the female self. In this case, losing God from her fingers, which turns them into stone, may be interpreted as a loss of power vital for creating the self by one's "own movement" (Cixous, 1976, p. 875). Consequently, the body, petrified and unable to inscribe itself, returns to its objectified state – "a side of mutton" (Sexton, 1999, p. 441). Even though the poem can also be interpreted through the religious lens, subsequent lines like "I who was a house full of bowel movement, / I who was a defaced altar" (Sexton, 1999, p. 442) show the complex relationship with the body that is both chained to the image of domesticity, even in its most primitive functions of "bowel movements," and connected to something sacred, yet tainted, though it remains unclear whether the altar in question is defiled by the consecrated wine or the blood of the sacrifice.

Finally, the full terror of the invaded and violated female body can be found in "Hornet," one of the poems from her posthumously published works, which generally received disparaging reviews for its lack of form, coherence, and cohesion. Even if it were so, these poems are far from negligible; in their incoherence, they show a certain clarity of vision, often terrifying and morbidly gruesome, but still worth a careful look. In the poem, through a metaphor of a hornet, Sexton possibly presents an unsettling depiction of how fear and anxiety infiltrate the mind and body, becoming inescapable and omnipresent. The hornet is a force with a relentless desire to find its victim and assault her:

Do not sleep for he wants to sew up your skin,
he wants to leap into your body like a hammer
with a nail, do not sleep he wants to get into
your nose and make a transplant, he wants do not
sleep he wants to bury your fur and make
a nest of knives, he wants to slide under your
fingernail and push in a splinter, do not sleep
he wants to climb out of the toilet when you sit on it
and make a home in the embarrassed hair. (Sexton, 1999, p. 500)

The imagery evoked is clearly of breaking and entering, of something violently intruding on the personal and the intimate. The desire to "sew up [her] skin" may also be interpreted as an impulse toward silencing, toward sewing someone's lips shut. Interestingly enough, both the hornet and its actions are described in strangely masculine terms: "a red-hot needle / hangs out of him" (Sexton, 1999, p. 499), the pronoun used is "he," and the stinging is described in hammer-and-nail imagery. The poem combines bodily harm, pain, and deformation, as well as sexual assault on the woman's private parts, thus turning the hornet into a threat that not merely stings but seeks to alter the body and consciousness permanently. Finally, the domestic spaces usually associated with the safety of home – "wrapped in the curtain" / "under the shelf" (Sexton, 1999, p. 499) – transform into a scene of terror as the hornet claims them as hiding places. The poem, thus, seems to reflect not only the unsafety of the female body from the harmful mental and physical attacks from a patriarchal society but also the hidden aspects of everyday life and consciousness.

Such images, overwhelmingly present in Sexton's poems, demonstrate the anxiety over body autonomy and society's urge to keep women imprisoned in their bodies, turned into objects, scorned and censored in attempts to evolve into subjects. However, as already mentioned, Sexton provided counter-images of femininity in her writing, too, and these are as

equally, if not more important, in understanding just how her writing challenged and transformed some of the deeply ingrained ideas about what it meant to be a woman in those times. The following parts move on to consider some of her poems that challenge the traditionally imposed images of womanhood and offer an alternative insight – praise for the wonders of the female body and a woman's sexuality.

3.2 "Question You About This": Female Beauty as a Cage

As previously stated, Sexton's poetry responds to the different manners women poets wrote about the body, exemplified by Ostriker (1986). Strangely enough, the poems about the rejection of the body, the author's ambivalent relationship toward it, and its celebration can be found throughout Sexton's corpus, so there is no chronological division between the themes that would indicate a change. Instead, all three attitudes are explored constantly, transforming from poem to poem and evolving into new insights.

Ostriker (1986) described women's attitudes of ambivalence toward the body as a response to "its conventional status as 'beautiful'" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 97), which, as she explained it, also signified a sort of imprisonment, a different kind of "bondage" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 104). In the context of Sexton's writing, such questioning of the female body as merely an object of desire and aesthetic value would make much sense, considering that "[i]n the second half of the twentieth century in America, woman's world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home" (Friedan, 1964, p. 31). Sexton's poems "Consorting with Angels" (*Live or Die*), "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (*Transformations*), and "Mother and Daughter" (*The Book of Folly*), among others, provide an excellent example of the ambivalence toward the beauty standards and expectations from a female body.

"Consorting with Angels" starts quite unambiguously with the statement: "I was tired of being a woman, / tired of the spoons and the pots, / tired of my mouth and my breasts, / tired of the cosmetics and the silks. / […] I was tired of the gender of things" (Sexton, 1999, p. 111). The opening states the weariness of being a woman, of the expectations tied to domesticity ("spoons and pots"), and the physicality of the female beauty ("my mouth and my breasts"). Such narrowly defined femininity traps itself and the woman into a role seemingly more associated with performance ("the cosmetics and the silks") than authenticity. The weariness extends to the imposed societal roles by which men, including her father, still take from what she offers ("the bowl I offered up"), reinforcing the notion of women as caregivers in a

patriarchal structure. This weariness is both the "housewife's fatigue" (Friedan, 1964, p. 25) – a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment with such restrictions on the woman's identity – and the "female fatigue of suppressed anger and the loss of contact with her own being" (Rich, 1972, p. 23). "But I was tired of the gender of things" (Sexton, 1999, p. 111), the speaker complains, which finally suggests a disillusionment not just with womanhood but with the entire concept of gender as a restrictive binary – it is, indeed, "a radical discontent with the awful order of things" (Sexton, 1999, p. 595). It may imply that imprisonment of gender works both ways, binding both women and men in socially constructed normativity. In the interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, Sexton declared:

> I see men as human beings. Like women's lib, I believe in men's lib. […] Because many men are stuck in dreadful jobs they loathe […]. He would love to throw it all over, but he's got to bring home the bread for the wife, who is very unhappy bringing up these draggy kids. She sweats all day. And it *was* a horrible day! If everyone could be liberated, could be fulfilled, it would be wonderful, marvelous. It's too bad that women couldn't rise up and free the men somehow. If they could be paid well enough, they could say, "Wait a minute. Let *me* go to work. You stay at home." (Fitz Gerald, 1978, p. 82, italics in the original)

While her statement demonstrates more expansive notions of the entrapments of gender, it also shows skepticism about the possibility of such a resolution of the problem, as she admits that it is "very hypothetical, one little drama in the perhaps world of never-never land" (Fitz Gerald, 1978, p. 82).

Therefore, the poem seeks a different escape, leading us into a speaker's dream full of symbolically imbued historical and religious figures. Joan of Arc, "put to death in man's clothes" (Sexton, 1999, p. 111), underscores the theme of rebelling against gender and stands as a reminder of the consequences of such rebellion. Adam and Eve, representing the original binary of male and female, are "both thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason" (Sexton, 1999, p. 112), suggesting the irrationality and inadequacy of these concepts to define human experience. Holding hands with them, the speaker is suddenly unburdened of gender: "I was not a woman anymore – not one thing or the other" (Sexton, 1999, p. 112). Yet, this movement away from gender does not seem so easy. The lines "I've been opened and undressed. / I have no arms or legs. / I'm all one skin like a fish" (Sexton, 1999, p. 112) may also indicate that the strictures of gender have been so tight for so long that to escape them one has to be disembodied and dismembered completely. The biblical imagery and the references to the Song of Solomon

are symbolic themselves and might further indicate a longing for both spiritual and bodily liberation.

"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" is another of Sexton's poems alluding to the deadly grip of the promoted image of proper womanhood as nothing more than a mindless beauty. The poem opens thus:

No matter what life you lead
the virgin is a lovely number:
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
arms and legs made of Limoges,
lips like Vin Du Rhone,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes
open and shut.
Open to say,
Good Day Mama,
and shut for the thrust
of the unicorn.
She is unsoiled.
She is as white as a bonefish. (Sexton, 1999, p. 224)

The satirical tone of the reimagined fairy tale, in combination with the references to contemporary American language and lifestyle, the poem also meets Ostriker's (1986) requirements of not "mak[ing] the poem itself too beautiful" and of making them humorous because "[c]omedy prevents the poet from lapsing into naïve self-exposure, and a comic stance enables writer and reader to agree that the predicament is, after all, innately ridiculous" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 105). In this light, Sexton's whole *Transformations* can be seen as an expression of ambivalence toward social and cultural norms.

Returning to the issue of the female body, Snow White is represented as a figure whose value is tied entirely to her appearance. She is described with objectifying, delicate, and artificial imagery ("cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper" / "arms and legs made of Limoges" / "her china-blue doll eyes"), implying not only the constraints of beauty obsession but also society's perception of "the female body as passive object" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 99), subject to the desires of others ("doll eyes / open and shut. / Open to say, / Good Day Mama, / and shut for the thrust / of the unicorn"). Passivity remains Snow White's defining trait throughout the story, as she plays "the dumb bunny" (Sexton, 1999, p. 228), whose decisions stem not from her agency but from what is expected or demanded of her.

The dangers and absurdity of such shallow values fed to women are explored through depictions of Snow White, who, as a young girl – "say she was thirteen" (Sexton, 1999, p. 225) – learns about the value of her body, ironically, through attempts of her stepmother to destroy it, and the prince's urge to abduct it, even in death, solely because of its beauty. On the other hand, the stepmother, "a beauty in her own right / though eaten, of course, by age" (Sexton, 1999, p. 225), represents another extreme – a desperate woman whose sole value, her beauty, is waning: "the queen saw brown spots on her hand / and four whiskers over her lip" (Sexton, 1999, p. 225), all but dehumanizing her and turning her into a ruthless assassin. Stripped of her former beauty, the queen is no longer a desirable "object" of affection, and since her beauty was the sole measure of her humanness, without it, she is another kind of mindless – not a "dumb bunny" but a raging wounded beast. Therefore, Sexton concludes, "[b]eauty is a simple passion, / but, oh my friends, in the end / you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes" (Sexton, 1999, p. 225). Beauty, presented to women as their only power, becomes simultaneously a curse and a source of self-destruction.

As a final irony, the fairy tale's ending offers a grim closure. After the wicked queen's demise, Snow White, now married to the prince, "held court, / rolling her china-blue eyes open and shut / and sometimes referring to her mirror / as women do" (Sexton, 1999, p. 229). Still locked in her doll-like passivity and the temporary security of her beauty, the mirror may foretell Snow White's destiny in a way similar to her stepmother's. The retold fairy tale may thus be read as a challenge to the image of the woman and her body as nothing more than "[e]xpensive commodity, pretty toy, sacred victim" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 216), a product of the society that prizes beauty and obedience in women, offering them few avenues for power outside of their physical appearance.

The poem "Mother and Daughter" from Sexton's next volume*, The Book of Folly* (1972), closely follows the predicament of womanhood from "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Linda, Sexton's elder daughter, is growing up, like Snow White: "Linda, you are leaving / your old body now / It lies flat, an old butterfly / […] loose as an old dress" (Sexton, 1999, p. 305). The body left behind is the body of a child, which the mother is unable to reach, as her "fingers turn to cankers," indicating powerlessness to prevent Linda from growing. The new body, a woman's body, inherits her mother's "booty, my spoils, / my Mother & Co. and my ailments" (Sexton, 1999, p. 306), thus, in fact, being passed down not only the treasures but all the damaging aspects of culturally defined womanhood, motherhood, and the pain that comes with aging. The mother has no choice but to give Linda all that is left of her, but it is hard to distinguish the gift from the curse.

However, Linda seems oblivious to the burden she has received – "Question you about this / and you'll not know the answer" (Sexton, 1999, p. 306), just as she might be unaware of how her transforming body, released from the protective cocoon of childhood, is culturally sentenced to the prison of everlasting duty, beauty, and self-sacrifice: "Keep on, keep on, keep on, / carrying keepsakes to the boys, / carrying powders to the boys, / carrying, my Linda, blood to / the bloodletter" (Sexton, 1999, p. 306). Unseeing, and perhaps unwilling to see this, Linda passes her time carefree, while the mother, like the wicked stepmother, foresees her "death / drooling at these gray lips" (Sexton, 1999, p. 306), robbed by Linda and her yet untroubled youth. Nevertheless, the mother here is not a vicious murderer trying to reclaim the mirror's favor. If anything, she may be seen as trying to break the mirror altogether so that Linda would not find herself trapped in its vicious circle of reflecting the wrong image. Without the veil and satire of the fairy tale, the poem is a rather gloomy representation of the "life-death cycle of the body" (Kevles, 1998, p. 335), questioning the possibility of ever escaping the "awful order of things" (Sexton, 1999, p. 595).

3.3 "Nothing in Your Body that Lies": Reclaiming the Flesh

Having explored the examples of Sexton's poetry that deal with the body's weakness and confinement to the standards of passive beauty, it is now necessary to inspect some of her poems that celebrate the body instead. According to Ostriker (1986), natural elements, like water, moon, earth, etc., which men have long used to describe women, are frequently employed by women poets to celebrate the physical self. However, these images are given new interpretations that reject conventional portrayals of women "as desired and dreaded Other" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 108), offering alternative perspectives instead, often through three metaphors: flower, water, and earth. Sexton's poetry also follows this pattern to some extent, but it also offers its own peculiar images of retrieval of the powerful female body and its sensuality. This is noticeable in the following poems that will be discussed below: "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" from *Live or Die* (1966), "In Celebration of My Uterus" and "The Nude Swim" from *Love Poems* (1969), and "The Fierceness of Female" from the posthumously published *45 Mercy Street* (1976).

As was often noted, poems of *Live or Die* that focus on survival include those addressing themes of children and childbirth. One of the strikingly vivid and meaningful poems among them is "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman," once again about Linda, but capturing a different reaction of a mother to her daughter's impending adolescence. Apart from

the first two lines, which sound like an announcement for the reader, "My daughter, at eleven / (almost twelve), is like a garden" (Sexton, 1999, p. 145), the rest of the poem can be read as a direct address to Linda, just as in "Mother and Daughter." The message, however, in this earlier poem differs entirely, revealing exuberance rather than despondency, tenderness rather than bitterness, and courageousness rather than fear.

The poem engages with the female body through the central metaphor of the daughter's growth, likened to a garden. Through the imagery of ripening fruit and vegetables – "lemons as large as your desk-side globe" / "garlic buds all engorged" / "the apples are beginning to swell" (Sexton, 1999, p. 146) – and the comparison of the daughter with the "stringbean" (Sexton, 1999, p. 146), the mother connects Linda's bodily changes to the natural cycle by which she is both amazed and perhaps a little frightened, as she repeatedly asks "Oh, little girl, / my stringbean, / how do you grow?" (Sexton, 1999, p. 146). The imagery of nature in bloom symbolizing puberty, and the representation of the powerful transformation taking place from the moment a woman conceives – "there would have been such ripening within" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147) – presents the connection between women and nature that provides an alternative and indeed contradictory image to the oppressive phallocentric derogation of women to the sphere of nature, which, often marginalized and devalued in contrast to reason, as Val Plumwood elaborated on in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, "includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 19). The mother offers Linda a belief contrary to this derogatory masculine perception, as Ostriker (1986) suggested women's poetry did.

However, the mother is also aware that there may not be a way to make the transition less frightening, a view that later took full force in "Mother and Daughter." The mother's fearfulness may also be hinted at through her memory of hearing "as in a dream / the conversation of the old wives / speaking of *womanhood*" (Sexton, 1999, p. 146, italics in the original), of which she heard nothing. Not privy to this essential information, the mother felt she was left alone with her changing body to wait "like a target" (Sexton, 1999, p. 146), an easy prey to misconstrued notions of womanhood. Therefore, the mother may feel some obligation and urgency to pass her knowledge to Linda so she would not share in her fate.

The metaphor of the high noon serves as a powerful symbol of the transition from girlhood to womanhood, which seems to be a woman's second birth – "women are born twice" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147). The mother advises Linda to "let high noon enter […] / let your body in, / let it tie you in, / in comfort" (Sexton, 1999, pp. 146, 147) rather than believe that it is

something ghastly and terrible, as "the Romans believed / that noon was the ghost hour" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147). It appears that those "young Romans," who are sure to come to Linda's door one day "at noon where they belong, / with ladders and hammers" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147) to conquer her like a foreign land, are the reason why the noon may be "the ghost hour" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147). Knowing this, the mother rushes "before they enter" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147) to be the first one to tell Linda that her "*bones are lovely*" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147) and "that there is nothing in your body that lies. All that is new is telling the truth" (Sexton, 1999, p. 148). The message stands as a compelling affirmation of womanhood, of the female body as "a world of its own, / a delicate place" (Sexton, 1999, p. 148) that is true and truthful in itself and in its endless "becoming / while it becomes" (Sexton, 1999, p. 147). The mother, as someone who has experienced the same and is now "an old tree in the background" (Sexton, 1999, p. 148), stands as a supportive but ultimately distant figure who can impart her knowledge on Linda but has to watch her embark on her own journey from a distance.

The poem ends with a final instruction or a command: "Darling, / stand still at your door, / sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone – / as exceptional as laughter / you will strike fire, / that new thing!" (Sexton, 1999, p. 148). It is a call for defiance, for standing her ground in the face of the Romans coming to subdue her. It is a call to arms against the invading and limiting images of themselves that the young girls at the threshold of womanhood are to receive from society while they should be creating them by themselves, those new images of fierce and liberating womanhood. The poem is pregnant with meaning, leaving a lasting impression, making one wonder about the other poem dedicated to Linda, "Mother and Daughter," and its drastically different tone. There is a possibility that Linda did not internalize the intended lesson, which may have inspired the subsequent poem. The later work resembles a kind of test, where the mother attempts to determine if the daughter remembers her teachings, only to discover that, despite her efforts, Linda remains similarly isolated and vulnerable to the inevitable challenges of a woman's life.

Let us now turn to Sexton's fourth volume, *Love Poems*, which, perhaps the most revelatory about female intimacy, received mixed reactions at its publication in 1969. Mona Van Duyn found the poems "simply not believable […] having none of love's privacy and therefore too frequently repelling the reader" (Van Duyn, 1978, p. 140), mainly because she assigned them with performative rather than confessional quality. Daniel Hughes praised the book, concluding that "the direct intimacy of these poems actually strengthens the self to a curious inevitability, in a particularized reality that nearly becomes myth" (Hughes, 1978, p. 141), yet in poems like "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" and "In Celebration of My

Uterus," perhaps quite predictably, he recognized "a typical Sextonish extravagance […], the old strain and dazzle" (Hughes, 1978, p. 141). There seemed to have existed a certain hesitancy toward the poems that dealt so bluntly with the body and its secret wants and needs, especially with individual body parts coming to the spotlight to "achieve significance beyond their function in the physical realm" (Chapel, 2012, p. 220).

"In Celebration of My Uterus" (*Love Poems*), despite having been analyzed and commented upon by many, is one of the poems almost impossible to skip when discussing the celebration of the female body. As Ostriker (1986) defined it, it is "a poem which finds unity where the culture propagates division: between a woman's sexuality and her spirituality, her creativity and her procreativity, herself and other women, her private and her public self" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 111), in a way also opposing the stereotypical and damaging images of womanhood that were exposed in "Snow White." In the poem, as in much of the rest of *Love Poems*, an interesting development is the personification of the body parts – in "The Touch," the hand is lying, collapsed, and lonely and the fingers are dancing; in "The Kiss," the mouth is in bloom; and in "In Celebration of My Uterus," the uterus is "singing like a school girl" (Sexton, 1999, p. 182). The jubilant beginning of the poem sets the tone, as the cancer misdiagnosis, "which is a striking trope for the culture's misdiagnosis of women" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 111), recovers the joys of living and being a woman. The first lines can also be seen as a juxtaposition to "The Operation," in which the "mighty doctor […] decide[d] to operate" (Sexton, 1999, p. 56):

Everyone in me is a bird.
I am beating all my wings.
They wanted to cut you out
but they will not.
They said you were immeasurably empty
but you are not.
They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong.
You are singing like a school girl.
You are not torn. (Sexton, 1999, pp. 181, 182)

The singing uterus, the "sweet weight," is also sung to: "in celebration of the woman I am / and of the soul of the woman I am / and of the central creature and its delight / I sing for you. I dare to live" (Sexton, 1999, p. 182). The conventional symbolism of the womb as a source of life affirms itself but in an alternative way: the "survival" of the uterus generates the

life, or the desire to live in the woman herself ("I dare to live"). Thus, the misdiagnosis that the uterus was "immeasurably empty," signaling the patriarchal valorization of the woman's body through the fullness of her womb, through childbearing, is rejected and replaced with a new meaning. The celebration of the uterus becomes the celebration of the self – "of the central creature and its delight" – removing the woman from the margins and bringing her to the center.

A characteristic return to the natural element, earth in this case, is also present: "Hello to the soil of the fields. / Welcome, roots" (Sexton, 1999, p. 182), and the fertility ("It is good this year that we may plant again – and think forward to a harvest"), which may be interpreted as owning one's body in its wholeness ("It is enough that the populace own these goods"), is celebrated by women all around the world, who "are singing together of this […] although some can not [sic] / sing a note" (Sexton, 1999, p. 182). The song is thus also an invitation for a communal rather than individual celebration of the body, as a unifying rather than dividing carrier of female experience. As the ending of the poem suggests, it may also be read as a hymn or a prayer for the future ("let me drum for the nineteen-year-olds"), a sort of ritualistic incantation trying to transmit the inner joy of womanhood into the outer world, into the collective conscience. The poem ends symbolically: "For this thing the body needs / let me sing / for the supper, / for the kissing, / for the correct / yes" (Sexton, 1999, p. 183). The stress on the seemingly simple, everyday human experiences – nourishment ("the supper"), intimacy ("kissing"), and agency ("the correct yes") – emphasizes, perhaps, the need for reintroducing the woman's body not as an object of desire and need but as a subject that desires and has needs of its own, among which the need for the power of choice, for living authentically, for the "correct yes" is of utmost importance.

The following poem in the volume is "The Nude Swim," which turns to the imagery of water. The poem recounts a shared, sensual experience in an isolated grotto "[o]n the southwest side of Capri" (Sexton, 1999, p. 183), where the speaker and her companion[3] swam nude. The poem opens with a description of the grotto as a space of privacy and freedom. As the speaker notes, they "entered it completely / and let [their] bodies lose all / their loneliness" (Sexton, 1999, p. 183). The grotto might symbolize an escape from isolation, both physical and emotional, as the act of swimming nude signifies a shedding of not only clothes but also societal

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[3] Sexton traveled to Capri on two occasions. In 1963, she was awarded a traveling fellowship by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She decided to split the money awarded with Sandy Robart, a close neighbor, who would accompany her on her trip to Europe due to her inability to travel alone. During the journey, she met a man in Rome, a Yugoslavian barber called Louis, with whom she had an affair, and who followed her and Robart when they visited Capri. In 1966, she traveled to Europe again with her husband, Kayo, and visited Capri, more precisely Blue Grotto, with him, too. Both occasions might have inspired the poem. Although the identity of her companion is not important, the gender might be, and it is most likely that the companion was male.

constraints and individual alienation. Thus, paradoxically, a place that is isolated itself provides a space for reconnecting with oneself and the other.

In the previous poem, the speaker was "filled" with birds – "Everyone in me is a bird" (Sexton, 1999, p. 181) – and here, instead of the birds, both the speaker and her companion are "filled" with fish – "All the fish in us / had escaped for a minute. / The real fish did not mind. / We did not disturb their personal life" (Sexton, 1999, p. 183). Both metaphors may be associated with freedom – birds in the sky and fish in water navigate infinite spaces. On the other hand, a comparison may be made on account of voice – while birds sing, which was the central motif of "In Celebration of My Uterus," fish are virtually mute. Fish escaping them may also be a metaphor for all the restraints imposed upon the bodies and minds, their sense of propriety, shame, or repression, being expulsed in the privacy of the cave. The "real fish," mute themselves, have no means nor reason to object to the metaphorical fish, as "their personal life" is not affected by the swimmers' brief release from the human condition. However, this may also indicate that the real world might not have had the same calm reaction to such momentary transcendence from their usual selves. The secrecy of their "transgression" is further emphasized by the image of the boatman, who "slept / with his hat over his face" (Sexton, 1999, p. 184), thus being unable to witness the scene.

The water, which is "so clear you could / read a book through it" and "so buoyant you could / float on your elbow" (Sexton, 1999, p. 184), becomes not just a physical medium but also a means of reaching emotional transparency and connection, a sense of clarity, weightlessness and ease that is not merely corporeal. Along these images, Sexton weaves in sensual imagery, particularly in referencing Matisse's *Red Odalisque*. By comparing herself to the odalisque, traditionally a symbol of the exotic and erotic, the speaker positions her body in a state of repose, beauty, and sensuality – "I lay on it [water] as on a divan. / I lay on it just like / Matisse's *Red Odalisque* (Sexton, 1999, p. 184). However, it appears that she also refuses to play into the eroticized image of the woman's body exposed solely to satisfy the curiosity of a male gaze: "One must picture a woman / without a toga or a scarf / on a couch as deep as a tomb" (Sexton, 1999, p. 184). The female body remains nude, liberated by and for itself, and not draped in "a toga or a scarf" to pose for the painter. Besides, being in the water, the body would be submerged and covered, or at least blurry, not allowing the intrusion of the unwelcome gaze.

The intimacy of the gaze surfaces, finally, in the closing lines: "you said, 'Look! Your eyes / are seacolor. Look! Your eyes / are skycolor.' And my eyes / shut down as if they were / suddenly ashamed" (Sexton, 1999, p. 184). In a sense, the way the eyes close immediately in

response to the companion's observation is close to how someone would react when seen in a moment of privacy, suddenly feeling the urge to cover the body from exposure. The ending may thus be interpreted both as a reaction that reaffirms the sense of modesty or a reaction that indicates the rejection of the sudden break of the pair's escape into connection and intimacy beyond words caused by the gaze. Thus, the body may be perceived as liberated only when it exists without the expectation of posing for or pleasing the eyes of the observer. The poem ultimately captures a moment of freedom and the dissolution of boundaries between the pair and between them and the natural environment with which they harmonize in a fleeting but profound moment of bliss.

The last poem I would like to explore here is "The Fierceness of Female" (*45 Mercy Street*), which explores themes of female sexuality and liberation through a vivid depiction of the female body engaged in an intense sensual experience. However, in women's writing, sexuality and sensual encounters should not be connected with something vulgar or pornographic nor judged as exceedingly exhibitionistic, as Sexton's poetry on such topics was often characterized. As Ostriker (1986) remarked, the "norms of female sexual purity, which amount to another sort of requirement of blankness, featurelessness, nonexistence, are not a thing of the distant past" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 63). Writing about female sexuality was often a means for women to regain their voice and express their desire for intimacy and pleasure, which had either been denied by assigning their bodies to the strictly procreative role or portrayed as sinful through the good/bad woman dichotomy. Rather than perpetuating the portrayals that separate the woman's experience from that of a man or enabling the antagonistic imagery in their writing, "sexual union becomes a figure in women's poems for every reunification needed by a divided humanity" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 176), and women often "describe sexual ecstasy intensively, commonly employing the idea of interpenetration between two lovers, the dissolving of boundaries between individual selves, and, at especially sensuous moments, the elimination of distinctions between human and non-human existence" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 174). Similarly, both "The Nude Swim" and "The Fierceness of Female" explore the body's sensuality as a unifying and shared experience that is empowering and formative for both parties rather than exploitative or harmful, thus opposite to the notion of "carrying […] blood to the bloodletter" (Sexton, 1999, p. 306).

"The Fierceness of Female" can be described as intensely sensorial without being ostentatious. From the outset, the speaker is situated in a deeply embodied state: "I am spinning on the lips" (Sexton, 1999, p. 546), suggesting surrender to physical sensations, which bring release from the weight of personal history, as if she is discarding her former self to inhabit her

body in the present moment – “they remove my shadow, / my phantom from my past, / they invented a timetable of tongues, / that take up all my attention” (Sexton, 1999, p. 546). The focus on the body’s movements is once again harmonized with nature and its cycles – “And like the ocean, / pushing toward land / and receding / and pushing” (Sexton, 1999, p. 546) – signaling the unity between the lovers (“all is two”) and between the lovers and the world. The act of lovemaking becomes, as predicted above, a scene of revival and release, of self-discovery and unification with the lover, where the bodies, lips, and hands seem like one, intertwined in an almost out-of-body experience that allows something new to emerge:

I unknit.
Words fly out of place
and I, long into the desert,
drink and drink
and bow my head to that meadow
the breast, the melon in it,
and then the intoxicating flower of it.
Our hands that stroke each other
the nipples like baby starfish —
to make our lips sucking into lunatic rings
until they are bubbles,
our fingers naked as petals
and the world pulses on a swing. (Sexton, 1999, pp. 546, 547)

The barren image of the desert is countered by the imagery of fertility, abundance, and flourishing (“meadow”/ “the breast, the melon in it”/ “the intoxicating flower”), indicating the possibility of rebirth and the awakening of sensuality. As the poem progresses, the intimate, tactile connection between the two bodies becomes the central focus. The touch of the hands, fingers, and bodies is a persisting motif in Sexton’s poetry, especially in poems dealing with intimacy, symbolizing physical and spiritual connection and fulfillment. It is as if the touch becomes a transformative force through which the world responds to the harmony, beating to the same rhythm as their bodies, reinforcing the idea of interconnectedness and unity. It also restores the woman’s body and sexuality from “nonexistence” (Ostriker, 1986, p. 63), showing that they resonate with the world and redefine the universal.

The final lines, taking a more spiritual turn, though some may find them blasphemous, depict the speaker “rais[ing] [her] pelvis to God / so that it may know the truth of how / flowers smash through the long winter” (Sexton, 1999, p. 547). There seem to be several revisions here

that make this poem stunningly empowering. Firstly, the God is rendered genderless – "it" – and thus stripped of the male power without being imbued with the binary opposition. The neutrality of "it" seems to create a sense of homogeneity that defies disunity and bias. Also, as Ostriker (1986) argued, such revisions "challenge not only our culture's concepts of gender but also its concepts of reality" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 223). Secondly, although it appears at first as if the act of "rais[ing] [the] pelvis to God" is an act of rebellion or disobedience if not of pure blasphemy, it may also be seen as a sort of role-reversal in which the speaker, the poet, is prophesizing "the truth" back to God, negating the traditional religious repression of the female body and sexuality, both symbolized through the pelvis. Finally, the image of "flowers smash[ing] through the long winter" is particularly symbolic as it represents a powerful rebirth and uncontainable force of nature to renew and flourish even after the long dormancy, which is the truth of life. In this light, the poem can be read as a celebration of the female body and sexuality and an empowering testament to its resilience, power, and fierceness, as the title suggests.

The female body was a pervasive theme in Sexton's poetry. All three explored attitudes toward the body can be found throughout her work, coexisting and merging at times. Thus, there is no way to seek the final answer to what might have been Sexton's definitive view on the body: rejection, ambivalence, celebration, or all three. Rather than answers, she provides questions and images that seem essential for all those contemplating or challenging what womanhood is even today, or today more than ever. Perhaps such images can also serve as evidence that even in her highly intimate poems, there is more than a "raw" confession; there is "something worth learning" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34), something beyond just "the burden of minute personal detail" (Hamilton, 1978, p. 128). While many had "turn[ed] away" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34) from her poems dealing with topics related to the body and its intricacies, which was a controversial subject for women poets at the time of her writing, she kept her word, "fasten[ing] a new skin" (Sexton, 1999, p. 35) around such topics, making the private public, but also declaring the private political. Her poems may indeed be seen, as she wanted them to be, as depictions of the "life-death cycle of the body" (Kevles, 1998, p. 335) or, as presented in this chapter, as a death-life flight of the body from the cage of suppression to the liberty of celebration and fierceness.

4. From Domesticity to Dissent: The Stages of Womanhood

"Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – 'Is this all?'"

– from *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan

"The only way to escape the abyss is to look at it, gauge it, sound it out and descend into it."

– Cesare Pavese

"Poetry led me by the hand out of madness. I am hoping I can show others that route."

– Anne Sexton

"When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, [...]. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman."

– from *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf

The theme that Anne Sexton wrote incessantly about was the woman, whether that woman was her or not. The housewife, the wife, the lover, the seductress, the seduced, the daughter, the mother, the poet, the madwoman, the cripple, the witch, the rebel, the suicide – these are some of the women we meet through her poetry, or the roles women play through life, willingly or not. In this sense, her poetry is a "journey," as Thomas P. McDonnell suggested, but not only "a journey in and out of the various dark" (McDonnell, 1978, p. 132) but also "a journey in and out of the various" self, and a voyage toward some kind of self-definition, or a quest for identity.

Much has been said about women's writing and identity exploration. In "On Female Identity and Writing by Women" (1981), Judith Kegan Gardiner proposed that "female identity is a process" and that "the hero is her author's daughter" (Gardiner, 1981, p. 349), explaining how these affect the fluidity and flexibility in women's writing, which often defies

conventional literary structures and genres. Since female identity is continually evolving, primarily shaped by relationships like the bond between mother and daughter, the writing becomes a maternal process, too, which is an idea quite similar to Rich's (1972) suggestion that a woman is "bearing" herself into the world, "becoming [one's] own midwife, creating [oneself] anew" (Rich, 1972, p. 25). Gardiner (1981) maintained that women writers and readers have distinct approaches to writing compared to men, viewing texts, particularly women's fiction, as a space where female authors explore and define multiple possible identities. Thus, the text and the female protagonist often "begin as narcissistic extensions of the author" (Gardiner, 1981, p. 357), but they gradually gain autonomy as the author learns to see her creation as separate from herself.

In women's poetry, Ostriker (1986) also proposed that women strive for "autonomous self-definition," which is, again, compared to "a woman attempting to give birth to herself" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 59). However, according to her, in the process of redefining themselves, women often begin by exploring a variety of representations that reflect their feelings of marginalization and inferiority through depictions of selfhood as "nonexistent, invisible, mute, dissolving, or deformed" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 60). Such portrayals of identity highlight the struggle of being an artist in a society that does not permit a woman a role outside the gender-assigned roles of a wife and a mother. This leads to a sense of division of identity, similar to the "double bind" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 3) situation Juhasz argued women poets are trapped in, by which their womanhood becomes denied by their poethood, and vice versa. Essentially, then, as Ostriker (1986) argued, "contemporary women's poetry commences with the dread of nonexistence" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 60) or perhaps with the fear of misrepresented and limited existence as lovers and nurturers. Thus, women's poetry, motivated by identity crisis, frequently reflects a sense of distorted, even deformed duality that often fails to achieve wholeness.

Sexton's poetry, in many ways, reflects these observations. When we separate the poems from the poet, giving them a life of their own, we may perceive Sexton as not only exploring and reinventing herself but also exploring and reinventing the image of a woman. Her poetry interacts with her memories and life, but, as suggested, it also transcends the self and engages in the interaction with the reader, showing perhaps a piece of the self to uncover a piece of someone else's self. Similar to her poems about the female body, Sexton's poems about womanhood in all its stages and particularities paint a picture that moves from deprivation and nothingness to defiance and survival, even when survival means scorn and rejection by society precisely because of her audaciousness to write herself out of the margins

and break her path into the new universal that would also include the particular. As Juhasz (1976) explained, and as was already discussed, the universal was grounded on male standards and experiences, and it thus excluded a large portion of what women may find to be universal experiences for them. Therefore, there is a difference between finding "the universal in the particular […] [and] find[ing] the particular in the particular" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 139). The particular experiences in Sexton's poetry may be seen as "touching the particular in someone else; [while] generalization obscures and even defeats the poetic event" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 139).

Sexton herself was perhaps on the trail of the same thought when, in "The Barfly Ought to Sing," she wrote how Sylvia Plath's early poetry "dodged the whole point and did so perhaps because of her preoccupation with form" (Sexton, 1966, p. 92). This was a response to Lowell's praise of Plath's early poetry as being able to "[get] right to the point," which she felt was inaccurate, sensing that those "poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that.)" because she "wasn't, in truth, free to be herself" (Sexton, 1966, p. 92). In comparison to Lowell and Plath (who was ranked lower than Lowell), Sexton was often given the inferior spot, usually on account of form, language, and content, except perhaps by Phillips, who labeled her as "the reigning high-priestess of the confessional mode" (Phillips, 1973, p. 6), which is a problematic praise if it fails to extend beyond just the confessional poetry. Rosenthal (1967) concluded that Sexton's "poems exist on a narrower scale than Sylvia Plath's. Their high points are not the magnificent fusion of private and universal motifs, but piercing, isolated strains of music and finely compassionate impressions of pitiful life" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 136). Yet, such criticism perhaps failed to recognize precisely the issue of the accepted definitions of the universal and private, just as John Holmes was unable to see beyond the strictly personal release of a mentally unstable mind. Furthermore, it also disregarded Sexton's talent to get to the core of the matter, to truly write about "the thing itself" (Woolf, 1935, p. 111), which, contrary perhaps to what Woolf had in mind, indeed could mean writing about all the experiences, thoughts, and emotions that, instead of "alter[ing] its [a woman's mind] clear vision" (Woolf, 1935, p. 111), actually clarify the vision.

Judging from Sexton's poetry, such as the already discussed poem "For John," from her interviews and her comments on Plath's earlier poetry,[4] Sexton's vision seems to have been clear from the beginning. Her poems were to bravely "make a clean breast of it in face of every

[4] The comment should in no way be taken as ill-intended criticism. Rather, it reveals the literary atmosphere of the era in which Sexton and Plath created, which was heavily male-dominated and based on traditional critical approaches that favored form above all else.

question”[5] (Sexton, 1999, p. 2), serving “as the ax for the frozen sea within us”[6] (Sexton, 1999, p. 48). In the 1968 interview with Kevles (1998), Sexton spoke of her courage to write about her private experiences as “digging up shit” with one hand while “covering it with sand” with the other, for which she “felt like a reporter researching himself” (Kevles, 1998, p. 313). However, she also reiterated that “poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical” (Kevles, 1998, p. 329) and that she often writes under a guise, believing that “when [she] [is] writing a poem, [she] [is] the person who should have written it” (Kevles, 1998, p. 330). In the 1965 interview with Marx (1978), asked about the criterion for truth, Sexton responded that “[t]he effort is to try to get to some form of integrity when you write a poem, some whole life lived, to try to present it now, to give the impact” (Marx, 1978, p. 35). Finally, in the 1974 interview with Fitz Gerald (1978), Sexton stated that she wished her poetry “to be like a snapshot, to have the quality of a candid photograph” (Fitz Gerald, 1978, p. 72). All her musings on her writing are quite telling about how she wanted it to be perceived, but they also form guidance through her poetic journey.

Sexton’s poetry about selfhood and womanhood, which often amounted to the same thing, indeed follows a “whole life lived,” and not necessarily her life only in isolation from everyone else’s. The photograph-like vividness of the images she evokes in her poems succeeds in getting “to the heart of the matter” (Kevles, 1998, p. 328), which might have been the whole point of her writing – “to give impact” (Marx, 1978, p. 35), as she put it, to reach someone outside herself with the awareness she had about herself and the state of the affairs that caused hers, and the dissatisfaction of thousands of other women. As discussed in Chapter Two, to escape oneself, one would probably have to thoroughly research and report oneself, as Sexton suggested, and explore one’s own identity in order to glimpse into another’s.

This chapter examines Sexton’s poetry that sought “the particular in the particular” (Juhasz, 1976, p. 139) experience or explored an invented identity through which it transmitted the truths many women could identify with at the time and can still identify today. These are the poems related to womanhood at its most vulnerable – pre-defined, boxed-in, given a role to play; womanhood at its most invisible and tabooed – mad, angry, and crippled; and womanhood at its most feared and subdued – rebellious, liberated, and strong, and thus dangerous, condemned, and punished.

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[5] Epigraph to *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*; an excerpt of Schopenhauer’s letter to Goethe from 1815, which was also the inspiration for the title of “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further.”
[6] Epigraph to *All My Pretty Ones*; an excerpt from Kafka’s letter to Pollak.

4.1 "A Kind of Coffin": Marrying Houses and Playing Life

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan (1964) discusses how women, living according to societal expectations of the "feminine mystique," often lost their individuality and lived through their children. This dynamic, supported by psychology's concept of "symbiosis," which insisted "that the constant loving care of the mother was absolutely necessary for the child's growth, for an indeterminate number of years" (Friedan, 1964, p. 277), resulted in emotionally disturbed children and infantilized mothers who found personal fulfillment only through their children. Such a symbiotic relationship was damaging to both mothers and children, leading to two ways of evading growth, as psychiatrist Andras Angyal suggested, although not strictly related to women: "'noncommitment'" and "'vicarious living'" (quoted in Friedan, 1964, p. 279). "Noncommitment" involves going through life without being truly engaged in jobs or relationships, as if "'playing a role'" (quoted in Friedan, 1999, p. 279), while "vicarious living" involves denying one's own identity in favor of the standardized, prescribed identity, which also meant concealing any desires which were incompatible with the required norms. Friedan argued that women trapped in the "feminine mystique" lived through these methods, as they were "at the very heart of [their] conventional definition of femininity" (Friedan, 1964, p. 280). However, since women had a natural desire to develop and reach their full potential, the suppression of identity could not be tolerated for long, leading to some form of resistance, also including mental breakdowns or even suicides.

Lacking ambition beyond marriage, as Friedan (1964) warned, the American housewife struggled with the pressures of life that "create[d] a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness," which was a direct attack to her ability to "retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or 'I' without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive" (Friedan, 1964, p. 293). Trapped against the wall, Friedan argued that the position of the housewife, forced to adapt to and accept that role as her only existence, was akin to prisoners in Nazi concentration camps who lost their identities and became consumed by basic survival needs. While American women were not facing physical extermination, they experienced similar dehumanization and infantilization and endured a "slow death of mind and spirit," being trapped in "the comfortable concentration camp" (Friedan, 1964, p. 296). To Friedan, educated women's feelings of entrapment and frustration in the role of housewives indicated that "*women have outgrown the housewife role*" (Friedan, 1964, p. 296, italics in the original). Although it may be argued that education had little to do with the feeling of dissatisfaction, as surely many uneducated women felt precisely the same, perhaps education provided an outlet

for the expression of the discontent and was undoubtedly (and still is) a path out of the metaphorical "concentration camp" for women, and a path to rediscovering their sense of self and pursuing accomplishments outside the four walls of a house.

Sexton's poetry parallels many of these ideas, even in the volumes that were published before Friedan's book, but especially prominent in later books, in a sense confirming Middlebrook's (1991) observation that "grassroots feminism was the theory, grassroots poetry the practice" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 364). In her memoir, Spivack (2012) also observed how "[w]omen's ambition was seen as 'male' or 'masculine'" and how various religious, political, and psychological ideologies combined to "keep women 'in their place' […]: stupid, pleasant, and compliant" (Spivack, 2012, p. 172). According to her, both Plath and Sexton, in life and poetry, "reflected that duality of expectation; […] the conflict between the needs of the writer and of the dutiful housewife" (Spivack, 2012, p. 172). Sexton's life speaks volumes about the feeling of maladjustment to the roles she was assigned, more than often to her disadvantage. Looking at her as a woman, we might at best say, as Margaret Atwood (1977) wrote in a review of *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977) edited by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, that "Sexton emerges as neither a heroine nor a victim but as an angular, complex, often loving and at times rather insufferable human being" (Atwood, 1977). Nevertheless, looking at Sexton, the poet, it is safe to say that she "explored the limits of sanity and the nature of womanhood more fully than any poet of her generation" (Chapel, 2012, p. 216). Many of her poems deal explicitly and implicitly with the woman caged in the house, even becoming the house herself or playing the role like an actress or a puppet, performing her life on stage. Some of these poems are "Housewife" (*All My Pretty Ones*), "Mother and Jack and the Rain," "Live" and "Self in 1958" (Live or Die), "Cinderella" and "The White Snake" (*Transformations*).

"Mother and Jack and the Rain" (*Live or Die*) is an intriguing poem, developing several themes through a reflective, almost nostalgic tone. Starting with "I have a room of my own" (Sexton, 1999, p. 109), the poem undeniably echoes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of My Own*, and the speaker's note that she is "fingering the pen lightly, my blade" (Sexton, 1999, p. 109) makes it clear that the room is indeed a space for creation. However, throughout the poem, whether this is a good thing or not becomes ambiguous. A pen being described as a "blade" indicates that it is also used for some sort of combat – for "grappl[ing]" perhaps with her multiple "selves" – "With this pen I take in hand my selves / and with these dead disciples I will grapple" (Sexton, 1999, p. 109) – suggesting the fragmentation within and perhaps without her, and the need to address it through a poem. The rain seems to be some haunting spirit, an instigator of the "old unnecessary stories" (Sexton, 1999, p. 109), which conjures up memories of

childhood, her mother and father, and of herself as the daughter – "I made no voyages, I owned no passport. / I was the daughter" (Sexton, 1999, p. 110) – seemingly drawing a parallel between her being a daughter and being virtually imprisoned, immobile, as if, perhaps, being closed in a room, her own but empty, since the earliest age.

The following section is a flashback to when the speaker was sixteen and spent a night with Jack "beside a tiny lake / and did nothing at all, lay as straight as a bean" (Sexton, 1999, p. 110), which progresses into a sort of game of "playing house":

We played bridge and beer games for their own sake,
filled up the lamp with kerosene,
brushed our teeth, made sandwiches and tea
and lay down on the cabin bed to sleep.
I lay, a blind lake, feigning sleep while Jack
pulled back the wooly covers to see
my body, that invisible body that girls keep. (Sexton, 1999, p. 110)

There is a double performance at play here: a performative role-play of two teenagers spending a night together pretending to be adults, playing bridge, drinking, getting ready for bed, etc., and a performance by the girl alone, pretending to be asleep while Jack tries to sneak a glimpse of her body. The passage highlights the complexity of female sexuality, particularly the pressure to remain "pure," to keep her body "invisible," since a "virgin is a lovely number" (Sexton, 1999, p. 224), as Snow White teaches us. In contrast to the speaker's passivity, Jack's active role in uncovering her body and gazing upon it shows the power dynamics in male-female relationships.

The last section brings imagery of death and loss, and again the image of the room – "I'm in a room of my own. I think too much" (Sexton, 1999, p. 110) – which sounds burdening rather than liberating, as if the room constricts instead of liberating. Mother and Jack, who "fill up heaven," are now said to "endorse / my womanhood" (Sexton, 1999, p. 110), yet even endorsed, the womanhood seems destined "to endure / somehow to endure" (Sexton, 1999, p. 111). This closure is slightly ambiguous, hinting at both resignation from life and determination to live despite the struggles of existence, which makes perfect sense considering the theme of the whole volume.

"Housewife" (*All My Pretty Ones*), one of Sexton's most famous poems "that crackles and is over almost before it starts" (Ostriker, 1986, p. 72), is an outright critique of gender roles, marriage as an institution, and particularly the machinations by which women are reduced to domesticity and the house to the point of being devoured by the house or becoming

the house themselves, therefore being turned into an inanimate, dehumanized object endowed only with minimal bodily functions needed for survival:

Some women marry houses.
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman *is* her mother.
That's the *main thing*. (Sexton, 1999, p. 77, italics in the original)

The woman in such a position becomes unidentifiable, or at least indistinguishable, from any other woman, as she is "permanent and pink," thus predefined not only in her role but also in her appearance so that she can best serve her biological purpose of attracting her husband who is to "enter by force." The house then becomes her second identity, the desired identity, whose existence is predicated on the erasure of the self that had existed before and kept existing under the second skin. This is why a woman is "faithfully washing herself down," kneeling in a subservient position, dutifully surrendering to the fate assigned to her from birth, when, by social expectations, just by being a girl, she essentially inherits her mother's "Mother & Co. and [her] ailments" (Sexton, 1999, p. 306). The final lines – "A woman *is* her mother. / That's the *main thing*" – suggest that the cycle continues from one generation to another, emphasizing the idea that a woman's identity and self-worth are inextricably tied to the roles of a housewife and mother, leading to a form of obligatory self-imprisonment, the loss of autonomy, and a permanent state of living under the mask of "another skin." On the other hand, the statement that "a woman is her mother" may also be interpreted as an act of self-creation by accepting to play the given role. In this sense, the closing lines could also be a call for re-evaluating the woman's agency to actively participate in her rebirth, in doing something other than playing house.

Expressing her disillusionment, in the interview with Kevles (1998), Sexton remarked:

> 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 was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be

> married, to have children. […] I was trying my damnedest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. (Kevles, 1998, pp. 309-311)

Her comments express the same sentiments as many collected in interviews and presented in Friedan's (1964) book – a sense of displacement, of being deceived and dragged into the picture-perfect life of Hollywood movies and fairy-tale-like happily-ever-afters, while under the façade, the house was already falling apart. Therefore, playing life instead of living it became a frequent trope in Sexton's writing, especially in poems about male-female relationships, marriage, and childbearing, reflecting the ideas from "Housewife." By extension, as noted by Waters (2015), "the figure of housewife […] is variously identified with dolls, puppets and other forms of automata" (Waters, 2015, p. 383) throughout women's poetry, including Sexton's. The disillusionment with the American Dream is almost palpable in Sexton's renditions of the fairy tales in *Transformations*. As Axelrod (1978) contended, neither the conclusion of the fairy tale nor the American Dream it symbolizes leads to happiness in love stories culminating in marriage. Instead, "the maturation signalled in the completion of courtship – the institution of marriage – is really a deathly stasis" (Axelrod, 1978, p. 138), or, as Ostriker (1983) observed, "these marriages are seen as some form of either selfishness or captivity" (Ostriker, 1983, p. 66).

Two fairy tales in the volume have eerily similar endings, "Cinderella" and "The White Snake." Either destined to marry the prince or being a princess married off, the woman seems to have little say in these matters. Cinderella meets the prince at the ball, which is "a marriage market" (Sexton, 1999, p. 256). He becomes so enchanted by her that he lays a trap for Cinderella – "the prince / covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax" in order to "find his strange dancing girl for keeps" (Sexton, 1999, p. 257). His plan is successful, and he finds Cinderella and marries her, yet in no part of the story do we hear Cinderella's voice and whether she wants the marriage. As soon as we discover that her foot "fit into the shoe / like a love letter into its envelope" (Sexton, 1999, p. 258), the marriage is announced, and we are informed that:

> 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,
> never telling the same story twice,

never getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That story. (Sexton, 1999, p. 258)

The ending satirizes the sheer incredulity of the idealized fantasy behind "that story," which is not only "pathetically dull" (Ostriker, 1983, p. 66) but also completely dehumanizing and petrifying, as the main actors are reduced to static figures of "two dolls in a museum case." They are preserved behind glass, almost like characters in Hollywood movies, devoid of the complexities of real life – no diapers, no dust, no arguments. Smiling eternally, they perform their roles, ultimately becoming "regular Bobbsey Twins," blank and idealized figures lacking individuality and personal growth.

The princess from "The White Snake," who was to be married through a competition, "[a] common way for princesses to marry" (Sexton, 1999, p. 231), shares a similar fate to Cinderella. The princess – "ever woman […], ever Eve" (Sexton, 1999, p. 231) – perhaps more intent on avoiding marriage than on entering it, kept demanding from the suitor to perform almost impossible tasks. However, she was unaware that, unlike all the other suitors who met their deaths in pursuit of her hand, the man who persisted had magical abilities that enabled him to succeed in the trials. When he accomplished the final task,

They played house, little charmers,
exceptionally well.
So, of course,
they were placed in a box
and painted identically blue
and thus passed their days
living happily ever after —
a kind of coffin,
a kind of blue funk.
Is it not? (Sexton, 1999, p. 232)

The ending nearly replicates the imagery of confinement and artificiality from "Cinderella," perhaps with even more sinister implications, as the "box" is now compared to a "coffin" rather than to a "museum case," which continues the metaphor of dehumanization making the pair not dolls but corpse-like bodies placed in the coffin. The marriage then seems to imply a death trap, a limiting and inescapable space of stagnation and "blue funk" – a state of desperation and emptiness masked by the illusion that they are "living happily ever after."

Both poems highlight the imprisoning, artificial, and death-like state of the institution of marriage and societal expectations about women renouncing their identities to become lifeless mannequins displayed behind the windows of the house that turns into a sort of graveyard. Fairy tales can easily be applied to real life, too. In her lecture notes, which remained unpublished but are quoted in Gill (2007), Sexton commented that in "Self in 1958" (*Live or Die*), "we have me stopped as the perfect housewife, as the advertised woman in the perfect little ticky tacky suburb…. It is a picture of me before madness became my friend" (quoted in Gill, 2007, p. 70). As Gill (2007) noted, the word "'stopped' […] connotes a state of frozen inanimation, or arrested development" (Gill, 2007, p. 70). Just like doll-like fairy tale renditions of princesses, Sexton is also caught in the "doll's house," a half-living "plaster doll," wondering if she is "approximately an I" and what exactly can be called "reality" (Sexton, 1999, p. 155). The speaker explains that:

Someone plays with me,
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,
Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?
Someone pretends with me —
I am walled in solid by their noise —
or puts me upon their straight bed.
They think I am me!
Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend!
They pry my mouth for their cups of gin
and their stale bread. (Sexton, 1999, p. 155)

What seems to be real – the perfect world of suburban houses with "the happy housewife heroine" (Friedan, 1964, p. 27) – is nothing but a construct, an illusion played out before the world until even the actors lose the sense of reality, until the act becomes the reality that destroys the real "me" of the actress, until, finally, "madness [becomes] [her] friend."

Finally, in "Live" (*Live or Die*), which has ultimately been interpreted as a poem in which the will to live conquers the death wish, there is a similar questioning of the authenticity of one's life. "Is life something you play?" (Sexton, 1999, p. 168) Sexton asks while contemplating how life has to continue, even if it is a pretense, despite suicidal thoughts. She describes this process as dismembering – "lugging myself as if / I were a sawed-off body" (Sexton, 1999, p. 167) – conjuring again the image of a doll, or a corpse, and as "a perjury of the soul" (Sexton, 1999, p. 167), an attack to the authentic self, or the authentic selves, however many there might be that have to be masked to comply to the norm. Sexton continues:

It became an outright lie
and even though I dressed the body
it was still naked, still killed.
It was caught
in the first place at birth,
like a fish.
But I played it, dressed it up,
dressed it up like somebody's doll. (Sexton, 1999, p. 167)

The woman's body, again, becomes a central image of the lie one has to live – it is predestined to be caged, caught inextricably in its anatomy. Although the pretense, in this case, is connected to faking a desire to live and not to marriage, it is still primarily metaphorized through images connected strictly to the woman and the female body that is "dressed [...] up like somebody's doll" and "caught in the first place at birth" into a net that prescribes living for others and giving life to others. The role is so stifling that there can be no other desire in a woman, especially not a destructive one. Should any ambitions for something more or impulses for something less appear, society is there to scream "at you / to shut up" (Sexton, 1999, p. 168), thus rectifying the transgression, whatever it may be. Life for a woman, therefore, becomes a play, a perpetual performance for oneself and others, in which the seemingly private domestic life serves as a stage for surveillance, like Snow White's "glass coffin" (Sexton, 1999, p. 228), through which the vicious, punishing eye of society peeps and violates the woman, like a hornet discussed in the previous chapter. To meet the expectations, the woman must, it seems, let the house devour her and strip her of herself so that she can be evaluated as a "good" wife and mother and thus rewarded by the societal notion of a "happily ever after."

4.2 "The Commonplaces of the Asylum": Madness and Domesticity

The uniformity of the women's identity that was expected and prescribed by society was not only metaphorically fatal; it was quite literally deadly to women's physical and mental health. As Friedan (1964) observed, there was "evidence that women pay a high emotional and physical price for evading their own growth" (Friedan, 1964, p. 281):

> During the 1950's, psychiatrists, analysts, and doctors in all fields noted that the housewife's syndrome seemed to become increasingly pathological. The mild undiagnosable symptoms—bleeding blisters, malaise, nervousness, and fatigue of young housewives—became heart attacks, bleeding ulcers, hypertension,

> bronchopneumonia; the nameless emotional distress became a psychotic breakdown. Among the new housewife-mothers, in certain sunlit suburbs, this single decade saw a fantastic increase in "maternal psychoses," mild-to-suicidal depressions or hallucinations over childbirth. (Friedan, 1964, pp. 281, 282)

The over-advertised "happy housewife" seemed to turn into a zombie, an infected half-living thing, yet there appeared to be no signs of change, nor were these problems discussed and shared in public. On the contrary, the silence was so profound that the problem seemed inexistent, as Friedan suggested. However, silencing had to backfire eventually, and, as Middlebrook (1991) stated, apart from "becoming ill to counteract some of the limitations placed on them by social conventions," women discovered other "form[s] of resistance" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 40) to the silencing, such as writing poetry. The obvious problem with this statement is the implication that illness, whether psychological or physical, was a choice or even a deliberate act on the part of women, an image that Middlebrook (1998) repeats in her interpretation of Sexton's "The Double Image," by stating that "[t]he poem is an analysis of the resistance by means of illness to the feminine roles available to women" (Middlebrook, 1998, p. 642). While I would be more than inclined to agree that Sexton's poetry, in general, offers strong resistance to the confining images of womanhood that were available in her time, the notion that this confrontation is achieved "by means of illness" disagrees with me. However, Middlebrook (1991) did confirm that the mental problems that Sexton experienced were common among women of her generation, "partly because in postwar America the concept of woman's place in society had contracted into idealization of the housewife's role" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 40). Perhaps, then, it would be better to say that, even though Sexton started writing, as already mentioned, as a form of therapy suggested by her psychiatrist, "the therapy was occasioned by her womanhood itself, by the very real strains and conflicts that Sexton experienced while attempting to exist in her world as a woman" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 118).

Madness was, nevertheless, a highly controversial topic in those times. According to Phelan et al. (2000), during the 1950s, "not only was the public's orientation to mental illness largely uninformed by the current psychiatric thinking of the day, but public conceptions were suffused with negative stereotypes, fear, and rejection" most likely "because mental illness was defined in […] narrow and extreme terms" (Phelan et al., 2000, pp. 188, 189). Being strongly stigmatized, madness was supposed to be hidden, and madwomen, being mad and being women, were "doubly relegated to the private world" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 127), which was the world inhabited by beautiful but muted dolls. However, in the "New Poetry" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 3), as Rosenthal called it, "the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of

psychological crisis, becomes a major theme," also serving "as a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 15). This seemed to hold true for male poets writing about madness, such as Lowell, whose "'myth' […] is that of an America whose history and present predicament are embodied in those of his own family and epitomized in his own psychological experience" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 61). Yet, when Sexton started writing about her experiences of madness, it seemed as if all hell broke loose. It was evident that a woman's "naked suffering" (Dickey, 1978, p. 117) was not identified as a part of "national and cultural crisis" (Rosenthal, 1967, p. 15). Rather, it remained latched to her alone and her "drama," even by Lowell himself, apparently, as he wrote that "[h]er gift was to grip, to give words to the *drama of her personality*" (Lowell, 1978, p. 71, my emphasis). It was as if she not only disturbed the literary notions of decorum but also chipped at the foundations of the idealized image of the woman by publicly deforming her. Perhaps the problem was not in the fact that she was ill but in the fact that she did not hide the illness or its causes behind closed doors as expected.

Anyhow, as Rich (1979) observed in her essay on Emily Dickinson, "[i]t is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment – that explodes in poetry" (Rich, 1979c, p. 162). Madness was one of the topics "under pressure of concealment" that, predictably, erupted in poetry, and Sexton was among the first women poets to break the silence about "the neurotic reality of the time" (Kumin, 1999, p. xxxiv). Her explosions drew heavy criticism and a desire for censorship, starting from John Holmes. Sexton remembered his criticism in the interview with Kevles and commented that:

> During the years of that class, John Holmes saw me as something evil […]. He told me I shouldn't write such personal poems about the madhouse. He said, "That isn't a fit subject for poetry." I knew no one who thought it was; even my doctor clammed up at that time. (Kevles, 1998, p. 315)

As already discussed, Holmes's criticism did not succeed in censoring Sexton's voice, nor did other similar objections to her writing. The reason is partly presented in her poetic response to John Holmes and partly, perhaps, in how she associated the two experiences – being mad and being a poet. In the same interview, she said:

> When I first got sick and became a displaced person, I thought I was quite alone, but when I went into the mental hospital, I found I wasn't, that there were other people like me. It made me feel better – more real, sane. I felt, These are my people. Well, at the John Holmes class that I attended for two years, I found I belonged to the poets, that I

was *real* there, and I had another, "These are my people." (Kevles, 1998, p. 314, italics in the original)

According to her statement, the only two groups Sexton could identify with were the insane and the poets, perhaps because many poets were also mad, but also because they both "talked language" (Sexton, 1977, p. 244). Language, for Sexton, meant "verbalizing the non-verbal" (Sexton, 1977, p. 245), which often also meant "sounding the unspoken or the unspeakable" (Clark et al., 1993, p. 1). In both groups, she felt she could express herself and be understood. Yet, her feeling of being "displaced" and "alone" only confirms the reality of the time in which the "realities" of experiences such as her own were so concealed that she felt almost unreal or perhaps inadequate in contrast to the desired model of a woman. Perhaps, then, her persistence in exposing through poetry these hidden realities of an ordinary woman, from her corporeality and desires to inner demons of madness and self-destructive impulses, was a way of challenging and transforming, unconsciously at first and maybe intentionally later, the notions of what is "real" and "sane" so that others like her could feel less alone.

The misconception that Sexton's poetry was a form of therapy because it started as or through therapy was incredibly damaging, as it diminished or completely negated her as a poet and tied her to the role of a patient. Sexton was a patient, but only in the office of her doctor. Outside the office, Sexton was a poet; she "had forged a professional identity for herself that Orne,[7] in his insistence on poetry as therapy […], refused to acknowledge" (Skorczewski, 2012, p. 59). Sexton's poetic transformations of her life and the excerpts from her therapy tapes in Skorczewski's *An Accident of Hope: The Therapy Tapes of Anne Sexton* are not and should not be comparable. The former reveals what the author wants to reveal and conceals or distorts what is meant to remain private – it is a controlled and artistic expression of the self and realities beyond the self. The latter, however, is an outright "rape of her privacy" (Spivack, 2012, p. 63) and perhaps the only "raw material" (Gullans, 1978, p. 131) offered to a bloodthirsty audience. Even Middlebrook's biography, heavily leaning on the therapy tapes Dr. Orne released, seems like a transgression against Sexton's privacy. Middlebrook said that "the tapes gave her an intimacy and understanding [of Sexton] she would not have had otherwise" (Berry, 1991), but the manner in which she procured this knowledge is highly questionable.

[7] Dr. Martin Orne was Sexton's therapist from 1956 to 1964. He taped sessions with her from 1961 to 1964 and released them to Diane Wood Middlebrook, Sexton's biographer, with consent from Sexton's daughter and literary executor Linda Gray Sexton. The American Psychiatric Association found this a breach of patient-doctor confidentiality despite the family's approval. Taken from Berry, 1991.

Sexton did use the insights she gained from her therapy in her poetry, but her poetry that explicitly or implicitly revolves around madness is not merely a raving of a lunatic. As Juhasz (1976) noted, "[f]or Sexton, as woman, the move from patient to poet has been a voyage from dependence and powerlessness to independence and power" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 127). Therefore, her poetry was not only a narcissistic self-portrait or a diary of the diseased; it also examined the causes of disease, many of which included the precariousness of a woman's position in society, which had apparently escaped her doctors.[8] In other words, the poet may have been mad, but the poems she wrote were far more than a madwoman's "confessions"; they do "'say the real say'" (quoted in Dickey, 1978, p. 118). In fact, many of the poems that focus on the experiences from the asylum often tell more or equally about the other or the world as they do about the self. Thematically, these poems meander from fear to anger to domesticized self-destructiveness and back to questioning the concepts of madness and sanity in the first place.

In "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), which reads as an inner dialogue, we are presented with what appears to be a paranoid conclusion that "[t]he world is full of enemies. / There is no safe place" (Sexton, 1999, p. 28). The enemies that are evident in the poem are "[t]he summer sun ray," which "looks around for [her]," "[t]he grass" that talks to her, and "[t]he sky" that "breathes upon [her] face" (Sexton, 1999, pp. 27, 28). These are natural elements personified into almost humanlike stalkers that demand attention from the lyrical subject – they demand to be seen, heard, and felt, just like society demands the woman to succumb to her "natural" role, which is virtually a state of invisibility, muteness, and restriction. The paranoid fear of enemies who are so persistent that there is no place where one could hide from them represents, perhaps, not only how it feels to be mad but also how it feels to be a woman under the constant pressure of surveillance and control until one reaches a breaking point.

A similar image reappears in "Flee on Your Donkey" (*Live or Die*), which begins thus: "Because there was no other place / to flee to, / I came back to the scene of the disordered senses / […] without luggage or defenses" (Sexton, 1999, p. 97). The asylum to which the speaker returns at first appears as a place of refuge instead of incarceration. It exists as a sort

[8] The notion of a woman's role as a dedicated wife and mother was equally present in psychiatric thought of the era. Dr. Orne had, in many instances, advised Sexton to "do more in her marriage" (Skorczewski, 2012, p. 102), and even emphasized that "[a] function of a woman is to have children" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 403), which leads me to believe that, to a certain extent, he could not acknowledge or understand the depths of her illness. Another of her therapists, Dr. Frederick Duhl, involved himself in a sexual relationship with Sexton during their therapy sessions, again breaching the doctor-patient relationship.

of an alternate reality in which the speaker hopes for some relief from the "hornets […] / hover[ing] outside, all knowing, / hissing" who "have been sent" (Sexton, 1999, p. 98) to torment the speaker with the knowledge that she does not remember. While the memories that flood her mind mix with the moments from the hospital in which both patients and doctors seem to exist in "the same ruined scene" (Sexton, 1999, p. 99), she seems to realize that the place she escaped to is the place she needs to escape.

The doctor who promised her insight into her true identity seems unable to keep his word as she spends time feeling like "a stranger / damned and in trance" (Sexton, 1999, p. 100), remembering the past and contemplating her interactions with the doctor. The feeling of disillusionment with the doctor intensifies as he is less and less perceived as a helper and perhaps more as a deceiver. Speaking to him, the lyrical subject complains:

You taught me
to believe in dreams;
thus I was the dredger.
I held them like an old woman with arthritic fingers,
carefully straining the water out –
sweet dark playthings,
an above all, mysterious
until they grew mournful and weak. (Sexton, 1999, p. 102)

Whether the dream was to get well or to have a happily-ever-after, it failed to materialize, suddenly revealing the futility of seeking shelter from the cage of the house in the cage of the asylum. "I have come back / but disorder is not what it was. / I have lost the trick of it! / The innocence of it" (Sexton, 1999, p. 103), the speaker proclaims, realizing that madness is an equally inescapable prison toward which she developed a sort of a Stockholm syndrome – "I have come back, / recommitted, / […] held like a prisoner / who was so poor / he fell in love with jail" (Sexton, 1999, p. 103). The imprisonment of madness is analogous to the imprisonment of womanhood – it is a jail one is forced to love despite the urge to flee.

The speaker seems to tread a tightrope between two forms of escape – one into death and the other into life. She states that "[t]his is madness / but a kind of hunger" (Sexton, 1999, p. 104), yet we are none the wiser as to whether she hungers for death or life, and where she urges herself to "flee on [her] donkey" (Sexton, 1999, p. 104):

Anne, Anne,
flee on your donkey,
flee this sad hotel,

ride out on some hairy beast,
gallop backward pressing
your buttocks to his withers,
sit to his clumsy gait somehow.
Ride out
any old way you please!
In this place everyone talks to his own mouth.
That's what it means to be crazy. (Sexton, 1999, p. 104)

What we do discover, though, is that being crazy means "talk[ing] to [one's] own mouth," thus being able to say whatever one pleases but remaining unheard, as if "rag[ing] in [one's] own bowl" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34). The image is almost identical to that presented at the end of "You, Doctor Martin," the opening poem of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* – "And we are magic talking to itself, / noisy and alone" (Sexton, 1999, p. 4). This could be connected to her idea of speaking a special language that only the insiders of a group can relate to. While she is allowed to say whatever she wants in the madhouse, the voice remains trapped within the boundaries of the self as "everyone talks to his own mouth" (Sexton, 1999, p. 104). However, the poet is a public figure, and "the poet's words affect other people: they may even cause changes, action" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 127). The only problem, as Juhasz (1976) noted, was that the "'poet' traditionally belong[ed] to the male […] world" (Juhasz, 1976, p. 127). Thus, even in the world of poets, Sexton's voice had to pass the barriers of male censorship to be heard and to effect changes.

Many of Sexton's poems directly address the reader, and among those, many directly address her doctors, expressing the difficulties of being heard or understood correctly by them. Even in the first volume, the tone of the address reveals a tinge of scorn or objection to the equally censoring and constraining patient-doctor relationship. In "Said the Poet to the Analyst," which establishes the difference between a patient and a poet from the title, the speaker declares that her "business is words," which are best described as "swarming bees," while the analyst's "business is watching [her] words" (Sexton, 1999, p. 12), thus exercising control over them, becoming the final authority to decide their value and meaning. The speaker "admit[s] nothing" except that she is "only broken by the sources of things / as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic / unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings" (Sexton, 1999, p. 12). The "sources of things" seem to indicate a misunderstanding, as the bees, possibly a metaphor for language, are dead and dismembered, perhaps taken out of context and twisted into meanings that the poet did not intend. The analyst, however, reserves the power to

decide if her language is "something it is not," to which the speaker can do nothing but "grow weak" (Sexton, 1999, p. 13). The conclusion may be that while the poet clearly "speaks the language," the doctor, being neither a woman nor mad nor a poet, does not.

In the poem dated June 6, 1960, from *Words to Dr. Y* (1978), the speaker demands to be heard. She "ha[s] words […] that have been hoarded up, / waiting for the pleasure of coming out" (Sexton, 1999, p. 562), and no matter how many times the doctor insists on "order" – "*And where is the order?* You will ask (Sexton, 1999, p. 562, italics in the original) – the speaker is determined to speak: "Words waiting, angry, masculine, / with their fists in a knot. / Words right now, alive in the head, / heavy and pressing as in a crowd. / Pushing for headroom, elbowing, / knowing their rights" (Sexton, 1999, p. 563). The image is undoubtedly reminiscent of scenes of protests from the Civil Rights movement. Although the words are "angry, masculine," perhaps to avoid the stereotype of the angry or hysterical woman throwing a tantrum, the explosion of words "knowing their rights" also prophesizes the women's liberation movement and the need to redefine "the order."

But how exactly are the particular episodes of the poet's madness speaking to the world outside herself? With Sexton, the devil is truly in the details, and one must overlook the private to get to the parts that reveal a larger picture. In many ways, Middlebrook's (1991) observation that "[j]ust as the act of writing took Sexton out of herself, into what she felt was another identity, so the finished poem conveyed meanings she had no consciousness of intending" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 61) is quite accurate. Unconsciously or not, Sexton's poetry frequently refers to the domestic situation as a scene of imprisonment and a sort of amputation of a woman's selfhood, which is both a symptom and a cause of the disease – as a symptom, it reflects society, as a disease, it reflects the individual. In many poems discussed so far, the motif of domesticity was connected with terror, invasion, confinement, and effacement of the woman's body, identity, and desires. In the poems about madness, it recurs as a haunting image of control.

In "Ringing the Bells" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), even though music lessons do not seem to help the patients, they must obey the instructions – "although we are not better for it, / they tell you to go. And you do" (Sexton, 1999, p. 29). Women are meant to be compliant even when what is asked of them does not benefit them. The unquestioning subservience only demonstrates the frighteningly successful yet detrimental adaptation process that turns women into robots who, even when defective, must continue to operate according to demands. The woman's place is so defined that even the bells in the poem "sound, / as untroubled and clean / as a workable kitchen" (Sexton, 1999, p. 29). It is particularly interesting how the "kitchen"

and other controlling images of womanhood become the only point of reference, even for situations and objects that have little to no connection to domesticity. In "The Addict" (*Live or Die*), for instance, the speaker is "on a diet from death" (Sexton, 1999, p. 165). The pills to which she is addicted are "[s]tubborn as hell, they won't let go," and the speaker is in "a kind of marriage" with them, which, in turn, is "a kind of war / where [she] plant[s] bombs inside / of [herself]" (Sexton, 1999, pp. 165, 166). Marriage to death or illness becomes an analogy to real-life marriage, which is a scene of control and conflict that offers no other escape except self-destruction. Nevertheless, even self-destruction seems to be "full of rules," as the speaker reminds us that she "[doesn't] make too much noise" (Sexton, 1999, p. 166). She is keeping quiet, following the rules of propriety, keeping face and posing as "a little buttercup in [her] yellow nightie" instead of letting the world see her "stand[ing] there in [her] winding sheet" (Sexton, 1999, p. 166). The poem is, of course, intensely personal, yet in its imagery, it also appears to be a harsh criticism of the social norms that prioritize hiding the decay behind a shining façade and locking the woman in yet another cage of invisibility and silence.

In his conclusion about Sexton's poetry, Phillips (1973) stated that she "is domesticating our terrors" (Phillips, 1973, p. 91). However, it seems more plausible that women were those domesticated to the terrors profoundly woven into their everyday domestic lives. Sexton merely dared to descend deep enough into the abyss to behold those terrors and resurface with some images that are not exactly "beautiful" but hold "a certain sense of order" and "something worth learning" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34). As Ben Howard observed in his review of Sexton's *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, Sexton's "metaphor fuses imagery of violence and death with imagery of the kitchen, suggesting a close, even inevitable relationship between them," reveling "the Mad Housewife, driven to distraction by suburban confinement" (Howard, 1978, p. 182). Lacking any other means of defense, Sexton spoke the language of "[her] people" (Kevles, 1998, p. 314) – the mad, the women, and the poets – unlocking the door to "the commonplaces of the asylum" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34) and various "all-electric kitchen[s]" inhabited by smiling "synthetic doll[s]" (Sexton, 1999, p. 155).

4.3 "Holding a Basket of Fire": Cripples, Witches, and the Misunderstood

If the woman is "stopped as the perfect housewife, as the advertised woman" (quoted in Gill, 2007, p. 70), deprived of authority over self-image, and "becom[ing] a displaced person" (Kevles, 1998, p. 314) that exists as a defective, inauthentic half-being, we might ask: Who is the real woman; what does she want; and what happens to her if she pursues dreams

outside the American Dream of life in a "perfect little ticky tacky suburb" (quoted in Gill, 2007, p. 70)? Sexton has the answers and often voices them through depictions of lives that belong to others, what Phillips (1973) called "a gallery of 'real' yet totally fictitious figures" (Phillips, 1973, p. 75). The prevalent portraits of cripples, rebels, and witches in Sexton's poetry offer some insights into the secret inner lives of women. Some poems that may help in the investigation of the desire against conditioned womanhood are "The Farmer's Wife" and "Her Kind" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), "Live" (*Live or Die*), "The Maiden Without Hands" and "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" (*Transformations*), "The Red Shoes" (*The Book of Folly*), and "The Witch's Life" (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*).

The association of womanhood with some kind of disfigurement, with either bodily or psychological deformity, is quite permeating in Sexton's poetry, which was also discussed in the presentation of the female body. Yet, unsurprisingly, this fascination is deeply attached to the woman's condition. As Friedan (1964) noted, in 1960, statistics showed that young women could not relate to stories about strong, independent, working women in magazines or with people who defied societal norms. However, these new housewives had no difficulty "identify[ing] with the victims of blindness, deafness, physical maiming, cerebral palsy, paralysis, cancer, or approaching death" (Friedan, 1964, p. 46). This concerning information can only be interpreted as women's response to an internal feeling of being in some way equally maimed or crippled by their own condition, a sort of "amputated self-perception" (Kolodny, 1978, p. 43), to borrow Kolodny's expression. Sexton both explores and questions this condition, often in brutally stark language.

"The Maiden Without Hands" (*Transformations*) begins thus:

Is it possible
he marries a cripple
out of admiration?
A desire to own the maiming
so that not one of us butchers
will come to him with crowbars
or slim precise tweezers?
Lady, bring me your wooden leg
so I may stand on my own
two pink pig feet.
If someone burns out your eye
I will take your socket

and use it for an ashtray.
If they have cut out your uterus
I will give you a laurel wreath
to put in its place.
If you have cut off your ear
I will give you a crow
who will hear just as well.
My apple has no worm in it!
My apple is whole! (Sexton, 1999, p. 273)

The sharp opening gets straight to the unsettling point of power, ownership, and objectification. The woman seems to be desired and admired because of her "maiming" and because of the control it gives the possessor, who also assumes the role of a savior, preventing any further harm ("so that not one of us butchers / will come to him with crowbars / or slim precise tweezers"). However, the "savior," paradoxically, seems also to feed off of the woman's maiming; as the voice of the speaker switches to that of the possessor, he demands she brings him her severed parts so that he can benefit from them ("so I may stand on my own / two pink pig feet"; "I will take your socket / and use it for an ashtray") or offer her substitutions, which are quite disturbing – "a laurel wreath" in place of her uterus, and "a crow" in place of her ear. The woman's body parts lose all human value and become bizarre, fetishized objects of possession for a man who is almost like a collector or a ringmaster in a freak show. As a final assertion of his superiority and victory, the speaker emphasizes his wholeness in contrast to the woman's dismemberment, which, in his eyes, is the ideal. The well-known fairy tale, which ends in the maiden's miraculous regrowing of her hands, indicated as undesirable wholeness, presents an eerie depiction of society's cruel desire to control and possess the female body and psyche.

Similarly, in "The Farmer's Wife" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), the wife, whose amputation seems metaphorical, as she is severed and alienated from her sense of selfhood, lives entrapped, "hating the sweat of the house" (Sexton, 1999, p. 19) and dreaming about "living her own self in her own words" (Sexton, 1999, pp. 19, 20). The experience of marriage is once more reduced to something mechanical and impersonal ("a sprouting broom factory"; "she has been his habit"; "slow braille touch of him"), offering unsatisfying intimacy devoid of emotional depth and connection that the wife desires "although / it leaves her still alone" (Sexton, 1999, p. 19). The distance between them is emphasized by the fact that the wife "will not say how there / must be more to living" (Sexton, 1999, p. 19) than what she experiences as

a monotonous, self-erasing routine, stressing her silence. Without any hope for change, resentful about the wasted potential of her youth – "her young years bungle past" (Sexton, 1999, p. 20) – watching her husband at night, she morbidly "wishes him cripple, or poet, / or even lonely, or sometimes, / better, my lover, dead" (Sexton, 1999, p. 20). Her wish is striking, of course, yet it may not be entirely malicious. It could also be interpreted as a grotesque though sincere longing for connection, for identification on equal terms. What she wishes on him seems to be what she sees in herself, and the only way they can genuinely bond is for him to comprehend her condition fully. However, as this, perhaps, seems too farfetched, at times, she wishes him dead, which would probably be the only way for her to regain her freedom and make more of her life.

In Sexton's universe, the woman's suffering "begins in the crib / […] when the planets drill / your future into you" (Sexton, 1999, p. 545). There is little to no hope of escape, as "the awful order of things" (Sexton, 1999, p. 595) always seems two steps ahead of the game. This is the prospect of womanhood in "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" (*Transformations*). The twelve sisters who are locked in their bedroom every night by their father, the King, manage to steal their way into the underground ballroom, where they "danced like taxi girls at Roseland" and "drank down their youth with nary a thought" while they were "painted in kisses" (Sexton, 1999, p. 280). Their youthful spirit, however, is a cause for alarm to their father, who "sent out a proclamation / that anyone who could discover / where the princesses did their dancing / could take his pick of the litter" (Sexton, 1999, p. 278). The metaphor of the "litter" is comical yet relatively accurate, as the princesses are offered without any volition of their own – they seem to be mere objects, chosen but not offered a choice.

Despite their outwitting their father and going to their nightly visits to the underworld, a young soldier succeeds in uncovering the princesses' secret and marries the eldest princess. The picture of defeat we are left with is utterly devastating:

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance
no more. The princesses were torn from
their night life like a baby from its pacifier.
Because he was old he picked the eldest.
At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes
and sagged like old sweatshirts.
Now the runaways would run no more and never
again would their hair be tangled into diamonds,
never again their shoes worn down to a laugh,

never the bed falling down into purgatory
to let them climb in after
with their Lucifer kicking. (Sexton, 1999, p. 281)

The victory, again, comes as a kind of superiority; it is a "victory over Mephistopheles the devil […] inside the heroine herself" (Friedan, 1999, p. 40), a victory over the "Lucifer kicking" in the princesses, over their desire to live outside the imprisoning fate. The rebellion is nipped in the bud before it even has an opportunity to lead somewhere, which is how most of the rebellions in Sexton's writing end – in defeat. However, this is no reason for them to cease altogether. On the contrary, rebellion in many forms is often the underlying motif of many of her poems.

Perhaps the ultimate rebel of Sexton's lore is the figure of the witch, whom she appropriates as a sort of alter-ego from the beginning of her poetic journey in her famous poem "Her Kind" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*). The witch is, historically and mythologically, a transgressive and dangerous woman, a destructive force that, in turn, must be destroyed. The witch is generally an archetypal image of an evil or a bad woman. That is how the myths and fairy tales represent her. She is usually old, with moles on her face, disfigured, and alone. As Bovenschen (1978) confirms, according to such representations, "anyone old and a little bit eccentric could be called a witch. We all get old, and are all considered eccentric if we do not voluntarily bow to our prescribed feminine fate" (Bovenschen, 1978, p. 85). Thus, the image of the witch is a repressive one and was, throughout history, deadly for many a woman who dared the wrath of the patriarchy.

However, Sexton's witches seem to be on a mission to extricate themselves from this image or show its falsity. As Greg Johnson observed in "The Achievement of Anne Sexton," "Sexton's witch is essentially harmless" (Johnson, 1988, p. 176). In "Her Kind," the witch is a "lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind" (Sexton, 1999, p. 15); she is, in a way, some sort of a cripple, a deformed figure with her excess fingers, and probably mad. Such a woman, apparently, "is not a woman, quite," "is misunderstood," and "is not ashamed to die" (Sexton, 1999, pp. 15, 16). Being a woman who fails to fulfill expectations thus means expulsion from womanhood and relegation to the status of a witch, a role that calls for severe punishment – it calls for a witch-hunt. However, this witch is a "survivor / where your flames still bite my thigh / and my ribs crack where your wheels wind" (Sexton, 1999, p. 16); she is defiant, and she knows she is "misunderstood." We cannot but sympathize with her, especially since the witch is both the speaker ("I have gone out, a possessed witch") and many others ("I have been her kind"), indicating an intricate connection between a multitude of women as the speaker appears

to be speaking as an individual and as a community simultaneously. As Kay Ellen Merriman Capo similarly observed in her essay "'I Have Been Her Kind': Anne Sexton's Communal Voice," the poem "establish[ed] Sexton's 'transpersonal' voice at the outset of her career" (Capo, 1988, p. 25) and "prophesized Sexton's later direction" of mythic poetry, especially from *Transformations* onward.

"Live" (*Live or Die*) features a similar duplicity of voice, as the witch is presented in third- and first-person singular, as if narrating a myth to her husband and children and suddenly becoming the myth herself: "[t]he witch comes on / and you paint her pink. I come with kisses in my hood / and the sun, the smart one, / rolling in my arms" (Sexton, 1999, p. 169). This witch is "render[ed] […] harmless" (Capo, 1988, p. 27) by her family, as they "paint her pink." The witch seems almost domesticated, and, at least for a moment, she accepts this form of acceptance, even though it is another mask superimposed on her already cracked surface. Still, the witch confirms herself as inherently "harmless" or "good" as she carries gifts in her hood – the most valuable gifts of love and light, proclaiming the wish to live.

The contemplation of the witch continues, or ends, in "The Witch's Life" (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*). Here, we seem to glimpse into the origin of the witch:

When I was a child
there was an old woman in our neighborhood
whom we called The Witch.
All day she peered from her second story window
from behind the wrinkled curtains
and sometimes she would open the window
and yell: Get out of my life! (Sexton, 1999, p. 423)

It would appear that a woman is not born a witch; she is made into one when, as Bovenschen (1978) suggested, she becomes old or behaves strangely. The old woman seems equally lonely and misunderstood as the witch from "Her Kind," as the children, including the speaker, pronounce her "The Witch." However, as she ages, the speaker's recollection of the woman gains a more empathetic reflection. She begins to "wonder if [she] is becoming her" (Sexton, 1999, p. 423) as she begins to transform physically ("[c]lumps of my hair […] / curl up individually like toes") and mentally ("[m]aybe my skull is too crowded / and it has no opening through which / to feed it soup"). As she detaches more and more from responsibilities and what is expected of her ("I am shoveling the children out") and becomes increasingly reclusive ("[m]aybe I am becoming a hermit"), the speaker starts identifying with the outcast figure once

viewed from a distance. It seems inevitable that she will, sooner or later, become "The Witch" for some new children, inheriting the position from the old woman before her.

But what can one do with this title but embrace it as anointment and transform it into something more – "It is the witch's life, / climbing the primordial climb, / a dream within a dream, / then sitting here / holding a basket of fire" (Sexton, 1999, pp. 423, 424). The witch, it seems, is remade – she is not the monster, nor merely a victim – she is also something ancient and powerful. Like Prometheus, she is "holding a basket of fire," which is a potent yet dangerous gift to humanity – a gift of her poetic witchcraft by which her "trances and portents" (Sexton, 1999, p. 88) become works of art. However, such breaches of social contracts are also imbued with enormous pressure. "[A] basket of fire" may burn the recipient with unwanted knowledge, inviting retribution, but it may also burn the holder, causing a breakdown.

"The Red Shoes" (*The Book of Folly*), which draws inspiration from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale of the same name, explores the breakdown of a rebellious woman. The poem opens with the speaker "stand[ing] in the ring / in the dead city" (Sexton, 1999, p. 315), putting on the red shoes, an act of almost ritualistic significance, as if she is summoning a spirit or conjuring a demon. The imagery accompanying this act is that of the calm before the storm – "Everything that was calm / is mine" (Sexton, 1999, p. 316) – foretelling a calamity. As the speaker repeats that she is "[tying] on the red shoes" (Sexton, 1999, p. 316), we are informed that:

I tie on the red shoes.
They are not mine.
They are my mother's.
Her mother's before.
Handed down like an heirloom
but hidden like shameful letters.
The house and the street where they belong
are hidden and all the women, too,
are hidden. (Sexton, 1999, p. 316)

The red shoes are passed on from generation to generation of women, but they must be "hidden like shameful letters," just like the women who own them must hide, too. The shoes are highly symbolic. Like in the original fairy tale, in which they become a means of punishment for the little girl's vanity, in Sexton's rendition, the red shoes also lead to destruction, but there is no given reason as to what the transgression was in the first place. All we know is that:

All those girls

who wore the red shoes,
each boarded a train that would not stop.
Stations flew by like suitors and would not stop.
They all danced like trout on the hook.
They were played with.
They tore off their ears like safety pins.
Their arms fell off them and became hats.
Their heads rolled off and sang down the street.
And their feet — oh God, their feet in the market place —
their feet, those two beetles, ran for the corner
and then danced forth as if they were proud.
Surely, people exclaimed,
surely they are mechanical. Otherwise . . . (Sexton, 1999, p. 316)

A woman wearing red shoes seems doomed for the sole act of wearing them. Thus, the red shoes could symbolize her desire to express herself, redefine herself, and be independent, creative, and free. In other words, they could be a symbol of her "Lucifer kicking" (Sexton, 1999, p. 281), which is against the norms she should follow. Hence, wearing the shoes is not only an act of rebellion but also a revelation of "the cracked mirror" (Sexton, 1999, p. 34) within oneself, a frenzy that threatens to swerve out of control. Indeed, the perpetual dancing of the feet in red shoes clearly signifies the loss of control as the women's bodies literally start to disintegrate. Under the pressure of hiding their true selves, the urge for expression becomes overpowering – it becomes deadly: "What they did was the death dance. / What they did would do them in" (Sexton, 1999, p. 317). The red shoes, originally a treasured inheritance, take the form of something ominous, equally oppressive, and deadly as the rigid shackles of cultural expectations. Could it be madness? If so, the woman's life seems grim at best – a perpetual flight from cage to cage without ever fleeing the vicious circle.

Womanhood, women, and women's condition are omnipresent in Sexton's poetry. Her explorations of various oppressive forces in women's lives are incredibly insightful and thought-provoking. They often begin within the boundaries of her private world, but their "weird abundance" (Sexton, 1999, p. 89) cannot but spill into the outside world, exposing it for what it is and how it relates to the woman's condition. As Middlebrook (1991) noted, Sexton's views on writing as a woman and "the woman question" have evolved over time, especially under the influence of a year spent at the Radcliffe Institute and her everyday conversations with Maxine Kumin, with whom she often discussed "feminist insights to the

particularities of their situations as writers who were women, as women who were much alike, and as women raising daughters to have high expectations of life" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 173).

Initially under the strong influence of Robert Lowell, whose notion of great poetry did not include that written by women, Sexton, like many women poets before her, believed that being described as writing "like a man" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 173) was the highest praise a woman poet could receive, which she said in an interview in 1962. However, in 1969, when asked to share her thoughts on the objectives of a feminist journal, she responded in a letter, "My comment is this: 'As long as it can be said about a woman writer, 'She writes like a man' and that woman takes it as a compliment, we are in trouble'" (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, p. 173). Although Sexton's poetry, even the early one, cannot by any stretch of imagination be perceived as man-like, I believe that the changes that had taken place throughout her writing, including the gradual distancing from the strict form, and becoming more and more daring in her ventures against patriarchy and the metaphors she employed, reflect an inevitable transformation in her consciousness that increasingly and more vehemently rejected the idea that a woman "wrote to please […]: a father/man/lover/husband/teacher/critic/editor" (Spivack, 2012, p. 57).

Sexton wrote to protest. She wrote to warn and to reveal. Sometimes, she may have revealed too much, yet even then, what remained hidden may have been of even greater significance. Who knows? She may not have offered us solutions to all the painful and pressing issues nor keys to locked doors of womanhood. However, she offered us her sight, her voice, and her touch – and "touch is all" (Sexton, 1999, p. 417) – as a poet, as "a woman of excess, of zeal and greed" (Sexton, 1999, p. 537), and as a woman poet eager to "spit out [her] words like stones" (Sexton, 1999, p. 84). Like Woolf (1935) advised and Spivack (2012) noted, "she wrote what she wanted, and the images carried her poems away" (Spivack, 2012, p. 57). The unabating interest in and relevance of her poems proves that, while she may not have been "poised for the act of survival" (Rich, 1979a, p. 123), she was more than poised for creating the art of survival.

Conclusion

Anne Sexton was one of the greatest American poets whose work has frequently been classified as confessional poetry. The circumstances surrounding Sexton's emergence as a poet and her writing were unconventional. She was a suburban middle-class housewife who started writing poetry on recommendation from her psychiatrist as a form of therapy after a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. Although she was not a trained poet, Sexton quickly rose to fame, partly due to the controversial subject matters of her poetry, which caused an uproar and attracted mixed reviews. Her candid but striking depictions of madness, suicidal impulses, the female body and its intricacies, as well as female sexuality, and different taboo subjects such as abortion, adultery, menstruation, etc., quickly reserved her the label of a confessional poet and many critics dismissed her poetry as trivial, indecent, and self-indulgent.

However, what has since been emphasized, especially in the late 1970s with the developments and growth of feminist literary criticism, is the climate in which Sexton created. From a literary point of view, confessional poetry as a genre was a breach of the Eliotic concept of poetic impersonality and respect for tradition, which has been foundational for generations of poets and literary critics. On the other hand, women were largely excluded from the literary world for far too long, and along with them, women's experiences were not considered part of the universal. The literary tradition was practically male, shaped by and around male standards and experiences. Furthermore, as described by Betty Friedan, this was the era of "the feminine mystique" (Friedan, 1964, p. 37), the era of the "happy housewife heroines" (Friedan, 1964, p. 38), whose sole purpose was to marry well, and be good mothers and wives. Sexton's writing, taken in this context, cannot comply with the sole label of confessionalism, as it clearly resonated with the issues women faced in those times, especially women whose ambition was for more than the social norms allowed them.

This thesis has argued that Sexton's work can be investigated outside the strict lens of confessional poetry as a kind of social commentary related to women's experiences. The investigation drew on major feminist theories and feminist literary criticism, as well as a variety of studies, essays, critical reviews, and reflections on Sexton's poetry, including her own interviews, almost completely avoiding references to biographical details from Sexton's life, including her controversial therapy tapes, in the interpretation of her poetry. The study focused on the content, rather than form, of Sexton's poetry, especially her less critically explored poems, illustrating how Sexton's poetry reflected a conscious attempt to break free from

societal constraints and express broader truths about the conditions and constraints of womanhood. The research emphasized Sexton's ability to transform personal material into profound, universally relevant poetry, ultimately also transforming her from a housewife and a patient into a major poet.

Sexton's poetry was intensely personal, yet it always seemed that there was a part of the other in her and a part of her in the other. This is why her poetry may be considered to transcend the boundaries of individualism, space, and time, remaining relevant and relatable even today. This study has identified her poetry as a way of voicing discontent with the social order that imprisoned women's potential to grow and express themselves. She often emphasized the elusive nature of truth, insisting that her poetry is not an autobiographical record but a search for a more profound, poetic truth, which was also a frequent motif in her poetry, examined through metaphors of truth, lies, and deceit. As a poet, Sexton searched for a way to transcend the boundaries of the self, climb out of herself, and relate to the outside world. Her poetry often symbolically represents this through the imagery of locked doors and a quest for the key to unlock them. The interpretations of her poems demonstrated that Sexton was continuously journeying in and out of herself, perhaps seeking to break the silence surrounding women's experiences and defy literary and social norms.

One of the themes Sexton wrote ardently about was the female body and sexuality, which made many critics, especially male critics, displeased with her poetry, labeling it exhibitionistic and crass. Nevertheless, a careful examination of Sexton's poetry involving the female body indicated that it might not have merely been a shock tactic; it had far more significant implications. Sexton's body imagery revealed concerns about women's body autonomy – the imagery of fragmentation and invasion of the female body signified patriarchal objectification of women, who were imprisoned in their biological functions as procreators. Furthermore, beauty standards imposed by society were presented as a cage that threatens to completely dehumanize women as passive and voiceless objects. To counter these images, Sexton offered alternative depictions of celebrating the female body, sexuality, and unity with nature and others. Her continuous engagement with these topics despite criticism may be taken as proof that she was using her poetic voice to critique, ridicule, and protest against the harsh patriarchal binds on the female body.

Lastly, this study examined how Sexton explored womanhood and selfhood in her writing. Just like in her depictions of the body, Sexton did not shy away from presenting womanhood at its most vulnerable, most ostracized, and most feared. She presented a case study not of her own illness and state but of the condition of the American woman in the era

that demanded her to renounce her identity and serve as a housewife, locked in the American Dream of femininity she did not choose herself. Sexton's womanhood is deformed, either by illness or by defeat, and all escape attempts are severely punished. The rebels in Sexton's poetry are either rejected and misunderstood by society or outright destroyed for their ambition.

Overall, this thesis strengthened the idea that Sexton's poetry, though exploring all the intimate corners of the self, also explored the larger cultural and political climate and revealed the selves of many American women equally locked in suburbia, feeling voiceless and alone. The sheer magnitude of her work prevented a more thorough investigation of a more significant number of her poems related to the presented themes due to the relatively limited scope of this study. It is also unfortunate that the study did not examine other dominant themes in Sexton's poetry, including motherhood, daughterhood, and the theme of the spiritual or religious quest, which became increasingly prominent in her later poetry. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study contributes to existing interpretations of her work that attempt to separate the poet from the poem. It may also prove helpful to future investigations into women's poetry of Sexton's era and how it revolutionized and impacted contemporary women's poetry.

To conclude, this thesis proposed that, analyzed through her biography, Sexton's poetry would be doomed to tell only one story, a story of digging through her art as through a document, stripping it bare of the elaborate web of creation she had woven into it until it lost all meaning. Analyzed through the lens of artistic creation, a woman's view of herself, all the parts of herself she wished to expose, hide, explore, or transform, and the world she lived and created in, it maintains its integrity and fullness of the image of the whole life lived, indeed like a bowl, magnifying the inside of the private and reflecting the outside of the public, becoming, as Axelrod (1978) suggested, "both an interior and exterior quest for meaning" (Axelrod, 1978, p. 139).

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Summary in Italian/Riasunto in Italiano

Questa tesi tratta la poesia di Anne Sexton, una poetessa americana degli anni ‘60 e inizio anni ‘70, spesso etichettata come poetessa confessionale insieme a Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell e W. D. Snodgrass. La poesia di Anne Sexton, che esplora frequentemente esperienze personali intense e argomenti tabù, come la follia, il suicidio, l’aborto, il corpo e la sessualità femminile, sfidava le norme poetiche del suo tempo. Le sue opere hanno attirato critiche contrastanti, con alcuni che le hanno etichettate come narcisistiche e persino imbarazzanti, mentre altri le hanno lodate per il loro coraggio e acume. La sua vita, e successivamente la sua morte per suicidio nel 1974, hanno spesso giocato un ruolo significativo nelle interpretazioni della sua poesia. Tuttavia, studi più recenti si sono allontanati da queste analisi ristrette per esaminare i contesti storici, politici e letterari più ampi della sua opera.

Ci sono stati molti sviluppi nel pensiero femminista e nella critica letteraria femminista dai tempi di Sexton, che hanno avuto un impatto significativo nel recuperare la sua opera dalle etichette di scrittura meramente autobiografica e confessionale, le quali degradavano la sua poesia allo stato di caso di studio e declassavano Sexton da poetessa a poco più di una paziente che elenca i suoi sintomi. La critica letteraria femminista ha contribuito a una migliore comprensione della poesia scritta da donne, inclusa Sexton, in quegli anni, notando le sfide uniche che le poetesse affrontavano in una società dominata dagli uomini. L’opera di Sexton affrontava spesso queste preoccupazioni femministe, rendendola una pioniera nell’espressione delle esperienze femminili.

Questa tesi sostiene che la poesia di Sexton rappresenta un viaggio trasformativo e performativo oltre l’auto-riflessione. La sua opera è un processo di espansione verso l’esterno da se stessa, trasformando l’esperienza personale in temi universali che risuonano con un pubblico più ampio, in particolare le donne. Lo studio si propone di esplorare come la sua poesia, anche nei suoi momenti più confessionali, parli di realtà sociali e politiche più ampie. La tesi evita una lettura strettamente femminista o biografica dell’opera di Sexton, concentrandosi invece sulle trasformazioni all'interno della sua poesia, in particolare quelle legate alla conversione del privato in pubblico, del personale in comunitario e del banale in materiale poetico. Esaminando una selezione delle sue poesie, comprese quelle che sono state meno studiate, l’obiettivo è gettare nuova luce sulla sua poetica e rivelare la ricchezza tematica della sua opera, specialmente nei suoi volumi successivi, che sono stati spesso criticamente trascurati e considerati inferiori ai suoi primi volumi.

La metodologia dello studio si basa sull'analisi letteraria, sostenuta dal pensiero femminista e dalla critica letteraria piuttosto che da riferimenti biografici, i quali potrebbero interferire con l'interpretazione delle poesie. Testi come *La mistica femminile* (1963) di Betty Friedan e *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986) e *Writing Like a Woman* (1983) di Alicia Ostriker guidano l'analisi. Inoltre, saggi, recensioni e opere che discutono esplicitamente la poetica di Sexton, come *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics* (1978) a cura di J. D. McClatchy e *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (2007) di Jo Gill, informano il framework dello studio, così come le osservazioni di Anne Sexton sulla vita, la società e la sua poesia disponibili nelle sue interviste. Piuttosto che sulla forma delle poesie, l'attenzione è sul contenuto, collegando le poesie personali e meno personali di Sexton a esperienze femminili più ampie e universali. La tesi si compone di quattro capitoli, ciascuno dei quali affronta diversi aspetti della poesia di Sexton, incluso il suo posto nella tradizione letteraria, la sua voce poetica audace, l'esplorazione del corpo femminile e la rappresentazione della femminilità in una società patriarcale.

Anne Sexton e la Tradizione Letteraria

Il primo capitolo esplora la posizione di Anne Sexton all'interno della tradizione letteraria più ampia, della scrittura femminile e del genere della poesia confessionale con cui è spesso associata. Il capitolo è suddiviso in quattro sezioni. La prima sezione esamina la tradizione letteraria occidentale e la critica letteraria. Discute i cambiamenti nella percezione della poesia nel corso della storia, partendo dagli antichi filosofi greci come Platone e Aristotele. Il Romanticismo e il pensiero modernista ricevono particolare enfasi, in particolare il concetto di T. S. Eliot di "poesia impersonale," che rifiutava l'espressività emotiva del Romanticismo, sostenendo un approccio più distaccato e consapevole della storia. Il pensiero critico di Eliot ha plasmato la creazione poetica moderna e la critica letteraria, influenzando molte generazioni future di poeti e critici.

La seconda parte affronta la poesia confessionale, poiché è emersa in reazione alle tradizioni formaliste della New Criticism, che enfatizzava l'analisi testuale e la natura impersonale della poesia, seguendo le teorie di T. S. Eliot. Entro la metà del XX secolo, l'insoddisfazione per queste norme letterarie restrittive ha portato a stili più personali e "grezzi," esemplificati dalla Beat Generation e dalla poesia confessionale, che si concentravano su temi intensamente privati, emotivi e autobiografici. Inizialmente, molti criticarono la modalità confessionale come eccessivamente introspettiva e autoindulgente, sebbene le

opinioni si siano poi modificate per riconoscere i suoi valori artistici. Studiosi come Deborah Nelson e Michael Thurston hanno successivamente ridefinito la poesia confessionale, collegandola a questioni culturali più ampie dell'era della Guerra Fredda, dinamiche di genere e psicoanalisi. I critici hanno anche notato il suo rifiuto dei vincoli letterari formali, allineandola maggiormente con le esperienze autentiche e vissute dei poeti.

La terza sezione esplora la scrittura femminile, evidenziando dibattiti significativi su come e perché possa o meno differire dalla scrittura maschile e se giustifichi criteri di valutazione e interpretazione separati. La sua attenzione è rivolta al pensiero femminista e alla critica letteraria femminista e all'evoluzione della scrittura femminile, presentando teorie critiche e opere, come *Una stanza tutta per sé* di Virginia Woolf (1929), *La mistica femminile* di Betty Friedan (1963), "Quando noi morti ci risvegliamo: scrivere come revisione" di Adrienne Rich (1972), "Il riso della Medusa" di Hélène Cixous (1975), *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* di Alicia Ostriker (1986) e *Naked and Fiery Forms* di Suzanne Juhasz (1976), tra gli altri. Queste opere hanno contribuito a reclamare le voci femminili e a rimodellare le tradizioni letterarie per riflettere le esperienze femminili, smantellando le influenze patriarcali sulla scrittura femminile. La loro analisi mostra i pregiudizi di genere nella tradizione e nella critica letteraria, sottolineando l'importanza di creare uno spazio per le voci e le esperienze femminili nella letteratura.

La quarta e ultima sezione colloca la poetica di Anne Sexton all'interno di questo contesto, considerando l'intersezione di genere e genere riconoscendo la sua traiettoria poetica unica. L'argomento principale è che il lavoro di Sexton non può essere facilmente categorizzato. La sua poesia profondamente personale e senza scuse femminile è emersa negli anni '60 e '70, un periodo di crescente consapevolezza femminista. Sebbene la poesia di Sexton fosse spesso classificata come confessionale, il suo lavoro affrontava questioni centrali alle esperienze femminili, intersecandosi con il più ampio movimento femminista dell'epoca. La ricezione del lavoro di Sexton è stata spesso dura, in particolare da parte di critici maschili, che hanno messo in discussione il merito letterario della sua poesia, che rifletteva il sessismo sociale più ampio che permeava il mondo letterario. Anche l'opera di Sexton non fosse inizialmente considerata attraverso una lente femminista, i critici successivi ne hanno riconosciuto l'importanza nel dare voce alle esperienze non espresse delle donne.

Poesia del Malcontento

Il secondo capitolo esplora come la poesia di Sexton, spesso criticata per essere eccessivamente personale o concentrata su sé stessa, funzioni sia come risposta sia come critica ai limiti sociali imposti alle donne. Si sostiene che l'opera di Sexton possa essere vista come uno sforzo per rompere il silenzio sui temi tabù, utilizzando la propria vita personale per affrontare temi universali e offrire una visione sociale e politica. Il capitolo è suddiviso in tre parti. La prima parte esamina come il termine "confessionale" sia stato spesso usato con connotazioni sessiste, in particolare per sminuire il lavoro di poetesse come Anne Sexton e Sylvia Plath. Questa etichetta, che implica frequentemente una debolezza o un eccesso emotivo, è stata usata per criticare la natura personale della loro poesia. Tuttavia, questa sezione rilegge la poesia di Sexton, sostenendo che essa trascende la confessione personale per offrire un commento sociale e politico più ampio. L'affermazione di Carol Hanisch secondo cui "il personale è politico" viene qui applicata, suggerendo che la poesia di Sexton, sebbene spesso focalizzata su lotte personali, critichi anche le aspettative sociali nei confronti delle donne. La poesia di Sexton viene vista come una ricerca dell'identità che riflette la condizione femminile americana della metà del XX secolo, attingendo a sentimenti inconsci e trasformando il caos personale in ordine artistico e sociale.

La seconda parte esamina l'approccio di Sexton alla poesia, concentrandosi sulla sua esplorazione della verità, delle menzogne e della loro complessa relazione. Il lavoro di Sexton veniva spesso sollecitato da coloro che cercavano una verità autobiografica nei suoi versi. Tuttavia, Sexton presentava una visione più sfumata della verità, suggerendo che la poesia potesse evitare la verità letterale per rivelare una verità poetica più profonda. In questo senso, la sua poesia operava in un delicato equilibrio tra verità e menzogna, complicando le interpretazioni semplicistiche. Il concetto nietzschiano di verità come costruzione sociale e metaforica viene invocato per illustrare questo punto. Le poesie analizzate offrono spunti sul funzionamento della poesia come mezzo per ingannare, ossia distorcere l'autobiografia, rivelando al contempo inganni che gravano sugli individui, in particolare sulle donne.

La terza parte esamina la poesia di Sexton come qualcosa di più di una tragedia egocentrica, concentrandosi sui temi dell'imprigionamento, delle porte chiuse e della ricerca delle chiavi per sbloccare la libertà – immagini particolarmente presenti nelle sue opere successive. Le poesie analizzate sfidano l'idea che il lavoro di Sexton sia semplicemente una liberazione personale, rivelando invece una ricerca di auto-scoperta, trasformazione e del potere di rompere il silenzio. Si discute dell'uso che Sexton fa del mito e della fiaba nella sua

poesia, principalmente attraverso ciò che la critica Alicia Ostriker ha chiamato "rivisitazione mitica," che le conferisce un potere unico di collegare le sue esperienze personali a questioni culturali e sociali più ampie. Per Sexton, la scrittura era sia un atto di emancipazione personale sia un modo per dare potere agli altri, sfidando le norme sociali che limitavano le voci femminili.

Infine, il capitolo sostiene che la poesia di Sexton rappresenti uno sforzo continuo per uscire da sé stessa e connettersi con gli altri. Sebbene alcuni critici abbiano sostenuto che ella fosse rimasta intrappolata nelle sue lotte private, il capitolo suggerisce che il viaggio poetico di Sexton le abbia permesso di rompere il silenzio sulle esperienze femminili e di dare voce a coloro che erano allo stesso modo rinchiusi.

Rivendicare il Corpo

Il terzo capitolo esamina come la poesia di Sexton ritragga il corpo femminile e la sessualità. Dopo una breve analisi delle opere pertinenti di critici letterari femministi, tra cui "Il riso della Medusa" di Hélène Cixous e *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* di Alicia Ostriker, che evidenziano l'importanza delle scrittrici nel rivendicare i propri corpi e le proprie voci nella letteratura, il capitolo è suddiviso in tre parti. Ogni sezione esamina uno degli atteggiamenti presenti nella poesia femminile nei confronti del corpo femminile – rifiuto, ambivalenza e celebrazione – identificati da Ostriker (1986).

La prima parte indaga come gli scrittori maschi abbiano storicamente oggettivato e controllato il corpo femminile nelle loro opere, spesso reagendo con disagio o disprezzo quando si trovano di fronte all'immaginario corporeo femminile nella poesia scritta da donne. Critici come James Dickey e Louis Simpson hanno respinto la poesia di Anne Sexton per il suo focus sulle esperienze corporee femminili, rivelando un disgusto e un disagio sociali nei confronti delle donne che scrivono dei propri corpi da una prospettiva personale. Tali visioni hanno contribuito alla repressione dei corpi e a un sentimento di frammentazione, dissociazione e vulnerabilità, che Sexton evoca frequentemente nelle sue immagini corporee. Molte delle sue poesie presentano una visione cupa del corpo femminile come luogo di sofferenza e oppressione, suscettibile di invasione e violazione da parte di figure autoritarie maschili.

La seconda parte esamina la complessa relazione tra identità femminile, standard di bellezza e ruoli sociali. L'opera di Sexton esplora continuamente l'ambivalenza nei confronti del corpo femminile, evidenziando i pesi e le restrizioni della femminilità imposti dalle norme sociali. Le poesie analizzate enfatizzano l'esaurimento nei confronti delle aspettative legate

alla femminilità e alla domesticità, rivelando la natura restrittiva dei ruoli di genere. Esse criticano gli ideali superficiali di bellezza, la passività imposta alle donne nella letteratura e nella vita reale, e la loro rappresentazione come oggetti di desiderio il cui valore è legato esclusivamente all'aspetto esteriore. La bellezza è esaminata sia come un privilegio che come una maledizione, poiché soggioga le donne a pressioni e aspettative sociali, diventando un fardello trasmesso attraverso le generazioni in un ciclo vizioso di oppressione.

La terza parte analizza la poesia di Sexton che celebra il corpo femminile, in contrasto con le poesie precedentemente presentate che ritraggono la debolezza del corpo e la sua reclusione a standard di bellezza passivi. Si esamina anche l'uso di metafore naturali da parte di Sexton – come fiori, acqua e terra – come uno dei modi in cui Ostriker (1986) suggeriva che le poetesse rivendicassero una rappresentazione potente e sensuale della femminilità. Le poesie che si concentrano sulla maturazione del corpo, sull'intimità, sull'unità e sulla sessualità vengono esplorate attraverso il loro legame con la natura e come opposizione all'oggettivazione maschile dei corpi femminili come meri oggetti di desiderio o procreazione.

Nel complesso, il capitolo riflette sulla complessa relazione di Sexton con il corpo femminile nella sua poesia, enfatizzando infine come affronti l'oggettivazione patriarcale e il silenziamento dei corpi femminili, rivendicando e celebrando l'esperienza femminile come autentica, potente e interconnessa con la natura.

Ritratti di Femminilità

Il quarto capitolo si concentra sulle varie rappresentazioni della femminilità nella poesia di Sexton, in particolare sulla sua analisi di come il ruolo socialmente costruito di casalinga limiti il corpo e la psiche di una donna. Il capitolo esamina il percorso di Sexton alla ricerca di identità attraverso la sua poesia, enfatizzando il suo desiderio di connessione con gli altri basato sulle sue esperienze uniche, un marchio distintivo della scrittura femminile notato da teoriche come Judith Kegan Gardiner e Alicia Ostriker. Il capitolo è suddiviso in tre parti, che esplorano la sua rappresentazione della casalinga, della donna folle e delle varie ribelli, come le streghe.

La prima parte esamina le restrittive aspettative sociali imposte sulle donne, in particolare quelle incarnate dalla "mistica femminile" che, come sostenuto da Friedan, richiedeva che le donne trovassero realizzazione solo attraverso i loro ruoli di madri, portando a una completa perdita di identità e soppressione delle ambizioni, che, nel tempo, si traduceva in crisi mentali o tendenze suicide. La poesia di Anne Sexton incarna questi temi di intrappolamento e dualità tra il ruolo di casalinga e le ambizioni personali, spesso ritraendo la

lotta della donna per mantenere la propria individualità in un ruolo prescrittivo. Le sue poesie mostrano un senso di disillusione nei confronti del Sogno Americano e delle limitazioni imposte alle donne. Nelle sue adattamenti di favole, critica l'ideale di matrimonio, rappresentandolo come una trappola che soffoca l'individualità e trasforma le donne in bambole o, ancor peggio, in cadaveri.

La seconda parte esplora i profondi effetti delle aspettative sociali sulla femminilità sulla salute mentale e fisica delle donne. Il continuo silenziamento e soffocamento dell'individualità femminile ha portato, infine, a malattie, e lo stigma che circonda la malattia mentale ha ulteriormente marginalizzato le donne, relegando le loro lotte alla sfera privata. In contrasto con i poeti maschi, che potevano esplorare la loro follia in modi che risuonavano con questioni nazionali, le rappresentazioni candidamente personali della propria follia da parte di Anne Sexton furono accolte con resistenza e censura. La trasformazione di Sexton da paziente a poetessa viene esplorata attraverso alcune delle sue poesie più intime, articolando la paura e la costrizione che le donne affrontavano sia negli spazi domestici che nelle istituzioni mentali, sfidando gli stereotipi di femminilità e la natura della follia.

L'ultima parte discute l'esplorazione della femminilità da parte di Sexton attraverso le lenti della disfigurazione, della ribellione e dell'archetipo della strega nella sua poesia. Sottolinea i modi in cui le donne sono spesso rappresentate come deformate o incomplete, sia fisicamente che psicologicamente, evidenziando le pressioni sociali che le portano a sentirsi come "persone sfollate" nelle proprie vite. Utilizzando figure di storpi, streghe e altri personaggi emarginati per trasmettere le loro lotte, la poesia di Sexton ritrae frequentemente le vite interiori delle donne che si confrontano con le aspettative sociali mentre aspirano all'autonomia e all'autenticità. Le interpretazioni delle poesie suggeriscono che queste rappresentazioni riflettono un più ampio fallimento sociale nel riconoscere i desideri delle donne al di là dei confini della domesticità, stigmatizzando qualsiasi rifiuto delle norme esistenti e punendo severamente la donna che osa ribellarsi.

In conclusione, il capitolo mira a illustrare che l'opera di Sexton si è costantemente centrata sulle donne, criticando gli aspetti restrittivi e disumanizzanti della vita domestica, che possono e conducono infine a malattie sia fisiche che spirituali.

In sintesi, questa tesi si propone di presentare Sexton non come una poetessa autoreferenziale, ma come una figura il cui lavoro riflette la crisi nelle identità femminili nella metà del XX secolo in America. La poesia di Sexton serve come ricerca di autodefinizione e ridefinizione della femminilità, dimostrando il potere trasformativo della poesia e riservandole un posto tra i poeti americani più schietti.