CHAPTER: II

WOMEN WRITERS SUICIDE IN LIFE

(VIRGINIA WOOLF, SYLVIA PLATH AND ANNE SEXTON)

This chapter attempts to analyze three woman writers suicide. It focuses on the biographical details, along with eliciting reasons and tracing the circumstances which have led to the ultimate crisis of taking their own life. The women authors segment their life experiences into the range of characters they create, hence an analysis of select novels which have suicidal characters are also included for analysis. The lives of women writers like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who took their lives at the peak of their career makes for a fascinating reading. Besides there is a search for probe into factors that have paused their way for their physical and mental deterioration. These factors stem from causes which are at times personal, or social, or environmental, or due to some unquoted, invisible reasons while male writers suicides are common in contrast women writers who commit suicide come under scrutiny in this chapter.

The high incidence of suicide among twentieth-century writers is well known and includes eminent writers such as Tadeusz Borowski, John Berryman, Paul Clean, Hart Crane, Romain Gary, Ernest Hemingway, Randall Jarrell, William Inge, Jerzy Kosinski, Primo Levi, Vachel Lindsay, Jack London, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Ross Lockridge Jr., Yukio Mishima, Cesare Pavese, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Path, Anne Sexton and John Kennedy Toole. A significant number of writers have struggled with depression and seductions of suicide. From Virginia Woolf Sylvia Path and Anne Sexton are three
women writers identified with the creative unconscious toward suicide. The focus of this chapter therefore is to study the life and works of three authors who took their own lives. Each case discusses the writers’ attitude toward suicide. A strange similarity can be perceived among these three gifted writers, although they belong to socially and culturally different milieus. This similarity is rather interior than exterior.

Virginia Woolf is regarded as a major figure in the modernist movement, and an experimenter and innovator in novel writing. The poetic and symbolic quality of her novels is much appreciated. In her novels, the emphasis is not on plot or action but rather on the psychological life of the characters. Her novels are also known for their delicacy and sensitivity of style, their evocation of place and mood, and their background of historical and literary reference. Psychological effects are achieved through the use of imagery, symbol and metaphor. Character unfolds by means of the ebb and flow of personal impressions, feelings and thoughts. Thus, the inner lives of human beings and the ordinary events in their lives are made to seem extraordinary.

Adeline Virginia Stephen was born into the late Victorian intellectual aristocracy in Hyde Park Gate, London, on January 25, 1882. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, the eminent literary critic and historian, was the founder of the Dictionary of National Biography. Her mother, Julia Duckworth, was a widow with three children when she married Leslie Stephen, who was a widower himself, in 1878. Virginia was the third of the four children of this marriage. Being a nervous and delicate child, she was educated at home, mainly by her parents. While Woolf received no formal education, she was raised in a cultured and literary atmosphere, learning from her father’s extensive library and from conversing with his friends, who were prominent writers of the era. Her parents
were ageing when she was born. Leslie Stephen was already 50. Both her parents had their shares of life shocks, having experienced the deaths of their spouses from their earlier marriages.

A hypersensitive girl, born into a family of creative writers and artists, Virginia began her life with more than an ordinary share of shocks, hurts and the misery accompanying it. All though her childhood she had to struggle with a ‘failed’ philosopher, who was a greater failure as a father. As a child, she used to think that the sudden shocks, which she received from life, were “simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life” (Jeanne 8).

Woolf herself writes about her birth in “A Sketch of the Past” in her Moments of Being "Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen…descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure: born into a large connection, born not of rich parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, articulate late nineteenth-century world” (10).

Roger Poole, the author of the voluminous biography, The Unknown Virginia Woolf, had revised the conventional view of Woolf as ‘mad’ by treating her breakdown as socially intelligible. This intellectual biography is one of the classic studies of Woolf’s life and work. Poole, who treated Woolf’s fear and resentment to her childhood and adolescence, writes about her childhood:

The pressure of living in the household of Leslie and Julia must have been enormous. Tremendous currents of energy flowed between Virginia’s father and mother. Virginia felt herself powerfully attracted to her mother
in the face of the demands made by Leslie Stephen on his wife and his womenfolk. Yet Leslie Stephen was a powerful, dominant, compelling figure. To Virginia, it must have seemed as if her mother were all gift, her father all demand (Poole 7).

Thomas Caramagno argues persuasively in *The Flight of the Mind* (1992) that throughout her adult life she was afflicted with manic-depressive illness, also known as bipolar affective disorder. Integrating neuroscience, psychobiography, and literary theory, Caramagno demonstrates through an analysis of five novels that Woolf's inner world oscillated unpredictably between moments when the self seemed magically enhanced and empowered, imposing meaning and value indiscriminately on the outside world, and other moments when the emptiness and badness of the world lay revealed, corrupting (or corrupted by) the sickening self"(3).

The emotional strain she suffered due to the tyrannical demands of her father was bad enough. Added to this was the sexual interference from both her half-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth. At a very early and most impressionable age (when she was barely six years old), Gerald assaulted her sexually. This was followed by George’s interference when she was thirteen. These experiences scarred her very spirit and its guilt was to haunt her until her suicide at the age of sixty.

Bell's view is that, this kind of incestuous exploitation was sufficiently traumatic to ensure that severe distaste of sexuality, particularly male sexuality, Woolf was to harbor all her life: Naturally shy in sexual matters she was from this time terrified back into a posture of frozen and defensive panic (Bell 44). Louise DeSalvo’s in *Virginia
Woolf: The Impact Of Childhood Sexual Abuse On Her Life And Work explains: "There is evidence to support that the novelist was raised in a household in which incest, sexual violence, and abusive behaviour were a common, rather than a singular or rare occurrence" (1). Evidences shows that she had faced in life disabling fear, guilt, anger, and confusion arising from sexual abuse.

In May 1895, Virginia’s mother died from rheumatic fever. Her unexpected and tragic death caused Virginia to have a mental breakdown at age 13. Although mental illness can certainly not be traced to any single event in a person's life, it is clear that the death of Virginia’s mother and the accompanying collapse of her father short-circuited an already fragile system, triggering, by that summer, the first of four break downs Woolf was to experience during her life. The physical symptoms which were present at each successive breakdown included intense agitation, spells of auditory hallucination, and a deep and almost completely incapacitating depression. Through these short interludes of sickness it was the symptoms alone that were treated, either by exercise or rest or sipping milk in darkened rooms. In this case, exercise was prescribed by the family doctor, and it fell to Stella, Virginia's half-sister, to help keep her outside the required four hours a day, walking and taking bus rides (Rosenthal 5).

Both Virginia’s parents were agnostic. Though their children had ‘sponsors’, none of them was baptized” (Nicolson 1). Virginia had her first bout of madness during the summer of that year. Her father’s indifference to the children’s feelings could be one of the reasons for her mental breakdown. Leslie Stephen’s deterioration reached its peak immediately after Julia’s death with what Virginia described as an ‘oriental’ grief that blinded him to his children’s right to their own
feelings and finally cut him off from their sympathies… Virginia, aged thirteen, stretched out her arms to this man as he came stumbling from Julia’s deathbed, but he brushed impatiently past. This scene imprinted for life on her memory, is emblematic of the emotional impasse, which was to persist in their relations from 1895 until Leslie Stephen’s death in 1904,” (Gordon 27).

In the article “Understanding Depression”, Erica E Goode, a senior editor with the US News and World Report, states that scientists consistently find that “being the child of depressed parents may double or even triple the risk of depression in later life” (Goode 20). Such studies indicate that in such cases, the depressive parents are likely to be irritable and critical during child rearing. The personal history of Virginia Woolf proves this fact. Both Leslie Stephen and Julia Stephen were intensely depressed persons. Both tried to submerge their grief in work. Their daughter Virginia seems to have imbibed those intense and exaggerated feelings of gloom even in her early childhood.

Perhaps the most devastating is the loss of a parent in childhood, either through death or atonement…those who have lost a parent, especially the mother, are more likely to develop serious psychiatric problems and, more specifically, to become psychotic in depressed and suicidal. Work by University of London Researchers George Brown and Tirril Harris demonstrates that women who lose their mother before the age of 17 are significantly more prone to depression as adults. The crucial factor, Brow and Harris say, is how the father or parental surrogate provides for the child. Inadequate care…roughly doubled the risk of depression in adulthood (20).
The chances of psychotic depression are unusually high among artists. In the 1970s, the eminent American psychiatrist Nancy C. Andreasen of the University of Iowa examined 30 creative writers and found 80% had experienced at least one episode of major depression or mania. She suggests that it is possible that “the sensitivity, openness, adventuresome nature and independent character of creative individuals in some way makes them more vulnerable to mental illness, in particular mood disorders” (17).

Chain deaths in the family mentally affected Virginia. Two years after the death of Julia Stephen in 1895, another death followed in the household. Virginia’s stepsister Stella Duckworth, who had taken up the responsibility of the mother, died suddenly in 1897. The two deaths were too much for the young, sensitive Virginia. She felt that the stable and secure world of her childhood home at St. Lves was crumbling. George Spater and Ian Parsons comment thus:

Other deaths followed. Leslie Stephen died of abdominal cancer in February 1904 after an illness, which lasted for nearly two years. These were of great emotional burden to the young Virginia who still felt attached to this old father in spite of his tyrannical demands for sympathy. Vanessa, her elder sister, had already shrugged off all responsibility towards her father because she could not tolerate his nagging demands for affection and sympathy anymore (Berman 78).

In spite of having done so much for her father during his illness, the hypersensitive Virginia still felt guilt-ridden when he died in 1904. She felt that she could
have done better or much more while he was living. So, in order to distract her, her brothers and sister took her first to Wales and then Italy and France. But when they returned, it looked as though the travels were in vain. Virginia had her second bout of madness in May 1904. She was taken to Violet Dickinson’s house where she made her first attempt to commit suicide.

A second severe breakdown followed the death of her father, Leslie Stephen, in 1904, after a long and painful illness, produced an array of conflicting responses in his children. It would be difficult to have Leslie Stephen as a father and not have a great many confused feelings about him. He commanded grand love with the same ease that he created bitter resentment. Whatever people felt about him, they felt it strongly. Certainly Virginia was deeply affected by his loss. She writes immediately after his death:

But how to go on without him. I don't know. All these years we have hardly been apart, and I want him every moment of the day. But we still have each other- Nessa and Thoby and Andrian and I, and when we are together he and mother do not seem far off (Letters Vol. 1,129).

During this time, Virginia attempted suicide again and was institutionalized. According to nephew and biographer Quentin Bell, “All that summer she was mad.”(Nicolson 456). The death of her close brother Tobey Stephen, from typhoid fever in November 1906 had a similar effect on Woolf, to such a degree that he would later be re-imagined as Jacob in her first experimental novel Jacob’s Room and later as Percival in The Waves. These were the first of her many mental collapses that would sporadically occur throughout her life, until her suicide in March 1941. In his biography, Bell reveals
that about the time of Julia Stephen's death in 1895, both Virginia and Vanessa became subject to the rather unfraternal embraces and groping of their half-brother George. Always warm and demonstrative by nature, the twenty-seven-year-old George apparently went well beyond the bounds of brotherly endearments, oppressing both sisters with a sexual interest they could only perceive as terrifying and obscene (Rosenthal 5). Though Woolf's mental illness was periodic and recurrent, as Lee explains, she “was a sane woman who had an illness.” Her “madness” was provoked by life-altering events, notably family deaths, her marriage, or the publication of a novel. According to Lee, Woolf’s symptoms conform to the profile of a manic-depressive illness, or bipolar disorder. Leonard, her dedicated lifelong companion, documented her illness with scrupulousness. He categorized her breakdowns into two distinct stages:

“In the manic stage she was extremely excited; the mind raced; she talked volubly and...incoherently; she had delusions and heard voices...she was violent with her nurses. (Alvarez 44).

In her third attack, which began in 1914, this stage lasted for several months and ended by her falling into a coma for two days. During the depressive stage all her thoughts and emotions were the exact opposite of what they had been in the manic stage. She was in the depths of melancholia and despair; she scarcely spoke; refused to eat; refused to believe that she was ill and insisted that her condition was due to her own guilt; at the height of this stage she tried to commit suicide” (Ibid 46).

The Bloomsbury intellectual group proved to be of great significance in Woolf’s development as a writer. Woolf moved to central London with her sister and brother
Adrian after their father's death, and took a house in the Bloomsbury district. They soon became the focus of what was later called the Bloomsbury Group, a gathering of writers, artists, and intellectuals, impatient with conservative Edwardian society, who met regularly to discuss new ideas. It was an eclectic group and included the novelist E. M. Forster, the historian Lytton Strachey, the economist John Maynard Keynes, and the art critics Clive Bell (who married Vanessa) and Roger Fry (who introduced the group to postimpressionist painters such as Edouard Manet and Paul Cezanne). Woolf was not yet writing fiction, but contributed reviews to the Times Literary Supplement, taught literature and composition at Morley College (an institution with a volunteer faculty that provided educational opportunities for workers), and worked for the adult suffrage movement and a feminist group. It also proved to be of great importance to her personality, because she married Leonard Woolf, one among the intellectual thinkers in the Bloomsbury group. He had joined the Ceylon Civil Service in 1904 and returned in 1912 on leave. Virginia used this range of social intellectual experience creativity yet critically. She always kept herself detached and aloof in the Bloomsbury group and in the social milieu. She was thirty years old, when she decided to get married to Leonard Woolf, the most rational among the Cambridge intellectuals of the Bloomsbury group. They were married in St. Pancras Registry Office on 1912. A more serious breakdown and suicide attempt came in 1913 when, shortly after marrying Leonard Woolf, she began suffering from severe headaches, heard voices, and could neither sleep nor eat (Berman 69).

It was certainly not physical attraction, which made her decide to marry this rational Jew. Yet the way he cared for her was overwhelming: Leonard became doctor,
nurse, and parent, semi-husband and chief literary adviser”, for her. And Virginia adored Leonard. In her dairy, she wrote: “Leonard thinks less well of me for powdering my nose and spending money on dresses. Never mind, I adore Leonard.” (Dunn 27). He founded the Hogarth press to help Virginia during her troubled times. In spite of that, the fact remains that the intellectual Leonard Woolf had really driven her to a state of deep psychological imbalance. Her attitude towards religion had imbibed of the agnostic attitude of her parents and the atheistic ideas of the Bloomsbury group. The superiors of this highbrow club believed that the rational mind or intellect was the only significant aspect of human being. Moreover, she married the most rational among those Cambridge intellectuals. This rational group had killed one of the most basic human needs. Having imbibed the atheistic attitude of her peers in Bloomsbury, she was shocked to find one of their friends, the poet T.S Eliot turning to religion. She made a very provocative comment on this, in one of her letters to her sister Vanessa:

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us from this day forward. He has become an Angelo catholic, believes in God…and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is, I mean, there is something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire, and believing in God (Sanders 4).

Besides novels, Woolf also published many works of nonfiction, including the two extended essays exploring the roles of women in history and society: A Room of One’s Own (1929) and Three Guineas (1938), where she examined the necessity for women to make a claim for their own life and literature. Her works of literary criticism
include *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Second Common Reader* (1932). After her death, Woolf’s diaries were edited and published in five volumes between 1977 and 1984 as *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. The Letters of Virginia Woolf appeared in six volumes from 1975 to 1980. Woolf was a prolific essayist; she published about five hundred essays in periodicals and collections, beginning from 1905.

The Monks House in the village of Rodmell, which the Woolf’s bought in 1919, was a small weather-boarded house which they used principally for summer holidays until they were bombed out of their flat in Mecklenburg Square in 1940 when it became their home. From July 1940, the Woolf’s became afraid of Nazi invasion. They kept enough petrol for this purpose. By 1941, Leonard became increasingly concerned about the deterioration in Virginia’s health. Her depression grew as the fear of madness enveloped her. On 28 March 1941, she loaded her pockets with stones and walked into the River Ouse at Rodmell, Sussex and was drowned. In her last letter to Leonard, she wrote thus:

But I know that I shall not get over this: and I am wasting your life. It is this madness. Nothing anyone says can persuade me. You can work, and you will be much better without me. You see I can’t write this event, which shows I am right. All I want to say is that until this disease came on we were perfectly happy. It was all due to you. No one could have been so good as you have been, from the very first day till now. Everyone knows that (Dunn 54).
Leonard Woolf also believed his wife suffered from manic depression, and he quotes in his autobiography, John Dryden's famous lines in the *Relationship Between Creativity And Madness*: "Great wits are sure to madness near allied, And thin partitions do their bounds divide" (32). Several of Woolf's relatives, on both sides of her family, almost certainly suffered from bipolar or unipolar (depressive) illness. A higher percentage of untreated manic depressives commit suicide than any other medical risk group. Jamison found in her review of thirty studies that "on the average, one fifth of manic-depressive patients die by suicide. From a slightly different perspective, at least two-thirds of those people who commit suicide have been found to have suffered from depressive or manic depressive illness" (Redfield 41).

The last words Virginia Woolf wrote were “Will you destroy all my papers” (Diary 456). Written in the margin of her second suicide letter to Leonard, it is unclear what “papers” he was supposed to destroy—the typescript of her latest novel *Between the Acts*; the first chapter of *Anon*, a project on the history of English literature; or her prolific diaries and letters. If Woolf wished for all of these papers to be destroyed, Leonard disregarded her instructions. He published her novel, compiled significant diary entries into the volume *The Writer’s Diary*, and carefully kept all of her manuscripts, diaries, letters, thereby preserving Woolf’s unique voice and personality captured in each line.

Woolf's voluminous diaries and letters help us to understand her attitude toward suicide. Her most revealing reference to suicide appears in a 1903 diary entry based upon a newspaper article about a middle aged woman's drowning in the Serpentine, an artificial lake in London. She is drawn to the story because of a suicide letter pinned to
the inside of the woman's clothes: "It was blurred but the writing was still legible. Her last message to the world-whatever its import, was short -so short that I can remember it. 'No father, no mother, no work' she had written but 'May God forgive me for what I have done tonight"(A Passionate Apprentice 212). Woolf imagines the emotions of a woman in situation, empathizes with her loneliness and despair, and apprehends the reasons behind the suicide. Woolf projects herself into the victim's situation, empathizes with her loneliness and despair, and apprehends the reasons behind the suicide.

"In writing about an unknown woman, Woolf seems to be writing about herself in particular, her fear of parental abandonment. She observes that although the woman was old enough to have experienced daughterhood, wifehood, and motherhood, the yearning for her parents was uppermost on her mind"(Berman 75).

On October 8, 1922 Virginia Woolf read about the death of Kitty Maxse, a friend of her pre-Bloomsbury youth who died on October 4 after falling over a banister:

The day has been spoilt for me – so strangely – by Kitty Maxse’s death; & now I think of her lying in her grave at Gunby…. I read it in the paper. I hadn’t seen her since, I guess, 1908 – save at old Davies’ funeral, & then I cut her, which now troubles me – unreasonably I suppose. I could not have kept up with her; she never tried to see me. Yet – these old friends dying without any notice, on our part always – it begins to happen often –saddens me: makes me feel guilty. I wish I’d met her in the street. My mind has gone back all day to her; in the queer way it does. First thinking out how
she died, suddenly at 33 Cromwell Road; she was always afraid of operations. (Diary 2:206).

After articulating her feelings of grief and guilt, Woolf dwelled on the unexpected nature of Kitty’s death and began to express faintly the idea that her old friend may have committed suicide to avoid an operation. Woolf quickly dropped her incipient thought, but six days later, on October 14, she was fully suspicious: “now Kitty is buried &mourned by half the grandees in London; & here I am thinking of my book. Kitty fell, very mysteriously, over some bannisters. Shall I ever walk again? She said to Leo. And to the Dr. ‘I shall never forgive myself for my carelessness’. How did it happen? Someone presumably knows, & in time I shall hear” (Diary 2:207).

Woolf’s obsession with Kitty’s mysterious death and her eventual, unverified conclusion that Kitty committed suicide may have stemmed from her long-standing preoccupation with self-killing. Woolf attempted to end her life twice before 1922, first in 1904 and again in 1913. Moreover, Woolf was concocting a fictional suicide. When concluding that Kitty killed herself: she was formulating plans for the composition of Mrs. Dalloway. Woolf wrote, “Mrs Dalloway has branched into a book; & I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side – something like that. Septimus Smith? – is that a good name?” (Diary 2:207).

Septimus Wareen Smith's suicide is one of the most haunting in literature, and though Woolf appears to have little in common with her tormented character, whose madness is attributed to his involvement in the Great War, he is among her most autobiographical characters, the one who comes, and closet to illuminating the wildly
fluctuating moods of manic depression. *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) presents a day in the life of a middle-aged married woman who is a political hostess giving an evening party. Close attention is given to *Mrs Dalloway*'s responsibilities as a hostess, buying flowers, arranging for food and drinks, conferring with servants, planning her own clothing, and bringing her guests together during the party. In other words, women are made for limited tasks as domesticity. *Mrs Dalloway* is Virginia Woolf’s best known novel. It is important to start with a plot overview for a better understanding of the analysis. The novel is centered on Mrs. Dalloway in the party given in her house and in the souvenirs of one past event remembered differently by her guests. *Mrs Dalloway* is mainly about Virginia Woolf’s experience of mental illness and women’s concerns as women and social individuals. *Mrs. Dalloway*, more than any modernist novel is one in which suicide plays a prominent role. During her life, Woolf consulted at least twelve doctors, and consequently experienced, from the Victorian era to the shell shock of World War I, the emerging medical trends for treating the insane. Woolf frequently heard the medical jargon used for a “nervous breakdown,” and incorporated the language of medicine, degeneracy, and eugenics into her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. With the character Septimus Smith, Woolf combined her doctor’s terminology with her own unstable states of mind. When Woolf prepared to write *Mrs. Dalloway*, she envisioned the novel as a “study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side”( Gay 107). When she was editing the manuscript, she changed her depiction of Septimus from what read like a record of her own experience as a “mental patient” into a more abstracted character and narrative. However, she kept the “exasperation,” which she noted, should be the “dominant theme” of Septimus’s encounters with doctors. Septimus's threat to
commit suicide terrifies Lucrezia, particularly when he talks about a suicide pact”

Suddenly he said, "Now we will kill ourselves"(58). Unable to live with Septimus in his suicidal state, she finds herself almost hoping that he will carry out the threat. Lucrezia decides reluctantly to enlist the advice of two physicians, Dr. Holmes, and Sir William Bardshaw, an eminent "nerve doctor". "Holmes fails to take seriously Septimus's frightening hallucinations and dispenses platitudinous advice that trivializes his patient illness"(Berman 83).

Researches have proved that human mind in its normal state could be a continuum between mental health and mental illness. Almost every one experienced mental health problems, in which the distress one feels matches some of the signs and symptoms of mental disorders. Charlotte Perkins Gilman too has faced similar situations in her life as revealed in The Yellow Wall Paper. Both Mrs. Dalloway and The Yellow Wall Paper deal with the theme of madness, which is the after effect of deep inner desolation. This madness culminates in suicide in one case. Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway is set within the framework of twenty four hours in London of the 1920s. It consists of two intertwined lines of development with Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, a perfect London hostess as the central character of the first series, and Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked ex-soldier, of the second. These two sets of characters and the related incidents develop alternately, coinciding momentarily at different points in space and time. The objects, people and scenes are invariably identical. But outwardly, they move in different spaces and circles. Septimus is worried that the world holds no meaning. He hears voices and speaks aloud with his friend, Evans, who died during the war. Septimus shows typical signs of mental break down. Dr. Bradshaw advises sending Septimus to a mental home
for a rest cure. The same evening Septimus throws himself out of the window. The Bradshaw’s, guests at the Dalloway’s party, tell the story of the suicide, thus bringing together the two lines of the narrative to the central idea of death. It is interesting to note here that originally Wolf had planned to make Mrs. Dalloway kill herself at the end of the party. Instead, Woolf made a strange twist by making Clarissa to vicariously experience the death of Septimus in her consciousness.

A tragic paradox accepted by almost all psycho-analytic studies about man’s being or existence, is that a man’s separateness or his unique identity should be preserved, but at the same time he should not be a total isolate. His relatedness to others is also a potentially essential basis for his being. Carl G. Jung explains this, while defining the process of individuation:

Since the individual is not only a single, separate being, but by his very existence also presupposes a collective relationship, the process of individuation must clearly lead to a more intensive and universal collective solidarity, and not to mere isolation (562).

The solidarity of the individual with society is a vital necessity. Genuine individuation should lead to a natural appreciation of the collective norm. A failure in connecting these two norms in its correct proportion can lead to frustration, depersonalization or the development of a false self-system, which can finally lead a person to self-annihilation or even to murder. In Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway too, this marital frustration is seen, though covertly:
Like a nun withdrawing…she went upstairs…There was emptiness about the heart of life: an attic room. Women must put off their rich apparel. At midday, they must disrobe…The sheets were clean, tight-stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be… that Richard insisted that she must sleep undisturbed (Dalloway 29).

Durkheim’s, egoistic concept of suicide can apply to Woolf's life. Insufficient integration with the society and an excess of individualism leads to egoistic suicide. It is the individual who detaches oneself from the framework or concern for the society in which one lives. As society has ceased to have any significance for him, the person withdraws into his own system of values.

Mrs. Dalloway fails to articulate Septimus’ suicide motive or define a definite moral position on his self-quietus. In fact, in the process of revising her novel, Woolf eliminated from her narrative Septimus’ declarations concerning his suicidal intentions. In her holograph notebook dated March 12, 1922, Septimus (still H.Z. Prentice) decides to commit suicide out of a desire for martyrdom: “One might give one’s body to be [eaten] by the starving and thus, thought Septimus, be a martyr, and then as I am going to die… I shall be immortal, he thought, my name will be in all the placards. Mrs. Dalloway’s critics, regardless of their differences, almost invariably vouch that Septimus’ suicide scene presents us with further interpretive challenges. Of all the narrative moments in Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus’ self-annihilation is the most troubling, not because of the nature of the deed, but because of the nature of Woolf’s writing.
While we read Septimus, it is as if we also read Woolf: we sense that the narrator’s free indirect style not only reveals the desperate thoughts of one who is about to kill himself but also reflects the stressed thoughts of an author struggling to manage her own irritated relationship, and compose a fictional suicide, for nowhere else in the novel do we encounter writing that is as fractured and uncertain. Nowhere else do we find a scene that is as clearly aware of itself as a literary production – that is as blatantly written. An accretion of conspicuous dramatic codes, all of which point to Woolf’s difficulty finding an opposite approach to her subject, blurs the seriousness and immediacy of Septimus’ situation. Consequently, his suicide lies in a distinct representational space set apart from Mrs. Dalloway’s seamless atmosphere, soliciting puzzlement in a novel that through and through invites sorrow.

In terms of writing Septimus’ suicide, it is as if an indecisive Woolf, struggling to find the most suitable way to kill her character, exhausted all her options and wrote herself into a corner, with the result that she had no other choice but to make Septimus die by self-defenestration: “There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out (Berman 90).

Another suicidal leap resonates with Septimus’ in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. According to Quentin Bell, Woolf first attempted to suicide by jumping out of a friend’s window in 1904 (1:89-90). Woolf, in a letter to Vanessa Bell written during her 1910 confinement, later expressed a desire to defenestrate herself: “I shall soon have to jump out of a window…. My God! What a mercy to be done with it!” (Letters 1: 431).

Mimicking Woolf’s failed and Kitty Maxse’s successful, and iconographic Victorian
suicide, Septimus’ self-annihilation serves as a nodal point at which various biographical and representational anxieties intersect. Moreover, the act of penning the event was, for Woolf, a tiresome and troublesome task. Her difficulty with the scene, which she revised substantially, reflected a greater, ongoing struggle to write Septimus’ insanity (Hoffman 178). A June 1923 diary entry suggests that Woolf’s frustration stemmed from her own experience with psychosis: “Am I writing The Hours from deep emotion? Of course the mad part tires me so much, makes my mind squint so badly that I can hardly face spending the next weeks at it” (Diary 2:248).

Clarissa endorses Septimus’ suicide because in many ways the two characters are identical. Woolf based Clarissa’s character on her friend Kitty Maxse whose accidental death in 1922 Woolf interpreted as suicide. Clarissa has more in common with Septimus than with anyone else. Both Clarissa and Septimus experience rapid alternations of mood, ranging from terror to exaltation; share the same mistrust of doctors; reject heterosexual love; and struggle with feelings of loneliness, isolation and depression. Both are married to spouses who neither experience nor understand their emotional highs and lows. Woolf was familiar with both realities, and in writing about Septimus's psychotic break, she transmuted her own painful experience into fiction. Woolf experienced while writing Mrs. Dalloway some of Clarissa's reaction to Septimus' wild emotions. She admitted in a letter written shortly after completing Mrs. Dalloway that his madness and suicide was a “subject that I have kept cooling in my mind until I felt I could touch it without bursting into flame all over. You can’t think what a raging furnace it is still to me -madness and doctors and being forced”(Letters 3:180)
*The Legacy* (1940) Woolf’s late short story also dramatizes suicide as a reunion with a lost loved one. The Legacy psycho biographically views Angela's motives for suicide as identical with Woolf's. The plot focuses on Gilbert Clandon's horrified discovery that the recent death of his wife, Angela, who was struck and killed by a car, may not have been accidental. Clandon finds it strange that his wife left everything in order, including gifts for her friends, almost as if she had foreseen her death. Angela left to her husband nothing apart from her fifteen-volume diary, which she had kept ever since they were married. "When he came in and found her writing, she always shut it or put her hand over it. 'No, no, no,' he could hear her say, 'After I'm dead-perhaps. 'So she had left it to him, as her legacy. It was the only thing they had not shared when she was alive" (Dick 275). Angela suicide seems motivated by the desire both to rejoin her lover in death and to escape from a loveless marriage. Additionally, she seems to be revenging herself on a husband who has disappointed her. The revenge motive becomes more apparent when we realize that Angela who has fiercely guarded the privacy of her diary for so many years makes no effort to destroy her writing following the fateful decision to take her life. Angela's imitation of her lover's suicide also demonstrates how one person's self-inflicted death "infects" another person. There are number of parallels between author and character. Both are private, introspective women whose marriages are childless; both turn to their dairies to record their innermost thoughts; both leave suicide notes to their husbands, essentially public men.

Death-drive, as defined by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, it is the co-existence of opposing feelings in one’s mind that is of Eros and Thanatos: and it “is the 'true result' and to that extent, the purpose of all life” (322). As Malcolm notes, in some
secret ways, Thanatos nourishes Eros as well as opposes it. The two principles work in convert concert; though in most of us Eros dominates, in none of us Thanatos is completely subdued. However, this is a paradox of suicide -- to take one's life is to behave in a more active, assertive 'erotic' way than to helplessly watch as one's life is taken away from one by inevitable mortality. (58) In the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, "death" can be seen like a ghost that cannot be expelled out of the consciousness of the hero and the heroine. For Woolf, Thanatos is closely related to her folk. Her father’s family had a history of psychosis. Her father was a man of extreme melancholy. Death of his second wife brought him to a deep depression. Woolf had a mother who was melancholically born. After her first husband died, she became more sad and silent. The melancholic character of Woolf’s parents had a great influence on her and planted the death instinct in her gradually. Woolf’s disease was another source of her Thanatos. Woolf inherited the psychiatric disease which had attacked her several times in her life. The spiritual darkness brought her great pain. She spoke to herself in her first mental break down, which lasted for several days.

Roger Poole ends *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* by personifying the river into which she threw herself as a faithful supporter. In language reminiscent of Edna Pointellier's hypnotic immersion into sea, he writes: "The water was her friend, and had been her friend ever since she was a child in Cornwall, receiving her with the dignity that she felt she needed, and indeed, deserved"(279).Nigel Nicolson, in his introduction to the final volume of Woolf's letters, confidently rules out the possibility that she was mad when she committed suicide. Instead, he prefers to see her as searching for novelistic closure (Berman 97). “To end her life at this point was like ending a book. It had certain
"Many people who take their own lives do not choose to die, but are impelled to it by their mental illness. Virgina Woolf chooses to die. It was not an insane or impulsive act, but premeditated. She died courageously on her own terms" (Letters 6:xvi-xvii).

Sylvia Plath remains the most haunting twentieth-century literary suicide. Since her death in 1963, Sylvia Plath’s life and work have provoked a vast and varied commentary. Some writers have attempted to separate her life and suicide from her art; others have devised metaphoric explanations for the concrete reality of her tragedy. Some like A. Alvarez have stated both alternatives, he sees the risk of suicide as a by-product of poetic commitment:

It is as though she had decided that, for her poetry to be valid, it must tackle head-on, and nothing less serious than her own death, bringing to it a greater wealth of invention and sardonic energy than most poets manages in a lifetime of so-called affirmation. If the road had seemed impassable, she proved that it wasn’t. It was, however, one-way, and she went too far long it to be able, in the end, to turn back. Yet her actual suicide... is by the way; it adds nothing to her work and proves nothing about it. It was simply a risk she took in handling such volatile material (357).

To understand her suicide, one needs to understand her work and her life as a unity. As Elizabeth Hardwick has said, “Her fate and her themes are hardly separate and both are singularly terrible (56). Plath created in her poetry a world in which she could no longer find the possibility of survival. She imagined compulsive, ritualized suicide
attempts as an effort to avoid an absence at the center of her being, a gap left by the father’s loss, by identifying with the father’s death. His death becomes, ironically, her first suicide, to be repeated at ten year intervals. In “Lady Lazarus” she affirms the ritualistic nature of her efforts:

I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.
This is number three
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

Sylvia Plath’s suicide at the age of thirty occurred when she was writing the best poems of her life. She regards herself as an escape artist in "Daddy" and “Lady Lazarus" and views suicide there and in her autobiographical novel, The Bell Jar, as part of a pattern of death and rebirth. It is easy to see why so many readers have celebrated these brilliant poems, with their incantatory rhythms, resurrection imagery, and feminist themes. Yet if death precedes rebirth in "Daddy" and Lady Lazarus, "there is no such affirmation in Plath's last poem, "Edge". Though Plath took pains to protect the sleeping children from the gas that snuffed out her life, "Edge" raises the most vexing questions about the boundary between healthy and unhealthy art. In the poem “Daddy” (1962), Sylvia shows an angry tirade against the father who has deserted her, a Freudian drama of repetition-compulsion in which the speaker resurrects her vampiric father only to kill him again in a contradictory attempt to efface the original source of her psychological pain. In Plath's poetry and prose, Otto Plath was to become a potent symbol of absence,
signifying the impossibility of lasting love, of God, or of any real meaning in life. The death of her father was a shock from which Plath never properly recovered (O'Reilly 10).

To Plath existence in a male world of double standards was unbearable. Death, which always had a fascination for her, became a passion, an obsession with her. She finally succeeded in committing suicide on February 11, 1963. The last poem she wrote was less than a week before her death and was ominously titled as “Edge” and it showed how she was preparing herself for the leap into the unknown. For her “Dying was an art” and she accomplished it to procure her freedom from the world of infidelities and anguish. Suicide seemed to her an assertion of power without succumbing to the ferocities of the world. She had an intense love for her father and believed that death would be a pathway to him. She believed that her death would give a better rebirth to her works which are a true record of her feelings.

Death is a major theme in Plath’s poetry because of her experiences of it in life. She was a manic depressive for most of her life and attempted suicide twice before she succeeded in 1963. Since her suicide, Plath has risen to iconic status. As Jane Marcus says on suicide: Suicide, in some sense, is perhaps the only solution masochistic enough to satisfy the pacifist when the politics and the violence of war become too much to bear (82).

It is quite essential to look into one’s personal life to see what has shaped that personality to whatever destiny they faced. Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Massachusetts and spent her early childhood years in Winthrop, a seaside town near Boston. Her father, Otto Plath was a renowned Professor of German and a bee specialist
at Boston University, while her mother Azelia Schober Plath taught medical secretarial training program at Boston University. Sylvia Plath and her brother, who was two and a half years younger to her, had their school education in a Public School in Boston.

In early childhood, Sylvia was the center of her father’s attention and she gloried in being the family’s darling and a special favorite with her grandparents. Soon, Otto Plath’s health started deteriorating due to diabetes and a wounded toe aggravated his misery. In November 1940, he died and his death was a great blow to Sylvia who loved her father most dearly she felt a sense of betrayal with her father for deserting her by his death hence, a combination of the hatred and the ‘electra’ love that she felt for him. It was not easy for Sylvia to bury the memories of her father. He emerged in her dreams and in her peculiarly hallucinatory imagination until 1942, when the family of Plath vacated the sea town of Winthrop. Her father menacingly and irresistibly appears again and again in her works as a Colossus of a sea – muse or an archetypal Greek king or as a beekeeper or as in the famous poem “Daddy”, a fictitiously brutal combination of husband and Nazi. This tangle of imagery—illogical, surreal, untrue has been inseparable from Plath’s psychic reality until her death in 1963.

During her last year in college she had another nervous breakdown and desperately made a serious suicide hid, which became the theme of her novel, The Bell Jar (Alvarez 23). Sylvia had been ill- first a miscarriage, then an appendicitis. She spoke of suicide with a wry detachment, and without any mention of the suffering of drama of the act. It was obviously a matter of self-respect that her first attempt had been serious and nearly successful, instead of a mere hysterical gesture. That seemed to entitle her to speak of suicide as a subject, not as an obsession. It was an act she felt she had a right to
as a grown woman and a free agent, in the same way as she felt it to be necessary to her development, given her queer conception of the adult as a survivor, an imaginary Jew from the concentration camps of the mind. (Alvarez 35).

*The Bell Jar* was published in London in January 1963 and Plath was first depressed by the reviews. The novel was a confessional writing and was autobiographical. It was undoubtedly a novel of challenge thrown by women in the world of men. She could not tolerate men and the norms that they enforced on women. She rebelled against the double standard of morals prescribed by men for women. Sylvia Plath comments: I could not stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not (57).

Though Sylvia was doing well in her life, she was often assailed with a gnawing sense of insecurity she could not decide what she would do after her academic career. Plath disgusted with the men she had met in her life and desperate with their oppressive attitudes resorted to suicide. Esther Greenwood too confronted the same peril. Both her selfhood and her womanhood were endangered. Sylvia’s restlessness and anxiety are expressed as those of the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* Esther Greenwood:

I saw my life branching out before me like green fig tree in the story.

From the tip of every branch like a fat, purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor and another fig was EeGee, the amazing editor and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America and another fig was
Constantine and Socrates and Attila. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go back and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet(56).

In 1953, she suffered a severe nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. She swallowed a huge quantity of sleeping pills hiding herself in the cellar of the family home. After three days, she was discovered by chance in a semi-conscious state. This was also an attempt to join her father. Following the breakdown, Plath was in hospital for a year and given electric shock treatments. When she returned to Smith in 1954, she resumed her successful academic career. In 1955, she graduated *summa cum laude* and won a Fulbright to Cambridge University, where she studied for a graduate degree in English Literature and in 1956, she met and married the poet Ted Hughes. In 1959, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes settled down in England in 1960. Her collection of poems was accepted for publication by William Heinemann Limited. Her first child Frieda was born in the same year. The first collection of poems the Colossus came out in 1962. In 1961, she applied for Eugene F Saxton fellowship to finish a novel, which she described as one-sixth completed already. On January 7, 1962, a son, Nicholas was born. Sylvia Plath divided her time between writing and house work and she was able to complete the novel within a year. She had withdrawn herself to a different setting in England – to the flat where the poet Yeats lived. There she was able to complete both the novel *The Bell Jar* and her collection of poems, *Ariel*. To combat depression and a feeling of frustration, Sylvia took a temporary job with the bookseller doing lay out for the children’s book page of the magazine.
The blow to her faith in life was the truth that she learned a bit late. Several months had passed before she learnt that on trips to London to record poetry for the BBC, Hughes was meeting Assia Wevil, whom he married after the death of Plath in 1963. This infidelity of the person whom she saw as the only mate worthy of her body and soul, of her talent and ambition in the whole world, left her desperately shattered. Her husband’s withdrawal from her left her isolated.

Life posed itself before her in all its existential mystery and misery. Both marriage and men were a menace to her. Even her children were not an adequate link to reconcile her to her husband. For her, marriage became an institution of empty emotions. Marriage seemed to be a trap, a swamp, a blind ditch from which she was unable to extricate herself. Ted Hughes along with the father ended as a metaphor for hatred. In his book on Sylvia Plath – *The Shaping of Shadows* he believes that Plath attempted suicide because her aim for transcendence was thwarted. He observes:

Plath's misgivings about the goal of transcendence are unchanged. For her, there is no one state of perfection at which to aim – life is individual willed struggle, the single leap to perfection or transcendence of the earthly struggle is therefore uncreative. It denies the very diversity and change which is creative life… Plath is attracted toward such an end and recognizes the roots of her conflict (between imperfect life and perfect transcendence of life through death (Hughes 128).

Plath aimed to assert her identity both as a woman and as a writer and she succeeded in both through her potent writings. Finally, when her life’s cruel reality
bruised her irrecoverably, she succumbed in the suicidal urges that were always prodding her. Greer I Slip –Shod Sibyls narrates the problem of women poets that leads them to suicide:

A woman poet’s suicide is merely a part of the misery of women and that is a world that was less unjust to women. Our poets would be less likely to destroy themselves…poetry as presented by the male literary establishment… enticed the woman poet to dance upon a wire to make an exhibition of herself and ultimately to come to grief. In the lethal portion that their souls imbibed, poetry was at least as important an ingredient as womanhood(421).

Plath has been accepted as a daring woman writer who has waged a dreary battle against patriarchy and its confinements. She has been a powerful influence for the feminists who became popular after nearly a decade. Plath was a very shrewd writer who realized the strategies adopted by patriarchy to curb her creative talents. Hence, there was a conflict within her as to what she had to choose – a domestic career or a literary career. Though she chose both, she never led one obstruct the other “Plath’s relentlessly humorless vision of herself as the heroine of a great drama gives her journal a verve and a luster that the journals of more restrained, self-deprecating classical writers lack” (Malcom 100). Plath has successfully challenged patriarchal structures and has successfully overcome them. Her suicide marks her inevitable repulse to the pressure of the male oriented society on her. In her poem “The Couriers”, she says

A thing of gold with the sun in it?
Lies, lives and grief

Frost on a leaf, the immaculate

Cauldron

Plath did not stop writing after the collapse of her marriage. She moved back to London and continued to write. Her letters to her mother *Letters Home* show that her life was characterized by intense bitterness and mounting anxiety about her future and her children’s. At the same time, they were marked by extraordinary exultation, for Plath was then producing at the rate of two or three poems a day. These were published posthumously in the collections *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1972).

*The Bell Jar* records the psychic disturbance in Plath and Esther reveals the heart throbbing outbursts of Plath against patriarchy. Patricia Meyer Spacks in one of her essay refer to the novel *The Bell Jar* as making a good survey of the limited possibilities for women. The sensibility expressed is not dismissible. The experience of the book is that of electrification … Female sexuality is the center of horror babies in glass jars, women bleeding in childbirth, Esther herself thrown in the mud by a sadist, hemorrhaging after her single sexual experience. To be a woman is to bleed and burn, womanhood is entrapment escaped from, surely only by death (159). She tells, “The air of the bell jar wadded around me and I couldn’t stir” (152). Plath too suffers the same suffocation when the patriarchal yoke tries to drown her attempts of writing *The Bell Jar* she observes “I’ve tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar” (Quoted in Ames 14) and she describes what she has been able to observe from life. “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream” (193). As oppression increases, she retrogresses
into her bell jar. She has been hospitalized for her psychic illness and has been discharged after a few shock treatments. Finally, when she realizes that her agony will not let her escape from her bell jar, she persistently resorts to suicide.

In most of the poetry of Plath registers her severe frustration with life and her unquenchable thirst for death. When she sensed the futility of living in an unfriendly world without a helping hand from her husband, she contrived to take away her life. Her loss of faith in men and in humanity as a whole led her to this predicament. Her central problem is explained thus:

When a confidence in love fails, there can be a loss of confidence in a benign universe and so meaning seems to dissolve, while the hold on reality breaks down and hopes dissolves into futility. Thus a schizoid feeling about the experience of reality yields those terrifying moments in the work of Sylvia Plath, when the sense of the self—in-the world falls apart (Holntook 18).

Death in her, purely, is an action, a possibility, a gesture complete in itself unmotivated and unexamined. Dissolution of personality leading to death is common in her poems. Plath’s ego suffers dissolution where she oscillates between the self and the object that is the “I” and the non “I”. Human consciousness to Plath was always an intruder in the natural world. As Joyce Carol Otes says, “If the self is set in opposition to everything that excludes it then the distant horizons of the wilderness will be as terrible as the kitchen walls and the vicious of hissing fat” (Alexander 26). The ignorance of life is clear in her early Ariel poem the ‘Tulips’ where she described that she has no place in
this world and she would like to quit the worldly pleasures and attain peacefulness in
death. Plath can be described as an escapist who never insisted on warring against the
patriarchy but to lay submissive to it. Kate Millet says, “In the matter of conformity,
patriarchy is a governing ideology without peer; it is probable that no other system has
ever exercised such a complete control over its subjects” (Millet 33).

If, attempted suicide is as some psychiatrists believe, a cry for help, then Sylvia at
this time was not suicidal. What she wanted was not help but confirmation: she needed
someone to acknowledge that she was coping exceptionally well with her difficult routine
life of children, nappies, shopping and writing. She needed, even more, a sort of feedback
to know that the poems worked and were good. So it was important for her to know that
her messages were coming back clear and strong (Alvarez 42). She asked for neither
sympathy nor help but, like a bereaved widow at a wake, she simply wanted company in
her mourning (42). The last few days of her life she wrote one of her most beautiful
poems' 'Edge' which is specifically about the act she was about to perform:

The woman is perfected.

Her Dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
Once at each little
Picher of milk, now empty.
She has folded
Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden
Stiffens and odours bleed (Plath 172)

The more she wrote about her death, the stronger and more fertile her imaginative world became. And this gave her everything to live for (Alvarez 54). Freud has written, 'Life loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked. 'Finally, Sylvia took that risk. She gambled for the last time, having worked out that the odds were in her favor, but perhaps, in her depression, not much caring whether she won or lost. Her calculations went wrong and she lost (55). "Edge" remains perhaps the most poetic suicide note ever written, yet despite the fact that the poem holds a prominent position in Plath's art and biography, it has been ignored by most critics. Judith Kroll's influential 1976 book *Chapters in a Mythology*, written with the help and approval of Ted Hughes views Plath's poetry as part of an elaborate mythic system removed from the artist's daily concerns: "Edge, Death and Co, and Birthday Present", which focus on actual or imminent death..." A Birthday Present and Edge, have little in common with stereotypes of suicidal women, and a great deal in common with tragic heroines who die calmly and nobly (129, 147-48).

In life, as in the poem, there was neither hysteria in her voice, nor any appeal to sympathy. She talked about suicide in much the same tone as she talked about any other risky, testing activity: urgently, even fiercely, but altogether without self-pity. She
seemed to view death as a physical challenge she had to once again overcome. It was an experience of much the same quality as riding Ariel or mastering a bolting horse—which she had done as a Cambridge undergraduate—or careering down a dangerous snow slope without properly knowing how to ski—an incident, also from life, which is one of the best things in *The Bell Jar*. Suicide, in short, was not a swoon into death but an attempt to cease upon the midnight with no pain; it was something to be felt in the never-ends and fought against, an initiation rite qualifying her life of her own. A. Alvarez, in his book *The Art of Suicide*, sees the risk of Sylvia’s suicide as a by-product of poetic commitment:

> It is as though she had decided that, for her poetry to be valid, it must tackle head-on nothing less serious than her own death, bringing to it a greater wealth of invention and sardonic energy than most poets manage in a lifetime of so-called affirmation. If the road had seemed impassable, she proved that it wasn't. It was, however, one-way and she went too far along it to be able, in the end, to turn back. Yet her actual suicide...is by the way; it adds nothing to her work and proves nothing about it. It was simply a risk she took in handling such volatile material(37).

Elizabeth Hardwick in her book *"On Sylvia Plath," poetry Dimension I: A living Record of the poetry Year* says “her fate and her themes are hardly separate and both are singularly terrible”(13). David Holbrook speaks of an incapacity to love that was at the heart of Plath’s experience (42). She was almost always confined to a world in which “Love is the bone and sinew of my curse”(42). In her writing Plath projects her own psychic and somatic states, her images, and a representation of her world of self-other
relations. Her works record, for instance, a consistent spectrum of feelings. Syntonic feelings are "fullness," "purity," "warmth," and "peace." Asyntonic feelings are "flatness," "thin papery", "feelings", "dead and moneyless" sensations, and "leaden slag" feelings. (Murray 149). Plath created in her poetry a world in which she could no longer find the possibility of survival.

We hear her speaking of an inner world found in history. The shut box and the mirror of herself are denied, but the oven, in the end, was not in Dachau but in herself. History came home, because that is where it originated. It “shouldn’t be” a mirror, but it was. There is a terribly self-defeating circularity in a psychic activity like Plath's. Like the compulsive person Otto Fenichel describes, she turns from "the macrocosm of things to the microcosm of words," in an attempt to master frightening psychic realities, only to find that "the sober words do not remain sober but become emotionally over catheter; they acquire the emotional value which things have for other persons". Plath could say, “It’s like water or bread, or something absolutely essential to me. I find myself absolutely fulfilled when I have written a poem, when I'm writing one”(Plath 168).

In the title poem of "The Colossus" Plath tries symbolically to re constitute her father, the image of a lost god. She begins in frustration:

“I shall never get you put together entirely, /
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed"(Plath 54).

The persistent, doomed effort to reconstruct her father, to deny the vacant space left by his death, is a central theme in Plath's work. In "Daddy" (A) she writes:

I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do (Plath 264).

If the death of her father is illogically conceived but psychologically perceived as her own suicide, we can understand this confusion if we regard the gap in Plath's self as the unfulfilled confirmation of her identity by her father. A crucial component of this identity is erotic, the need for a pre-adolescent girl of nine to have her womanliness accepted and confirmed by the first male in her life. When her father died the erotic component of Plath's identity, her sexuality as a woman, remained unconfirmed. The good libidinal attachment to the father could not realize itself and her subsequent fantasized relations with men confirm instead both her ambivalence toward her father's loss and her struggle against that loss. Plath's response to her father's death was to become like her father. The compulsive aspect of Plath's ritual of self-destruction mirrors the strongly obsessional nature of her personality (Berman 166).

Hughes reports that she would sit with a thesaurus on her lap (it was her father's book), carefully going over the words, circling words of special significance (containing them with boundaries for further use) and writing each word in her poetry as if it were a hieroglyph, a separate entity of its own. (82). If she were unsatisfied with a poem, she would often scrap it altogether rather than re-work it. She was ruthlessly self-critical and destroyed hundreds of her poems, but her determination was immense. We see a common obsession root in the effort of composition and the inner need to re-compose her father. Psychologically, she depends on the very image she would murder for the means of murder itself; she drives the stake in the vampire's heart. Her aggression, in its
verbal and phallic form, is inseparable from the fantasized aggression of the father, "the language obscene / An engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew" (Daddy 264).

The desire for the father also becomes a search for him in other men, what Plath calls "models" of him. After her suicide attempt in "Daddy",

"I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkamf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do.

So daddy, I'm finally through. (Plath 288).

Here the father is at once a negative ideal and an object of desire. In The Bell Jar, Esther's desire for "some flawless man" (87). When Plath writes "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," we hear a double echo of her frustrated desire, for she is done with murder, and she is "through," dead. Presence and absence, love and hate, can only be united in the suicidal act. In "Ariel" Plath concentrates on the dynamics of her identification and regression in one brilliant passage:

And I

Am the arrow

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red Eye, the cauldron of morning (Plath 98).

It also reveals the source of Plath's anxiety over sexualized activity, a competitive striving for the father at the oedipal level of organization. When Esther wakes up after her
electric shock treatment she remarks: “I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (152). At that moment, "an old metal lamp" surfaces in her mind. The lamp was "one of the few relics of my father's study," she recalls. One day she “decided to move this lamp from the side of my mother's bed to my desk at the other end of the room” (152).

To suggest that for Plath this intolerable separateness marked a deep confusion between the sense of identity-as-separateness, the capacity to identify the boundary between self and other, and the loss of her own sense of identity as a person. If there are others and other things, then she is "a reject," thrown back from the sea. In the final months of her life Plath's work was infused with extreme and contrary emotions about motherhood." Her own childbearing seems to have amplified a fierce attempt to differentiate benign and malignant components of mothering, to find herself by ridding herself of horrid maternal images. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree" she says:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.

Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.

How I would like to believe in tenderness (Plath123).

To suggest that the precipitating factor in her final self-destructive journey was her feeling of having been abandoned by Ted Hughes. Her separation from him seems to announce the loss of the protective stability that her marriage had made possible. She could not fill the horrible center of motherhood because her own rage now coincided with the sense of abandonment, and in her own role as a mother she could no longer maintain the boundary between the needs, aims and fears of the mother and the needs, aims and
fears of the child without absolutely splitting her nurturing self from her incandescent inner world.

Plath’s depiction of a bold, victimized persona compelled critics to consider how the details of her personal life explained the subject matter of her poems; and, rightfully so, since it’s undeniable that Plath herself embraced the idea of divulging the details of her personal life and feelings through her work. At the root of the struggles described in Plath’s poetry is the fact that she suffered from an underlying mental illness and had a history of depression, suicidal tendencies and mental therapy, which included electro-shock treatments. Her published poetry and journals publicly expose how she expressed what it felt like to be her. For instance, in a journal entry dated October 3, 1959, Plath opens the entry with: “Very depressed today. Unable to write a thing. Menacing Gods. I feel outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness” (517).

Specifically, in the poems composed near the end of her life, she describes a self that is preparing for suicide. Although it is often difficult for a friend or family member to believe, a person who commits suicide might exhibit predictable patterns of conduct. As with other behavioral indicators, like those associated with a physical addiction or mental illness, a person intending to commit suicide may go through several stages before the final act. While not an exact science, an individual can prepare herself to understand how a suicidal individual might be trying to communicate. Robert Marrone, author of *Death, Mourning & Caring*, describes what a person can look for:

Suicidal ideation, triggering events, and warning signs form an interrelated triad that is present in many suicides. Suicidal ideas, threats, and attempts
often precede a suicide. The most commonly cited warnings of potential suicide include (a) extreme changes in behavior, (b) a previous suicide attempt, (c) a suicidal threat or statement, and (d) signs of depression, hopelessness, and a sense of a meaningless life (193).

Those thinking of suicide can be helped simply by someone asking about and listening to their feelings; though, ironically, it seems that talking becomes easier and more necessary for those surrounding a suicidal individual after the fact. In the case of Plath, the thematic presence of isolation, rejection, death and rebirth, whether by shedding a figurative skin or through death, shows a final perceived self-shaped by suicidal thoughts. However, some do argue that perhaps Plath didn’t intentionally commit the final act but only meant to test her expanding boundaries.

The breakdown of her family placed Plath under tremendous stress. After her husband, Ted Hughes, left her to be with his lover, Assia Wevill, Plath was left on her own to care for two small children. Because Hughes’s departure fuelled Plath’s depression, she began taking medications to help her cope and function on a daily basis, which her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, blames for encouraging rather than suppressing her suicidal thoughts, especially since such medications contain side-effects that increase suicidal thoughts.

Since Plath’s first suicide attempt (via an overdose of sleeping pills) was thwarted, it’s reasonable to assume that Plath might have more readily entertained suicidal thoughts because she thought someone would save her again. Additionally, perhaps Plath thought that this dramatic act might bring her family back together or
simply punish her husband for his careless actions. A. Alvarez asserted that she orchestrated a dangerous, risky cry-for-help based on the clues left behind: “Had everything worked out as it should – had the gas not drugged the man downstairs, preventing him from opening the front door to the au pair girl – there is little doubt she would have been saved. I think she wanted to be; why else leave her doctor’s telephone number?” (36).

Since we will never know Plath’s true intentions that day, it’s necessary to consider her actions within the whole context of her life. By doing this, we extend our perspective to consider not only her specific actions in life, but also what she had to say in her writing. Dated October 23-29, 1962, “Lady Lazarus” establishes a distinct obsession with “Recurring suicidal thoughts or fantasies” by using a religious figure to represent rebirth as an extended metaphor and also demonstrates a flippant treatment of her own suicidal tendencies (Marrone 188). As the female counterpart of Lazarus, Plath creates a supernatural being steeped in religious reference, and her tone articulates a sense of awe at her own inability to die, adding to mysterious aura of the continued existence. In his essay, “Plath’s and Lowell’s Last Words,” Steven Axelrod points to a style of poetry as a way to interpret Plath’s metaphoric representation of the mutated biblical figure: “The Confessional poet assumes that psychological and historical experience, the individual and the general, are related, and even at some deep level synonymous” (6). Plath again predominantly uses a first-person perspective; however, the idea of suicide is discussed more than the speaker herself. Her thirtieth birthday marks her third time to attempt death, and the speaker recounts her previous two endeavors with relish:
The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident.

The second time I meant

To last it out and not come back at all.

I rocked shut

As a seashell.

They had to call and call

And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (35-42)

In addition, Plath speaks of dying as an art form, with the survivor of suicide described as an exhibition later in the poem. Claiming to know the recipe for a successful attempt at death, the speaker recalls in-your-face details about her brushes with death:

“I do it so it feels like hell. / I
do it so it feels real. /
I guess you could say I’ve a call” (46-48).

Sylvia Plath suffered from both parts in the society, the male and the female. From the male side, she lived in a society dominated by males. Sylvia refused to be a traditional woman who does secondary jobs and has less influence on her society; she had conflicts with males who oppressed the smarter and more confident women. Conversely, Sylvia was not satisfied with women themselves who surrender to males’ will, and accept to be only housewives looking after children and husbands and occupy their minds with trivial matters. In fact, Sylvia criticized her father for using her mother to type and documents his dissertation and assists him with fulfilling it, but his
acknowledgement and dedications went to the male. In fact, Sylvia was rebellious and resisted the utilization or marginalizing of women in society. Therefore, she considered men to be opponents and not as complementary to each other. She felt her existence and success were threatened by men. Even Ted Hughes was her competitor, although he encouraged her to write and used to advise her about her works. Her self-destruction resulted from the surrounding situations and factors. Reading two poems by Sylvia Plath "The Colossus" and "Daddy", the verses confirm the above mentioned conclusions. For example, regarding Sylvia Plath's feelings of despair and isolation and emptiness in her soul can be detected easily from "The Colossus":

My hours are married to shadow.

No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel

On the blank stones of the landing (Plath 56).

Plath's first volume of poetry, The Colossus, similarly displays an overriding preoccupation with estrangement, motherhood, and fragmentation in contemporary society. More formal than her later work, the poems of “The Colossus” reveal Plath's mastery of conventional forms, though they bear distinct influence of her association with confessional poets like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. Much of Plath's rage is directed against her father, whom she invokes as both a Muse and target of scorn. While in the title poem Plath refers to him as an "oracle" and "mouthpiece of the dead," in "Electra on Azalea Path," she rails against his premature death and her own lost innocence.

My father died, and when he died

He willed his books and shell away.
The books burned up, sea took the shell,
But I, I keep the voices he
Set in my ear, and in my eye
The sight of those blue, unseen waves
For which the ghost of Bocklin grieves.
The peasants feast and multiply (56).

"Lady Lazarus" remains one of Plath's most fiercely debated poems. Early critics such as M.L. Rosenthal, who used the word "confessional" to describe the late poems of Robert Lowell, have seen "Lady Lazarus" as an intensely personal reflection of Plath's nightmarish suffering.

At the time of her end, Sylvia was alone with her children in Devon. However, she entered the most productive phase of her creative life. For example, between September and December of 1962, she produced as many as forty lyric poems of immense power, often writing two in a day. As previously suggested, she subordinated the pain and depression to writing. In December, Plath seemed to be tired of her enforced isolation in Devon, but exultant at her creative breakthrough, so she moved back to London with her children, where she continued writing poems, but with less ferocity than the initial outburst of the autumn. She was probably working on a second novel, which dealt with the subject of her marriage. The shocking news of Sylvia's ending her life occurred in the morning of 11 February 1963; Sylvia Plath committed suicide in London. She and her husband had separated, whether she was willing or not, she went through again the same piercing grief and bereavement she had left as a child when her father, by his death, seemed to abandon her. For the artist himself art is not necessarily therapeutic;
he is not automatically relieved of his fantasies by expressing them. Instead, by some
perverse logic of creation, the act of formal expression may simply make the dredged-up
material more readily available to him (Alvarez 53).

Plath’s own life complicates our understanding of The Bell Jar’s reception, given
that the novel was published in England under a pseudonym in January 1963 and did not
appear in America under Plath’s own name until 1971, long after she committed suicide.
Plath’s death in February 1963, at age thirty, occurred just weeks after the British
publication of the novel. Though Plath biographies are full of references to her struggle
with depression, "scholars have only recently started to write about how Plath herself
participated in a larger cultural conversation about medicine and mental health" (Moraski
8).

Anne Sexton was born Anne Gray Harvey on November 9, 1928, in Newton,
Massachusetts. The youngest of three daughters born to prosperous parents, Sexton
began writing poetry as a result of unemotional breakdown that led to serious depression.
Her first of several suicide attempts was an overdose of Nembutal. Despite a
lasting relationship with her psychiatrist, Martin Orne, Sexton lived a troubled life. As
part of her therapy, Orne suggested Sexton write poetry, and she did accordingly.

Sexton’s parents, Mary Gray Staples and Ralph Churchill Harvey, were known to
drink regularly and sometimes heavily. They were somewhat prominent and quite
socially active. Scholars suggest that they may have valued their social engagements over
their family responsibilities. There is some evidence that Sexton's mother was jealous
about her very early writing. Sexton did not have obvious creative aspirations, but instead
seemed to think more about a family of her own. At one point her mother accused her of plagiarism and had that particular writing examined. It was deemed to be original, but many scholars suggest this incident affected Sexton's relationship with her mother. When Sexton reported feelings of guilt about her childhood, she focused on the relationship she had with her grandmother. She admitted to feeling responsible for the failure of this relationship.

Sexton had two older sisters. Biographers have noted that Sexton and her sisters were not especially close to one another, and her position as the youngest child in the family has been underscored. Research on family structure, including birth order, often suggests that an individual's expectations and worldview are associated with ordinal positioning within the family; interestingly, it is frequently the middle-born child who grows up to be the creative rebel. Sexton was socially active as a teenager, but also showed signs of a preoccupation with death. She was active in extracurricular activities, including athletic teams and cheerleading.

From the evidence of her poems, it seems clear that Anne's closet confidante and friend during these early years and into her young adulthood was not a parent or a sister but her great-aunt Anna Dingley, after whom Anne was named. "Nana," as Anne called her, spent long visits at the Sexton home through Anne's childhood. One of the greatest tragedies of Sexton's life was Nana's death in 1954, at eighty-six years of age, after having suffered for years from senility (Barnard 3).

Ann Gray Harvey attended public school in Wellesly first through tenth grade. When she was seventeen she was sent to Roges Hall, a boarding school for girls in
Lowell, Massachusetts; she graduated in 1947 and then, in the fall of that year when she was nineteen she entered The Garland School in Boston, a finishing school for women. Throughout her school years, Anne was energetic and flirtatious, according to Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, her classmates remember her as happy, vivacious and popular but underneath, she later claimed, lurked exquisite pain which found an outlet in her role as the class rogue.

In the summer of 1948, when Ann was nineteen, she met and married Alfred Mulller Sexton II, a sophomore premedical student at Colgate University. Anne and "Kayo" as he was called met in July. In August they eloped and they were married in Sunbury, North Carolina. On 21 July Anne gave birth to her and Kayo's first child Linda Gray Sexton at the Newton Wellesley Hospital where Ann had also been born. For the next two years Anne suffered several serious emotional setbacks. Sexton and Ames report that during this period Anne was intermittently hospitalized at Westwood Lodge for attempted suicide.

Sexton began writing seriously in 1957, publishing *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* in 1960, a collection that won her significant praise for a first book. Though she received little formal training in poetics, claiming to learn meter by watching I. A. Richards on television, her poetry has notable formal sophistication. She is best known for the intensely personal quality of her work that early mentors, including John Holmes, tried to discourage in her.

Sexton wrote about subjects that were previously unexplored in poetry, such as abortion, menstruation, and the allure of suicide for her. At a time when the most
critically acclaimed poetry was considered "representative" of the human condition, Sexton wrote unabashedly about herself, writing on topics that some found "embarrassing" and others didn't even consider appropriate for poetry (Alvarez60). Also noteworthy was the fascination with death that her poetry reveals, a fascination she shared with friend and fellow poet Sylvia Plath, whom she met while taking a writing seminar with Robert Lowell at Boston University. Previously, in a Holmes workshop, Sexton had met and struck up an important and lasting friendship with the poet Maxine Kumin. Kumin was the one with whom Sexton shared her ideas and early drafts of poems. In 1967 Sexton received the Pulitzer Prize for Live or Die (1966) as well as the Shelley Memorial Prize. Other significant awards included a 1969 Guggenheim Foundation grant to work on her play Mercy Street and the American Academy of Arts and Letters travel grant in 1963.

Though there is much scholarly disagreement about which poets should be included in what M. L. Rosenthal labeled the "confessional" school of poetry--so named because of the confessional quality in the work--no one seems to argue with Sexton's placement therein. Others sometimes grouped her with confessional poets including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, and Theodore Roethke. While this label is used disparagingly at times to describe Sexton's work, it is certainly an appropriate label, though Rosenthal actually fashioned it for Lowell rather than Sexton (Millet 39).

Despite frequent stays in a mental hospital and continual psychiatric therapy, Sexton published seven poetry collections in her lifetime with three more published posthumously. Her best work is probably found in All My Pretty Ones (1962), which
bears an epigraph from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Among her best-known poems are "Her Kind," after which Sexton named the band with which she later performed; "The Abortion"; "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound"; "In Celebration of My Uterus"; and "The Ambition Bird." Notable in her work is the collection published in 1971 titled *Transformations*. In these poems Sexton retells some well-known Grimm's fairy tales from the perspective of "a middle-aged witch, me," creating some comic moments and leading to some surprising conclusions that are not part of the original tales (Alvarez44).

Sexton was an enormously popular reader on the poetry reading circuit. So popular was she, in fact, that she was able to command reading fees far in excess of those most poets received at the time. She was a glamorous woman--her early career before writing poetry included a brief stint as a model--and she had many fans, both inside and outside academia. Many thought of her as a celebrity first and a poet second. Even as she gained exposure for her poems, the effects of her medications, combined with an increasing alcohol dependency, were slowly putting a damper on her creative fires. She repeatedly made attempts on her own life, and finally she succeeded. On October 4, 1974, right after meeting with a close friend to discuss her latest book of poetry (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*), Sexton went home, locked herself in the garage with the car running, and succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning.

Sexton life and work are especially interesting because her poetry was clearly tied to her own psychiatric treatment. While she is probably best known for *Live or Die* (1966), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, Sexton also received acclaim for *The Awful Rowing towards God* (1975), *The Death Notebooks* (1974), *The Book of*
Folly (1972), Mercy Street (1969), Love Poems (1969), All My Pretty Ones (1962), To Bedlam and Partway Back (1960), Transformations (1971), and several volumes of selected and collected poems. In 1970 she wrote several poems that illuminate her thoughts; "For Death of the Fathers," a sequence published in The Book of Folly; “For Mr. Death who stands with His Door Open" and the sequence “The Death Baby”, which she saved for "The Death Notebooks". These poems are not much alike but they have one thing in common: for the first time Sexton naturalizes death, permits mortality its place in the passing of the generations.

Anne Sexton's second child, Joyce Ladd Sexton, was born on 4th August 1955. According to Sexton and Ames, “Anne was unprepared for the responsibility of another infant, an inquisitive two-year old, a household, and a husband...Her anger and concomitant depression deepened"(22-23). In December she began seeing a new psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, who encouraged her to write poetry. In many poems, Anne refers to her child Joyce's early separation from her in “The Double Image", for instance, recalling "The time i did not love/ myself," she addresses her child:

Today, my small child, Joyce
love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice
when I came back to call...(Sexton 54)
During these early years of her career, Sexton experienced personal tragedy along with her professional success. She checked herself in and out of mental intuitions, which she called her "summer hotel" and later her "sealed hotel". About Sylvia Plath's suicide in early 1963, Sexton wrote: "she had the suicide inside her. As i do. As many of us do. But, if we're lucky, we don't get away with it and something or someone forces us to live" (Gray and Ames 261).

According to Sexton, Sylvia's death is actually not one of failure. There are two other poems in Live or Die, however, where Sexton's attempts to adopt Plath's style and tone but is unsuccessful. In a 1968 interview, Sexton commented on several ways in which Plath's Ariel had influenced her writing. Plath, she said, "had dared to write hate poems, the one thing I had never dared to write. I think the poem, "The Cripples and Other Stories" is evidence of a hate poem somehow, though no one could ever write a poem to compare to her 'Daddy'. There was a kind of insolence in them....I think the poem, 'The Addict' has some of her speech rhythms in it (Boston 1). A number of Plath's Ariel poems, including Daddy do project insolence in the expression of powerful emotion; comparison with the poems Sexton mentions reveals the relative strengths of Plath's work.

Sexton's aunt on her father's side attempted suicide in early childhood, lived several decades in an apparently stable marriage, and eventually committed suicide just before she turned seventy. The family believes that if her aunt's suicide had any sort of influence on Sexton, it was probably informational (e.g., the aunt modeling suicide) rather than genetic." The incident, according to Middle Brook, had a permanent effect on Sexton.
After Anne Sexton's own breakdown, she worried about ending up in a mental institution like Nana. More important, she believed that she had personally caused great-aunt's breakdown, and that Nana, who condemned her as "note Anne" but a "horrible and disgusting" imposter, had sentenced her to break down as well. Nana's rage took root in Sexton as a frightening symptom, which she described as a "tiny voice" in her head "shouting from faraway", telling her she was awful, often taunting her to kill herself (Anne Sexton 16). Sexton's fear that she had caused her Nana's and mother's illnesses recalls Freud's theory of the "omnipotence of thought": the belief that one's hostile thoughts can literally kill another person. It seems likely that a major reason for Sexton's preoccupation with suicide was the need to punish herself for harboring ambivalent feelings toward those closest to her. She felt that same guilt toward her father, stating to an interviewer the fear that her opposition to his remarriage had caused his death (No Evil Star 54). Sexton eloped with Alfred Mueler Sexton II when she was twenty years old, maintaining the view that she would become a traditional housewife. She apparently got along no better with her mother-in-law than she did her own mother. There were instances of various kinds of misbehavior, ranging from cigarette smoking to angry outbursts in the home of her in-laws. There were also instances of depression, especially after the birth of her two children: Linda in 1953 and Joyce in 1955. Sexton's first attempted suicide was not long after the birth of her second child. Although Sexton had planned to be a housewife and mother, she had difficulties coping with life, especially when her husband was away on business, falling into bouts of depression during the times he was gone. Sexton's illness had been extremely hard on her children. Linda recalled being told by Billie from a young age she must be very careful of her mother's
feelings and never do anything that might unbalance her and make her sick. "I always lived on that brink of fear that she was going to fall apart and really kill herself" (Middle Brook 153).

Like Sexton herself who was unable to love either her mother or herself, the speaker in her poem is ambivalent over being reunited with her own daughter. Each time the child calls the speaker mother; the speaker thinks of her own mother and becomes depressed again. The poem ends with a disturbing insight into the speaker relationship with her daughter (Berman 185).

…we named you joy.

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.

And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (Complete Poems 41-42).

Sexton was a bit of a rebel and nonconformist, or at least had difficulty with certain social norms. There is, for example, some indication that she was promiscuous, and she eloped with Alfred after knowing him for a very brief period of time—and while engaged to a different man. Scholars note that this type of behaviour was not unusual given Sexton's creative temperament. Other researchers suggest that the social and historical milieu of Boston in the 1950s was a factor in Sexton's troubled life. Sexton's expectation of being a housewife could easily have reflected social norms and pressures rather than a true inclination and intrinsic interest. Perhaps Sexton had a creative drive that she could not reconcile with the pressures placed on her to move in a more
conventional direction. Depression could have easily resulted from the incompatibility between her creative temperament and social expectations.

Sexton was apparently addicted to sleeping pills and perhaps also to alcohol, further evidencing serious psychiatric disorders. At one point she had an affair with one of her therapists, further supporting the idea that she was not bound by most social norms. Another explanation for Sexton's suicide involves the domain of poetry. Poets often invest a great deal of themselves into their work. Even if the poetry is eventually critically acclaimed, the writing of poetry can be quite stressful because on one hand the individual exposes a great deal of herself, and on the other hand the individual is working alone in an area where feedback is often quite delayed. The delayed gratification may have been particularly difficult for Sexton because she manifested many strong social needs. She was also intelligent, generous, witty, talented, and hard-working; despite her illness, she found ways to get work done, and she had deep capacities for love and for pleasure.

Biographers place great emphasis on Sexton's psychiatric treatment, which was significant as evidenced by the content of her poetry. And, it is possible, given her nonconformism that Sexton suffered from a borderline personality disorder. There are reports of her schizophrenic language, for instance, as well as her tendency to enter some sort of trance at the end of her psychiatric treatment sessions. She apparently did not want to end the sessions, perhaps because of emotional and social needs. Sexton's increased reputation as a poet seemed to cause a new kind of marital difficulty. There were reports that her husband did not appreciate her work, and additional suggestions that her
schedule, required by her publishing and the promotion of her work, caused friction at home.

The poets, Sexton and Plath, have been connected by many critics, as well as in many minds, due to several factors. First, both were classified as confessional poets, along with Robert Lowell and others, since they exposed their personal emotions in their poetry. Second, both writers were friends. The first meeting which established their friendship took place in Robert Lowell’s poetry class at Boston University. The brief but intense friendship, as David Rini Dad describes it, influenced the work of both poets. The third and the most important factor of the Sexton-Plath death remains that both writers were obsessed with death not only in their poetry but also in their lives. They both had breakdowns and eventually committed suicide. Plath becomes more famous after her death. According to one source, her husband, Ted Hughes, becomes the executor of her literary estate. He arranged for the publication of Ariel. A review in Time magazine highlights Plath’s self-destruction, making Ariel sell in massive numbers. When her book *The Bell Jar*, which was scheduled to be released only weeks after her death, was published in 1971, it became a bestseller for six months (Kehoe 88-94). Plath’s suicide upsets Sexton. Sexton tells her psychiatrist, “Sylvia’s death disturbs me, Makes me want to do it. She took something that was mine, that death was mine” (Morrow 76). Sexton fixation with wanting to die increases; Sexton acknowledged that Plath's suicide deepened her own fascination with self-extinction. Her poem "Sylvia's Death", written a few days after the event, unabashedly romanticized suicide. Death would release her from her conflicting, upsetting emotions. Her poem “Sylvia’s Death” expresses her anger and pain:
Thief!
How did you crawl into,
Crawl down alone
Into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
The death we said we both outgrew,
The one we wore on our skinny breasts,
The one we talked of so often each time
We downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,
The death that talked of analysts and cures,
The death that talked like brides with plots,
The death we drank to,
The motives and then the quiet deed?(128).

At Sexton’s funeral, her friend and fellow poet Adrienne Rich observed:

We have enough suicidal women poets,
suicidal women,
enoughself destructiveness
as a sole form of violence
permittedto women ( Adrienne Rich 397).

Sexton has a long flirtation with death. According to one source, she attempts to
numb her emotions with alcohol. She checks in and out of sanatorium where doctors try
to minister her hysteria, depression, anorexia, insomnia, and wildly alternating moods.
She engages in many love affairs, including a long sexual involvement with her
psychiatrist. Her writing career peaks as she receives rewards and honours for her poetry, but her celebrity status strains her marriage. After she and her husband are divorced loneliness, depression, and alcoholism consume her. She begins writing poems with religious themes and becomes nervous when readers do not like them. She searches for compassion through love affairs, but her needs for comfort and security are not fulfilled. Sexton's life ended in a suicide that was the act of a lonely and despairing alcoholic, but it might have ended silently and much earlier if she had not, almost miraculously, found something else profoundly important to do with it. Sexton eventually choosing suicide over what she suspected was the looming alternative, permanent hospitalization. She had always feared that her life would end as Nana's had: that she would lose her family home and be permanently hospitalized; that she would lose her mind and reside in the infantile twilight zone of social life reserved for that aged and ill (Middle Brook 379).

Sexton wrote at least twenty poems about suicide. One of the most important is "The Double image" written in 1958, shortly before her parent’s death. The poem is addressed to Sexton's younger daughter who spent the first three years of her life in her paternal grandmother's care. "The Double Image" has autobiographical and poetic significance, revealing many of the feelings towards suicide that appears in Sexton's others death poems, and portraying the "almost unnamable lust" in ways that had not been previously in American poetry. Consisting of seven parts, each containing between two and six stanzas, "The double Image" offers profound insights into intergenerational conflicts. The poem opens with the speaker about to turn thirty, trying to explain to her daughter why she has been unable to care for her;

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head (Complete poems 35-36)

Suicidal thoughts in the form of "ugly angels" haunt the speakers, accusing her of indefinable crimes. She tells her daughter that although she wanted to be with her, the fear of killing herself prevented her from mothering the child. The speaker's violence remains internalized through "The Double Image", resulting in the reader's close identification with the suffering poet. "The Double Image" does not describe in detail Sexton's two suicide attempts, but it does reveal the paradoxical dynamics of suicide, including the sense of being simultaneously in and out of control. Although she refers to herself early in the poems as "I, who choose two times/ to kill myself", the decision to commit suicide seems to have been made not by the "I" but by demonic inner voices. Suicide thus appears to be less rational, voluntary decision than one determined by a sinister force over which the self has no control. The guilt is so overpowering that the speakers yearns for death as a release from private torment:

I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out,
putting the armless and washed through the rigmarole
of taking boxes and the electric bed (Complete poem 36)
The speaker’s drug overdose reflects Sexton's characteristic method of suicide: ingestion of pills. She depicts suicide not as an active, violent assault on the body but as an eating away from within. Sexton does not romanticize suicide in "The Double Image", as she does in many of her later poems, rather, she views it as an act of desperation arising from the absence of healthy self-love, an insight that has important psychological, cultural and feminist implications.

Second part of "The Double Image" focuses on the most troubling relationship in Sexton's life; the bond with her mother. After recovering from her first suicide attempt the speaker finds herself unable to return to her husband and children and travels instead to her ancestral house in Gloucester, where she lives with her mother, the mother-daughter connection in "The Double Image" is fraught with guilt, anger, and disappointment, as it is in Plath's Bell Jar. Sexton poses a special problem to readers because the impulse that gave rise to her numerous suicide attempts seems to have been closely allied with her creativity. Not that her "madness" is identical with or can be reduced to her art rather she began writing poetry in an effort to master the intolerable feelings that brought her repeatedly to the brink of suicide.

The frequency and intensity of her psychological breakdowns were devastating to her and over the years her suffering took its toll on everyone close to her. As Rhonda notes in her diary entry, /Sexton lived longer than Plath did, dying shortly before her forty-fifth birthday, she attempted suicide at least nine times and wrote far more poems about the attraction to death than Plath did. Suicide was so much part of Sexton's everyday life and art that she seems to have constructed her personal and artistic identity around it. She referred to suicide in "Wanting to Die" as an "almost
unnamablelust" (Complete Poems 142), and she came closer to describing this impulse than any other contemporary American poet. She was remarkably successful in transmuting suicidal depression into the stuff of poetry.

Sexton’s “Live or Die” also ends with the poet's decision to live, a decision which strategically follows a long and complex series of suicide arbitrations. This reflection process must be considered in the examination of Sexton's suicide poems, because the suicide reflections are ordered toward a conclusion inscribed in her work. Sexton's suicide-desires is never resolved in All My Pretty Ones, and this desire becomes a subject of increased urgency in her collection, Live or Die. There are several explicit suicide poems in Live or die, which include "Suicide Note" Wanting to Die" and Sylvia's Death”, and these poems pose a question that is answered in the final poem, "Live".

Sexton's suicide attempts are linked with her descriptions of breakdown and institutionalization; however, she focuses on suicide-desire, in this book, as a polemical issue or conditions.

In “Flee on Your Donkey”, one of the first poems she defines a persistent "hunger" for death, which exists after another breakdown and suicide attempt: "I have come back/but disorder is not what it was. /I have lost the trick of it/The innocence of it" (103). The deaths of Sexton's parents are also extricated from her own -death-wish in Live or Die. In "Suicide Note", she writes: please do not think/that i visualize guitars playing/ or my father arching his bone. / I do not even except my mother's mouth"(159). The poet is a solitary suicide through these poems; she is a "chronic suicide" who "postpones death indefinitely, at a cost of suffering...which is an equivalent to a partial suicide, a living death"(Menninger 88). Sexton explores suicide as a facet of her existence and being
in her work. Like Plath, she considers it as "an art," as theatre, as a "call" (Lady Lazarus":255).

In "Wanting to Die", she creates a utilitarian contrast between suicides and carpenters:"they want to know which tools/they never ask why build"(142). There is a body of scientific theory on the nature of suicide. One socio-psychological theorist begins with questions such as: "why does man include so fearful a thing as death when nothing so terrifying as death is imminent?"(Farber 3). His assumption is that death is always and in every case "fearful" and "terrifying". Sexton's final work is contrary evidence. A. Alvarez in his extraordinary study of literature and suicide he writes that "each suicide is a closed world with its own irresistible logic"(Alvarez 120). Each suicide is special, wrapped in its own individual mystery. A brief note of Sexton's comments on death, from her letters to friends reveals her obsession with suicide:

Killing yourself is merely a way to avoid pain."

"suicide is the opposite of a poem."

Once i thought God didn't want me up there in the sky. Now I'm convinced he does."

" In my opinion Hemingway did the right thing."

"One writes to forestall being blotted out."

"I'm so God damned sure I'm going to die soon"(Sexton 209).

Sexton's ideas on suicide obviously changed as she came closer to her own death. Anne Sexton believed that the most interesting poetry was written out of the personal experience; from the beginning of her career as a poet, Sexton's creative impulse grew
from the "need to make form from (the) chaos" of her biographical and psychological realities (Gray and Ames 43). Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" adopts a nursery-rhyme rhythm to express the speaker's stark confrontation with her hate-love of Daddy and husband. Power derives from the combination of tight form, ironic use of the nursery rhyme, and astonishing content; the voice we hear is hard and jaunty:

You do not do, you do not do
Anymore, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.
....
There is a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I am through. (54)

In "Cripples and Other Stories", Sexton confronts her perception that her parents, mother as well as father, never loved her, and mixes therapist with father in the poem. Yet the hard-edged power of Plath's "Daddy" is missing here, and Sexton appears not to dare Plath's insolence:

God damn it father-doctor
I'm really thirty-six
I see dead rats in the toiler
I'm one of the lunatics.

... 

Though I was almost seven
I was in awful brat.

I put it in the easy Wringer.

It came out nice and flat. (Complete poem, 80-81)

Similarly, "The Addict" in which Sexton writes to capture "some of [Plath's] speech rhythms," pales by comparison. When reading "The Addict" one thinks less of Plath's "Daddy" than of her "Lady Lazarus":

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.(Plath )

"The Addict", in which Sexton, sounding like Plath, uses black humour to rationalize her obsession with death. The Addict portrays suicide as a ritualistic performance. Sexton expresses a similar idea in "The Addict":

Don’t they know
That I promised to die!
I'm keeping in practice.
I'm merely staying in shape.
The pills are a mother, but better,
Every colour and as good as sour balls.
I'm on a diet from death. (Complete poem 85).

Sexton wrote about the social confusions of growing up in a female body and of living as a woman in post-war American society. Thousands of women have shared the mental disorders that disabled her, and hundreds of thousands have shared her dissatisfaction with life as a suburban housewife, but few possess the gift, or summon the discipline and courage, or make the friends, or command the financial resources, or have the well-timed good luck that made Anne Sexton into a serious poet (Middle Brook 10).

Anne Sexton's poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author’s life that one's literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering (Dickey 117). Anne Sexton claimed that suicides are a special people. "We walked death," she said, "and this was life Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, young gifted and attractive women spent hours exchanging details of their suicide attempts; and after Sylvia Plath's successful attempt some years later, Anne Sexton wrote a poem "Wanting To Die":

Suicides have already betrayed the body.
Stillborn, they don't always die,
But dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet...
To thrust all that life under your tongue-
That, all by itself, becomes a passion (142).

"Wanting to Die is Sexton's most thoughtful meditation on suicide, exploring the desire for suicide without the emotionally and self-indulgence of Sylvia's Death. The tone is mournful and subdued, unlike the exclamatory rhythms of the Plath elegy. Sexton is able to analyze the yearning for death with detachment and objectivity. In *Death Notebooks* she also wrote:

Depression is boring, I think
And I would do better to make
Some soup and light up the cave(365).

The seductions of suicide no longer concern her; the deaths of friends and relatives are secondary. Like John Donne, she is lying down in the inescapable coffin that is her own, "trying on", as she tells us, her "black necessary trousseau"(Gilbert 164). She has inevitably tried to define the death that is neither a handful of pills nor somebody else's funeral but, in a sense, a precondition of life itself. And she joins the company of writers who have asserted with Gertrude Stein that "being dead is not ending it is being dead and being dead is something," or with Wallace Stevens that "Death is the mother of beauty, Mystical/ within whose burning bosom we devise/ Our earthly mothers, waiting sleeplessly"(164). To identify her love of death with her love of poetry is to insult that struggle. In a letter to Anne Clarke in 1964, Sexton wrote:

“I’m working like mad on his section of poem on death. I see already what a strange poem i wrote last year. It is all about (death) and am rewriting it
enough to make it a little clearer. I think I'll make a section of them.

Maybe I'll call it "The Woods of the suicides" (letters 232).

A number of creatively eminent individuals have taken their own lives, including John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and many other writers. The large number of such cases suggests that there may be a functional relationship between creativity and psychological health. This relationship seems to vary across domains, with the rate of suicide especially high in certain groups of artists, suggesting that there may be something unique to those domains that either draws suicide-prone persons into the domain or has an impact on the individual such that suicide is considered and often attempted.