CHAPTER- VI

THE ART AND TECHNIQUE IN SEXTON’S POETRY

The critic M. L. Rosenthal was among the first to use the label “confessional poetry” in the modern sense. Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* is a collection of poems full of references to mental illness, a theme that became characteristic of the confessional genre later. In his analysis entitled ‘The Confessional Poets’, Robert Phillips asserts that “a confessional art is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed”. (Phillips 173) Rosenthal was the first to use the term ‘confessional poetry’ for the particular work produced by the poets of sixties. He defined confessional poetry as the one in which “the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme.” (Rosenthal 25)

In 1959 Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* opened up new areas of awareness and the poet for the first time emerged without any mask and bared his soul completely. To own what we are, to accept what we feel and to come up with that without any mask in full knowledge, with no intention of ‘telling it slant’ was how Confessional Poetry introduced to the world. In Lowell’s poems collection of poems, Lowell “abandoned the formal concerns of his first collections and turned to free verse and the voice of intense personal concern”. (Marowski 235)

Elements of modern confessional poetry can be easily traced in the autobiographical works. The earliest confessions were written in the second half of the fourth century by Saint Augustine. Writers like St. Augustine, Rousseau, and De Quincey, instead of confessing before a priest, chose to make their confessions in writing. The purpose of confession, then, was to come face to face with God, or the self. It was believed that it repaired the loss which the person suffered. It is in this sense; it proved to be partly a therapeutic process of self-redemption. This is the therapeutic nature of confession which is common to these works. These confessions were about Saint Augustine’s spiritual struggles and aimed at salvation. However, it is as a psychological document of the mind’s struggle that the book compels our attention. The official adaptation of Christianity provided the people of Western Europe with a fresh impulse towards self-scrutiny. What holds the reader is the personal, subjective experience of man. Robert
Phillip rightly says, “we are living in a great age of autobiography.’ Confessional poetry is thought to begin with the publication of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*.”(Phillip 173)

After Saint Augustine’s confessions, the number of such personal records increased. Some of the important confessions were written by Saint Simon, John Wesley, Prince Kropotkin and George Fox.

Defining the Genre it could be said that Confessional poetry is where the poet does not keep himself detached, with what he is experiencing. Earlier Confessional poetry was marked by a reflective study of the past, of remembered experiences, an approach that resembles the process of psychoanalysis. However, in a broader sense, confessional poetry describes any writing that focuses on intimate personal experience.

Confessional poetry can be defined as a personal poetry which occurs as a result of the exploration and responses to the most inner reaches of the poet’s self below the rational and conscious level. Poems grow out of images discovered in the depth of human dark. They are spoken by the voice of most profound silence in a man.

Confessional poetry is that “great terrain of subjectivity and autobiography whose opening was signaled by Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*” (Rubin 17) In this genre, poets in his or her own individual manner tries to express their innermost feelings of the heart, for example, those of failure, guilt, disappointment, incestuous desire.

The term ‘confession’ even within its secular context retains a non-secular ethos, an ethos, which is largely obscured in autobiographical documents. Autobiographical documents propose to recount a life while confessional documents recount a life of extremity, sin, or salvation. Although, Confessional poetry is autobiographical it is important to recognize that it is a literary practice and, necessarily, informed by life and art. Confessional poetry, as Sexton observes in ‘For John Who Begs me Not to Enquire Further,’ is a ‘complicated tie’.

Robert Phillips asserts that, a confessional art is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed. Various critics have tried to define the term ‘confessional’. The critic M.L Rosenthal in his book *The New Poets* says that the term ‘confessional poetry’ came naturally to his mind when he reviewed Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959. The reason for this could be the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings and psychological traumas of a disturbed
childhood, sexual guilt, alcoholism, repeated confinement in a mental hospital and academic mal-adjustment. The poems are usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself. The only difference lies in the confessional poet’s refusal to pursue the indirect means of creating objective correlation for his emotions as the poet is not separate from the man who suffers.

“A confessional poem would seem to be one in which the writer speaks to the reader, telling him, without the mediating presence of imagined event or persona, something about his life.” (Howe 228)

A.R. Jones defines the confessional poem and says “It is a dramatic monologue in which the persona is not treated dramatically, as a mask, that is, in the manner of Browning’s Dramatis Personae, but is projected lyrically, as in Whitman’s Song of Myself or in Pound’s Pisan Cantos. In other words, although the poem’s style and method is unmistakably dramatic, the persona’s naked ego is involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences. (Jones 14) Ralph J. Mills Jr. defines confessional poetry as that which deals with “the more intimate aspects of life, areas of experience that most of us would instinctively keep from public sight” (23)

M.L Rosenthal defines the confessional poem as one in which “the private life of the poet himself, especially under the stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme.”(25) Many critics call Confessional poetry a literary convention like any other, the only problem with it to make it sound as if it were true, whether or not, the poet is presenting the actual facts of his experiences or not, is irrelevant. He must give the illusion of true confession. Robert Lowell himself once said, “There is a good deal of tinkering with facts” but of course, “the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell”.

The label ‘confessional poetry’ over-simplifies and undervalues the nature of the poetry of Lowell, Sexton and Plath. While these poems frequently engage in what is repressed, hidden and falsified, defining them as ‘confessional’ undermines the creative ability of the writer to construct a persona or imaginary scenario that is separate from their lives.

Confessional Poetry and its ambassadors need no introduction. The Confessional poets created a disturbing, often autobiographical poetry of pain that shocked the world with its raw anatomy of human suffering. Indebted to both Romantic poets and French Symbolists for their introspective ruminations on the darker realms, the
movement dramatized everyday human misery and pain with unsparing technical mastery, blurring boundaries between personal torment and political realities. Anne Sexton explored her abortions and depressions; Sylvia Plath charted her suicidal tendencies; Robert Lowell scrutinized his marital discord and emotional breakdowns. Confessional poetry’s tone of guilt-ridden despair was not limited to the page. Sometimes called the “murderous art,” the movement lost many of its practitioners to suicide, including poets John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The legacy of the confessional poets lived on as a mode, the ultra-candid dissection of private distress. Charles Molesworth is of the view that the confessional poets gathered their concerns from two cultural moments: the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language and the insistent psychological of a society, strange into itself and adrift from purpose and meaningful labor. Some of the confessional poets are Robert Lowell, John Berryman. Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and among the poets of Asian origin are Nizzim Ezekiel and Kamala Das.

Critics have argued whether or not the poems of Lowell, Sexton and Plath are ‘confessional’. M.L. Rosenthal argued that Plath was a ‘confessional’ poet because she “followed Lowell’s autobiographical method in Life Studies”. Likewise, Edward Butscher argues that ‘Plath’s confessionalism was the ultimate goal of her poetic career.’ Howe also describes Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ as a ‘confessional’ poem because it discusses her recurrent suicide attempts. Nevertheless, Howe criticises much of Plath’s poetry for being self-indulgent, describing ‘Daddy’ as a “revenge fantasy” rather than ‘confessional”. (Howe 232) Howe separates Plath from the ‘confessional’ category because he claims that she has “abandoned the sense of audience’ in favour of self-indulgence”. (233) In stark contrast to this, Rosenblatt argues that while Plath’s later poems were influenced by life experiences, her poetry does not depend on its confessional nature. Rosenblatt states that while these poems ‘begin with an autobiographical situation’ they ‘exist by themselves and can be read and understood in most cases without biographical information.’ Rather than directly using her experience in the poems, Plath frequently uses “elements from her experience as the starting point for imagistic and thematic elaborations.” (Rosenblatt 53)

The confessional poet is involved not only in his emotions, but in their sources, in his hidden motives and compulsions, in his own violence. The growing awareness of
psycho-analysis has brought a clinical awareness among these poets. For the
confessional poet, mania, depression, paranoia and hallucination, all that comes into the
scope of psychosis becomes as urgent and as commonplace as beauty, truth, nature and
the soul were to the Romantics. The confessional poetry is the poetry of suffering. The
suffering is not physical but mental and psychological. The poets write about their own
mental and psychological state, even about their own attacks of madness. The
psychological condition of the confessional poets has been a subject of discussion
among the critics. The confessional poetry has widely been misread and some critics
have dismissed their poetry as mere confession, gossip and scandal. To dismiss the
poetic art of such distinguished poets as Robert Lowell and Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath,
Anne Sexton, Berryman and Snodgrass as mere case history of mentally troubled
persons, is certainly vulgar criticism. These poets by treating their lives as material do
not make their poetry more personal, but rather they depersonalize their own lives. The
confessional poetry should be considered more as poetry and less as confession. We
must not allow the often shocking confessions to overshadow the more important
literary triumphs of these poets—“the triumphs of artifice, of artistic distance and control,
of fashioning a language that will correspond to the centrality, in a century of mass
culture, to man as a private person.”(Marowski 235)

Confessional poetry is a poem woven tapestry between fact and fiction, where the
reader never really knows which is which.

Anne Sexton as a Confessional Poet had a style of her own. Sexton’s work and its
handling of taboo or shocking subjects that were not traditionally discussed in poetry
before the so-called ‘confessional poets’ make her one of the confessional poets. These
taboo subjects such as mental breakdowns, suicide, marital problems and incest were
themselves hidden from poetry in the past. “Sexton’s poems engaged in what was
‘repressed, hidden, or falsified’ from an early stage in poems such as ‘In the Beach
House’, which associated her parents’ lovemaking, ‘the royal strapping’, with a beating
she had received from her father.” (Kevles 5) However, Anne Sexton’s recurring
themes were further expanded upon throughout her poetry so that any repressed feelings
were finally revealed. In The New Poets (1967) M.L. Rosenthal remarks that the term
“Confessional poetry” has ‘done a certain amount of damage’ because it is ‘both helpful
and too limited’. (Rosenthal 26) In the light of this statement many a times Sexton’s
poetry was put under a scanner.
“Repression was a key theme for Sexton, which is reinforced by the comments of Robin Becker, a former student of Sexton’s, who explained how Sexton used to ‘unrepress’ the class.” “What remained repressed for Sexton were her memories of sexual abuse, whether real or imagined. While her friends believed that Sexton was sexually abused, her therapist, Dr. Orne, believed that it was a false memory. However, Sexton’s preoccupation with incest is clear in many of her poems including ‘The Truth the Dead Know’, ‘Flee on Your Donkey’ and ‘In the Beach House’. In, ‘The Death of the Fathers’, Sexton suggests incest in her description of dancing with her father. The innocent dance is perverted with the image of ‘The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me’. (Sexton 2710)

As well as repressed images of sexual feelings toward her father, Sexton’s poems imply an unnatural relationship with her mother. Sexton reported to her psychiatrist, repressed memories of her mother’s genital inspections, which left her feeling ashamed and humiliated. While this theme is not properly explored in her poems, Sexton implies hostility toward her mother in many of her poems.

If the themes of insanity, suicide, marital discord and incest had been hidden from society, Sexton tackled these themes vigorously and forced people to acknowledge them. In an interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton admitted: “Recently I noticed in ‘Flee on Your Donkey’ that I had used some of the same facts in ‘To Bedlam and Part Way Back’, but I hadn’t realized them in their total ugliness. I’d hidden from them.”(Kevles 21) In Sexton’s poem ‘Live’, she mentions her time in a mental hospital by referring to ‘my hospital shift’. Sexton offers the reasons for her mental breakdown, blaming her suicidal tendencies and the pressures of her family: “A husband straight as a redwood, two daughters, two sea urchins, picking roses off my hackles. If I’m on fire they dance around it and cook marshmallows” (168)

Domesticity depresses the character - most likely to be Sexton herself - because she feels used by her husband and children. Sexton admits what the critics always highlight “People don’t like to be told, that you’re sick”. (117) However, Sexton is more upbeat in this poem when she mocks ‘Even crazy, I’m as nice, as a chocolate bar.’ More overtly suicidal is Sexton’s ‘Wanting to Die’ in which she claims that ‘suicides have a special language.’ In this poem, the character states that “Twice I
have so simply declared myself, have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy”. While she realizes that ‘Death’s a sad Bone’, she is drawn to it ‘year after year’. (98)

Sexton’s first three collections were dominated by traditional Confessional themes, themes which she insistently genders toward the presentation of a distinctly female perspective. She draws extensively from her own experiences, and then goes about aligning these experiences, theoretically, within an implicit female collective. She abandoned the themes of Confessional poetry after the publication of Live or Die in 1966.

Anne Sexton in her lifetime wrote many poems and in every poem she portrayed her inner most feelings, from the recess of her heart. Her early poems included the collection of poems based on Sexton’s knowledge regarding the mental asylum and her own therapy sessions with the various psychiatrists. Bedlam was one of the most popular mental hospitals of UK at that time and the collection portrayed a foray of deep feelings of a woman’s heart and her yearnings. In 1962 followed her next collection All My Pretty Ones which comprised of many of her famous poems such as The Truth the Dead Know, The Starry Night, The Operation, The Abortion. Live or Die Sexton’s Pulitzer Award winning collection was published in 1966 and it made waves in the literary circles of America. Poems like ‘Flee on your Donkey’, Love Songs, In Celebration of My Uterus, Oh Sweeney, For My Lover Returning to his Wife, Again, Again and Again make part of this collection. The next collection of poems the Love poems came out of the press in the year 1969. The most important poems of this collection were ‘Menstruation at Forty’, Sylvia’s Death, Wanting to Die, Suicide Note, In the Beach House etc. Transformations was one of the most remarkable collections of poem which came out for the people in 1971. Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, Rumpelstiltskin, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Red Riding Hood and many other poems, were the traditional popular childhood stories which become a part of every child’s childhood and a part of his growing years. Every child is made to believe in the message of happy endings and ‘lived happily ever after’. Anne Sexton brought out the reality of the belief and expressed the need for the children to know the reality. She expressed that the parents must not make their children live in a utopian world but must know that there is little connection between the stories and the real life. Life has its own lessons to be taught to every individual. Sexton communicated the harsh realities of life through the age old bedtime stories. In 1972, came Sexton’s
next collection named *The Book of Folly* which comprised of poems like ‘O Ye Tongues, The Doctor of the Heart, The Ambition Bird, The Red Shoes and the Psalm series’. This collection was one which took mainly the form of prose. *The Jesus’ Papers* were a part of this series and were more searching and more daring in nature. “In her early collection of poems *All My Pretty Ones* Sexton projected the cruelty of the crucifixion, but now a different Jesus with a different voice came up in *The Book of Folly*, who was more humanized and modernized and who was suffering knowingly, so as to endure.”(Morton 73)

Anne Sexton became one of the best known of the often-controversial Confessional poets. Anne Sexton wrote openly about menstruation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when these topics were forbidden in poetry. There’s possibly no other American in the times that has cried aloud publicly so many private details. In additional to focusing upon her emotional life, Sexton’s later work includes frequent allusions to mythology, fairy tales, and Christian motifs, and explores such topics as romantic love, motherhood, and relationships between the sexes. So, Anne Sexton uses twisted metaphors and similes, symbolic images, and vivid colors to tell about her transformed poems. Sexton herself employed the language of magic in her writing, and often described herself as a witch; however, she used this language as poetic imagery, and with considerable irony, as a means of demonstrating the power of her writing.

Many critics like Vendler calls Sexton’s style of writing as a ‘*Journal Writing*’ commenting that the voice in Sexton’s poetry is merely *conversational*. It ‘chatter’ and ‘moan’ in a facile fashion. Vendler called Sexton’s work as “‘childlike’, ‘infantile’ and ‘babish’, ‘lacking the complexity of the Gospels and the worldliness of the Greeks’”. (443)

Critics frugally commented on the poetic devices used by Anne Sexton in her poetry. In *The Times Literary Supplement* it was read that many of Sexton’s poetry were arresting but such naked *psyche-baring* makes demand which cannot always be met. Confession may be good for soul but absolution is not the poet’s job, nor is the reader’s. Many readers questioned Anne Sexton’s writing style, whether the contents could be called confessional or not. Does her work reflect the artistic control which is quintessential for quality work or not?
The term has come to many negative connotations and has been a subject of wide variety of criticism and debate. In an answer to the above questions Erika Jong in (Anne Sexton. 2009) says-Whenever Anne Sexton’s poetry is discussed the term confessional poetry is not far behind. To some, it is one of those pigeonholing terms which the critics coin so as not to talk about poetry as poetry. The mind of the creator is all important and the terms like this undercut the creativity.

In an interview with Patricia Marx, Sexton said “I rallied against being put in the category of confessional poets. Then I decided… I was the only confessional poet”. She went on discussing the influence on her work of other confessional poets such as W.D Snodgrass’ The Heart’s Needle. She said “It so changed me and undoubtedly it would have changed my poetry. At the same time everyone said, you can’t write this way. It’s too personal; it’s confessional; you can’t write this, Anne, and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission”.

Joel O. Conarroe, however, had a more positive view of Sexton’s candor. “Miss Sexton is an interior voyager,” ‘describing in sharp images the difficult landmarks of her own inner landscape. Poem after poem she focuses on the nightmare obsessions of the damned: suicide, crucifixion, the death of others, fear, the humiliations of childhood, and the boy-child she never had. Anne Sexton has ability to face up the reality, that makes her toughly honesty, and she is able to gain a series of victories over them.

Sexton’s poetry is often solidly narrative lucid in language with words which are simple to understand. Her poetry also gave glimpses from her own life transformed by her poetic imagination. In fact, she was quite conscious of how poetic conventions inform and shape poetry and fiction. The majority of Sexton’s poems contain the first person perspective, possibly to infer that she is indeed the persona of her poetry. However, she also uses different perspectives in other poems.

Diane Middlebrook, in Anne Sexton: A Biography, quotes Lowell’s comment and mentions that both the prose and the poetry of Anne Sexton possess the narrative quality of the prose and the lyrical quality of the poetry. Both move with ease and are filled with experience just like good prose.

In Sexton’s own description of her writing process, she calls her poems ‘stories. I do have a feeling for stories, for plot and maybe the dramatic situation. I really prefer dramatic situations to anything else. Most poets have a thought that they
dress in imagery . . . But I prefer people in a situation, in a doing, a scene, a losing or a gain, and then, in the end, find the thought the thought I didn’t know I had until I wrote the story . . . This is, in fact, a major criticism of my poetry

Dickey suggests that Sexton’s poetry is so narrative that her creative energy might be better expressed in fiction. Although he asserts that Sexton is indeed a writer of ‘seriousness,’ who does indeed have a “terrible story to tell,” he also remarks, “In the end, one comes to the conclusion that if there were some way to relieve some of these poems of the obvious effort of trying to be poems, something very good would emerge. I think they would make far better short stories, and probably in Mrs. Sexton’s hands, too, than they do poems” (Colburn 64)

Sexton employs an odd mixture of humor and horror to explore a variety of recurring themes, including the volatile relationships between fathers and daughters, as well as the longing for lost children. With this a preoccupation with the female body and the development of the female artist resonates throughout. One of the most special features in her poetry is fusing of demographic and personal histories in her work with the influences of the social, economic and sexual milieu. Sexton’s biographer Dianne Wood Middlebrook states, “Sexton wrote about the social confusions of growing up in a female body and of living as a woman in postwar American society” (Sexton xx)

“It’s too strange. It’s just a matter of coincidence. I think probably I’m an artist at heart, and I’ve found my own form, which I think is poetry. I was looking at educational television in Boston, and I. A. Richards was explaining the form of a sonnet, and I thought, ‘well, so that’s a sonnet.’ Although I had learned about it in high school, I hadn’t ever done anything about it. And so I thought, ‘I’ll try that, too. I think maybe I could.’ So I sat down and wrote in the form of the sonnet”. (Colburn 70)

Sexton called the process of composition as ‘milking the unconsciousness’ and she was sure that this process would prove to be a kind of psychotherapy and a refuge from their identities for the affluent American daughters, wives and mothers during the second wave of feminism post World War II during American’s Women Movement. Sexton’s poems deals with suicide are shocking, and, according to many who knew her, her writing of them was her means of keeping her suicidal impulses at bay for the final 18 years of her life.
The most important thing about Anne Sexton is that her strength and the weaknesses as a poet consists in the fact that she is most herself and cannot be referred to literary influences. If this gives her individuality and a personal meaning, it also leads to lapses of tact and a general looseness in verse structure.

Poetry is not a matter of inspiration alone. Diction and the verse leave an impact on the reader’s mind. Good poetry is the result of painstaking efforts on the part of the poet. Anne Sexton too sat with Maxine Kumin, her best friend and discussed the draft and structure of each and every poem she wrote. They both would sit together to develop their poetry every day and in case any of them was away for some reason, they did not mind discussing their poems over telephone for hours until they got the correct words to be used or correct diction. Before a poem would get the final shape many rough drafts were thrown into the dustbin.

Coleridge defined poetry as use of ‘right words at the right place’ Anne Sexton had been a painstaking artist who tried to use the best possible words to her best capacity to make her poetry most expressive. Sexton poured her sincerity and devotion to writing a poem which came straight from the poet’s heart and reached straight to readers’ heart. Words chosen by Sexton are with reference to their sense and sound. Although at many places she has used figurative language as opposed to the literal language.

---

-As for me, I am a watercolor.  
I wash off.

-We stand in broken  
lines and wait while they unlock  
the doors and count us at the frozen gates  
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken  
and we move to gravy in our smock  
of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates  
scratch and whine like chalk in school

*(For My Lover, Returning To His Wife)*

Sexton is economical in her use of language but she is never obscure. Clarity is the virtue which she prizes above all else and condensation is never at the cost of clarity. Simplicity in language and diction characterizes Sexton’s poetry. Even philosophical, Biblical and psychoanalytical subjects are dealt with simplicity and clarity. Vendler calls Sexton use of language in her poetry as ‘conversational’ as if she is
‘communicating’ with her readers. The diction in her poetry is ‘‘childlike’, ‘infantile’ and ‘babish’, lacking the complexity of the Gospels and the worldliness of the Greeks. Sexton is sharply aware of the blend of sense and sound in poetry. She knows well what will please her readers and what will keep the attention of her audience intact. Sexton’s choice of words is of words that are alive and transfer the exact thought from the poet’s heart to that of the readers.

And if I tried
to give you something outside of myself,
you would not know
that the worst of anyone
can be, finally,
an accident of hope.

(For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further)

Sexton is well aware of the nature of words, their contemporaneity, their meaning, phonetic associations and inner potency. Various words are put together in her poems to create a lyrical quality and the rhythm of real experience. Her mentors, Robert Lowell, W.D Snodgrass and I.A Richards and also her mother who was her biggest critic, Sexton learnt that tone, vocabulary, diction, sound, all need precision to convey the idea correctly. She has tended to use a casual way of utterance and contemporary words, idioms and phrases. In fact, what Sexton suggested to Plath was the force of simple rhyme, simple rhythm and the magic of nursery rhyme and that fairy tale faded with time at the face of reality. The language of the confessional text is often to be read as ‘transitive and referential,’ as a truthful representation of the lived experience of the author. Confessional poetry, unlike other postmodern poetry, persists in being read as an expressive, realist mode, offering privileged and reliable insight into personal experience. Following this suit Sexton does not coin new words but she uses words from the common, everyday vocabulary but by her use imparts to them a new meaning and images and symbols according to need. Sexton stresses the right of the poet to impart new significance to words, to inform them poetically.

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

(Wanting To Die)

By her skilful use of words the poet turns the abstract into concrete, infuses sound into sense, and conveys his meaning through the rhyme and rhythm of her verse. In ‘Jesus’ Papers’
series, the words used are highly charged with emotions and thus their expressive range is much enlarged.

**The harlot followed Jesus around like a puppy**

*For He had raised her up.*
*Now she forsook her fornications*
*And became His pet.*

*(Jesus Raises Up The Harlot)*

“Sexton’s words have immense potential to bear various shade and nuances of feelings, her vast storehouse of emotional analogues and other equivalents. It is as useful and transmutes her ‘joys’, ‘longing’ and ‘hopes’ into sensitive mould of language ‘the speech of the mind’. What Anne Sexton says is much more important than the medium in which she says it. The language employed by the poet is not that important. What is important is the thought contained by the words. Although, Sexton could not complete her higher education as she got married at an early age, she almost instinctively, is aware of the value and significance of words and recognizes fine shades of meaning of one word and another. For her as for W.B Yeats, ‘words alone are certain good’. (Morton 168) in 1959 she lost both her parents and the pain and her sense of loss was poured in her poem.

*Gone, I say and walk from church,*
*refusing the stiff procession to the grave,*
*letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.*
*It is June. I am tired of being brave.*

*(The Truth the Dead Know)*

Sexton does not consciously work upon her lyric to create spectacular effects. They emerge from ‘somewhere deep within, the inner recesses of the mind’. She uses words with caution. Poetry for her, is an organization of the best words in the best possible order. The harvest of the words in the poems is rich and varied; it gives the true picture of the poet’s moods and feelings. She achieves an easy commerce between the idea and the word. Quite unlike some other poets like Robert Lowell, with the occurrence of the ideas, words also occur on the fingertips of a born poet like Sexton. Quite against the dictum that ‘the best poets wait for words’. Anne Sexton wrote without any loss of words. Maxine Kumin, a close friend of Anne Sexton, in her forward to her *The Complete Poem* says that “there was a time when Anne was
writing poems at the speed of two or three and sometimes even four in number, in one single day” (Middlebrook VI)

This statement does not mean that Anne Sexton wrote carelessly. Critics and many analyst of Sexton’s work agreed that as a matter of fact, her diction reveals her mastery of her chosen medium, and when at her best she has almost Shakespearean felicity of expression, a classical simplicity and clarity. Being a poet of confessional mode, Sexton’s diction is colloquial, that of the confidential chat of a sensible friend and sometimes as a mother to her daughters drawing vocabulary largely from the language of everyday use. Diction, in the hands of Anne Sexton is not a tool but a poetic medium pure and simple. In ‘Said the Poet to the Analyst’ Sexton writes which confirms this statement.

My business is words....
Your business is watching my words

(Said the Poet to the Analyst)

The poet speaks of words as ‘like swarming bees’, ‘alive and vital’, creating their own shape. (Colburn 234)

Sexton’s style, which had transitioned from formal to free verse over the course of her previous collections, took another new direction. The poems of Transformations published in 1971 were not lyrical and confessional but were based upon Sexton’s life experiences. They were narrative and fictional, based upon Grimms’ fairy tales. Novelist Kurt Vonnegut wrote the book’s foreword, and Barbara Swan furnished the illustrations. Critic Suzanne Juhasz has remarked upon the hidden feminist agenda of the poems, calling them ‘revisions of patriarchal myths to reveal the truths that women know.’ Later made into a successful opera with music by Conrad Susa, the book was a critical and commercial success but it would be Sexton’s last. Commenting on the Prosody and Versification in Sexton’s poetry an observer stated that a syllable missing at each line in Sexton’s poetry makes her poem written in regular trochaic pentameter which means a line with five trochaic feet, or stresses. If one extra syllable were added, it would transform the same line into a line in regular iambic pentameter. Some critics claimed that Anne Sexton’s poetry is mostly driven by the open-wound approach to highly intense subject matter, but that it lacks the aesthetics of a technically trained poet. In an interview with Patricia Marx, Sexton
admitted that she imposes some exceptionally different meter or rhyme scheme, which allows her to be truthful.

Speaking on the poetic form to be followed during an interview, Anne Sexton said “I describe the poetic form in this way that if you use form it was like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage and you could let some extraordinary animals out of it you had the right cage and that cage would be the ‘form’” (Colburn 235)

Sexton employs a great variety of thematic and technical shapers on her poetry. Thematically her poems are often built around paired contrasts as guilt and love, truth and falsehood, mobility and fixity, illness and health. Some of the poems like ‘The Double Image’, ‘The Mirror’ and ‘The Portrait’ all speak of the past and present confronting each other, the conflicts of the parent and child, or the testing of identity by measuring it against family history; sin, guilt, belief, grace and love worked through a number of poems about Christ or traditional Christian faith; the connection of writing to finding health.

One preoccupation in her poetry which acts as an informing principle for both theme and techniques is ‘ritual’. This preoccupation expresses itself in her use of words or images commonly associated with rituals – ‘sacrament’, ‘ceremony’, ‘rites’, ‘ritual’, ‘magic’, ‘exorcise’, ‘communion’. These and words with similar connotations, occur frequently in many of the poems to indicate at the very least a kind of compulsive pattern by which the poet tries to make sense of what she is saying.

Three aspects which predominate Sexton’s poetry are:

i. Rites of mastery, in which power is tested or exorcised.

ii. Rites of initiation or cleansing, in which the poet looks for confirmation of a new insight or stage of growth or experiences testing, purification or absolution.

iii. Rites of communion, where some gesture or order of words opens up a sense of openness with others.

In some of Sexton’s poems such as ‘The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator’ she employs a more consistent meter along with a slant or more surprising end rhymes. The use of refrain in the poetry appears to be restricted in the absence of a strict verse. In the seven line stanzas of the poetry Sexton employs the rhyme scheme ababcc. The sixth line in each stanza is rhymed to the refrain. “At night, alone, I marry the bed,”
which is repeated in the seventh line of each stanza. The music in this poem is heavily dependent on the rhyme scheme, but the poem lacks the central heartbeat of a strict meter. The end rhymes are also expected and unsurprising. There is only on instance where the reader is not greeted at the end of a line with a word or an idea that takes the breath away. It is in the rhyme between “together” and “feather” in the third stanza.

Take for instance this night, my love,
that every single couple puts together
with a joint overturning, beneath, above,
the abundant two on sponge and feather,
kneeling and pushing, head to head.
At night alone, I marry the bed.

(The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator)

To make the poem even less interesting structurally, the internal rhymes feel accidental, such as: “overturning,” “kneeling” and “pushing.” And so, with all true end rhymes and few enjambments, a sing-song quality is created. It is inescapable. It resonates throughout the poem and overwhelms the seriousness of the subject matter. The underdeveloped form feels as if it is poking fun at the speaker. ‘Menstruation at Forty’ stands for loose iambic rhythm throughout with the exception of few lines with very strict iambic meter. However, the iamb is flip to trochaic in instances when a central point needs to be emphasized. A few examples of where the lines are forced out of rhythm are:

You! The never acquired, Love!
That red disease— and
David! Susan! David! David!

(Menstruation at Forty)

These detours from the iambic rhythm in the poem make the readers pay attention to the poet’s words. These instances are where the speaker asserts her voice. She speaks of her blood and of her babies; and she wants to be heard.
Though a rhyme scheme is not present in the poem, the music of the poem can still be felt in the like and unlike sounds bouncing off one another. The differences are created in the sonic contrasts between Germanic root words and Latinate root words.

All this without you—
two days gone in blood.
I myself will die without baptism,
a third daughter they didn’t bother.
My death will come on my name day.
What’s wrong with the name day?

(Menstruation at Forty)

In reading the lines above aloud, the reader can intuitively distinguish between the contrasting sounds of German sounding root words such as, “blood,” “death” and “wrong,” which are associated the body to Latin sounding root words such as, “baptism,” “daughter” and “brother,” which are associated with the emotion. And in the intermingling of these sounds, a tone depicting the speaker’s conflicting emotions is generated; a tone that can be perceived on a deeper level than the meanings of the words themselves. The reader is invited to understand the female speaker intimately, not just from the knowledge of her body through the words used, but also through the sounds her heart makes in the way that the music of the poem is being played out. ‘In Celebration of my Uterus’, ‘There is enough here to please a nation. It is enough that the populace owns these goods.’ The repeated usage of the “s” sounds throughout the poem gives the diction a soft female quality. Though this is a noticeable contrast to the position of power of the first four lines, it works. The contrasting quality between the softness of the sounds and the strength of the speaker’s voice is representative of the conflict between societal expectations on how a woman should behave and her own desire to attain strength and control over her body.

Everyone in me is a bird.
I am beating all my wings.
They wanted to cut you out
but they will not.
They said you were immeasurably empty
but you are not.
They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong.
You are singing like a school girl.
You are not torn.
In Celebration of my Uterus

The end rhyme of “not” and “not” is also the most stressed rhyme in the stanza, which helps to reiterate the point the speaker is making about the state of her uterus. Though there are no rhyme schemes present in the poem, end rhymes can be found throughout, such as: “wings” and “dying,” to which “wrong” is a slant rhyme. “Wrong” is also a slant rhyme of “torn.” In the same way, “bird” rhymes with “girl” and “out” rhymes with “not.”

...one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine,
one is at the aquarium tending a seal,
one is dull at the wheel of her Ford,
one is at the toll gate collecting...

In Celebration of my Uterus

With the repetition of the phrase “one is,” the poem becomes incantatory. Sexton pays homage to Walt Whitman as the women chant praises to their healthy uterus.

One can see an example of Repetition in Sexton’s poem ‘The Starry Night’. The poem is rich in its imagery and has excellent sound and rhythm.

Oh starry night!

This is how I want to die

(The Starry Night)

The expression ‘Oh starry night’ is repeated in stanza one, and then again in the fifth and the sixth stanza. Another interesting poem ‘Her Kind’ shows use of repetition in the last two lines of each stanza. In the first five lines of each stanza, Sexton describes the situation using one of the three points of view. To finish each section, she says, ‘A woman like that is’ and ‘I have been her kind’. She does this to reiterate the importance of her agreement to the other three views – the witch, the housewife, and the adulteress. Also, every other line rhymes in each stanza. This is interesting because, unlike many poems that we see, the rhyming words aren’t necessarily at the end of the sentence. Sexton uses enjambment, allowing phrases to continue to the next line, while simultaneously keeping each stanza symmetrical in rhyme which in some of the lines is ababcb. The line da DUM, da DUM, da DUM, da DUM, da DUM is written in tetrameter that has four regular beats and eight syllables.
Sexton’s early poems are strictly formalist in their structures, and her later poems, including the *Transformations*, published in 1971, follows an interlocking rhyme scheme of ‘ababcb’ except in the penultimate line of the second stanza, where she braids in a third ‘a’ rhyme, instead. The rollicking rhythms also contribute to the “lively, almost gleeful tone of the poem,” as Greg Johnson has noted. Finally, each stanza ends with the words “I have been her kind,” the poet’s device of the refrain mimicking the witch’s device of the repetitive incantation.

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

*(Cinderella)*

Poems from *Live or Die* are based on ritualistic rhythms and mythological concepts. In addition, meter and its singsong rhythms are a representation of chanting and singing performed at rituals. Sexton’s use of image-laden words within rhyme schemes and metrical lines reveals this.
Throughout *Transformations*, Sexton uses forms in interesting ways. “Rapunzel,” for instance, is almost melodic, and form appropriately mirrors content here, as Rapunzel sits in her tower alone all day, singing. The following lines exemplify how Sexton’s story-telling section of the poem is still somewhat prosaic in its syntax and line integrity, but musical in its meter and flow, especially when repeated.

Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,
and thus they met and he declared his love.
What is this beast, she thought,
with muscles on his arms
like a bag of snakes?
What is this moss on his legs?
What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?
What is this voice as deep as a dog?
Yet he dazzled her with his answers.
Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.
They lay together upon the yellowy threads,
swimming through them
like minnows through kelp
and they sang out benedictions like the Pope.

(Rapunzel)

This section sings almost like a song when read out loud. It’s as if Sexton is trying to lure in the reader as Rapunzel did her Prince. The rhymes and conversational speech in the poem work cohesively together to create a smooth and easy reading experience, especially when the poem is read aloud. These devices fool the reader into a false comfort. The speaker is able to digest the concept of uterus without realizing that, under normal circumstances it would be something very difficult to swallow, as it was a concept so rare.

Sexton uses the mystical Palindrome in her later poems. Palindrome involves a word play in which a word, phrase or sentence reads the same backwards or forwards. She once said “busy with an idea for a code, I write signals hurrying from left to right, or right to left, by obscure routes, for my own reasons; taking a word like ‘writes’ down tiers of tries until its secret ‘rites’ make sense; or until suddenly, RATS can amazingly and funny become STAR and right to left that small star is mine, for my own liking, to stare its five lucky pins inside out, to store forever kindly, as if it were a star I touched and a miracle I really wrote”(Middlebrook 345)

A location for a word play, her fondness for rhymes, homonyms and palindromes are the special features of Anne Sexton’s poems.

Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods.
She began looking in the sky
expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch.
Ms. Dog, how much time you got left?
Ms. Dog when you gonna feel that cold nose?
You better get straight with the Maker.
Cuz it’s a coming, it’s a coming

(Hurry Up Please It’s Time)

“Oh Lord”, they said last night on TV, “the sea is so mighty and my dog is so small”,
I heard dog. You say, they said boat not dog and that further dog would have no meaning. But it does mean. The sea is mother-death and she is a mighty female, the
one who wins, the one who sucks us all up. Dog stands for me and the new puppy, Daisy.” (Kumin xxx)

The use of ‘Dichotomy’ use of concepts and ideas which are totally different from each other, is another skill Sexton possess an excellence in.

Your business is watching my words. But I admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance, when I can write my praise for a nickel machine, that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic the jackpot came crackling three bells out, over the lucky screen. But if you should have this is something it is not, then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny and ridiculous and crowded with all the believing money

(Said the Poet to the Analyst)

The poem ‘Said the Poet to the Analyst’ has two stanza structures which usually signal the presence of a basic dichotomy. Reader’s expectation of a dichotomy is heightened by the title, which calls attention to the opposition between the role of the poet and that of the analyst.

The parallel structure of the stanzas with their antithetical beginnings suggests the development of a dichotomy in which every element is systematically compared and contrasted.

Sexton’s poetic career began as a suggested method of personal therapy, a way of reconstructing her apparently disintegrating life. A large number of her poetry deals with intensely personal subjects: relationship with parents and parental figures, relationship with children, lovers and therapists. The language used by the poet is self-reflexive that seeks to evaluate and accommodate one subject position that of the writer.

Symbolic Imagery is a quintessential part of poetry. Elements of a poem do not simply represent something basic, or something we are accustomed to in our everyday lives. Rather, they allude to literary history, Classics and Christian mythologies. The imagery in Anne Sexton’s poetry is always functional, never merely decorative and is drawn from the familiar and the common places. The symbolic images increase the expressive range of her language. Images drawn from the human body and specially the female one are used most frequently. The images concretize her fond awareness.
of the intimate human details. They adequately express her love for human body as also the aversion to it. The symbolic images are her themes as well her modes of expression. They dramatise her passion and impart certain depth and resonance to Sexton’s feelings. The imagery and symbolism in most of Sexton’s poems are sound reflective, contemplative, and mature. They offer newly evocative and memorable images that are expressed most often in free verse and are both more appropriate and more surreal than before. The book *Love Poems* offers appropriate and crystal clear images for the reader to see especially in ‘The Touch’.

For months my hand had been sealed off in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railings. Perhaps it is bruised, I thought, like a clock, by its five knuckles and the think underground veins. It lay there like an unconscious woman.

...An ordinary hand—just lonely for something to touch that touches back

*(The Touch)*

In yet another poem ‘The Break’ Sexton has written :

It was also my violent heart that broke falling down the front hall stairs.
It was also a message I never spoke, calling riser after riser, who cares’.

*(The Break)*

The two quotes show images that these poems definitely contain love in them. ‘The Touch,’ in *Love* poems, establishes a notion that all the love poems are ‘a celebration of touch’, in a way she does not consciously intend. In second, ‘The Break’ extends the female passive and males active motif while realizing in greater detail, the imagery of violence that links love or its absence with torment, anger, and death. All in all, these love poems contain the images that can reflect maturity for the readers to witness.

Symbolism is one of the most important elements of ‘The Starry Night’. In Sexton’s poem, she uses many symbols to help describe her feelings. The ‘black-haired tree’ represents her because it is the only object noticed in the town, or in society. She is visualizing the town and seeing herself there, being alone and gazing out into the sky.
She also uses allusions to show how evil and tormented she feels. The poem reads, ‘The night boils with eleven stars’. The eleven stars symbolize the eleven good Disciples of Christ, and she is the twelfth evil one, Judas. She also creates symbols when using personification because she portrays the power of the moon, the sky and the wind, the ‘unseen serpent’. She describes the wind a second time as ‘that great dragon’ that she wants to be engulfed by. Each time Sexton uses symbolism, she creates a distinct image of how she wants to die. She uses these images to allow the reader to transform her somewhat confused ideas into a more tangible and more readable poem.

The poems in the *Live or Die* collection, follows symbiotic representations of nature. The nature of things, of life, of the cyclical and structural order of life, controls not only the content of every poem, but also its form. Poems are rituals, and most rituals are performed on behalf of the non-human element of nature. For instance, all poems go through a birth, death, and re-birth process just as the moon has three phases related to the matriarch of the female, and as the seasons follow a similar cycle. Sexton uses consistently archetypes and symbols, as well as similes and metaphors, to illustrate more clearly the mythologies they are iterating or conveying, in her poetry. Colors, shapes, plants, animals, and numbers provide hints to the roots of a poem. In poetry there are consistent allusions to the sun, the moon, the sky, heaven, hell, as well as labyrinths, and spirals, and darkness and light.

By using vivid colors as another technique in her writing, Sexton transforms her poems into vibrant colorful images in the reader’s brain. The book of poems *Live or Die* showcases a more controlled, analytical approach to the Confessional style to show color in comparison with her other volumes written before this one. Color clearly shows in ‘Three Green Window’: ‘Half awake in my Sunday nap I see their green windows in three different lights—one west, one south, and one east.’

Frye promotes, “A literature grows out of the primitive verbal culture which contains a mythology; it can grow out of any mythology, but it is historical fact that our literature is mostly directly descended from the Biblical myth,” (Frye 17) Sexton has definitely used a lot of Biblical references in her poetry, especially in her later poetry.

*My sin is always my sin,*
with no special legend or God to refer to.
I think it would be better to be a Jew

(My Friend, My Friend)

For instances Live or Die reads like a reinterpretation of several of the Biblical stories. Like Plath and other contemporaries, Sexton paints her poetry with a mythological brush so as to disguise roots of the poem. This is both intentional and done unconsciously. And the speaker appears to be in awe witnessing the powers of the higher God— that who is larger than humanity thus drawing inspiration and acceptance of the quest. Sexton’s poem, contain elements of sacrifice, birth, marriage, death, etc., in each of them. Further, the unity of Live or Die is the reverberation of myth. It is not tied together by Sexton’s voice or by an Oedipal complex, but rather by the retold myths of love, life, death, sacrifice, and rebirth, which all tie into the speaker’s quest. When read in the guise of myth, Live or Die becomes a metaphor for a casting out of the devils inside the speaker, which takes her on a voyage from believing that the best solution is to live. In living, however, the speaker realizes that she must sacrifice, kill the false self, marry herself and ideals to God, and inevitably be reborn so as to truly live.

The Bible, most popular book in the world, is a huge collection of myths. Myths that were cave-wall portrayals which became rituals with time. Sexton relied for inspiration and language on this bank of mythology, and soon she started writing about life steeped in the mythological traditions of birth, the quest for a Holy Grail, the traditions of love; Eros & Psyche, Demeter & Persephone, Man with God, or the atonement of the soul by killing thy false self and usually involving sacrifice of Jesus, Jesus of resurrection, rebirth, or re-creation, myth of the eternal return, the seasons, Mother Earth, the Moon or Sun Goddess, and inevitable death. Sexton, herself, admittedly that she relied on and beckoned myths mostly Christian as she was Protestant.

Sexton relied on her unconscious to write her poetry noting, “Poetry milks the unconscious,” and that “The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of,” (Kevles 85).

The clutter of worship
that you taught me, Mary Gray
is old. I imitate
a memory of belief
that I do not own. I trip
on your death and Jesus, my stranger,
floats up over,
my Christian home,
wearing his straight, thorn tree.

(The Division of Parts)

Some critics criticized Sexton that she wrote as if she was Demeter or Mary Magdalene, or Christ for that matter. Sexton did not write as if she were God, she wrote about a relationship with God and the struggles of obtaining such a union. This involved acts such as sacrifice, rebirth, death and even sex, which brought the speaker closer to God. Sexton claimed to have communicated with God; she certainly was not accredited by any sort of authority.

God spoke to me and said:
Here. Take this gingerbread lady
and put her in your oven.
When the cow gives blood
and the Christ is born
we must all eat sacrifices.
We must all eat beautiful women.

(The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks)

In ‘Flee on your donkey’ the donkey in Sexton’s work can be associated with the physical side of the incarnation of the Christ. Jesus was carried into Jerusalem by a donkey. Myths from this time period and hereafter tell of quests for salvation, fertility, a sword, a holy grail, and of course rebirth. Thirty seven stories stemming from these myths include ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Beowulf, Perceval: The Story of the Grail, and, of course, The Fisher King. Sexton’s Live or Die are identified with the body of Christ. Yet, they are also associated with the demonic as well. These images include the sun, the tree, water, fish, bread, wine, and so on. These are common correlations, though Frye frames it best, noting, “Christ is the sun of righteousness, the tree of life, the water of life, the dying God who rose again, the saviour from the sea” (Frye 122).

Further, Sexton employs a multitude of images found in the Bible, including the city, mountain, river, garden, tree, oil, fountain, bread, wine, bride, sheep, etc., which all
serve to present a unifying principle. Significantly, the tree is in fact connotative of the tree of life, such as it was in the Garden of Eden, but also the fall of Adam and all that is tempting. The word tree or a representation of the tree is utilized over a dozen times in Live or Die. Sexton’s works are not only indicative of the female, they are also symbolically tied to Christ. In fact, the rose, as exploited in “Walking in Paris,” ‘...by the rose window of Notre Dame,’ (136), and in Live ‘picking roses off my hackles” (Sexton.p.168) and in ‘O Ye Tongues: Third Psalm’ she suggests the speaker’s desired relationship with the risen body of Christ; or more specifically Sexton’s idea of Christ, which could be female or even a martyred witch like Joan of Arc.

Let Noah build an arch out of the old lady’s shoe and fill it with the creatures of Lord.
Let the arch of salvation have many windows so the creatures of Lord will marry mouthfuls of oxygen
Let Anne and Christopher rejoice with the worm who moves Into the light like the doll’s penis.

(Third Psalm)

The number three signifies the holy trinity, or that of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Frye iterates what we all know, “God is three persons and yet one God” (Frye 142). Furthermore, Christ rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion, prior to which he had proclaimed, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” (John 2:19). The temple he spoke of was his body thus the correlation of all buildings in myths of Christianity with Christ. Sexton, the third of three daughters, references this fact and alludes to the number three on several occasions. In the poem “Three Green Windows,” from the Live or Die collection, Sexton writes, “I see three green windows, in three different lights” (105); in “And One for My Dame,” the speaker proclaims, “in his bedroom on a three-day drunk” (95); in “Those Times...” she divulges, “being a third child, the last given and the last taken—” (118); and finally in Live she bequeaths, “Oh dearest three, I make a soft reply,” (169). In her continuous utilization of the number three it becomes much more suggestive than a number; it transforms into an archetype of the Holy Trinity. This should not be considered a coincidence, unless a coincidence of the unconscious.
The next step of her journey is an early attempt to become one with Christ. In “The Sun,” (96-7) Sexton employs several archetypal elements to promote the concept that the speaker is dying into Christ. Like the Apostles “the fish” of the poem, the speaker not only identifies with Christ, “I am an identical being,” she proclaims to be one of his followers:

Now I am utterly given.
I am your daughter, your sweet-meat,
your priest, your mouth and your bird
and I will tell them all stories of you
until I am laid away forever,
a thin gray banner.

Here again, however, the speaker’s journey towards a spiritual rebirth falters. She announces, “I have come back,” presumably to reality, and eventually accepts the fate of a spiritual death, proclaiming:

Soon I will raise my face for a white flag,
and when God enters the fort,
I won’t spit or gag on his finger.
I will eat it like a white flower.

(From “Flee on Your Donkey”)

“Three Green Windows” (105) describes yet another situation where the speaker gives up faith and begins her descent. Within the title alone, “Three Green Windows,” we have two explicit archetypes; one of which serves as a metaphor of the Holy Trinity, the other for rebirth and fertility.

From The Book of Follies Sexton gave reference to the parable when Jesus encounters the harlot Mary Magdalen being stoned “stones came at her like bees to candy and sweet redheaded harlot that she was, and she screamed out ‘I never’ ‘I never’ he raises her up and efficiently heals her “terrible sickness” then and there lancing with his thumbs her breasts, ‘those two boils of whoredom’ until the milk runs out”. This brings an example of Sexton’s mastery over using Biblical and contemporary language. The harlot followed Jesus around like a puppy

For He had raised her up.
Now she forsook her fornications
And became His pet

(Jesus Raises Up the Harlot)
If we were to take the criticisms at face value and promote the notions that the poetry of not only *Live or Die* but almost all her poems are actually about Sexton’s atonement with her childhood- which was corrupt and distressing- her incarcerations at mental institutions, her struggles as a wife, mother, and daughter, her desire to kill herself, the discovery of herself and hence reconciliation with God, and finally, her desire to actually live, does this not resemble a metaphorical and mythological descent into hell and ascent into heaven- or at least into the Kingdom of God.

Similes & Metaphors have made Anne Sexton’s Poetic Craftsmanship special and outstanding. Use of ‘figurative language’, instead of the literal language forms the style and expression of the poems in Sexton’s early poems. In ‘The Starry Night’ from the collection *All My Pretty Ones* Sexton purposely hints around about what she is trying to say. She also uses simile in the poem, for example, “one black-haired tree slips up like a drowned woman into the hot sky” and “to push children, like a god, from its eye.” These phrases are used to signify what these objects look like, not to describe exactly what they are. Personification is also used in this poem. Words such as “boil” are used when describing the sky and “bulges” when talking about the moon. These inanimate objects are given lifelike characteristics because they further explain how real this scene truly is. She is depicting a scene of night, of peacefulness and serenity. Therefore, the poet uses certain words and phrases to make the effectiveness of the poem more concrete. Sexton’s desire to die is easier to understand when she uses figurative comparisons because she uses these to create universal feelings in her writing. In some other Sexton’s poems Simile isn’t as prominent. For example in “Her Kind” because the organization of personas doesn’t allow for many other elements to stand out, Similes are used in an insignificant manner. However, she does use metaphors in describing the three points of view in each of the three stanzas. For example, in the second stanza she “fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves”. Sexton could be comparing worms and elves in the woods to her husband and children at home. Altogether, the collaboration of different repetitions and metaphors in this poem helps us gain a better understanding of the message that Sexton is trying to demonstrate – that she understands what it’s like to be “her kind”. The poem, ‘Wanting to Die’, is an attempt to explain the suicidal feelings that haunts Sexton as well as many others like her. In describing the reasons why a person would like to die, Sexton uses a great deal of simile and metaphor to get her point across. The first two lines of the poem are calm and distant, but the third immediately shifts to the desire
for death. In the second stanza, a metaphor is used to give an illusion of things that are normally considered “worth living for”. She says, “I know well the grass blades you mention, the furniture you have placed under the sun.” The third stanza continues with another metaphor in which she compares suicides to carpenters such that carpenters simply ask “which tools, they never ask why build”.

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

(Wanting to Die)

This poem continues with simile and metaphor in each stanza as Sexton tries to explain what wanting to die is like to someone who only wishes to live. An interesting metaphor is used in the eighth stanza. The line reads, “To thrust all that life under your tongue! – that, all by itself, becomes a passion.” Ending life is compared to taking pills and implies that it can become a habit eventually, or a passion.
In the final stanza, we are left with an understanding of one’s will to die and why life isn’t always most favorable. In a sense, ‘Wanting to Die’ is just another suicide attempt. Of course, no matter what the final stanza implies, we are satisfied in being given an explanation of the desire to die, written in a way so that others can relate to and try to understand where Anne Sexton was coming from.

Sexton’s another poem ‘Suicide Note,’ is one of the most highly controversial poem. It is very much similar to many of her other suicide poems, but it is so carefully constructed in the form of a note left to a “dear friend” that it is said to have possibly been her very own note left before her final and successful attempt. The irony is that ‘Suicide Note’ was actually written ten years before she committed suicide. If she is indeed the persona in this poem, as many tend to believe, it is extremely hard to form an opinion as to whether or not this was a real suicide note written by her and for her own suicide.

Dear friend,
I will have to sink with hundreds of others
on a dumbwaiter into hell.
I will be a light thing.
I will enter death
like someone’s lost optical lens.
Life is half enlarged.
The fish and owls are fierce today.
Life tilts backward and forward.
Even the wasps cannot find my eyes.

(Suicide Note)

She uses symbols such as worms, fields and blood to set the scene for death. After revealing the intentions of the note, the persona introduces the “dear friend” to whom she is speaking. In the following stanzas, Sexton compares her suicide to that of God because he “rode calmly into Jerusalem in search of death.” In the final stanzas, the persona says goodbye and attempts to justify committing suicide once more. The poem reads, “So I will go now without old age or disease, wildly but accurately.” This is only another reference to the earlier statement made about God traveling in search of death – He went willingly and healthily, not of old age or anywhere near unanticipated death. In contrast to the ‘Suicide Note’, Live or Die is written like a romance; a quest for life through the experience of a metaphorical death. The speaker’s life in the volume could be considered a wasteland, which is inevitably fertilized and brought back to life by the Sun-god or by the Son or even by the Virgin Mary; the sun as an archetype of Christ is strewn throughout. In fact, though she never read William Blake, many contemporary critics have compared Sexton’s poetry, at least in its use of Biblical archetypes, to his.

By using twisted metaphors and similes as a technique in her writing, Sexton transforms her poems to be anything but the ordinary. Using metaphors in the poem, ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’ contribute to the breezy contemporary sound. In addition, nearly every line of this quote uses simile or metaphors to develop the tone:

No matter what life you lead
the virgin is a lovely number:
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
arms and legs made of Limoges,
lips like Vin Du Rhone,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes
open and shut.

(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs)
This other twisted metaphor depicts theme and tone for the ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. “Her stepmother, a beauty in her own right, though eaten of course, by age, would hear of no beauty surpassing her own. Beauty is a simple passion.” (3)

In ‘In Celebration of My Uterus’, the female at the center after many years of silence and taboo comes out in open and makes one wonder.

Everyone in one is a bird.
I am beating all my wings.
They wanted to cut you out but they will not.
They said you were immeasurably empty but you are not
they said you were sick unto dying but they were wrong.
You are singing like a school girl you are not torn.

(In Celebration of My Uterus)

Another quote from Love poems that makes women a symbol comes from ‘The Kiss’:

My mouth blooms like a cut.
I've been wonged all year, tedious nights, nothing but rough elbows in them and delicate boxes of Kleenex calling crybaby, crybaby, you fool!

(The Kiss)

‘Flee on Your Donkey’ from Live or Die, contains metaphors so vivid that the actual hornets can remind the speaker first of flowers, than transmogrify into stinging, hissing, threatening things that recall frightening radio programs of the speaker’s youth: “The Hornet knows. Hornets have been sent. They cluster like floral arrangements on the screen. Hornets dragging their thin stingers hover outside”.

(76)

Kathleen Spivack suggested, “the desire to be immortal was a strong motive for Anne’s writing” Nobody can argue that Sexton saw herself in the eyes of a goddess, or at least a disciple of Christ on a quest to reach his Kingdom. However, J.D. McClatchy remarked, “Sexton’s use of imagery in Live or Die is primarily
psychotropic—used less for literary effect than as a means to pry deeper into her psychic history.

The religious quest of *Live or Die* involves first, the conflict of the speaker and the acknowledgment of the evils that harness her life and reside within. Thus, the speaker endures a perilous journey in order to cast out the devils inside her by defeating the metaphorical dragons monsters in her life.

As significant as the tree, water, in its many forms, is also prevalent throughout the collection, and serves a dualistic role. It is both the giver and taker of life, and serves as means for baptism and rebirth. Whether in the form of rain, the sea, or the ocean, it denotes the water of life or of Christ, but also the Leviathan or sea monster, which the speaker must battle and kill. Examples of Sexton’s use of water as archetype can be gleaned in the following instances: “My skin flattens out like sea water” (97); “and go down that river with the ivory, the copra and the gold,” (107); “This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying, went on and on in water as white and clear” “Rain is a finger on my eyeball. Rain drills in with its old unnecessary stories”.

Sexton’s volume is associated with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth. Most notable of these descriptive is fertility, as mentioned in “Those Times…” Menstruation at Forty, Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman, and A Little Uncomplicated Hymn, Fertility, as Frye suggests, means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female. These elements appear throughout *Live or Die* in the form of: ‘That red disease,’ from ‘Menstruation at Forty’.

There is blood here and
I have eaten it and I am handed
wine as a child is handed milk.
It is presented in a delicate glass from
for the Year of the Insane…to conjure
up my daily bread.

*(Menstruation at Forty)*

Her poems are heavily populated by simile and metaphor, which, might come off as overbearing, but her descriptors don’t. Not only do they easily measure up in quantity, but in quality as well. Every metaphor was blissfully simple or fresh, and all were most appropriate.
One with one eye
like a great blue aggie
One with two eyes,
common as pennies.
One with three eyes,
the third like an intern.

(One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes)

In conclusion, Anne Sexton’s poetry basically revolves around the theme of death and dying to go to a better place. Throughout her life, she believed that she was destined to be unhappy and live in sorrow. She used her poetry to paint pictures of her misery, her longing to be at peace, and her desire to simply “split from her life.” As we know, Anne Sexton eventually got what she was wishing for when she committed suicide in her garage. Although her life was indeed tragic and somewhat mysterious, her poetry reveals a great deal to us today. Her expertise in using poetic elements to successfully relate to theme is quite unique. Critics frequently comment on the dual nature of Sexton’s poetry as a ‘cathartic process’ and ‘destructive urge’. While many find courage in Sexton’s willingness to transmute painful personal experience and taboo sexual topics into art, others condemn such themes as exhibitionistic and inappropriate. James Dickey reviewing Sexton’s To Bedlam and Part Way Back says, “One feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of such naked suffering”. (Dickey 87) Despite the limitations of Sexton’s unabashed self-scrutiny, many critics discern profound archetypal motifs in her work, particularly allusions to the Oedipus myth in themes of incest and the relentless search for forbidden truth. Though, Love poems and Transformations were Sexton’s best-selling and most popular volumes during her life, her critical reputation rests largely on the poems of To Bedlam and Part Way Back, All My Pretty Ones, and Live or Die. Renowned for her heavily revised verse in earlier volumes, most critics note Sexton’s declining artistic discipline in hastily composed later volumes such as The Book of Folly, The Death Notebooks, and The Awful Rowing Toward God. A celebrity and trenchant poetess whose frank discussion of sex and mental illness offered liberating honesty for many, Sexton remains among the most important female poets of her generation.

Confessional poetry is a genre soaked in realism; however, its archetypal language makes it more romantic and surreal in form and tragic in content, which is most closely related to myths.
I see leaves—
leaves that are washed and innocent,
leaves that never knew a cellar,
born in their own green blood
like the hands of mermaids.

The speaker, however, comes back to the realization that it is Christ whom she desires, noting, “It is a time of water, a time of trees.” Though at this point on her journey, these two elements do not represent what she wishes or what they had previously. They are now the antitype. Regardless, the line is quite similar to that from *Genesis*: “And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (2:9). The next spiritual step for the speaker comes in recognizing the journey the soul takes after death, though she probably does not believe hers would travel the same route or to the same divine and heavenly place as others have.

Breathe!
And you’ll know...
an ant in a pot of chocolate,
it boils
and surrounds you.
There is no news in fear
but in the end it’s fear
that drowns you.

The speaker accepts fate and whatever the divine has to offer. This would vacillate, however, as her perilous encounters and experiences continued until the predictable conflict. In a letter to Erica Jong Sexton wrote: “I keep feeling that there isn’t one poem being written by any one of us...The whole life of us writers, the whole product...is one long poem- a community effort if you will...It doesn’t belong to any one writer- it’s God’s poem perhaps” (414).

Sexton did refer to and consider her poetry as personal. In an interview for *The American Poetry Review* she remarked: “Poetry is for us poets the handwriting on the tablet of the soul. It is the most private, deepest, most precious part of us,” (Colburn 35).

Sexton relied on her unconscious to write her poetry noting, “Poetry milks the unconscious,” and that “The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of,” (Kevles 85).
Sexton’s poetry is such which situates meaning within frameworks of codified lines and verses. Her poem narrates stories and self and situations, which ask the reader to inquire more deeply into the work that they do. Sexton’s poetry mapped internally the disintegration, despair, loss and disconnection which were paralleled externally across the United States and its terrains of exclusion and loss. Her poetry operates to deconstruct the forms of masculine language from within. Her poetry exhibit the empowerment of the female voice through the codes and strategies of Sexton’s concentrated poetic style. The Sexton’s ‘I’ is a female subject in poetic language that serves multiple purposes and which is insistently ‘the least stable entity in language since its meaning is purely a function of the moment of its utterance’ ‘I’ Serves as the basis of self-construction a lasting self upon language alone. In a letter to her psychologist, Sexton declared with dismay ―All I am is the trick of words writing themselves‖. (Middlebrook 82) Sexton was always aware of both the ethical imperative to give mastery over language and of the way that a free-wheeling language undermines the construction of a lasting self. In other words, her view of language behavior obviates the possibility of cure, and thus of survival.

Almost all of Sexton’s volumes received a mixed response. Dickey praised the subject of the work, but found that “the poems fail to do their subject the kind of justice which I should like to see done.... As they are, they lack concentration, and above all the profound, individual linguistic suggestibility and accuracy that poems must have to be good.” On the other hand, Melvin Maddocks believed that “Mrs. Sexton’s remarkable first book of poems has the personal urgency of a first novel. It is full of the exact flavors of places and peoples remembered, familiar patterns of life recalled and painstakingly puzzled over.... A reader finally judges Mrs. Sexton’s success by the extraordinary sense of first-hand experience he too has been enabled to feel.” Barbara Howe thinks that many of the poems are flawed, but overall she judged ‘Bedlam’ “an honest and impressive achievement.”

The instability of the surface text alerts readers that they are entering ambiguous and equivocating poetic territory. An ‘obsessive combination’ acts as a buffer between Sexton and her poetry, an exercise in language that questions the very production of language, meaning and authorial involvement. The imperative to write, with which the first line ends, sets off a train of words associations and linguistic games that Sexton criss-crosses through the remaining lines of the poem that locate, dislocate and
relocate signification within the fluid and interchangeable units of language that Sexton employs. The metaphysical nature within a discourse runs to the very heart of poetic practice. “Language is the house of being”( Heidegger 103). Sexton’s language equates with the soul, an element of the absolute within our finite existence. It is a language that speaks ‘as an essentials’ that produces in words the essence of ‘Being’.