CHAPTER- III

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN THE EARLY POEMS

Being a confessional poet, Sexton believed in complete honesty and self-revelation in order to create the most creative poetry and she tried to follow it as much as she could. This made her poetry a representative of herself. This was the reason it was so touching and reached the heart of all her readers. This aspect doesn’t make Sexton an untalented writer although; she used poetry as a medium to express her pain and to get some solace out of her life full of struggles. The analysis of her poetry reflects a variety of shades and moods. If we divide Sexton’s complete work into two, for our convenience, we can call it her early work and later work. A transgression from somewhat happy and a carefree childhood, to a more complicated life- experiences could be noted on studying Sexton’s early and later poetry. Her suicide at her early age came as a shock to all those who could relate well with her life story and admired her for her lucid and candid style. Some people criticized her for committing suicide and trying to escape, rather than facing her share of problems. The message received by many through this act of Sexton was ‘when there’s no way out, then just give up’, which was unacceptable to many and she became a person of contempt again. She was an icon for many and she had impressed upon many veterans and had bagged scholarships for attending universities to deliver as well as attend lectures and workshops. As a young confessional poet, she had a great influence on many young minds and her suicide was something which encouraged the escapist tendency.

Anne Sexton was a rebellious natured woman of the twentieth century America. This made her break the social norms. She could not agree to the rules set for the women and thus her poems portray housewives as adulterous and a good and a bad witch. Freud’s impact could be seen on her early poetry but her later poetry offered a poetic synthesis. Later poetry became more and more psychoanalytical. By the time Sexton wrote Transformations, she realized that psychoanalytic theory was essentially poetic, linguistic and metaphorical. Basically, the main themes touched upon in her poetry are very new, untouched by anyone else earlier. Nobody dared to write poetry on themes like hers. In the opinion of most people, Sexton was a poet who wrote on behalf of emotionally injured and fragile people. Some people even called her a
mentally and emotionally unstable woman. Broadly, the themes of her poetry could be categorized such as:

- Incest and Molestation
- Death
- Memory lapses
- Feeling of Worthlessness
- Entrapment
- Suggestibility
- Doppelgangers- a German term, which refers to a ghostly double of a living person especially one that haunts its fleshly counterpart.
- Alienation

Sexton’s poetry basically revolves round one of the above mentioned themes. Throughout her life, she believed that she was destined to be unhappy and live in sorrow. She used her poetry to paint the picture of her misery, her longing to be at peace and her desire to simply “split from her life”. She wrote so as to make people understand what she has been craving for.

The complete works of Anne Sexton comprises of the following collection of poems published during and after her life time. An attempt to divide them into early works and later works have been done to understand the progression of Sexton’s poetry, which is assumed to have taken place with her growing years of maturity and the number of visits to a psycho-therapist.

Early poems:

- *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* 1960
- *All My Pretty Ones* 1962
- *Live or Die* 1966
- *Love Poems* 1969

Later poems:

- *Transformations* 1971
- *The Book of Folly* 1972
- *The Death Notebooks* 1974
- *The Awful Rowing Towards God* 1975 (Posthumous)

The early poems written by Sexton, gives full and exact flavors of places and people she remembered. She also recalls the familiar patterns of life which painstakingly
puzzled over in order to solve the mystery of life. The collection gives extraordinary sense of firsthand experience to all the readers. In the words of a critic Melvin Madocks (1993) “Sexton’s early poems has a personal urgency of a first novel.”(Madock 124) Sexton’s early poems earned her the label of ‘serious and outspoken soap opera’. The poems included in-depth analysis to project the symbolic themes and poetic techniques. It introduced a bold aspect of life such as the direct treatment of the female body, which was till now never a part of poetry. Another critic of English Literature, Candor called Sexton an ‘Interior voyager’ who describes sharp images of her own inner landscape. (Berry 36) The novelty of themes treated with utmost honesty was Sexton’s forte.

*To Bedlam and Part Way Back* one of Sexton’s earliest collections, has the rawness and the influence of her teachers and her friends with whom Anne Sexton interacted during the various writing workshops.

‘Her Kind’ can be called the signature poem of Anne Sexton. It was published in the collection of poems called *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* in, 1960. The poem no doubt bears a signature of Sexton, as it brings out her deep emotions, straight-speaking and her critical attitude towards the society and its norms laid down for the women. The title of the collection itself seems to be a suggestive one- ‘Bedlam’. Probably Sexton gave a reference to the famous lunatic hospital of London which was first of its kind in the world. The fact, that Sexton started writing poetry only on the insistence of her psychiatric therapist, explains the reference to Bedlam in her early collection of poems.

Researcher Mc. Clatchy says “the poem ‘Her Kind’ is the poet’s travel, down the memory lanes. She remembers, all she has gone through which is ugly and not very pleasant. Her memories bring her pain and agony and they remind her how lonely she had been on this earth- a dark cave dweller as she calls herself. The poem begins with ‘I’, which means it begins in first person. The reader is convinced reading the entire poem that the poet is laying her soul bare to the readers justifying the Confessional genre she writes in”. (Mc.Clatchy 27)

By employing the persona of a witch in the poem, Anne Sexton brings out the fact that modern women were an outcast in the then society of America. The poem voices the agony of modern women, who is considered as evil one and also it represents the voice of American society. Repetition of ‘I’ after every line signifies the poet’s agreement to whatever was happening.
Defining a twentieth century witch, Sexton says what matters is not what a witch does, but how and when she does it. A witch is always imagined to be, a woman with strange behaviour and is assumed to have special powers. She is different from the rest of the society; she works in the night when there is silence and nobody around. She is encompassed with mystery and her ways are mysterious. She is not what she seems to be. Sexton compares the modern women including herself to such a witch. She calls herself to be ‘possessed’. She calls herself possessed as she is unlike normal women who are family oriented. Sexton is independent, disobedient, not timid but daring; she travels alone in the night in a carefree manner. The first line of the poem ‘Her Kind’ opens as-
I have gone out, a possessed witch

Using a powerful imagery, Sexton defined her isolation as something much inflicted upon her by the society. The only reason of unacceptability on account of the society was that she was a woman who knew what she desired and would put her interests on priority unlike, the conventional women who abided by the rules of the society. She was a person who would choose her path rather than travelling on the paths, laid down by others. She felt suffocated with the restrictions on women, and always desired the freedom of space around. She would also expect her family and the society to support and respect this. In other words, she wanted to lead her life, in the way she wanted and desired. Hence, she compared herself to a witch or an outcast.

A woman like that is not a woman, quite

Her thought process is rejected out rightly by the society and her family. They had lot of expectations from her, being a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law. Hence, with so many expectations from various ends, she found it very difficult to adjust and meet the demands of all. Because of being free spirited she has been accused and criticized of not being a normal woman and she is compelled and forced to believe it. She is made to isolate herself from the society. She feels no power against the powerful social disapproval. So she declares:

I have been her kind

She feels so dejected because of the attitude of the society towards her, that she calls herself associated with witch. As if, she is of the same class, same blood or someone
who shares the same interest. The refrain suggests that she is not her but similar to her, her kind. The poem brings out her deep pain. She feels that it was the society who was responsible for what she had become. It was because of apathy towards her that she required psychiatric help. She was completely bereft of the moral and emotional support of her family and the society, just because she did not give up to the pressures of the society. It was because of this, that she alienated herself and made a world of her own where she could find space for herself. Being a Indian woman the description given by Sexton reminds me that a large number of Indian women who think differently from the society, experience the similar pain, similar sense of disassociation and isolation from society at many junctures of her life.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by

Just like the witches in the olden days were taken and left out away from the human establishments and were banished completely, so was the poet, as she was sent off to the mental asylum though she was not insane. What she expected was little understanding, warmth of love and care when she needed them the most. The poem brings out her expectation from society of being little welcoming, and understanding with her and with all the modern women like her. In a way, she appeals to everyone not to view the free spirited modern women, with negativity. She urges that independence and being free spirited, is actually a positive step for the whole society. Through this poem the poet actually brings out her own support to the change and her adaptability towards it.

survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind

Towards the end, the poet exposes her strong survivor instincts. She is not scared or ashamed to die for her crusade. She will continue to make the society understand that being different is not evil or something incorrect or negative. Although, she feels that she has suffered a lot, of rib cracking pain, torture and stress because of unsupportive people around her. Although, her real personality is somewhat burnt in the fire of hatred, she will not give up and go on asking the society to change their outlook and accept new women as they are. Thurber has stated “Anne Sexton strongly implores
that ‘the witch’ or the change is a positive approach as women will finally step out into the world and discover it by themselves and learn to accommodate themselves. The society should stand by them and carve a new beginning” (Thurber 211)

The poem ‘Her Kind’ raised a question mark on the myth of women empowerment in America, which obviously did not exist. It brought out Sexton’s strength of accepting herself and to be steadfast with whatever comes her way to find a place for different women like her. She was the only one, who openly expressed her solidarity with the unconventional women of America in the 50’s

‘For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further’, was something like a direct response to the suggestion of John Holmes, Sexton’s earliest friend, philosopher and guide to write poems. He was Anne Sexton’s earliest critic and he would give comments on her poetry and its style. It was he with whom she learnt the craft of writing poetry. He suggested Sexton, not to use her personal experience as the theme of her poetry and being a woman, not to cross the boundary and bring her readers too close to her inner self by giving them to read about her personal experiences on abortion, menopause, adultery, female love and sexuality, gender and the postpartum agony and her suicidal tendencies. Jo Gill observes “Holmes called her poetic contents as her ‘childish preoccupation’. No one knows the exact reason of Holmes saying so, but it was said that her treatment to the poetry resonated his past. Although, Anne Sexton was hurt, she tried not to give any heed to his suggestion and she wrote ‘For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further’ which was considered to be her impromptu response to Holmes’ suggestion. It can be called Anne Sexton’s apology and her defiance of her confessional style of writing against the desire of Holmes” (Gill 45-46)

It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;

The poem was a kind of a justification to her readers for the intimate personal account she gave in her collection of the poems, To Bedlam and Part Way Back. The themes of poems which were included in this collection were not very common yet. They were quite bold and even the poets of the confessional genre had not revealed the arenas of their private life to the extent Sexton did in her poetry. She was convinced
that the personal consequences of her poetic self-confrontation provided an escape to her from her own mind. Hence, she wrote:

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.

The fall out of ‘For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’ was estrangement with John Holmes and probably many readers like him. Anne Sexton accepted that she couldn’t have written poetry without exploring and revealing the realms of her inside. She felt that while writing poetry, her inner truth kept surfacing and that is why she had to turn down her mentor’s request of stop being introspective. Through this poem she appeals to Holmes to be understanding, as it was really needed on her part to write the kind of poems she did. Although, Holmes could not agree upon and be considerable about this aspect, he never undermined Anne Sexton’s poetic caliber. He wanted Anne Sexton to stop writing about her personal life as he felt that by doing this she was putting her family life at stake. Anne Sexton went on enquiring further, asking intense questions about the strength related to physical body. In doing this she could not remain sophisticated and sober with the themes and the language, her poems spoke about the pain, physical and emotional pain related to many aspects of a woman. Holmes accused Sexton for writing for the sake of release of her feelings and he commented that Anne Sexton would surely outgrow to this weakness of hers. In one of her letters to Holmes, Sexton wrote “Of course I will change, will grow to look around instead of inside but incase it takes a little while, I hope that you will wave back to me from your distant shore and understand the signal if not the words, will see the gesture and disregard the lack of sound”(Salvio 117) Sexton felt that John Holmes was under a self-deception and believed what was good for him, was good for others too and Anne Sexton, his student did not follow this rule.

Through Bedlam collection, Sexton took her readers for inward journey which normally the society scorns and avoid. Her contention by writing such poetry was to help her readers understand their own inner feeling and analyze with more depth rather than creating a wave in the society. Anne Sexton created her own work. Yet, her analysts, her ‘enthusiasts’, criticized her for asking for sympathy from audience.
To them Sexton says ‘Your business is watching my words’. She is generous and always credit where credit is due. Undoubtedly, her indebtedness to her doctors is great. They made her produce some of the most wonderful works and Sexton has not forgotten to give credit to them in her work. ‘I have words for you Dr. Y/ words for sale’ In the poem ‘You, Doctor, Martin’ for example the good doctor walks from ‘breakfast to madness’ into the cotton wool world of his patients.

...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

(You, Doctor Martin)

Anne Sexton’s concern for the inmates immured in the mental institutions lasted all over her life. But unlike Robert Lowell, she never made the mad a subject for her poetry. Jones commented, “In fact, as far as the poetry is concerned, other people existed for her only as an audience. Her first audience was medical, her next, her dead parents and her great aunt Nana and then the public.” (Jones 13)

*All My Pretty Ones* is a collection of poems, which was published in 1962. It brought Sexton the image of a blunt and a straight-from- the shoulder melodramatic person. Her candid way of revelations in her poetry shocked many in the poetic fraternity. Her poems included an in-depth analysis to project the symbolic themes and poetic techniques. It was for the first time that a woman poet had included bold aspects of life, such as the direct treatment of the female body. These were the subjects which were till now never a part of poetry.

The poem ‘The Abortion’ seems to be truly an autobiographic account of Anne Sexton’s struggle with her emotions and sentiments and her constant dilemma over her sense of discrimination.

When she wrote To Bedlam and Part Way Back poems, in her real life, she lost the support of her husband and his family and also lost the custody of her daughters by that time. The poem ‘The Abortion’ is a part of the Bedlam poems. The act of abortion involves getting rid of a baby when still it is the mother’s womb. It can be both a deliberate action or could be a miscarriage due to many reasons. If we go by
the religions, no religion permits deliberate abortion until given to some unavoidable medical reasons. If done knowingly, it is considered as a murder of a child who is alive by the consent of the mother and it is a crime which goes heavy on one’s conscience. Sexton opens her poems lines as:

Somebody who should have been born
is gone

The very first line which is a refrain exhibits intense pain in itself. When a reader reads the line, he experiences a rush of heavy emotions. Rightfully the life should have been allowed to come in this world but probably his own parents deprived him of this right. His first right to live has been denied, he is gone, been flushed as an unwanted foreign stuff from the mother’s womb where he thought he was safe.

Anne Sexton expresses her complexity of thought. She must be experiencing a surge of mixed emotions at the time when she decided to undergo a deliberate abortion.

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,
each bud puffing out from its knot,
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

In first two lines there is gentleness of emotion and in the third line a contrast to the first two lines is projected. The speaker feels the pleasure of being capable of giving life to someone but in the next line she reveals her decision of planning to take away that life. Somewhere, she could feel the brutality of the act. So she changed her shoes and drove toward a place where no one would ask any questions for her act. This way she makes her feel that this act is not on her conscience but soon she realizes that she cannot actually escape it. The following lines say it all:

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all...
he took the fullness that love began.

Sexton uses a reference of German fairy tale according to which, Rumpelstiltskin asks for the heroine’s first born in lieu of helping her to spin the straw into gold that the king had asked. When the time to take away the child comes, the lady pleads Rumpelstiltskin to ask for anything else but her child and then he agrees to do so, on condition if she could figure out his name in three days. The lady succeeds in guessing his name and thus saves herself from losing her baby. By giving the
reference of this German fairy tale, Anne Sexton compared Rumpelstiltskin to her doctor who was supposed to abort fruit of her love. Sexton subtly complains that the doctor should have asked her to think it over before committing the sinful act. Before taking a child away from a mother, Rumpelstiltskin gave her a chance to protect her child but the doctor did not do anything like this. He did not ask Anne Sexton to think again over the matter. The comparison of her doctor with Rumpelstiltskin clearly shows her regret. She felt bad although, later to the act being committed with her consent but certainly she regretted the decision.

Yes, woman, such logic will lead to loss without death. Or say what you meant, you coward...this baby that I bleed.

Sexton has clearly expressed her resentment over the act in the above lines when she says that momentarily she convinced herself for the act of aborting her child by calling it logical but actually she feels like a baby killer and she can never get rid of this feeling of guilt ever.

This poem successfully brings out the confusion of Anne Sexton’s mind because of which she could go for an abortion and later on feels that she should have been given a chance to reconsider her decision by the doctor. A thought process like this clearly points out at her weakness of mind and her ability to make right decisions. Her wavering thoughts make her feel that whatever she has decided was correct at one moment and at the other she feels that she is a coward and killer of her own baby. She cannot stand the thought harming an unborn child.

‘The Truth the Dead Know’ coming from the same collection, is a poem written in an elegiac tone, on Anne Sexton’s loss of parents within a span of three months in the same year. The elegy expresses the pathos of her heart and it continues with the theme of death. Through this poem, Sexton expresses how deeply affected she is, by her parents’ death. The loss occurred one after the other, and she never imagined the course of events like this ever. Somehow she is deeply moved by the mortality of human beings and she feels she is losing the charm of man’s life on this earth.

She begins the poem with the word ‘Gone’ which itself hits like a gong. The word holds the power to communicate the pain Sexton has had while choosing to write this word. The heaviness of heart doesn’t require any other expression and is well
addressed with the use of the word ‘gone’ in the very first line. The reader instantly feels the pain of the poet and one cannot stop himself from becoming a party to the poet’s loss.

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 last line very well expresses how Anne Sexton feels at such a major loss. She must have pulled herself together when she lost her mother, who passed away in the month of March 1959 and barely after three months, in June, she lost her father too. Loss of her mother was tremendously painful and loss of her father was a total blow to her. She was shocked, under depression, in a state-of-mind which did not allow her to believe that her parents were no more in the world. It was completely unacceptable to her. Her heart and mind refused to believe what they were told or what her eyes saw. Each and every line of the poem is capable of defining the poet’s pain right from the epigraph in the beginning of the poem to the last line (Colburn 186)

For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959
and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959

Poet’s moroseness is heightened all the more in the line where she reveals her inability to go to the burial ground to see the last rites performed for her father. She admits, she has no courage to witness the priest performing the last rites for her father and that is the reason she heads towards the cape. In her solitude she feels she can still touch her parents and she can feel their touch as well. It doesn’t seem that they are not alive. Sexton can feel that her parents are with her in flesh and blood.

and we touch. In another country people die.

Although, the poet doesn’t want to acknowledge the demise of her parents and repeatedly, she refuses to accept the fact of life, that no man is immortal, she is aware of the fact that she cannot count on this belief of hers. She will have to accept the universal law of nature and that man is mortal and whoever is born, will die one day. Deep within her heart she knows that she will not mourn for her parents forever but she will always feel the vacuum made by their absence. Despite of their differences, she knew that they would stand by her in times of her need.
The poem expresses the sense of loss and the pain she would always feel in her heart. She would always feel that there were lot of unsaid words which she wanted her mother to know and lot of unshared feelings which she would want her parents to know but with their leaving the mortal coil, it was like a dream which was painful. Through this poem the poet once again expresses the anguish and her painful gloomy life.

The entire collection of her poetry seems to revolve round ‘death’ and sometimes makes the reader wonder how the poet was obsessed with the thought of death and the idea of parting with life. In ‘The Abortion’ it was the death of the unborn fetus, ‘The Truth the Dead Know’ speaks about death in general and ‘The Starry Night’ again talks about the poet’s choice of place to die.

‘The Starry Night’ from the same collection is the poem written by Sexton in 1962. It was published as a part of All My Pretty Ones. The poem drew its inspiration from Vincent Van Gogh’s painting ‘Starry Night’ painted in 1889. The painter was not much successful earlier but his painting ‘Starry Night’ brought him recognition and world acclaim. Gogh has said to have reflected his lonely and miserable life through this paint while he was in an asylum in 1889.

Anne Sexton was facing a hard time of her life when she drew inspiration from Vincent Gogh’s painting and wrote a poem ‘The Starry Night’ sharing the same title with the painter. At this time Sexton was confused with her role of a mother and her aspirations. Her husband kayo was away and this made Anne Sexton all the more remorseful and lonely.

Sexton gives her poetry an epigraphic beginning quoting extracts from Vincent’s letter to his brother. Vincent has used vivacious colors specially the blue and the yellow. Wagner & Martin in their book of essays co-written with Linda Sexton comments, that there are a lot of contrasts suggested in the painting of Vincent Gogh. For instance, calmness and frenzy, brightness and darkness and many others. Anne Sexton on the other hand follows the theme of life and death in her poem inspired by Gogh’s work. She disassociates herself with the earth and connects herself with the sky and using an imagery of death she brings out the fact that she gives no importance to the town which is painted by the painter. She finds it non-existent and not worth mentioning. What is worthy in the town is the point where a tree with its dark branches connects the earth and the sky. Sexton used the term ‘slips’ for the branches. She used the term for communicating drowning of the tree in the inverse manner, into
the sky. This was a strange usage on account of the poet and it brought out her inclination towards death and suicide in a way. She does not find suicide as a wrong deed but she glorifies it by calling it a way to connect with the sky. She goes on to the extent of expressing her desire to die at such a place. She reveals that a person like her prefers sky to the town and the earth. She calls it to be the perfect place to die. With this desire she also expresses that she dislikes the silence and lifelessness of the town and admires the sound and action of the sky instead.

The town does not exist except where one black-haired tree slips up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.

The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars

Anne Sexton has brought in the paradoxical nature of life and death in this poem. According to her, the town is a place which is silent as dead and uninspiring but the sky is raging with heat. In a very unusual manner the poet calls death as something active and life as passive. This itself shows that she does not enjoy being alive in the town and be silent but is passionate about dying and being active. The suicidal tendency and her attraction towards life and death is once again reflected clearly in yet another poem:

Oh starry starry night! This is how I want to die:

The above line states the urgency and lays stress on the poet’s desire about how she wants to die. The line makes the readers feel her urge and excitement when she says ‘Oh starry night, Oh starry night’. It seems she wants her desire to be heard at any cost. The star studded beautiful painting of Vincent Gogh inspired Anne Sexton to choose the beautiful location as the most ideal place to die rather than any place on earth. This poem also reflects that Sexton admits the power of nature and states that although, the sky is star lit and the lights of the town are innumerous, the town lights can never overshadow the beauty of the sky. Sexton’s tone is quite somber here and she probably finds her own existence meaningless and she feels, if she has to perish than it should be as graceful and as glorious as the sky light or any other natural phenomenon such as sunshine.

The collection Live or Die brings out poems like ‘Wanting To Die’, one of the earliest poems which was published in the award winning collection, Live or Die in the year 1966. ‘Wanting To Die’, written in free style with each stanza having three lines, a
tercet. “The poem is written in a conversational manner. Sexton’s conversations with
God reveal that suicide for her is like an intense yearning which can neither be
declared nor defined. This makes this poem a literary suicide note from the perspective
of many critics. Some of them feel that Sexton addresses this poem to her sympathetic
listeners to whom she wants to explain the reasons of such irresistible thoughts”
(Long 39) Impact of Freud’s theory of death-drive which refers to having a tendency
to go from organic to inorganic state for a human can be established here.

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

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have taken on his craft, his magic.

In the poem she talks about number of suicide attempts made by her and the
simplicity of the act for her. The choice of words used by Sexton shows that to her it
was ‘so simple’. She calls it ‘heavy and thoughtful’. It was not something impulsive
but she had many times carefully and consciously thought about it before putting
into action. The choice of words used, to write the poem shows that the poet was
somewhat addicted to this behavior and the thought process where she considered
suicide to be simple, and part of winning of battle of life.

‘To empty my breath from its bad prison.’

Through this poem Sexton in a way has given voice to many people’s wish, which at
some point of time have surfaced in the form of a wish to commit suicide. The title of
the poem is so catchy that everyone wants to know how the poet feels about it and
they want to understand how without self-pity, it is possible to analyze the reasons
which make a person choose to end his life rather than living it to the fullest.

Suicides have already betrayed the body.
Still-born, they don’t always die,
but dazzled, they can’t forget a drug so sweet
that even children would look on and smile.’
To thrust all that life under your tongue!—
that, all by itself, becomes a passion. ‘
Sexton has used a lot of similes and metaphors in this particular poem. ‘To thrust all that life under your tongue!’ Anne Sexton metaphorically explains this line saying that eventually suicide becomes a passion or a habit just like popping of a pill under ones tongue. Towards the end of the poem, Sexton gives an impression to the readers that suicide is something which makes an individual master of his fate. He finds himself incapable of living his life as per his wish and with committing suicide he feels empowered to choose to die as per his likes and dislikes. Although, this idea stands contradictory to Sexton’s own expression, as in the beginning of the poem she says that the idea of dying brings a person under a kind of a spell. One is, as if he is being drugged. One succumbs totally to the desire of taking away one’s own life and the reasons appear to be most convincing. According to Sexton it is not the reason which drives a man towards suicide then but it is the tools which he uses at this time.

At times, Sexton achieved moments of transcendence where she could overcome her condition and proclaims:

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

But this kind of vision was not often granted to Sexton as she was not a romantic poet and could not see romanticism in the drab events and consequences of day to day life. Anne Sexton on the contrary chose to sink in the dirt of depression and benumbment, into tranquilized tranquility. She chose to be drugged into something quite different from the peace of mind envisioned by Wordsworth. In poetry ‘Lullaby’ from To Bedlam and Part Way Back she writes;

My sleeping pill is white.
It is a splendid pearl;
It floats me out of myself,
My stung skin as alien
as a loose bolt of cloth.
I will ignore the bed.
I am linen on shelf.

Passivity is hutch in her, completely. The other face of passivity is hysteria, a short-circuiting caused by emotional overloading. Sexton’s creativity gift after the four books produced increasingly strange fruit of stock, either stunted or weedy never fully
matured. In a sense there was a clinical inevitability to it all. Trying to express her
once she wrote to her friend Ruth;

My Friend, my friend, I was born
doing reference work in sin, and born
confessing it. This is what poems are:
with mercy
for the greedy,
they are the tongue’s wrangle,
the world’s potage, the rat’s star

Another remarkable poem from the same collection *Live or Die* is ‘Flee on Your
Donkey’. The poem which was published in the Pulitzer awarded collection of *Live
or Die*. By this time the poet Anne Sexton, had taken many trips to the mental home
and had received many sessions from various therapists. During an interview, Sexton
had once admitted that the facts that she has talked about in her poem were not
realized by her in their total ugliness and she had hidden them. Probably, she knew
very well that the veracity regarding her own statements was not impeccable.
‘Flee on Your Donkey’, deals with depressive thoughts with themes such as insanity,
suicide, marital discord and incest, hidden from the society. The opening lines of the
poems convey the depressing note of the authors tone. She seems to be unsure of her
own decisions.

Because there was no other place
to flee to,
I came back to the scene of the disordered senses,
came back last night at midnight,
arriving in the thick June night
without luggage or defenses

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the readers of Anne Sexton’s poetry would
certainly feel the pain of a person who treats himself like a homeless. Diana
Middlebrook in the biography of Anne Sexton writes “Despite of having a big family
Anne Sexton was a lonely soul. During one of the therapy sessions one of her
Psychologists had understood that Kayo Sexton was the only factor in Sexton’s life
which provided her stability. With his extensive business tours, Sexton became more
and more lonely and depressive. Kayo was the life force of hers and in his absence;
she started looking for happiness outside her home and marriage which did her more
harm than anything else. She was constantly looking for the final escape from her life
‘a place to flee to’”. (156)

Everyone has left me
except my muse,
that good nurse.
She stays in my hand,
a mild white mouse
As per a recording of an interview recorded by Diana Middlebrook in Anne Sexton’s
biography, Sexton has stated “Poetry led me by the hand out of madness. I am hoping
I can show others that route.” This statement was holding lot of importance as it states
that for Anne Sexton, poetry was a very effective medicine for her ailments and she
desired to share this precious medicine with others who were in need of it.

Six years of such small preoccupations!
Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!
O my hunger! My hunger!
I could have gone around the world twice
or had new children - all boys.
It was a long trip with little days in it
and no new places.
Anne Sexton knew very well that the peace of her mind could be safeguarded only by
herself and the control of her destiny was in her own hands. Once in November 1958,
she wrote to W.D Snodgrass about her first kissing experience. “Then at thirteen I
kissed a boy (not very well but happily) and I was so pleased with my womanhood
that I told Nana That I was kissed and she went mad. I tell you this not to confess but
to illuminate. At thirteen I was blameful and struck, at thirty I am not blameful”. (Middlebrook 221)

Like Oedipus I am losing my sight.
Like Judas I have done my wrong.
Their punishment is over;
The shame and disgrace of it
Are all used up.
But as for me,
Look into my face
And you will that crimes dropped upon me
As from a high building
And although I cannot speak of them
Or explain the degrading details
I have remembered much
About Judas
About Judas, the old and the famous
That you overlooked
Anne Sexton’s self respect was in shambles many a times but she kept on gathering it up always and pulling herself up each time. Sexton was exposed to the delving and deductions of psychiatric scrutiny quite often. Her persona was interpreted by different people in different way, without even making an effort to know the real Anne Sexton. Consequently, figure of death became quite prominent in her poetry as an ultimate source of escape. A critic Margaret Honton, commented that Anne Sexton could never get over with the death of her childhood ever. Sexton believed, she had been robbed of a seemingly happy childhood and she resents this fact. So often in her view of herself as a child she goes beyond the bounds of belief and fact placing herself in a Gretel or Cinderella role and complaining about the ill treatment endured. For long six years Anne Sexton went on making trips to the mental asylum in a hope that she would ultimately come out of her state of hopelessness. She spent time observing people around her. She knew she was different. She was a seductress. Women try to bank on the sexual energy, when they are bereft of the emotional support from someone close to them, someone they love. May be this was exactly what Sexton desired from Kayo and when she could not get the attention and love she demanded, she tried to look for that flawless and unconditional love outside her marriage. She had wild passionate affairs with many men and at least one woman, making little efforts to conceal them from her husband. When she had an affair with her own therapist, Kayo considered him as a third party and meddlesome. When the therapist tried to convince Anne Sexton to leave Kayo, it was the most disastrous thing because nobody had ever known where this could lead Sexton to. She was involved with the third therapist, when she finally left Kayo. Their relationship started eroding long back actually before it finally ended. Years later, she told Linda, her daughter that she believed that the only way to transcend hurt is to tell it all and tell it honestly. This explains why Anne Sexton found solace in writing poetry. She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction, at a time when none of these were treated as proper topics for poetry. Maxine Kumin noted in the foreword to Sexton’s Complete Poems: “If it is true that she attracted the worshipful attention of a cult group pruriently interested in her suicidal impulses, her psychotic breakdowns, her frequent hospitalizations, it must
equally be acknowledged that her very frankness succored many who clung to her poems as to the Holy Grail.” (Middlebrook 318)

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

Eventually Anne Sexton realized the futility of all the sexual engagements. With the death of her parents, she was heavily dejected with life and lost all confidence on life. Slowly and gradually she realized that everything was ephemeral and she could hold to nothing forever not even her lunacy for that matter. Finally, she found the best way was to escape from the world we all live in. That was the end of all the problems.

Anne, Anne,
flee on your donkey,
flee this sad hotel,
ride out on some hairy beast,
gallop backward pressing your buttocks to his withers,
sit to his clumsy gait somehow.
Ride out any old way you please!

Once, during a lecture session with her students at Colgate University, Sexton shared the manuscript of this poem with them and revealed her desire to flee not only from her life but also from her madness. She agreed that the poem was self-indulgent, it persistently lament over women confinement within their lives.

The last lines once again emphasize on her urge to get away from this world. The Live or Die poems explore Sexton’s swaying between her passion to embrace death and life and her maternal responsibilities. In Anne Sexton’s urges, her suicidal tendencies became much stronger every time. She wanted to flee from the world she had known, she wants to escape from there. The feeling that she is done with everything is quite strongly put in, in her poems by Sexton.

Anne Sexton’s Love Poems do not resemble the other verses with same name. In fact, at times the poet is criticized for being lover of the physical attributes, sex and flesh, than anything else. ‘In Celebration of My Uterus’ is a poem of its own kind in many ways. It celebrates the female body like nobody ever did it before. Sexton as a poet could dare to talk about a subject which was never discussed openly. She not only
talked about the female body but also the various processes related to it and brought out creativity with procreativity. The poem is included in the collection of *Love poems* and it celebrates the woman’s love for her valued organs. The poem also brings out the fact that woman underestimates her potential and does not realize the true value of her body and her female organs, until she faces some kind of crisis related to them. Uterus is the only organ, unique in the female’s body, which has no anatomically similar organ in males hence it, serves the symbol of feminine gender identity. Meaning without this organ a woman cannot be called a female.

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

Sexton begins this remarkable poem with personifying the womb/uterus as a living being and alienates herself with the doctor’s decision of removing of the organ from her body through hysterectomy on account of sickness and malfunctioning. Right from the beginning Sexton doesn’t agree with medical associates’ theory, of her womb dying. She could see it as a very much healthy individual and not just a small organ.

With the uterus personified, Sexton gives a new dimension to it and calls it to be the soul and the central figure of a woman. It is the reason to celebration in a woman’s life. The poet says hello to the soil of fields and symbolically she wants to convey the fertility power the uterus. According to Sexton, its potential is not to be challenged and it is not something which would be determined by professional doctors. Sexton wants to keep the right to making decision, reserved to her and she decided not to part with an integral part of her existence. Parting with such an organ is like parting with the poet’s own female identity. Sexton emphasizes that the uterus is not merely what it seems to be to everyone but it is a medium to connect with the nature. According to
Margaret Honton, “It gives an opportunity to every woman be a part of the Universe’s creation” (211) It is not just physical but somewhat spiritual too.

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you.

Through this poem, Sexton stands for the female solidarity. She connects woman to woman, across the world making them aware that even if they are different from each other in many ways, they all have one thing in common and that is the presence of their uterus which connects them in oneness.

Many women are singing together of this:
in the middle of Wyoming and one is
anywhere and some are everywhere and all
seem to be singing, although some can not
sing a note.

Anne Sexton implores that a woman does not depend on their male counterparts to acknowledge their identity and their happiness. Sexton believes that every cell in the woman’s uterus is alive and the school of thought which believes that the uterus cells get their life only once they are fused with the male’s cell, are not only incorrect but ignorant of the female’s existence and potential too.

Each cell has a life.
There is enough here to please a nation.
It is enough that the populace owns these goods.

This poem brings out Sexton’s quality of unifying the self and the body. She doesn’t advocate for their alienation and fragmentation but she recognizes and urges all women to recognize their inner voice.

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
let me sing
for the supper,
for the kissing,
for the correct
yes.
This poem marks the celebration and acceptance of women’s monthly ovulation as the inevitable continuation of the cycle, until it is fertilized. This treatment is model in itself and it highlighted the poet’s sense of integrity with womanhood.

‘In Celebration of My Uterus’ is a poem which puts Anne Sexton in the ‘Female’ category as per Elaine Showalter’s theory of ‘Gynocriticism’. The poem marks the self-discovery of womanhood in the poet. She rejects the two forms of dependency on male counterparts - imitation and protest, in writing poems and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature. Critic Pam Morris in her book edited by E. Richard says, “Sexton certainly does not yearn for a separation of the female tradition from male tradition by writing this poem but she indirectly states that women must work both inside and outside the male tradition simultaneously. Sexton tried to focus on newly visible world of female culture knowingly or unknowingly. She wrote about such topics to understand the specificity of women’s writing not as a product of sexism but as a fundamental aspect of female reality”.(543) From her poems one can make out that Anne Sexton’s sensibility are female, stem from womanhood. As a woman, she picks apart the seamier parts of women’s biological destiny and possibilities. She talks about abortion and menstruation and does not spare either. Nearing a hysterectomy she wrote ‘In Celebration of My Uterus’ and she could grasp some hints of what was to become second wave of feminism. The description she dashes off to Erika Jong in one of her letter of herself as ‘the woman of the poems’, ‘the woman of the kitchen’, ‘the woman of the private hungers’, support this feministic aspect further. It also reflects that a lot of conflicting directions pull her apart and her mind were not always her own and furthermore, emotionally she could not stand alone.

Another brilliant poem from the Love Poems collection ‘The Kiss’ makes Anne Sexton celebrate a woman’s desire and need to be loved by a man in her another poem ‘The Kiss’. Sexton felt that she had come across a lot in her small span of life. “She yearned for true love like any other woman. Brutal truths of a married life tore her apart. Sexton had to stay away from her husband Kayo when he was away on his business trips. She could not carry the domestic burden and responsibilities of two small girls all on her own. She felt that her life had tremendously changed in between the domestic, medical and her personal needs. Sexton had lot of affairs in order to fill
up the void created by the circumstances in her life. She had stint of affair with her fellow scholars while learning to write poetry at conferences and seminars, she attended and also with a number of therapists she consulted for psychiatric help”. (Clark 69)

Poem, ‘The Kiss’ portrays Sexton’s intense desire to be loved and wanted by her man. The poem is full of passionate feelings. Most probably it describes the poet’s feelings, she experienced while being involved in a passionate affair with psychiatrist Dr. Zweizung. Sexton gives lot of importance to how revived she feels, when she experiences a very intimate kissing with her beloved. All this time, in the absence of such a warmth she felt as if she was not alive and with just one passionate French kiss, she felt as if she has a new flavor in her life and she has a reason to love her life. Through this poem, Sexton has expressed not only her own feeling but she has represented the entire woman community who comes to life with warm and affectionate touch of their man. Until this time, she was dull and susceptible to low moments and used to break down very frequently. But the new affair has revived her and brought freshness of spring season in her life. She understands the significance of loving touch in her life all the more now.

Before today my body was useless.

Now it’s tearing at its square corners.

It's tearing old Mary's garments off, knot by knot

and see -- Now it's shot full of these electric bolts.

Zing! A resurrection

The kind of importance given to her affair with her boyfriend can be clearly seen as Sexton calls it a resurrection. Using a Biblical allusion she emphasized on Jesus’ coming back to his life after he was crucified on holy Easter. Similarly after a long period of lifelessness, exploitation and mental and physical helplessness, Sexton came back to her life only after her lover’s kiss and physical contact. All this time she had felt as if she was a living dead who was deprived at emotional and physical levels.

This poem gives us an example of Anne Sexton’s beautiful craftsmanship for portraying the psychological side of a woman.

My nerves are turned on. I hear them like musical instruments. Where there was silence

the drums, the strings are incurably playing. You did this.
Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped into fire
Sexton compares herself with a wooden boat which is useless in the absence of water to float. With the use of such powerful images Sexton showed the void space and her aimless life and the affair in her life were like painting of the wooden boards to renew them. It brought excitement once back in her dull life and she did not feel that she was merely a wooden board. She has been painted in the colors of life and was in love once again. Earlier, there was a dead silence in her life which was replaced by the music of love life because of one person. The poet gives the credit of bringing this positive change in her life to her lover. She calls her lover the composer who has stepped in for the fire present in human body, where fire is the symbol of the presence of sexual urge/energy which would eventually pave the path for creation. Sexton seems to be completely contended by her relationship with her beau. She seems to have got for what she had been craving all this time in her life. She also brought out the concept of ultimate soul-mate with her new lover.

Through this poem, Sexton has given implicit importance to the male presence in a women’s life. She has sketched not only her own painful and incomplete life in absence of her husband but also figured out what a male touch means in a woman’s life. It was only she who could come out with such an audacity and bring out the significance of love, emotions and physical intimacy with the person whom a woman loves. The male factor, to some extent, represented the man a helmsman of a woman’s ship. Although, the poem has shades of conventional thought process, it also highlights the woman’s individuality and her happiness in making her own choices concerning all her matters.