CHAPTER- IV

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN THE LATER POEMS

The collection of poems named *Transformations* was the fourth volume and was published in the year 1971. According to Lauter, *Transformations* marked the shift of focus from personal to transpersonal or cultural aspect in Sexton’s poetry. Sexton’s creative stint was well reflected by seventeen long poems of *Transformations*. These poems were a departure from her usual style, which is often thought of as dark, brutal, even suicidal and without humour. “Sexton seemed to forsake her confessional style and adopt, if unconsciously, the precept of ‘writing as re-vision’ formulated by Adrienne Rich in her now canonical and well-known essay. She re-writes sixteen tales from the Brothers Grimm, ‘told in a wisecracking Americanese that simultaneously modernizes and desentimentalizes them”. (Ostriker 232). All based on the fairy tales of brothers Grimm. The tales such as- Snow white, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, the Frog Prince, Briar Rose, Hansel and Gretel, and others gave Sexton’s poetry a structure and a rich medium for her colorful imagery, which allowed her characters wit, and brought out the best of her intelligence into words. The tales provided Sexton’s poems a beginning, middle and an ending.

If someone asks what fairy tales are? To define the fairy tales, we can say that the stories about fairies, generally legends about people with diminutive size believing to posses supernatural and magical powers, having great influence either good or evil over the affairs of the man. The fairy tales were recorded since 1750 and the “fairy-stories” were about the adventures of men in the perilous realm or upon its shadowy marches. In contrast, Young in his book writes that Sexton’s poetry undermines the fairy tales with deadly address and a merciless employment of city American idioms. Occasionally vulgar, often brilliant, nearly always hilarious, to one’s cruel mind! She is a Thurber; the elegant master-spook of the graphic and English arts a true believer. His versions of Grimm or Anderson, however salty, set out to rival the originals, his ear was in thrall to Lewis Carroll and his wit, in this area was less clinical than linguistic. Anne Sexton is set out to get the brothers Grimm armed with illuminations supplied by Freud but as much by the wised-up modern experience of having been victimized by grand- mother and recaptured by the pragmatic test. In such
endeavours, tone is everything. Andrew Lang in his essay says “It is true that the plea in his fairy tales was not addressed to children but to parents and guardians. It is parents and guardians who have classified fairy-stories as Juvenilia. And this is a small sample of the falsification of values that they exhibit in their lives. First of all: if written with art, the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which offers a peculiar degree or mode, of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, all things of which children have, as a rule, less need than older people. So, it is the grown-ups that need to learn more from the fairy tales rather than the young ones” (Toliden 113)

In Transformations following the suit of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, Sexton takes the garb of a folklorist. Her personal evolutions become more and more frenetic and directionless by the publication of this collection. In the introductory poem of the Transformations “The Gold Key” Sexton sets the tone by telling the readers that ‘the speaker is a ‘middle-aged witch, me’ (223) with this Sexton forces the readers to acknowledge the possibilities of difference in points of views from the ones the reader so readily accepted when he was being narrated the tales as a child. In fact Sexton’s Transformations introduced a virtual contrast of a middle-aged witch to the young virgin with whom we are accustomed to identify in fairy tale reading. Sexton gives her readers the liberty to explore and enjoy the readership. Her poems do not bend or reshape the original, They simply “discover and release elements already implicit in these stories”(Hruschka 45) enlarging and pronouncing that which already exists, holding it up to scrutiny, and allowing for transformation to take place not in the fairy tale itself, but in how we view it.

Anne Sexton’s narrator in her poems is a modern ‘middle –aged witch’ who proclaims her collection of poems to be a book of odd tales. Odd because, she keeps plots of the Grimm tales but tells them in a contemporary vernacular and with popular allusions. The result is a synthesis of myth and modernity which brings a fresh outlook at powerful and cultural documents through which children’s imaginations are shaped. Through the similes, prologues, epilogues and innumerous metaphors, used by Anne Sexton in Transformations, she not only startled the readers but also conveyed messages both personal and societal which could be quite heavy for the readers. Through these poems Sexton stood up against the meek portrayal of the woman in the fairy stories which every child is told in his childhood. Similar to
Sexton’s style of confessional poetry, the cause and effect of her *Transformations* reveal much about the poet. Sexton wanted to show the two different sides that people can have. The good stories the people have and the bad stories they have. She is paralleling the fairy tales to real life. Sexton retold the stories in her own style, contrasting the rosy images of human happiness with that of decay and despair of everyday life. She conveys this message with a sadistic tone and modern language, while drawing upon the hardships of American culture. As a child Anne Sexton came across parents who were busy with socializing and alcoholism and she suffered neglect and verbal abusive nature of her parents. Her marriage with Kayo became unstable later on and Anne was continually engaged in extra-marital affairs. The poems she wrote in this collection come alive in her mind as real life incidents and characters. She uses harsh satires and dark humor to bring out the fact that real life is far away from the conventional happy ending of the fairy-tales. She explores topics such as romantic love, motherhood and relationships between the sexes through her version of the conventional tales also conveys that happy endings are not a must for the tales.

*Transformations*, speaks about the feminism in the Anne Sexton’s poetry. According to a common feminist belief, many of the women accused of being witches in the past, were actually pioneers of the feminist movement. They were women rebelling against the male-oriented society. As the influence of those “witches” grew, the patriarchal society so prevalent at the time came to fear them. The steps it took to negate their growing influences contributed to what might be considered virtual witch hunts. Shiho Fukuda, in his research work writes “It is not certain whether or not Sexton had already been influenced by the feminist theory concerning witches when writing *Transformations*. But in consideration of the feminist discourse that started to spread throughout America in the Sixties, it is no wonder that the devil may-care attitude displayed by Sexton’s middle-aged witch attracted such tremendous attention when the book was published. In order to experiment with a new style of writing, Sexton made a transition from traditional to a somewhat feminist manner of writing which became a subject of criticism later. In fact, Anne Sexton viewed and studied her surroundings of her times and found that America then was under the influence of the patriarchal society on one end and under the feminist movement at the other.
The inspiration to rewrite the Brother Grimm’s stories her way came to Anne Sexton from her daughter Linda. As a mother, she became so curious about her daughter’s liking for fairy tales that she asked and noted down her favourite ones. When queried about that incident later in her life, Sexton’s daughter, Linda Gray Sexton in an interview recorded in ‘No Evil Star’ said that her mother “wrote down a list of the titles of Grimm tales with black felt pen on a paper napkin” (298). Concerning the background to this, Sexton commented in an interview that she only perceived “some unconscious message that she had something to say” while reading her daughter’s original Grimm fairy tales (144). This suggests that what she wrote in Transformations may have been based on model stories that were selected at random and based solely on the impressions they had made on her daughter’s psyche. In consideration of this, it may be well noted that there must be another reason for the poet’s inconsistency as a woman writer in Transformations. “Within the pages of that new paradigm are stark examinations of the dark side of life for females in a patriarchal society along with cynical comments on their helplessness. 

Transformations portray many aspects of being a woman, and in particular the tormented struggle with her own demons that formed the script for Anne Sexton’s life and the key to her death.

In Snow white and the seven dwarfs, ‘The Grimm Brother’s tale, Snow White and the seven dwarfs traditionally tells the story of a girl who lives with her step mother and is ill treated by her. She suffers because of her step mother’s jealousy and becomes a prey to her foul play. Snow-White represents the ‘good woman’, woman who is naive, innocent and submissive, as she does not revolt against her step-mother’s incorrect behavior. Snow-White’s step mother is the representation of ‘happily ever after’ state as she is both queen and “the only beauty of the land” (Sexton 225), the ultimate, desirable, fate of the typical fairy tale heroine. Technically, the rivalry in the tale of Snow-White is between the royal bride that is and the royal bride that is to be. The choice made by the Snow-White to quietly work in the dwarf’s home represents the society’s expectant behavior of woman who is meek and submissive and a mute worker. Snow-White’s beauty must not surpass the beauty of her step-mom and thus she is not supposed to be a threat to the state of ‘happily ever after’.

The story of the snow-white and seven dwarfs originally goes like this: After her mother’s death Snow-white’s father remarries and the girl is bereft of her father’s as
well as her mother’s love. She is reduced to a domestic help by her step mother. The step mother is obsessed with her own beauty and she asks the magic mirror if she has any other competitor in beauty and for many years the mirror confirms that Snow-White’s step mother is the most beautiful woman. Everything changes when one day the mirrors informs the queen that it was Snow-White who was more beautiful women than her. Her mother could not accept this fact and hence, she ordered a huntsman to get rid of her by killing her. Seeing a beautiful, innocent girl, the huntsman fails to comply with whatever he has been told and he fakes the killing of Snow-White. Sometime later the jealous queen comes to know about this fact and she becomes angry and desperately desires to end her step-daughter’s life. In the mean on the other side, the Snow-White has started living with the seven dwarfs who revives her thrice after she was almost killed by the jealous queen. But the last time even the dwarfs were unable to bring the Snow-White to life and later she is brought back to life by a prince who requests the dwarf to allow him to take the beautiful girl even if she was unconscious. The touch of the prince brings Snow-White to life once again and he marries her and they live happily after.

Sexton, in her version of the Snow-White and the Dwarfs brings out a contrast to the traditional tale. She draws a parallel between the step-mother who represents the evil and the Snow-White who stands for innocence. The end where the Snow-White becomes the mighty and powerful after becoming the queen and the erstwhile queen is no more important and her standing is reduced to a dust mouse under the bed, here the story is transformed. It is no longer the story of a wicked stepmother’s cruel treatment to an innocent child rather, it is one of the conflicting interests in which new beauty and new power rises to take the position of the old.

Sexton begins her fairy tale saying that for people a woman’s virginity is a matter of great importance and they expect women to be epitome of righteousness like Virgin Mary. Sexton satirically states, when in the present time they are not able to find such women who could match Virgin Mary, people simply turn their back to this and they prefer to remain in the illusion that Virgin Mary still exist. They love the very idea of having such idealized woman. As Kumin says, “Anne’s response to rejection was to transform herself into a flamboyant and provocative woman. The timid child had become a brilliant exhibitionist.”(Sexton VIII)
No matter what life you lead
the virgin is a lovely number:
She is unsoiled.
She is as white as a bonefish.

Sexton addresses her Snow-White as a ‘thing’ and compares her with various objects.
She calls her cheeks as fragile and makes the following comparisons. Cheeks with cigarette paper, arms and legs made of limoges, and lips like Vin Du Rhone. Rolling her china-blue doll eyes is being compared to a doll, the mechanical motion of the eyes that open and closes like a doll shows her lifeless, without a mind of her own.
She does as she is told, like a child controlling the opening and closing of its dolls eyes. She is no more important than a dust mouse under the bed.

Snow White, the dumb bunny,
opened the door
and she bit into a poison apple
and fell down for the final time.

The rebel in Sexton calls Snow White ‘unsoiled’ and ‘as white as a bonefish, still she is a ‘dumb bunny, who despite of being warned by the seven dwarfs, accepts what she is given by her disguised step-mother. The Women in the then America were dumb and not thought of as intelligent either. Snow-White continues to open the door to the evil stepmother and fall for her tricks, even though the dwarves warned her many times, and one would think that she would learn from her past mistakes “once more the queen dressed in rags and once more Snow-White opened the door”. (Sexton 7)
Sexton expresses her resentment calling the Snow-White a ‘dumb bunny’, and compared her to an animal because of her lack of intelligence.
Sexton as a rebel further commented sardonically regarding the beauty, vanity and dependence of women on men. Beauty is very important to the female antagonists in fairytales. Beauty is that tool through which are the lead characters be it Cinderella, Snow-White and Sleeping Beauty each find their prince. Had they were not beautiful, they wouldn’t have been noticed by the princes. Snow-White is beautiful and it is her beauty which leads her into trouble as her stepmother cannot bear someone to be more beautiful than she is “Suddenly, the mirror replied, Queen, you are full fair, ‘tis true, but Snow-White is fairer than you…So she condemned Snow White to be hacked to death”(Sexton 5). At the end of the seventh stanza, she is said to ‘lay still as a gold piece’. Here, she is compared to a valuable object- she is valuable only because of her
beauty and alleged purity, and because she has no will of her own. When she died, the
dwarves ‘made her a glass coffin and set it upon the seventh mountain so that all who
passed by could peek in upon her beauty’. This shows that even in death, she is only
something to look upon and be admired.

Next very important aspect highlighted is the theme of vanity. Snow-White’s
stepmother ‘would hear of no beauty surpassing her own’, which becomes the reason
to kill Snow-White. When the mirror used to tell her that she was ‘the fairest of us
all’, ‘her ego was deeply hurt. Here, Sexton compares pride and vanity to poison. She
believed that these vices destroy a person. Probably in her personal life too, Anne
Sexton had to face a lot of opposition pumped up by the egoism of her family
members and to a large extent it affected the psyche of Sexton and hence, her frequent
bouts of depressions and her visits to mental hospitals were justified.

However, Snow-White’s step mother is not the only character overcome with vanity.
In the last four lines of the poem, ‘Snow-White held court, rolling her china-blue doll
eyes open and shut and sometimes referring to her mirror as women do’. This
indicates the cycle renewing- Snow White will soon become like the evil queen,
consumed with vanity. Here, Sexton is saying that in these fairytales, the ‘happily
ever after’ is not realistic. She attempts to illustrate that Grimm’s fairytales have
taught children certain wrong things, by highlighting that beauty is not the only trait a
woman should have, and that it can lead to vanity as the evil queen and Snow-White
show. The queen’s vanity is so overpowering over her life that when one day her
mirror replies to her frequently asked question ‘queen, you are full fair, ‘tis true, but
Snow-White is fairer than you’, she decides to get Snow-White killed to death. ‘Now
the queen saw brown spots on her hand and four whiskers over her lip so, she
condemned Snow-White to be hacked to death’. Her vanity and pride have ‘poisoned’
her mind so much that she will go to extreme lengths to ensure that she remains ‘the
fairest of them all’. Her jealousy and narcissistic tendencies draw her to murderous
ways. She asks the hunter to ‘bring her, her heart’ so that she can ‘salt it and eat it’.
When she is bought the heart, she ‘chewed it up like a cube steak’, stating ‘now I am
fairest’. She shows no sympathy for the apparent death of her step-daughter, even
though she brought it about, and even makes a point of congratulating herself that
once more, she was the most beautiful in the land.

Through the character of the evil queen, Sexton shows that vanity is a sin, and the
way in which it can affect somebody. Although she is retelling a fairytale, she does so
in a way that explicitly shows her own point of view. Her sarcastic tone when referring to the evil stepmother (and throughout the poem in general) illustrates her feelings towards the character’s portrayal. These fairytales were written by men, and men at this time did not think of women as their intelligent equals, more as beautiful creatures to be admired and have their children; almost like pets. As they believed a woman’s sole attribute should be her beauty, this is how women were portrayed in their work. Sexton, being a woman, knows this to be false and unfair, and her snarky tone throughout the retelling of the story highlights this. She is saying that not all women are solely concerned about their looks, and they should not be judged by their appearance, but what is actually inside.

Her sarcastic tone throughout ‘Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves’ shows her belief that the portrayal of characters in these fairytales is unfair and unjust, and teaches children that men should be strong, brave and intelligent, whereas women should simply be beautiful and submissive. Sexton suggests she is only there to look pretty— to be a trophy wife to the prince and in doing so ridicules the ‘happily ever after’ endings acquired by such fairytales. The ‘as women do’ is extremely sarcastic. Sexton is saying that this may be the way women are presented in fairytales, but it is not an accurate representation of women. Not every woman is obsessed with their looks. Snow-White may be beautiful, but she does not use her intellect. She does what she is told, and is greatly influenced by others. Also, her life is incomplete without the prince, and she would be dead if not for the mercy of the hunter, or the help of the dwarves. Sexton tries to illustrate through her mocking tone, the untrue notion that women need men to protect and look after them, and woman’s happiness depends on their presence. Snow-White becomes a victim to the male-oriented division of labor, by agreeing upon to the subtle power of those seemingly gentle seven dwarfs to “keep house”. Anne Sexton using a metaphoric expression calls Snow-White high spirited like a ‘soda pop’ or ‘Orphan Annie’ who accepts to listen to the ‘seven fathers like ‘small czars’. The irony projected by Sexton in the end of the poem is that once Snow-White is redeemed from all miseries and gets married, she follows the same idea that women’s priority is her beauty and nothing else. She must take utmost care of her looks and hence, she keeps a mirror close to her always. Some believe that this idea itself is a representation of patriarchal system which falters the growth of women. As Hall points out, Sexton “deflates characters pretensions, undercuts most expectations held by readers of Grimm, and rebuilds in their place her own view of
things” (118). Snow White is no longer the heroine who, after many trials, achieves her dream, but rather an empty-headed virgin who is beautiful and vain and little more. The dwarves, in comparison, become authoritatively oppressive as they take in Snow-White, making her their housekeeper and ultimately viewing her as a possession. With these twists, Sexton criticizes the values of patriarchal society by revealing the falsity of the eternal feminine and angelic virgin. She brings attention to the subjugation of women while at the same time revealing the role women have played in perpetuating the stereotypes of patriarchal society. According to Wolfgang Mieder, the Grimm brothers’ story of Snow-White is a “tale of narcissism, beauty, jealousy, competition, temptation and eventually maturation. All of these descriptions are true of Sexton’s poem except the latter; no character, least of all Snow-White, matures by the end of the poem. As far as intelligence and common sense goes, she is still that thoughtless doll she was at the beginning of the tale. In fact, a man has rescued her from every trial: the hunter from the original death sentence, the dwarves from the disguised stepmother’s trickery and the prince from the final trickery of the apple. Snow-White appears satisfied to remain the beautiful, vacuous virgin that she has always been. The innocence expected of a virginal beauty, however, seems to have been corrupted as Sexton’s Snow-White sits upon her throne, ‘rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut / and sometimes referring to her mirror’ as she observes the death of her stepmother. While poetically just, the stepmother’s death at the wedding feast is torturous, especially as she is made to dance at the wedding feast by ‘red-hot iron shoes’ transforming her death into a form of entertainment. Throughout this macabre spectacle, Snow-White does nothing but refer to her mirror, as was the habit of her stepmother. Carol Leventen conveys this development nicely: ‘her future is her (step) mother’s past’ Snow-White is no longer the angelic virgin, but rather a perversely vain and empty-headed girl who is following in the footsteps of her stepmother”. (Mieder 50-162)

In Sexton’s version of ‘Cinderella’ Anne Sexton sarcastically emphasizes that all the stories are mythical and unrealistic. The concept of ‘happily ever after’ that the society chases, does not actually exist. Through the poetry, Sexton projected that fairy tales are not real and they do not exist in the real world. No matter how hard one tries to find a world of fantasy, it will never exist. This is a dream world and society goes after this illusion without knowing that will never come true. Anne Sexton, starts the
poem sarcastically hinting about the gloomy fate that awaits women in the patriarchal society saying ‘You always read…’ insisting on the fact that the current society brain wash their children saying that everything in life is always fine, when in reality, it is not always great and happy. “Anne Sexton insists that ‘trickery and deceit happens more often than the Cinderella story’. People are always trying to get revenge at other people” (Middlebrook 201)

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)

Sexton feels that the concept of ‘happily ever after’ is completely impossible in real life. Real life stands for discussions, arguments, calculations, give and take principle, deprivation, continuous fighting the hardships and facing the harsh realities, dealing with people who think differently and adjusting with them to maintain peace in one’s life. But still everyone in his childhood is told stories of the fairy world, a world which actually does not exist. It is something which could be preserved in museums or better to say a place which has nothing to do with the present time and the true world.

Anne Sexton did not appreciate the way all the fairy tales were designed. She strongly believed that we grow up listening to these fairy tales and we believe that the fairer sex is a meek, delicate and needs support of the man at every juncture of her life. Since childhood, we directly or indirectly communicate to our children that woman cannot stand alone and needs emotional as well as physical support of man. Our society raises their boys making them believe that they are physically stronger and master of much more caliber and talent than women. Anne Sexton has highlighted this observation which she has made in her poem Snow-White and the seven dwarfs. She communicates her deep pain, expresses her strong rejection to the fairy tales which always projected that fair sex is inferior to men. She calls women as ‘things’ and
highlights her pain on being treated as inanimate and lifeless. Sexton’s use of metaphors and similes to bring-out her thoughts is exquisite.

Roisin Sheerin suggests that “Cinderella’s character is so elastic that she has been reinvented by so many different cultures that it is hardly surprising to find that she is sometimes cruel and vindictive, at other times compassionate and kind and agrees, in spirit, with Jane Yolen’s assessment that ‘the shrewd, resourceful heroine of folktales from earlier centuries has been supplanted by a passive princess’ waiting for Prince Charming to rescue her” (42)

In another interpretation by the critics it is said that in her version of Cinderella, Sexton has trivialized the prince in her poetry which otherwise as per the patriarchal society is to be projected as a decent husband and father. Sexton on the contrary, compared the venue of prince’s ball to a ‘marriage market’ with the women in attendance being exchanged as if they were profitable products. The prince frantically seeks the hand of Cinderella “for keeps” for fear that such an excellent commodity will otherwise be snatched away by a competitor. The prince seems to be so self-centered that he regards his future bride as simply a commodity indicates, he lacks not only the ability to offer sincere love but also the thoughtful consideration necessary to understand and preserve her dignity. Despite of this, Cinderella and her step sisters go on admiring him because he is a royal person. Sexton satirically mentioned the confusion and yearning of women for a successful marriage by adhering and following the concepts of Patriarchy, without even questioning once. Although, she has also maintained the originality of the Grimm tale by keeping the moral lesson, that virtue is always rewarded.

Once
the wife of a rich man was on her deathbed
and she said to her daughter Cinderella:
Be devout. Be good . . .
Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,

“Sexton’s Cinderella is a subdued woman, who does not complaint for anything in life. She does not even express her love for her prince charming and instead patiently waits for him to discover her and redeem her. Sexton is consistent with her
overarching conception of her characters as commodities”. (Leventon 140) this gives an insight into the author’s personal belief as well. Comparison of Cinderella with the American singer Al Jolson tells a tale too. This popular White American singer, comedian and actor appeared in blackface often in his performances to portray the power of Whites over blacks in American society of the early nineteenth century. By comparing Cinderella to Al Jolson, Sexton relegates her to the lowest rank of the society. Although, Al Jolson’s objective was to uplift the position of Black society and to emphasize that they had equal rights and they must be given equal opportunities of growth and entertainment too. Sexton is satirically in her tone, when she ends the poem saying ‘That Story’. That story was meant only to amuse the readers, since Cinderella and her prince never faced any tribulations of domesticity and death. Sexton also coined a new thing wherein she dehumanized the two by freezing Cinderella and her prince in time and space: ‘like two dolls in a museum case,’ in order not to disturb their original patriarchal gender roles and also to show the stagnation in the couple’s life. Sexton further heightens it, when she compares them with ‘Regular Bobbsey Twins’, characters of children’s novels that ‘lived happily’ in the minds of readers. In the end Sexton in a way gives the message that neither men nor women must be denied to live their life as they want. Sexton tries to say that although, patriarchy may have a negative effect on the women but even the men are not left untouched by it and actually it tricks both of them. “Transformations is not structured around the idea of male and female as polar opposites and is consequently not gynocentric”. (Ostriker 232).

The poems in the Transformations section brilliantly mark the transition of Anne Sexton as a mature poet. It reflects a number of shades for instance, ‘Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs’ portray the heroine as vindictive and vain, ‘Rapunzel’ involves a lesbian relationship between Rapunzel and Mother Gothel. Anne Sexton’s Biography talks about Sexton’s great rapport with her great-aunt Nana. In the absence of the much needed attention she desired from her parents, which she never received, Sexton turned to her Nana. Nana was a spinster who lived an independent life and had then moved to the Sextons home, was the source of unconditional love to Anne Sexton. In turn, Anne Sexton too responded equally to the affection and love her aunt craved for. The subtle relationship between these two women is spotlighted by the monologue of the “middle-aged witch” in ‘Rapunzel’.
Because Rapunzel was a beautiful girl
Mother Gothel treasured her beyond all things.
As she grew older Mother Gothel thought:
None but I will ever see her or touch her.

(Rapunzel)

In the process of losing her hearing ability, however, Nana gradually withdrew into herself. With the passage of time, not even her favorite grandniece was able to keep her company. She ended her days committed to a mental institution where she kept everyone at a distance. The period of “playing mother-me do” ended between them, and “Mother Gothel,” or Nana, was never again able to be a source of love and attention. Sexton was shocked to see the changes that overcame Nana. No longer would she hear her great aunt say “Hold me, my young dear, hold me”, words that had been such great comfort. That protecting figure guarded her against the outside influences. She was so strong that nobody could compel Sexton to accept the tenets of a traditional male-centered way of life without question. Losing the companionship and protection formerly provided by Nana, contributed to Sexton’s falling victim to the subtle urgings of the patriarchal society.

‘Briar Rose,’ based on the Sleeping Beauty story, features a young girl haunted by the incestuous advances of her father. Sexton’s later volumes reveal the poet’s anguish growing within her. Using twisted metaphors and similes, symbolic images and vivid colors, Sexton tells her poetic tale of romantic love, motherhood and relationship between sexes and anything which reflected America during her times. These poems were a departure from her usual style which is often thought of as dark, brutal, even suicidal and without humour. In a letter to Paul Brooks, Anne Sexton wrote, “I wrote them because I had to…because I wanted to …because it made me happy.”(Lois and Sexton 143) They have much the same effect on readers. Sexton wanted to show her reader, a side of her they had not seen before. And she did. The poems are to the point, mocking but most of all, funny yet paradoxically. They are, as Sexton admits “A kind of dark, dark laughter without quite meaning to”. She said in a radio interview once that “I have joined the black humorist”. Undoubtedly the subject fairy tales was an unexpected choice for a dark poet like Anne Sexton. Fairy tales have their share of monsters and dragons, of course but they also have their heroes and heroines, charms, tricks and happily-ever-after endings. Sexton was drawn to them
enough to produce a small volume of poems on the subject. The reason she gave, in interviews and letters were off hand. One of her daughters, probably Linda, suggested that she write some poetry based on the tales and she enjoyed working with them. But an examination of the mythology of the fairy tale suggests that there was more to it. Sexton seemed to be inclined towards creation of new myths to serve a twentieth century viewpoint. In particular, she may have been creating new myths concerned with romantic love. Myths make life easier to understand. They give people a way to explain, if not to completely understand, the forces working upon them.

The mythology of fairy tales, while varying widely from culture to culture, repeats universal themes. One of these themes is ascendant over evil, often through the intervention of supernatural help. Thus mythology can be inspirational. *Transformations*, a retelling of Grimm’s fairy tales, marked a shift away from the confessional manner of her earlier work, which several commentators found to be a fruitful change. Gail Pool, for example, contended that the tales provided Sexton with “a rich medium for her colorful imagery,” a distance from her characters which allowed wit, an eerie realm where she had always been her sharpest’, and ‘the structure she needed and so often had difficulty imposing on her own work. At last she had found material to which she could bring her intelligence, her wit, all that she knew, and she created. In Stanley Kunitz’s words, ‘a wild, blood-curdling, astonishing book’. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt echoed Pool’s analysis, arguing that Sexton’s earlier work tended to lack control but in the latter poetry perhaps, she worked too closely with firsthand experience. Similarly, Louis Coxe discovers a new objectivity and distance in *Transformations*, and calls it a growth of the poet’s mind and strength. Joseph Campbell says that “folklores and dreams are subject to individual interpretation on the bases of one’s psyche, having the cultural influences as well. Its influences are not just relics of religion or superstitions but reflections of primitive human desires and fears. Hence, the skeptical handling of Sexton’s of these tales does not in any way diminish their psychic impact on the readers. She does not attempt to rationalize or explain the tales.” (Gallagher 267-275)

*The Book of Folly* (1972), her later poems grew increasingly sentimental and narcissistic. The next collection was *The Book of Folly* which got published in 1972. *The Book of Folly*, dedicated to the author’s daughter, Joy, is divided into two parts. The first section, which actually consists of twenty poems, is entitled ‘Thirty Poems’ and the second is entitled ‘The Jesus Papers’. ‘Thirty Poems’ is a return to Sexton’s
standard confessional poetry, while ‘The Jesus Papers’ contains nine poems which are all based around the character of Christ and various stories from the New Testament. ‘Thirty Poems’ begin with ‘The Ambition Bird’, which is about the peculiarity of being a writer and the joy and agony of inspiration. ‘The Doctor of the Heart’ laments medicine’s inability to cure emotional ills. ‘Oh’ describes the speaker’s feeling that she is being pursued by death, although she seems to accept this with fascination rather than fear. ‘Sweeney’ is completely autobiographical and in fact the author uses her own full name in the poem.

These later poems emerged Sexton as a new Sexton who was more seasoned with the gift of making her poems more rhythmic and the story teller’s power to disarm and distract. Some of the most popular poems of this collection are, ‘O Ye Tongues’, Psalms, Oh Sweeney, The Doctor of the Heart etc. and each poem came up with a mature idea. With the exception of Transformations in 1971, a series of verses based on folk tales, and the occasional poem in The Book of Folly which published in 1972, her later poems grew increasingly sentimental and narcissistic. As her friend and poet Maxine Kumin once observed, many of the verses in The Awful Rowing Toward God published in 1975 were written in a ‘white heat’ –at the rate of two, three, even four a day; and they show hasty and even manic compositions. The verses here and in many other poetry of the subsequent collection often feel like unedited journal entries, embarrassing eruptions of pain, self-loathing and fear, unmediated by sufficient artistic discipline or control. The poems about God tend to combine blasphemy with recycling of Sunday school pieties ‘God dressed up like a whore/in a slime of green algae./God dressed up like an old man/ staggering out of His shoes./God dressed up like a child, all naked’, while the ones about women come across as sappy compilations of romantic cliches ‘and the man/inside of woman/ties a knot/so that they will/never again be separate’ or dated litanies of Stepford-wives complaints “Supertime I float toward you/from the stewpot/ holding poems you shrug off/and you kiss me like a mosquito”.

The Book of Follies also discusses Sexton’s prose work; she calls them The Jesus Papers. These papers were more searching and daring. She brought a different Jesus with a different voice, one who was more humanized and modernized and who was suffering knowingly. Ostriker commented saying Sexton’s poems reflected upon the quest for a male figure to love and trust. These poems dealt directly with the figures
of Jesus or the traditions of Christianity, built around rites of communion, prayer and gift-giving. These poems are her most complicated work, for they do not simply rest on traditional forms of words and actions to counterpoint or frame the struggle for peace or unity, they explore a profound ambivalence about Christian understanding of life. Christianity in the full force of its explanation of human existence entices her, as the epigram from ‘Guardini’ in All My Pretty Ones indicates:

“I want no pallid humanitarianism- if Christ be not God, I want none of him; I will hack my way through existence alone …

The prayers or acts of communion in the poems, then, are neither ironic parodies nor secularized ceremonies; they are rather expressions of the deepest human needs in the full consciousness that ‘need is not quite belief’ poems which employed ritual language to speak of cleansing, initiation, prayer or communion often succeeded in being culturally symbolic precisely to the extent that they revealed an isolation and anxiety on a personal level which was not to be relieved by rituals. The poet’s intense attraction to Jesus, the man who suffers for others and Mary, the perfect and all forgiving mother, always stands at odd with the worship which attends both those figures. Anne Sexton’s poetry chronicles a struggle to come of age: to work through the conflicts with the parents in order to forgive and be forgiven: to break free from the guilts and inadequacies of the past and become open to others; to become the kind of parent who sets her children free and thus breaks the cycle of guilt and shame which has marked her family history. If we are to believe some, ‘Anne Sexton has penetrated deeply into chaos and has tried a number of strategies for working her way through it. In some of these strategies, therapy and poetry have come together. Confession has brought relief by putting things in order in the process of sharing the shame and suffering; the devices which protect the reader from too much reality also protect the writer’ (Colburn 380)

In one of the poems from the collection The Oyster Anne Sexton provoked the idea of getting older and mature throughout the entire poem by using symbolism. The poem represents the loss of innocence and death of childhood. Sexton’s later work reveal the poet’s mounting anguish, coloring her work with an increasing religiosity. The themes of alienation, death and salvation are evident in ‘The Death of Fathers’ and ‘The Jesus Papers’ in The Book of Folly, ‘The Dead Baby’ and ‘O Ye Tongues’ a sequence of Psalms, in The Death Notebooks and ‘The Rowing Endeth’. The tone of spiritual peace rises in The Book of Folly. The poems ‘O Ye Tongues’ is a sequence
of ten psalms modeled on the Jubilate Agno of Christopher Smart. The loose theme of the sequence is praise of the mystery of creation, of which Sexton’s imagination is a part; its center is a spiritual autobiography that traces back to infancy the origin of her image-making gift. According to some critics ‘O Ye Tongues’ a poem full of affection, is the last poem, a farewell that is profound. “For Sexton, ultimately her deities were resided in her father and her mother, God who will finally guarantee her that immortality and idealized family circle in which she will at last win the love, acceptance and protection and approval denied her by her parents. That was the kind of image she had created”. (Batison 23).

In ‘The Exorcist’ an early poem about abortion, it is ironically said that an aborted fetus is being cast out like a demon but the poem’s text with the refrain ‘I know you not’ sensitively brings out the fact that the speaker is actually betraying Christ. Many of Sexton’s letters depict an intense need for faith undermined by solid skepticism: “In case it is true, I tell my catholic friend… in case it is true, I tell myself and plead with it to be true(Lois and Sexton 125) God? Spend half time wooing Roman Catholics who will pray for you in case it’s true. Spend other half knowing there is certainly no god. Spend fantasy time thinking that there is a life after death, because surely my parents, for instance, are not dead, they are good god! Just buried” (Lois and Sexton 235)

In another letter Sexton wrote “Yes it is time to think about Christ again. I keep putting it off. If he is the God/man, I would feel a hell of a lot better. If there is a God… how do you explain him swallowing all those people up in Pakistan? Of course there is God. But what kind is he?” (Lois and Sexton 368)

‘The Jesus Papers’ is systematic, structured and miniature reinterpretation of the Christian myth just like Transformations is of the Grimm’s tales. The subject is far more audacious than the tales and had been attempted by just two other poets in the history of English Literature. They were John Milton in Paradise Regained and Blake in The Everlasting Gospel. The debatable question which these poets dared to touch upon was –Was Jesus a man? The poets imagined what manner of man. Sexton’s Jesus is as disagreeable as Milton’s in Paradise Regained. The opening poem ‘Jesus Suckels’ consists of three sections and the relevant Biblical text attributes the moment of brutality to Jesus’ adolescence. Sexton in her letters pushes the time back when she writes “woman, what I have to do with thee”? The initial imagery implies that Mary is
Mot 
Mother Nature or the pre-Christian goddesses who represent her divine fertility. Man and God are her privileged superiors and historical conquerors. 

When Jesus encounters the harlot Mary Magdalen being stoned “stones came at her like bees to candy/ and sweet redhead 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)

Sexton has touched upon various angles and tried to improve her understanding about Jesus through her many letters as ‘Jesus Cooks’, ‘Jesus Summons Forth’, ‘Jesus Dies’, ‘Jesus Unborn’, ‘Jesus Suckles’ and so on. ‘Jesus Dies’ is like ultimate Sexton’s poetry where Jesus’ self revelation of his sore need for God, ‘man-to-man thing’, that is half competitive, half desperate is mingled with furious irritation at his audience’s sensation seeking. From Crucification, Sexton does not move on to resurrection but writes another woman poem ‘Jesus Unborn’ which turns out to be like ‘Jesus Suckles’ a judgment of the virgin’s role in Christianity. In the final poem of ‘The Jesus Papers’ Sexton marks it with the poem entitled ‘The Author of the Jesus Paper Speaks’ which defines the place of not only Mary but of all womankind in western religion. The poem has been divided into three sections. She writes 

I yanked, 
waiting for the moon juice,  
Waiting for the white mother,  
blood spurted from it  
and covered me with shame. 

(The Author of the Jesus Paper Speaks)

The contents of this letter could be interpreted in many ways. Blood can be menstrual blood, shameful because of the societal taboo; it was the sign of female pollutedness. It could also refer to the sacrifice of mothers. They give up their own life for others’
life. It could also be a reminder that all lives lead to death. The cow might be nature of
Mother goddess or Anne’s own mother who shamed and blamed her and whose
‘double image’ she was. At this point Sexton dramatically introduced her
communication with God in the poetry. God says

“people only speak good things about Christmas, if they want to say something bad,
they whisper”

(The Author of the Jesus Paper Speaks)

This is a change in the tone as well as in non sequitur, it is funny and it gives us a God
who like a boss or an earthly father is uncomfortable with the way his governing role
divides him from those he governs. God seems to be interrupting a mother-daughter
interview, making a bid for attention and sympathy for his own concerns. In this poem
Sexton moves from a daughter role to mother-role and in God’s terms she produces
Christ. Judging by the last seven lines of the poem, she brings in the submissive
gesture God was looking for.

Then God spoke to me and said
Here: Take this gingerbread lady
We must all eat beautiful woman.

(The Author of the Jesus Paper Speaks)

“The changed tone tells us as if God has been reassured and confirmed in his
Godliness and Sexton’s feminine compliance, much as a man tired and complaining
after work will have his dignity renewed by his wife or daughter laying out a perfect
dinner. This final speech is authoritative not only in the sense of issuing commands
but in the sense of assuming verbal commands over the poems prior structure of
symbols. Nature and femaleness at first large and powerful are reduced to domesticity
and powerlessness. In a way ‘The Jesus Papers’ series is a recapitulation of divine
male power and mortal female submission. Despite of this the writings do not portray
protesting images of Anne Sexton or other women within Christianity. On the
contrary she complies; she agrees and obeys just as Mary and the harlot comply
within the sequence. For herself and on the behalf of all the beautiful women she
accepts humiliation”. (Colburn 270)

The Death Notebooks and The Awful Rowing Toward God marked the return of
Sexton to the Confessional method. Anne Sexton’s last book, The Awful Rowing
Toward God, published in 1975, just before she died, brought the same theme but with an added touch of joy, although they were less powerful and imaginative.

Many readers like Heyen severely criticized “Sexton’s work and called it the beginning of her ‘down-hill journey’. Sexton’s poems became less intense, less dramatic and less interesting as one book followed another…. There were moments, occasional lines or even poems that reflected or raged with her old power, but overall Sexton’s voice often became maudlin or silly” (Colburn 261) Robert Mozzocco supporting Heyen said “That while the early poems depict intensely introverted states in highly extroverted style and are well constructed, the later poems seems to be less commanding, strike dissonant strains, of the keyboard and become more programmatic” (Mozzocco 107)

Many other critics like Jong advocated for Sexton’s poetry saying it should be treated fairly although, she was uneven and excessive, but that was because she dared to be a fool and dared to explore the dark side of the unconscious.

Critic Serlin in her work on Anne Sexton’s poems comments “The later poems go far beyond in making luminous art out of the night thoughts that have haunted the poet for a long time”. (276)

In The Death Notebooks, The Awful Rowing toward God, and 45 Mercy Street, the last two published posthumously, Sexton returned to the confessional method. While these books have been praised, they have also been more severely criticized than her early writings, many readers detecting deterioration in quality. In like manner, Patricia Meyer Spacks argued that Sexton’s poems become more and more sentimental in that they overindulge in emotion and fail to evaluate that emotion. The sentimentalism becomes “painfully marked” in Awful Rowing, with its embarrassments of religious pretension. The problem of internal division, the perception of divinity, the will to rebuild the soul: all alike register unconvincingly. The poetry through which these vast themes are rendered is simply not good enough. On the other hand, not all critics disparaged the later books. In a response to Spacks’s critique, Jung urged everyone to be fair about Sexton’s poetry. She was uneven and excessive, but that was because she dared to be a fool and dared to explore the dark side of the unconscious.

Moreover, Sandra M. Gilbert believed that The Death Notebooks goes far beyond the earlier volumes in making luminous art out of the night thoughts that have haunted this poet for so long. Finally, Carl Jong, in a review of Notebooks, assessed Sexton’s
poetic significance and contended that her artistry is often overlooked: “She is an important poet not only because of her courage in dealing with previously forbidden subjects, but because she can make the language sing. Not just of her skills in writing traditional poems... But by artistry, I mean something more subtle than the ability to write formal poems. I mean the artist’s sense of where her inspiration lies.... There are many poets of great talent who never take that talent anywhere.... They write poems which any number of people might have written. When Anne Sexton is at the top of her form, she writes a poem which no one else could have written...” (Jong 321)

The nurturing child-woman cannot seek answers, yet answers are still needed, there are other aspects of the poets, such as multi-faceted Ms. Dog, frequently linked by critics to “man’s best friend” as well as Eliot’s “foe to man” who digs up dangerous secrets. Ms. Dog appears in The Awful Rowing Toward God as possessed. “Mr. Dog. Why is your evil? It climbed into me. It didn’t mean to. But this is a controlled and willed possession which includes both animalian and the divine; “I have for some time, called myself Mr. Dog. Why? Because I am almost an animal and yet the animal I lost most- That animal is near to God, but lost for Him” (Sexton 448). Maxine Kumin confirms the biographical variety of this confession, noting but Sexton’s love of palindromes.(xxx) and in ‘All God’s Children Need Radios,’ her undisguised autobiographical narrator makes a complex association between herself and the dog.

“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”. (Sexton xxx)

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)
The editors of her Selected Poem note, “She served as a ritual witness to the inner lives of large number of troubled people” (Sexton xx)

*The Awful Rowing Toward God* does not reverse the loss of energy. This first posthumous book of uncollected poems is readable and often touching. The collection makes the series of quest poems written by Sexton at breakneck speed ‘in a frenzy of despair and hope’ as Anne Sexton got divorced in November 1973 and scarcely revived from the shock. Some of the critics felt, some time before her death that Anne Sexton had already given us her best work, that her poems were becoming as weak and uncertain as was her ability to hold to the lifeline. Her world, a theologian might say, is inert, a world without reciprocity, one that will not reveal itself, will not shimmer with transcendence. The collection brings out a different side of Anne Sexton to the world. It looks as if in her last two books the poet is trying to give imaginative birth to an adequate Godhead in order to meet her ferocious need for cosmic love. But since her need is no match for her doubt, it results in heroic failure.

I cannot walk an inch
Without trying to walk to God
I cannot move a finger
Without trying to reach God

*(Not So, Not So)*

The poems in this collection are attempts of the poet to locate the self. Sexton tries hard to search for a deeper meaning of her life and existence. She implicitly insists that the realm of the sacred must answer to her experience of reality. She questions if the objective and subjective were the different sides of the same coin as she was able to establish this fact in her earlier collection *Transformations*. In *The Awful Rowing* and *The Death Notebooks* Sexton is once again working through a prior tradition but now as if her life depended on it. Poems like ‘Civil War’ and ‘Frenzy’ imply, in fact, that only by working on a constant effort to create God coextensive with her own imagination can the poet hope to be saved. This was a risky proposition when the worshipper’s ego is as frail as Sexton’s. She is trying to conquer all these elements of herself and build a new soul and sing an anthem of herself. Sexton’s goal may be the same as Whitman’s goal of becoming One with the Oversoul,

Let there be God as large as the sunlamp to laugh it heat at you
She prays in the course of Psalms that “God will digest me” and at the end she declares “For God was as large as the sunlamp and laughed its heat on us (Sexton and Christopher) and therefore we did not cringe on the death hole” Sexton imagines that God transcends within all flesh. He is a jigsaw with thousands of pieces, ‘dressed up like a whore, like an old man, a naked child, present within all domestic routines and especially present within human sexuality:

When they fuck they are God
When they break away they are God
When they snore they are God
In the morning they butter the toast,
They don’t say much
They are still God.

(The Fury of Cocks)

Such a God is benevolent. The image of God dressed as an old man somehow reminds the readers of Blake’s Nobodaddy, and the image of the child certainly brings up images of the newborn Jesus. He has nobody but wishes he had one, envying humans their body as we envy him his soul. Giving reference to Sexton’s The Jesus’ Papers bearing reference to Isaiah 66:12 Anne Sexton wrote ‘On good days he gives milk’. Salvation depends on her ability to keep “typing out the God my typewriter believes in. What I earlier called an adequate God-one powerful enough to love and accept Sexton and all of us ratlike cursed ones falling out after”

(Frenzy)
Anne Sexton talks about God and humans and this dominates The Awful Rowing. Through most of the volume the tone, is frenzied and agonized. God is distant, indifferent. In the penultimate poem when the poet trembles to utter her faith that God is in all matters ‘Heaven smashes my words’
The final poem of The Awful Rowing was intended to be a happy ending by Sexton.

As he plunks down His five aces
And I sit grinning at my royal flush,
He starts to laugh,
The laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth and into mine,
And such laughter that He doubles right over me
Laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.
Then I laugh, the fishy docks laugh
The sea laughs. The island laughs.
The Absurd laughs
Dearest dealer I with my royal straight flush,
Love you so for your wild card,
That untamable, eternal, gut driven, haha
And lucky love.

(The Rowing Endeth)

*The Awful Rowing Toward God*, a work that compels the reader to experience the world as the poet does, with its superficiality and despair but one must not forget that it is also a place in which hope and the possibility of redemption still exist. The volume begins with a poem called ‘Rowing’ and ends with ‘The Rowing Endeth’. Robert Lowell praised calling her work intelligent and sometimes highly critical analysis of the suicidal impulse….

*The Awful Rowing Toward God* contain poems of superb, unforgettable power. The book will probably be preferred because it is the posthumous volume of Anne Sexton’s work and because it describes, with more candor and wit and warmth than Sylvia Plath allowed herself, the stages of the ‘rowing’ toward what Sexton calls ‘God’. Anne Sexton’s abiding problem as the artist behind each poem must be to continue to find, somehow, images that render the spiritual conditions of her poems. Robert Lowell in an interview to NYC said commenting critically that it is true that the sensibility of the God brought forth in book *The Awful Rowing Toward God* is finally quirky, blotched, passionate and murderous, perfect only in the perfections of its imperfections; and it is also true that Anne Sexton believed in going on, writing the next poem, allowing her poems to, perhaps, be filled with the weaknesses of her own soul. But it may not be ungracious of us to ask for more voltage in more poems.

“Although, Sexton began writing religious poems early in her career, her last volume of poetry reflect her growing awareness of the imminence of death, an awareness that seemed to cut her off from the conventional world of suburbia and the marriage in which she would earlier lose frightened herself” (Lois and Sexton 312 ) Instead with increasing absorption, she turned to a private self-contained mythology of God and self which would compensate for the sense of a lost self which had plagued her all of her life. The compensatory function of religious myth is especially apparent in Sexton’s posthumously published volume *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. This volume is filled with poet’s the religious inclination towards the journey toward God. The collection reveals the poet’s inner journey into the unconscious revealing her increasing need to find in death the ideal mother and father, the male and the female
archetypes of the united self from which she had felt severely disassociated by her birth, and even more so, by their deaths. In The Awful Rowing these underlying psychological patterns transform her sea journey toward God into regressive journey. The opening poem ‘Rowing’ records the poet’s retrospective that for most of her life “God was there like an island I had not rowed to” This self-loathing is attributed to the loss of a controlling, godlike essence, the divine father who could ‘love’ and ‘feed’ the seemingly insatiable primal hungers. Sexton explaining this says;

To be without God is to be a snake
Who wants to swallow an elephant

(The Play)

At one time Sexton feels that she can get rid of the hungry rat ‘gnawing’ inside of her, only if she can find God, who will ‘embrace’ the starving creature. Sexton defines ‘Mother’ as the repressive force which surgically fragmented the daughter’s bond with the father principle.

“May be my mother cut off the God out of me, leaving only the evil flesh- the incestuous instinct that separates you with God”

Sexton realized that the sexual instincts in man and woman stand for ‘double hunger’ bringing them together and driving them to reach through the curtain of God.

When the priest asks whose God are you looking for?
A starving man does not ask what the meal is.

(45, Mercy Street)

“Sexton’s God is obviously the male principle lost and idealized father, who could provide recognition and meaningful transformation of the primal instincts. In order to express her sense of psychic disassociation or loss of ‘soul’, Sexton frequently externalizes this lost ‘god’ but the lost self has, in actuality, been buried under the repressed and the distorted instincts which often break out with dangerous intensity. Anne Sexton, yearned for that larger experience, that rush of near-divine certainty that the self is immortal; she knew it existed but she could not reach it. The place I live in/is a kind of maze/and I keep seeking/the exit or the home. The excerpt is from ‘The Children’. Trapped within her specific, private self, she seems to have despaired of any remedy short of death....” (Oates 99)

The 39 poems of Sexton’s posthumous volume, The Awful Rowing Toward God,… set out reasons, explanations and occasionally rueful apologies for her emotional
predicament; like some of the finest poems of *The Book of Folly* of 1972. “There are poets who seem to choose their surreal images with fastidious care, as if seeking physical images to describe what are primarily intellectual or even ideological beliefs; Anne Sexton, however, gives the impression of selecting from a great flood of dream-like or nightmarish images precisely those which communicate most directly to the reader and to the poet herself. Her painful honesty is well known. What her unsympathetic critics have charged her with—an overvaluing of her private sorrows to the exclusion of the rest of the world seems to have been felt by Sexton herself. Anne Sexton, then, can be dismissed as ‘sick’ and her poetry dismissed as the outpouring of a pathologically egocentric imagination—unless one is willing to make the risky claim, which will not be a popular one, that poets like Sexton, Plath, and John Berryman have dealt in excruciating detail with collective pathologies of our time”. (Oates 113)

The more fortunate artist is simply one who, for reasons not known, identifies powerfully with a unit larger than the self: Faulkner with his ‘postage stamp’ of earth, Shakespeare with the glorious, astounding variety of human personality, Dostoevsky with all of Russia, such artists surely dramatize their own emotions, but they give life to the world outside the self by means of these emotions and in so doing often draw up into consciousness aspects of the p in 1971, most critics celebrated *Transformations* as “witty, ironic and acerbic,” Its sales were particularly strong; in fact, *Transformations* quickly became one of Sexton’s best-selling collections, second only to *Love Poems*” (Martin and Leventen 136). The underlying patriarchal message of feminine passivity by creating a satiric feminist revision of the story is successfully attempted by Anne Sexton. According to Lieberman and Rowe, “when it comes to the ‘sexes of the rescuer and the person in danger,’ very few fairy tales stray from the story in which men come along to rescue women who are in danger of death or are enslaved, imprisoned, abused, or plunged into an enchanted sleep which resembles death. In short, the heroic prince rescues the damsel in distress. Because of this unchanging and constant gender role division, young girls are taught that their ideal role in society is that of inaction and self-sacrifice; they are the helpless damsels awaiting the rescue of handsome princes, a plot that unfailingly results in marriage”. (Lieberman 9) Catherine Lappas describes this idea more dramatically saying “Like virginity, the passive female is expectant, that is, she awaits for
seemingly a whole life for the prince to give her life” (113). In this manner, the woman does not truly exist without the man. According to Karen E. Rowe, “the tales which glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine’s cardinal virtues, as the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers do, suggest that culture’s very survival depends upon a woman’s acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity” (Rowe 9) In words of Beauvoir’s “myth of woman, stereotypical versions of femininity become the true identity for women as far as society is concerned. While fairy tales provide these absolute types of woman, such as the ‘virgin of pure spirit’ and the ‘cruel stepmother,’ Sexton has confused the lines between these archetypes. She has shown the cyclical nature of these stereotypes by blurring the myth of woman through her creation of an innocent virgin who, through her own lack of intellect and common sense, is destined to become the cruel stepmother; her purity is being stained Throughout the tale” (Beauvoir 254) Secondly, Anne Sexton aims not to have her reader’s sympathies shift but abandon them completely. Her works leave the reader’s with an ambiguity which makes them think that Sexton’s poems are feminist but some of the critics feel that it is the other way round. Carol Leventen laments that Sexton’s project fails at points where she “unwittingly perpetuates many of the gender arrangements of the originals and, moreover, that many of her keenest insights and sympathies are reserved for the emotional complexities she attributes to her male characters”. (145) The third aspect which could be noticed is that Sexton has brought in the concept of doppelganger in her poetry. Doppelganger is a German word which refers to the ghostly presence of a living person especially one that haunts its fleshly counterpart. In ‘Rumpelstiltskin’ Sexton has brought out the pathetic life of a dwarf, a ‘freak’ of sorts who ‘has been exhibited on Bond Street,’ who has ‘no private life’ and is yet lonely enough to lament, ‘no child will ever call me papa,’ but she also presents him as being the self same trickster of the brothers Grimm - the self proclaimed ‘evil eye’ (234).

One part soft as a woman,
One part a barbed hook,
One part papa,
One part Doppelganger.

Sexton has brought the idea of doppelgangers in the poem ‘Red Riding Hood’, originally a tale of brothers Grimm, too. She has transformed the Grimm’s message of
“trust me when I say ‘beware the wolf’ and she brought it to another level of understanding where she said “trust no one; beware the wolf within us”. (272) So, this way Anne Sexton brought in a more complex aim of awakening the reader’s subconscious. This point was completely missed by the Grimm brothers and their characters – the grandmother and Red Riding hood. They are destined to remain over trusting and naïve or, as Jack Zipes puts it, “in a state of social amnesia. By not remembering how empty and treacherous their lives had been, they will obviously repeat the mistakes they had made in the past”. (Zipes 325) It must be noted, that Anne Sexton gave an ending which was different than the original tales’. Her ‘Red Riding Hood’ was not forgetful or dismissive unlike that of the Grimm’s character. In the end Sexton’s ‘Red Riding Hood’ says “Never again will I stray off the road and run into the forest when my mother's told me not to”. Sexton keeps her Red Riding Hood naïve and forgetful whenever she desires to and is not influenced by Grimm’s tale’s events. Sexton has definitely revised the Grimm’s tale as per her own likings. Where the brothers Grimm strive to ‘teach a lesson’ not simply to those who would act in the deceptive manner of that ‘old sinner’ the wolf, their main focus is on teaching a lesson to the naïve child who would act out the disobedience displayed by Red Riding Hood. With her revision of the tale, however, Sexton suggests that, because Red Riding Hood does not ultimately suffer the consequences of her disobedience, the Grimms’ message falls flat.

In fact, in Transformations the poet Anne Sexton could be seen as a critique not only of the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm, but also of the revisionist fairy tales. It is implied that to revise the story, to shift the readers’ sympathies from one character to another, is to fall into the same old trap of defining the tales, the world and ourselves, in terms of the ideal and absolute. It was Anne Sexton who encouraged her readers and the world to recognize the duality, the dual nature of our world and to acknowledge our doppelganger, that small old man inside all of us ‘who wants to get out’ (233) A strand of spiritualism can be clearly seen in Sexton’s poetry and it states that towards the later part of her life Sexton had probably understood that the real purpose of every individual’s life was something much higher and bigger. People were different in front of others, different when they were alone and the real persona of the same person was completely different and his objective of life was something soulful.
Sexton through her version of fairy tales in the *Transformations* has expressed her rage and challenged the idea of ideal ending of happily ever after, a solution that culminates in a perfect, non-problematic conclusion and is a universal perspective. Sexton’s *Transformations* is one that rages against solutions, perfections and optimism. It is in this effort against the happily ever after that Sexton takes on the persona of the middle-aged witch. Sexton does not aim at changing the story or bring in the feministic aspect but she wants to see and let her readers analyze the stories as they stand. Sexton insists in a subtle manner that no amount of rewriting and revision of the fairy tales will turn the real life experiences always happy as told in the tales.

Comparing her *Transformations* one can say that Sexton’s ‘Early work’ was the exploration of self. Her later work was exploration of God. Sexton’s explorations of the fairy tales are not carried out with the intention of establishing a beautiful ideal, but with her exposing the horror that is simply put, in their search for ‘the answers’, their intent is to muster “the courage to make clean breast of it in the face of every question”(Lois and Sexton 2) Under the influence of the fairy tales one might chose to read one’s own life and see it as problem free and expect to have a ‘happily ever after state’ ignoring the harsh realities. Sexton does not encourage this idea. It is “a kind of coffin”(232), “a museum case” or “a prison”(258) Sexton implores the readers to “enquire further”(34), “Coming out of prison” to acknowledge and to confront the problematic, the horrific even “this after death”(295) Sexton’s main objective by bringing up her *Transformations* is that her poetry work as ‘axe’ shattering “the frozen sea within us” and leaving us to feel “lost in a forest remote from all human habitation” (Lois and Sexton 48)

What voyage this, little girl?
This coming out of prison?
God help –
This life after death?

(*Briar Rose*)

Ultimately, Sexton’s book of *Transformations* aims to unleash the illusion of the ideal perspective, of the happily ever after, whatever form it may take. Hence, its method is to investigate the tales as they stand, simply to uncover and examine the problematic, rather than to offer an alternative. The fairy tales of the brothers Grimm are not adapted or revised; they are simply represented in such a way that our reading of them will be transformed. It is noteworthy the way she ends her collection *Transformations.*
It shows Sexton’s effort to understand the stories on her own terms, precipitating a transformed view of traditional social values, particularly those associated with feminine life patterns: love, and marriage, beauty, family and most radically, the idea of goodness and moral responsibility. The fairy-tale end of the marriage which is supposed to represent romance and financial security ever after becomes ‘ironically’ “that story”.

Most of the Sexton’s tales in *Transformations* end in marriage and marriage symbolizes captivity or selfishness. Sexton calls the virtue of beauty as stupid and a commodity. In ‘Snow-White’ Sexton writes that an innocent virgin’s beauty makes her a stupid doll, a commodity and the conscious beauty of the experienced woman makes her not only cruel but also doomed.

Beauty is a simple passion but oh, my friends in the end you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes

*The Awful Rowing Toward God* is a book of agony. It a tale of agony suffered by a woman so gifted that when she speaks of her feelings, the words are illuminated by a pure genius of language. Clearly, the God she is searching for is the symbol. “Even in her pain and confusion, a richness of imagery tumbles off her tongue ‘the sea that bangs in my throat’, she has always been astonishing and inventive in her use of metaphor. This was especially true in her *Transformations*, where her comparisons are delightful, even hilarious. In *The Death Notebooks*, when God became a sun lamp, she started moving decisively toward the metaphor as a weapon, molded with the surrealism that comes from the deepest, most irrational part of the mind. It is too easy to read Sexton’s decision to abandon her life in her poems. She has been sending the message for years, and fighting death’s temptation “to put all that life under your tongue!” But even in her despair she has a kind of rueful gaiety, as in the picture of God wishing he had a body in ‘The Earth’. There are poems, such as ‘Is It True’?, where one wishes the poet could have stopped and revised; there are poems full of carelessness and redundancy. But it is like wishing Niagara would stop and rearrange a pebble. The rush of her genius and passion kept her alive and we are privileged to witness the phenomenon….” (Whitman 66)

Anne Sexton wrote a poem that belongs with the most terrible and yet the most intelligent and convincing work of what is loosely called the ‘confessional mode’. Mazzocco said “Anne Sexton often wrote of the cruelty of life and the cruelty of
people, particularly the ungiving nature of her parents, yet unlike Sylvia Plath she
seems always to have been asking to be forgiven. Plath had a colder heart, perhaps,
but wrote fiercer, purer poetry, was indeed a genius. Sylvia Plath refused to forgive
the world and there’s always something triumphant about that refusal. Plath is always,
as she says, ‘ready for enormity,’ crossing the frontier, with no carols to be sung, no
Whitmanian salutations to accompany the hearse and one has to honor her. Faithful to
her demons, she seems, in the end, a conqueror, victorious. Anne Sexton dealt with
the theme of vulnerability directly, bluntly. Also the theme of melancholia, often
picturing herself as a ‘possessed witch,’ or speaking of ‘Menstruation at Forty,’ or
laughing at herself as a housewife mixing the martinis. But these highly womanly
images were never any match for the presence that really haunted the poems, the
specter of her as a dependent, arrested in the past, the child with the ‘night mind’ or
night wound. Anne Sexton’s sense of violence was always faltering. Violence seems
never to have enhanced her work as it did that of Mishima and Plath. With these
figures there’s an objectification or theatricalization of the body—Plath and her
“Greek ritual,” Mishima’s head severed with the single stroke of a sword—that has
not apparent in Sexton. The murderous impulses that lie buried in her work always
verge on the lurid or the awkward; the cry of ‘my hungers! my hungers!’ is a cry of
absence, of feelings that can neither be named nor stanch. The flute player in Live
or Die, whose eerie music intoxicates the poet, is a dwarf with an ‘enormous
misshapen mouth,’ who sits in a cave, ‘a great hole in the earth,’ with its ‘tons of
suffocating dirt,’ the distance in which his listener must enter in order to be fed. Her
best poems—poems like ‘Flee on Your Donkey,’ ‘To Lose the Earth,’ ‘Letter Written
on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound’—are delicate, visceral, poignant. The
throes of a dire need run through them. Others, less successful, are a diary of scars
where the reader can discern his own. But good or bad, because the protagonist is so
often so dreadfully unhappy they are poems one can never take lightly. .‖ (Mazzocco
22-23)

Michael Lally evaluating critically said “Technically the poems in The Awful Rowing
Toward God aren’t exceptional. They rely heavily on the kind of surrealist mixing of
metaphors and unlikely juxtapositions that the French- and Spanish-speaking poets
perfected long before most poets in the United States cared for or caught on to the
strategy: … although my heart/is a kitten of butter,/I am blowing it up like a
zeppelin. When this works, coupled with the insistent rhythms of her short lines and litany like lists, the poems aren’t easy to ignore. When the images are weak, the poems are still often hard to ignore. What is so compelling about them, even when they are close to just plain silly, is the dark and desperate vision of the poet. It turns even the most commonplace objects and acts into devices for life’s capricious maliciousness, renders the most harmless things harmful: The windows, / the starving windows / that drive the trees like nails into my heart. Sexton’s poems are full of common things … that bring her aggravation and pain, or worse: the dogs … pissing on the doorstep, the sun turning into poison. ‘Picking the scabs’ of the spiritual wounds this causes, she flashes the scars like credentials and those of us who might get some pleasure and satisfaction, even joy, from these common things are intimidated. Not that there isn’t any pleasure or potential for joy in these poems. In ‘Welcome Morning’ she claims ‘There is joy/in all’ then catalogues it including the joy ‘in the outcry from the kettle … in the spoon and the chair / that cry ‘hello there, Anne / each morning … in my pea-green house.’ But we are right to be suspicious when a poet who gives us brilliant images of pain offers us these ‘outcries’ and ‘pea-green’ vehicles for ‘joy’…In the poem ‘When Man Enters Woman’ she seems at last to be talking about something pleasurable…. But again we worry about the choice of images: the ‘knot,’ the flower without its stem through which life flows. Then she refers to the impetus for such sexual coupling as the ‘double hunger’ and the readers are almost ready for the conclusion that ‘God/in His perversity/unties the knot.’…Readers are left feeling foolish again for believing in the possibility of lasting relationships, or callous for not being overwhelmed by the impossibility. Even the small rewards of passing pleasures are once again revealed to be more of life’s insidious tricks. And there is no room for humor. Her painful vision is always valid and real and earned and her death insured that. It is she, the poet, who has really untied the knot. The poet acting as God in the world of the poem, constantly frustrating the reader with glimpses of hope and possible relief from ‘the darkness and its amputations.’ Death hovers about those gruesome TV reports as the only consolation, but in these poems it’s too late for death, only God is left, the God she created to make these poems work, who even ‘in His perversity’ is ‘the real McCoy/in the private holiness/of my hands.’(Lally 3)
Bell commented that “In most of the poems the vague cloud of unknowing that she
calls God is alien, indifferent, elusive, untouchable, a mocking parody of life without
death. Yet never is Sexton’s roil of feeling as she gropes for a holy order transmuted
into the heightened language that is poetry. Her images are stale and flat, the words
screamed, not chosen. The evil she decries in the world beyond her anguished
solipsism turns into the peep show vulgarity of a horror movie, as in ‘After
Auschwitz,’ where the imagery drawn from the Holocaust is too easy, in fact a
desecration. Written from the extreme knife-edge of self-slaughter, these last poems
of Anne Sexton are festering wounds, alarm bells of unbearable pain. Yet they remain
obdurately private and personal, and she knew it: “I have so much I want to say.. But
the words aren’t good enough.” (Bell 3)

History of English literature witnessed a transition post-war. The verse featured
simplicity of style and brought in the feature of self-disclosure. Anne Sexton
championed this change dramatically. These tendencies reach the zenith with Anne
Sexton’s three volumes-The Book of Folly, The Death Notebook, and The Awful
Rowing Toward God. In these final statements the poet lays her most private moments
and her craziest fantasies at the reader’s judgment, and she reduces a once-graceful
style to its barest, crudest form. Whatever one might think of these poems, it would
seem unwise to underestimate their importance, as they are the last testament of a
gifted and widely recognized American poet. Sexton’s poetry marks a total shift in the
history of American poetry. Critics have often quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous
remark that there are no second acts in American lives, and Sexton is squarely in the
tradition of writers whose careers are a long downhill slide from early achievement.
Jarrell has provides an epitaph which is rather polite and courteous. “A good poet,” he
said, “is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be
struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great.”
Never mind the numbers, or whether they were evenly spaced out over the course of
her life. Anne Sexton did her standing out in thunderstorms. Her rain-soaked poems
will vanish. The lightning-struck ones will remain” (Pollitt 533)

Unlike other poets Anne Sexton has used diction, imagery, and syntax in her poetry in
their simplest terms. Her religious anxiety and religious quest has been reduced by her
craftsmanship and her caliber, to a kind of light informal verbal communications. In
the words of Howard, episodic structure is prominent in these three volumes, both in
the syntax of individual poems and in the structural relationships of poems grouped as
sequences…. Poetic sequences have become common in post-war American poetry. On the whole, they created little or no sense of progression, whether dramatic or thematic, nor did they present multiple perspectives on a single subject or situation. More than anything, they evoked a sense of succession and repetition, of events following one another in predictable and usually empty patterns. The poems themselves generate a similar mood, with their frequent catalogs and their elemental narratives.