CHAPTER II

The Poetry of Anne Sexton: Method in Madness

Anne Sexton is renowned as one of the most powerful poets of the post-World War II era. She is best known for her vivid, intense poems that explore topics such as personal feminine identity, individual suffering and oppression and the inevitability of death. The autobiographical elements in her writings poignantly reflect her struggle with despair and mental illness, her efforts to assert a female identity and to balance familial, marital and career aspirations. Her poetry, therefore, has been viewed as a cathartic response to her divided personae as an artist, mother and wife.

Hailed as “the mother of confessional poetry” (George 90) Anne Sexton has successfully transformed her life details into art. Her biography reveals her unique experiences of sickness, excitement, madness, suicides, nightmares, frustrations and poetic achievements. From early childhood she was dissatisfied with her position in the family, and felt herself unwanted. She sought for approval and appreciation outside home, and had a flamboyant, willful pattern of behavior. She was also fed up with the responsibilities after marriage. For her, life after marriage was characterized by the pattern of professional success, personal tragedy and emotional difficulty. All these oddities resulted in frequent hospitalization for mental imbalance and attempted suicides. It was her psychiatrist who advised her to take up writing as a means of ventilation. Of course, poetry led her by hand for
it offered her relief and solace and also won her several accolades. This chapter undertakes a thematic analysis of Sexton’s poetry with reference to aspects of confessionalism.

Anne Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts in 1928 to Mary Gray and Ralph Churchill Harvey. As one of her eminent biographers, Diana Hume, George remarks Sexton had always been an attention-seeking child who was attached to her Nana, her great-aunt Anna Dingley. At nineteen, she eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton II and the couple underwent financial crisis before her husband could settle down in a wollen firm. On 21 July 1953 Anne Gray Sexton gave birth to their first child Linda Gray Sexton after which Sexton suffered serious emotional setbacks to the extent that she had her stint at Westwood Lodge, for attempted suicide. In the meanwhile, Anne’s Nana died in July 1954 and it aggravated her malady. Her second child, Joyce Ladd Sexton was born on 4 August 1955; the additional responsibility deepened her depression and she was again admitted to a mental hospital. Having attempted suicide again on 9 Nov 1956, she consulted the psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne who advised her to take up writing which transformed her from an ordinary frustrated homemaker to an artist. In the words of David Lester and Rina Terry, “Anne Sexton illustrates the dialectic in poetry as therapy, between expression and catharsis on the one hand and cognitive control on the other. To be sure, because her poems were often based on her experiences and emotions, they were outpourings of her individual human experience” (264).

Writing came to the rescue of the troubled soul of Anne Sexton’s so much so that she decided to give her best to it. Hence she started attending classes to learn the art of poetry
wherein she came in contact with Robert Lowell, Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath and Maxine Kumin. In the meanwhile she had started the process of translating her personal experiences into poetry which ultimately resulted in the publication of her first volume of poetry *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* in March 1960. The epigraph chosen by Sexton for the volume happened to be a quotation from Schopenhauer which emphasizes “the poet role, like the philosopher’s, is to seek enlightenment at any cost, at the cost of disapproval, disaffection, madness, death” (*Anne Sexton* 13). Bedlam acts as the backdrop of many of the poems in the collection and they express the poet’s experience of madness and frustration. The interesting fact associated with the Bedlam poems is that though Sexton was a student of Lowell’s she was not influenced by his works as Sexton had already finished writing the book even before Lowell could publish his *Life Studies*.

The Second Volume of Poetry, *All my Pretty Ones*, was published in the fall of 1962, and it was nominated for the National Book Award the following year. The collection was meant to commemorate her dead family members as there were “so many dead”. “I am tired. But I continue. I am not well yet. But I hope I’ll make it” (*Letters* 101-102). The theme of loss pervaded all through these poems and as Sexton observes, *All My Pretty Ones* was the name for my dead. I began badly with raw emotion and bitterness, with no good lines at all, and no form, nothing but the need to give reality to feeling” (*No Evil Star* 43).

*Live or Die*, Anne Sexton’s third published volume of poetry, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. It is the only volume in which Sexton intentionally arranged the poems in chronological order of composition as she “thought the order of (the poems)
creation might be of interest to some readers” (*Live or Die* xi). While Barbara Kevles saw a “structured tension…which pits the wish to live against the death instinct” Sexton “didn’t plan the book anyway”. The poems in the collection deal with the conflict between life and death but, as the last poem reveals, it is the wish to live, despite all shortcomings and failures that eventually underlies these poems.

In an interview with Barbara Kelves Anne Sexton remarked: “I have not only lived but loved, that sometime miracle” (*No Evil Star* 94). The *Love Poems* treat love as one of the themes but with a difference. They explore love’s turbulence and joy, and also cover topics such as physical love, masturbation and adultery. As Maxine Kumin observes, “Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring … Today, the remonstrance seem almost quaint” (“How It Was” xxxiv). The observation holds good as it paved way for many women writers from all over the world to explore their innermost feelings and experiences in their poetry.

Sexton transforms the familiar Grimm’s Fairy Tales into poetry in *Transformations*, the fifth volume of poetry which was published in 1971. Sexton got reacquainted with them due to her daughter Linda’s interest in them. She started writing her own version of it. Her observations on the book are as follows: “I realize that the *Transformations* are a departure from my usual style… I wrote them because I had to. . . because I wanted to. . . because it made me happy. I would like my readers to see this side of me, and it is not in every case the
lighter side. Some of the poems are grim. In fact I don’t know how to typify them except to agree that I have made them very contemporary. It would further be a lie to say that they weren’t about me as much as my other poetry” (Letters 362). Posing the role of a ‘witch-creator’ Sexton has chosen certain tales which would yield to her flights of fancy and in the process of transformation she shifts her focus from the illusory world created in the original Tales to the realistic world.

Sexton’s forty-fourth birthday saw the publication of The Book of Folly: Fire and Ice (1972), her sixth volume of poetry. The book is dedicated to the poet’s younger daughter “For Joy” with a single telling line, “When she comes to this business of words” and the words forming the poems are again explicitly autobiographical. This volume, which consists of thirty poems, covers a range of topics beginning from the task of writing which actually denies her a ‘normal’ woman’s existence, then shifting her focus to her physician who “ought to have more respect to her heart” and then recording her true feelings and concerns for her daughter Linda in “Mother and Daughter.” The collection also includes poems like “One-legged Man” who needs his other leg, his woman for, after all, she is useful at times:

I keep thinking that what I need
to do is buy my leg back.
Surely it is for sale somewhere,
Poor broken tool, poor ornament. (21-24)

The year 1974 witnessed the publication of Sexton’s next collection entitled The Death Notebooks. Her preoccupation with death is established in the volume though right
from the beginning of her poetic career she has been consistently dealing with the theme of death. The collection also contains poems that deal with God as she realizes her helplessness and limitations as a human. In fact, her anxiety to die reveals her desire to live eternally in a divine world which is free from the flaws of mundane existence.

*The Awful Rowing Toward God* is the last planned collection of Anne Sexton’s poetry and it was published in 1975, four months after her death. In her own words the poems of the collection are “raw, unworked, all first drafts, written in a frenzy of despair and hope. To get out the meaning was the primary thing-while I had it, while the muse was with me” (*Letters* 390). Despite the hasty composition of these poems the volume contains some of her best poems like “Rowing” which talks about her endless search for God, “The Civil War” which assures that she would definitely put together “the broken pieces of God” in her, “The Witch’s Life” which once again deals with the ordeal of a woman writer and “The Fallen Angels” which records her appeal to the fallen angel to “whisper something holy / before you pinch me / into the grave” (37-39). Sexton declares in “Frenzy”:

I am, each day,

typing out the God

my typewriter believes in.

Very quick. Very intense,

like a wolf at a live heart.

Not lazy.

When a lazy man, they say,
looks toward heaven,

the angels close the windows. (3-11)

Through her poignant words she affirms her belief in confessional art and the simile of the wolf reveals the challenges faced by the artist in the process of creation. Thorough self-examination, especially done through the confessional mode is a critical experience; it is like a wolf tearing at a live heart. The heaven, here, is not ‘enosis’ –the poetic heaven – where the imagination gives shape to and unifies human experiences. The God, therefore, is also not the Puritan or the Transcendental God, but an entity presiding over art and artifice.

45 Mercy Street is one of the posthumously published works of Anne Sexton. It was published by her daughter Linda in 1976 and when Sexton started writing these poems she called the book The Life Notebooks but later she realized that “I absolutely cannot call it The Life Notebooks because I think I have yet to write that book” (Letters 416). It was a period when she was deeply tormented by her divorce and according to Diana Hume George, Sexton thought that the divorce would ease her pain but unfortunately it only aggravated her problems which resulted in her suicide on 4 October 1974. The poems in the collection such as “45 Mercy Street”, “Bat”, “Snake”, “Sheep”, “The Wedlock”, “Divorce”, “Killing the Love”, and “End, Middle, Beginning” once again deal with anger, guilt, fear, love, deception, and death.

The other volumes of poetry which were published after her death include Words for Dr.Y. and Last Poems. Words for Dr.Y contains three sections: (i) Letters to Dr.Y which consists of twenty-three poems related to Sexton’s interaction with her psychiatrist, (ii) The
second section is entitled *Poems 1971-1973* which has been arranged in the manner of composition and deals with death, bitterness and love. (iii) The third section is called *The Horoscope Poems* and the fourteen poems of the collection are an attempt to understand her traits and nature as an individual. There are six poems found in *Last Poems* and they deal with two prominent themes, love and death.

Having authored several volumes of poetry, Anne Sexton confessed that “the stuff I write is so controversial. No one will like it….“ (*Letters* 68). As the poet talked much about her inner being, her madness and female physicality, John Holmes, her friend-critic “told me (her) that I shouldn’t write such personal poems about the madhouse”. He said, “That isn’t a fit subject for poetry” (“Kevles Interview” 89). Despite such disparaging remarks she continued with her soul-baring writing as it helped her cope with reality in all its bleakness. She also maintained that she “can’t write any other way… The writer is stuck with what he can do” (“Kevles Interview” 90).

Throughout her life, Anne Sexton consulted her psychiatrist and was hospitalized for depression. Many poems were an aftermath of her stay in those ‘summer hotels’ or ‘sealed hotels’ as she described those mental institutions. In her own words, in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, she was “giving the experience of madness” (“Kevles Interview” 94) and Bedlam becomes the typical locale of her poems that deal with madness. Sexton’s preoccupation with madness has eventually resulted not in pandemonium but in art, that is, poetry. One really wonders whether a person who goes through acute depression can objectively and coherently
translate her experience so well as there seems to be a method in her madness, to use a Shakespearean expression.

The opening poem of her maiden collection “You, Doctor Martin” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 3) reveals every aspect of poetry tinged with confession. The poem begins on a dramatic note “You, Doctor Martin, walk / from breakfast to madness” (1-2). The words are addressed to her physician Dr. Martin Orne who does not belong to their world of madness obviously but is forced to enter into their world due to his vocation as a psychiatrist. Thus, “walk from breakfast to madness” is an example of syntactical foregrounding which describes the way he enters into the disorderly world of madhouse from the orderly, outside world where he has his breakfast. Then she tells us that she got into the “antiseptic tunnel” in late August and declares that she is the “queen of this summer hotel or the laughing bee on a stalk of death”. Though Sexton’s idiom seems to be modernist, reminding of Eliot’s “patient etherized upon a table”, there is a distinct difference. While Eliot’s metaphor captures a social malaise, Anne Sexton’s metaphor speaks of an individual sickness. The position of her being a ‘queen’ shows her supremacy over the other patients as she is less insane than the others, and also probably because of her skill to recreate her experiences into words. The image of “the laughing bee” sitting “on a stalk of death”, the compressed metaphor, is striking as it not only highlights the productive nature of the bee which is capable of ‘sweetness and light’ but also underscores her positive approach towards death. This is what we mean by method in madness.
The second stanza gives a description of how the patients in the asylum “stand in broken lines” which suggests disorder, “at the frozen gates of dinner”. Of course, life has come to a standstill for these inmates as their movement is externally contained. Therefore, life is frozen in the madhouse and what each encounters is nothing but boredom. She further goes on to narrate the mechanical chores which includes the making of moccasins:

…At first my hands
kept empty, unraveled for the lives
they used to work. Now I learn to take
them back, each angry finger that demands
I mend what another will break
tomorrow (17-22)

Thereby, she establishes a connection between moccasins and poetry. Even writing poetry is complex and difficult like making moccasins initially but now her ‘angry finger’ is used to the job to the extent that she even revisions her previous craft to attain perfection.

In the asylum, life has been reduced to two activities, “sleep or cry” for Sexton. With the assurance of Dr. Martin’s “third eye” watching them all the time she says

You twist in the pull
of the foxy children who fall
like floods of life in frost (35-37)
She acknowledges the great efforts taken by Dr. Martin to comprehend the subtle machinations of the minds of the inmates of the asylum. At the same time the intensity of the trauma is brought out by the analogy of floods of life in frost. The usage of alliteration is noteworthy since it offers a glimpse of sanity and order in an insane world. The stagnation experienced in their lives presently, as implied by ‘frost’ is temporary just as the frost, is and, thereby the poet is hopeful of a better future for all of them. But then the idea of sin torments her for the state of madness takes her closer to those otherwise forgotten sins as she deliberates “I am queen of all my sins / forgotten. Am I still lost?”. She seems to fear her sins more than she fears madness as they seem to engulf her completely and there seems to be no way out. Thus, the speaker talks about her madness in detail as both the person who experiences the poem and the one who reflects upon it.

The poem “Kind Sir: These Woods” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 4) brings out her fear of being rejected by the world as she deals with “untold and unreal” subjects like madness and guilt:

… I am afraid of course
to look this inward look that society scorns -
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns. (21-24)

Sexton expresses her fear of writing such personal poems as society does not approve of such writings. Yet, she continues her quest in ‘these woods’, which could be metaphor for the source of her poetry, to find out finally the faculty of her poetry, which resides within her
own self. She also talks about the dilemma as she is sandwiched between the grapes and the thorns. ‘Grapes’ might refer to the art that finally overcomes the ‘thorns’ which could be sharp criticism her art evokes. Thus, despite the bitter criticisms leveled against her, Sexton continued to write in the confessional mode till the end of her life and these poems are grapes of wrath overcome.

Colloquialism, one of the features of Sexton’s poetry, helps the reader to readily participate in the intensity of the confusions experienced by the speaker of the poem, “Music Swims Back To Me” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 6). The opening line “Wait Mister. Which way is home?” at once captures the helplessness and the disorderly state of mind of the speaker. She is lost in the darkness of the “private institution” and, therefore, she wants to get away from it. The urge to go home suggests consciousness, and at the same time her disoriented self is unfolded as she does not know the way to her home. But the ‘mister’ is of no use as he is unable to guide her back home and memory comes to her rescue as she “can feel the tune they played / the might they left me / in the private institution on a hill” (8-10). Thus, memory which suggests the past and her link with the outside world and the loss of memory are juxtaposed in the poem to paint the trauma of the speaker.

“Lullaby” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 29) is another poem which has bedlam as its setting and it describes how the speaker-patient slips from consciousness to unconsciousness having taken the evening pills from the nurse. The pills are successful in erasing the troubling state of consciousness. Here are the lines that describe the sleeping pill:

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 (14-18)

The effect of the white, pearl-like pill is explained by the poet when she says that her own skin has become a loose bolt of cloth. The medicine has obviously severed the connection between the mind and the body and whatever sensations the skin / body might experience will fail to have any effect on the patient.

The plight of the speaker-patient is further captured in “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 27). In this poem, God comes to the rescue of the poet-patient just as the pills alleviated her pain in “Lullaby”. There is something ‘suspicious’ or even eerie in the ambience of the asylum which terrifies the patient. As one who is utterly helpless and hopeless she turns to God for refuge as she quotes from the twenty-third Psalm of the Bible:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow

...........

I will fear no evil, fear no evil (3-8)

The idea of turning to God for security and comfort is the theme of the poem “For the Year of the Insane: A Prayer” (Live or Die 131). Written in August, 1963, the poem is in the form of a prayer fraught with anguish experienced by the poet during a period of
recovery after the electroshock therapy for nervous breakdown. The poem has a dramatic opening with the poet making a fervent appeal to the mother of Christ and by implication the mother of all mankind:

O Mary, Fragile mother,

hear me, hear now.

Although I do not know your words (1-3)

There is a note of urgency with the repetition of the word “hear” as the poet pleads to be heard “now” although she has not been properly initiated into the doctrines of the Catholic faith: “I do not know your words”. Her predicament is made explicit in the sixth line where she declares herself to be an ‘unbeliever’. In an interview with Barbara Kevles she observed that “there is a hard-core part of me that believes, and there’s this little critic in me that believes nothing” (23). It is this irreconcilable situation that is presented in the poem: one part of the poet making a strong plea to be saved and the other remaining an “unbeliever”. Her cry to be saved is undermined by suspicion. That is why the rosary “lies unblessed” in her hand and each bead feels “hard” between her fingers because they lack practice.

A similar situation is presented to us in “With Mercy for the Greedy” (All My Pretty Ones 62) where she declares: “I detest my sins and I try to believe / in The cross … / But I can’t. Need is not quite belief”. These lines mirror Anne Sexton’s plight in For the Year of the Insane. However, in such a desperate situation she cries out to divine grace for a smooth transition from life to death and from insanity to mental stability. In a penitent mood she
confesses that she is “ugly” and still “submerged” in her sinful past and driven mad by her chaotic thoughts. Although there are chairs she lies “on the floor” in an act of supplication.

Being a beginner she falters at every word of the prayer as revealed in the line “word for word I stumble”, but soon a stage is reached when she is so completely absorbed in praying that she becomes physically almost inert (“only my hands are alive”) as she slips into a trance in which she has a vision of Mary (“I feel your mouth touch mine”). There is a strain of religious experience in the poetry of Anne Sexton as she confessed in an interview that the Jesuits will “find my work very religious, and take my books on retreats, and teach my poems in class” (Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics 26).

After a faltering beginning the chanting of prayer comes in waves “hammering in upon” her, the intensity making her “sick in the summer heat”. The only relief from inner suffocation is provided by the open window that not only appears to listen to her prayer, but also, “like an enormous fish”, exhales her “Wide lung” and allows a breath of fresh air into the room. The widow “murmurs” and acts as a “soother” for her frayed nerves.

In the next section she recounts how she is constantly assailed by the thoughts of death. The lines “closer and closer / comes the hour of my death”, suggest an immediacy of perception; of something moving forward ominously and relentlessly. Death has become such an important feature of her inner landscape that “In the mind there is a thin alley called death”, and she moves through it in the same facile manner as a fish through water. The death-wish so overwhelms her that she is unable to grasp the fullness of life and grow limp: “My body is useless / It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet”. Her body has “given up” and
the only signs of movement at the mental level is the recitation of “half-learned Hail Mary and the Full of Grace”. Her proximity to death is more pronounced when she accepts bread, the sacrament, mechanically without being conscious of the act and she is almost Nietzschian who said that there is always contempt in the act of speaking:

Without words one may touch bread
and be handed bread
and make no sound

(45-47)

In the penultimate section the prayer to Mary is renewed: “O Mary, tender physician / come with powder and herbs / for I am in the center”. God is the best healer when one finds oneself in the thick of problems. The momentary relief from confusion comes in the form of wine being handed to her. But this consolation is disturbed when the fear of being rejected overtakes her. Earlier she accepted wine with a child-like simplicity but now there is the fear of coughing it out as the fear of sin takes over.

The concluding stanza opens with the poets’ appeal to Mother Mary to be seen: ‘O Mary, open your eyelids” for the poet is in “the kingdom of crazy and the sleeper”. She further cries to Mary as follows:

O mother of the womb
did I come for blood alone?
O little mother,
I am in my own mind
I am locked in the wrong house.  

Christ shed his blood in order to save mankind. But since it was shed for the sins of man, blood in a way reminds one of one’s sinful nature.

When Anne Sexton was troubled by madness momentarily she was in the grip of death forever. Death is one of the prominent themes handled by the confessionals and Sexton is no exception. Her biography reveals her preoccupation with death which culminated in her suicide. In one of her letters to Brian Sweeney in 1970 she writes “You are so right about my fear of death. I have embraced it only because I feared it so” (Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters 368). These words remind one of the defiant words of John Donne who put an end to Death himself by embracing death so that he would enter into eternal life in his religious poem “Death be not Proud”. Though Anne’s poetry does not reveal that sort of an anger towards death, it is obvious from the large number of death poems she has written that she was not merely disturbed by the thoughts of her own death but also by, the death of others like her Nana, mother, father and friends like John Holmes and Sylvia Plath. At times she wonders whether these deaths were the cause of her madness as revealed in one of her letters: “I’m tired of all these dead. There are getting to be too many of them” (Letters 151).

There is a deep sense of loss and despair exhibited in the death poems where she talks about her kith and kin. She believes that “Life is a trick / life is a kitten in a sack” (Some Foreign Letters 16) and, therefore, it is always better to die. The inevitability of death and the inability of one to accept it is the theme of poem “Old” (All My Pretty Ones 69). Reality is harsh and painful and it is in the world of dream that one finds comfort and solace.
Dreams are expressions of one’s suppressed feeling, the time when the sub-conscious that has been suppressed throughout the day surfaces. Therefore, the poet longs to remain in the world of dreams and does not want to accept reality.

It is the desire of every individual to remain young. Every culture has a myth related to the quest for fountain of youth that will enable a person to remain young always. The opening lines of the poem are as follows:

I’m afraid of needles.
I’m tired of rubber sheets and tubes.
I’m tired of faces that I don’t know
and now I think that death is starting (1-4)

Written in the first person pronoun “I” the poet expresses her fear of going through a life filled with needles, rubber sheets and strangers as they disclose the fact that she is getting closer to death. The repetition of “I’m” not only foregrounds the ‘self’ of the poet but also brings out the monotony and boredom which mark her life as a patient. The lines also capture the last stage of a person’s life as described in Shakespeare’s *All the World’s a stage* when physical and mental charm is lost and when there is a need for constant support until one’s death. Thus, “needles”, “rubber sheets”, “tubes” and “unknown faces” refer to the time spent in a hospital under the care of nurses and doctors.

Memories of the past are difficult to let go and they grow along with us creating more longing and dissatisfaction with the present. Even as the poet dreams of memories of
childhood fun and laughter there is resentment when woken up into the present reality, for “In a dream you are never eighty” (“Old” 18). Thus the poet concludes by saying that childhood days are the best part of a person’s life for it is filled with happiness and absolutely devoid of the fear of growing old and the inevitability of death.

“Three Green Windows” (Live or Die 105), a free-verse poem, is about reliving the youth at a time when the person reaches the middle-age and is going through what is called middle-age syndrome of longing to be young and vibrant again. The poet awakes one Sunday afternoon to view the outdoors through the perspective of the three windows in her room which are in three different directions: West, South and East. The three windows have different shades of light but reflect the same green of the trees outside which have just started to get their summer hue. Windows signify the windows in the person’s mind or, in other words, the poet’s mindscape. The mindscape throws open possibilities that are not possible in the real world. This is done by first erasing the reality that is perceived by the physical senses. As a consequence, the poet appears to be too relaxed that she feels “as light as a sponge” having got rid of two significant worries (although temporarily):

I have forgotten that old friends are dying
I have forgotten that I grow middle – aged (5-6)

Thus it is forgotten that old friends are dying and that the poet is nearing that day. It is also not to be remembered that the poet has attained middle-age. The image of the tree that is thick and sensuous and that of the gargoyles which are wet induces memories of time in the life of the poet: a time when everything was fresh and green, when the body was firm, fit and
supple, when the blood was alive and the mind just as alive and fresh with new ideas and innovation.

The freshness of everything around her makes her happy as she is eased of any burden. It also shows how nature has the ability to nurture and repair itself. So also the mind when it is inspired by nature has the ability to look beyond the trivialities of the present and to revive the lost ambitions and goals. Nature also comforts her like a mother by giving good rest and reward for the hard labour. The fruits of summer stand for reward in one’s life for all the hard work. The leaves denote youth and innocence which are lost when one grows up physically and metaphorically.

In the last stanza the poet goes through the process of unlearning all that education has taught and relearning, as the poet says, the ‘life that was mine’ as the poet says. Knowledge, learning, education and intellect have played spoil sport in that they have taken away the life that can be enjoyed and rejuvenated by becoming one with nature. In this half-asleep state of trance the poet realizes the truth of being alive by becoming the child she once was. What was lost through mindless gaining of knowledge has been realized through water and trees.

The unusual serenity found in “Three Green Windows” does not last long as death seems to be at the threshold and that she cannot but embrace him. The different strategies employed by death to conquer people make the poet wonder at him, “Mr. Death, you actor, you have many masks” (“For Mr. Death who stands with His Door Open” 2) Death is
inevitable and, therefore, it has to be accepted. The only thing the poet can do is to place an obligation with regard to his approach towards her:

But when it comes to my death let it be slow,

Let it be pantomime, this last peep show,

So that I may squat at the edge trying on

my black necessary trousseau

(44-48)

The imagery of a play continues as she wants death to be gentle and slow so that like a professional actor on stage she will completely forget the outside world and its worries, which will further enable her to completely and thoroughly experience death for, it is the “last peep show”. Terms like “pantomime”, “peep show” and “trousseau” convey the idea of drama and hence it is appropriate that she is clad in the right costume.

While the poem “For Mr. Death who stands …” reveals death as an actor, the poem “The Silence” (The Book of Folly 318) shows how “silence is death”. Writing is a form of communication that the poet has adopted in times when the need arises to talk to someone. Unfortunately, this communication is one-way as it does not respond to her. Yet in order to rid her loneliness she tries to write:

I am filling the room

with the words from my pen

Words leak out of it like a miscarriage

I am zinging words out into the air
Sexton started writing poetry on the advice of her psychiatrist who meant it as a therapy. But the futility of the exercise of writing to save her is explicitly brought out by the two analogies. Words, for Anne Sexton, do not appear out of creative impulse but they “leak out” of the pen because the mind can no longer contain them. Therefore, it appears as if she is left with no option but to carry on with her writing. The comparison of words to the premature expulsion of a foetus from the womb shows how poetry comes out of her spontaneously and voluntarily. At the same time her off-spring is yet to attain maturity. The second analogy where she compares words to squash balls shows how they spring back and reach her zealously to continue to torment her, as silence seems to prevail irrespective of her poetic talent.

The last stanza defines silence as death:

The silence is death
It comes each day with its shock
to sit on my shoulder, a white bird,
and peck at the black eyes
and the vibrating red muscle
of my mouth
Death haunts her as she describes death as “a white bird” which visits her daily and happens to be her sole companion. The bond between her and the bird is visible from the way it sits on her shoulder pecking at the black eyes and the red muscle. Both “black” and “red” are disturbed and finally destroyed by the destructive “white bird” for it is no ordinary bird but a bird of prey. Thus the poet shows how “silence” creates an ambience congenial for the visitation of death.

As a result of the “silence” which kills her, Sexton would love to embrace her only visitor Death, voluntarily. This idea of death takes us to her poem “Wanting to Die” (Live or Die 142) which is a deliberation into the “special language” of suicide and thereby brings out suicide’s complete isolation from the comforting world of human touch, the total breakdown of predictable relationship between the human and the natural and the alienation of the individual. The poem is a monologue as there is an implied listener whom the speaker addresses. Adopting a conversational tone the poet confesses how she suffers from loss of memory which has disconnected her from life as she remains “unmarked by that voyage” called life. Then she goes on to elaborate on how the “unnamable lust” called death keeps returning to her.

Sexton confides that she has no complaints against life but still she would like to die.

But suicides have a special language.

Like carpenters they want to know which tools.

They never ask why build.  

(7-9)
There is an echo of the poem Max addressed to her friend Max Kumin where she brings out a similar idea “to build our death like carpenters”. Obviously the outside world can never understand why anyone would commit suicide as the language of suicide is unique and special. Like the carpenter chiseling wood, death also slowly chisels life. Besides, the carpenter in a way symbolizes death.

The longing to die is further pronounced when she calls it a passion. She is also impressed by death’s loyalty:

and yet she waits for me, year after year,

to so delicately unto an old wound,

to empty my breath from its bad prison (25-27)

The poet’s passion for suicide is visible as she talks about how suicide becomes a soothing balm as it frees the individual from the agony of an “old wound”. The body, therefore, becomes a “bad prison” as it is not only the abode of the “wound” but also because it entertains thoughts of guilt and fear as a consequence of the wound. Hence suicide becomes a welcome relief for it empties her breath delicately, thereby paving way for its liberation.

The theme of suicide continues in Sexton’s other poem entitled “Suicide Note” (Live or Die 156). The poet begins by stating that suicide is much better than to be alive and remains insignificant like a worm, and to go through the monthly cycle which keeps reminding one that she is a woman. In simple words, death is better than to be born a woman. As suicide is not acceptable in the eyes of law and religion the poet knows that if it were
committed it would only take her to hell. The process of death is such that it changes her perspective about life just like a person who wears lenses. Nature seems fierce to her and life seems to be rocking her. The rocking movement denotes her struggle to find solace in the last moments of desperation. Life is such that it will always seek to survive. That is the law of nature. But now that she has decided to take control over this enormous power called life, nature is fighting back and trying to offer her comfort. She says that

Life tilts backward and forward.

Even the wasps cannot find my eyes (26-27)

Wasps are known to recognize the colour blue. In her case eyes are closed and, therefore, wasps are unable to find them. This is how she reacts to life. The eyes are a significant part of one’s body and according to the poet, there was a time when the eyes were awake and responsive to stimulus. But the painful experiences of life have rendered the eyes lifeless.

Later in the poem she affirms that the act of committing suicide is her destiny. Nature follows a pattern of life making sure that people grow old and die either a natural death or owing to some ailment. Death is destined for everyone who is born:

But surely you know that everyone has a death,

his own death,

waiting for him.

So I will go now

without old age or disease,
Wildly but accurately,
Knowing my best route,
Carried by that toy donkey I rode all these years

……

Here, the poet expresses her desire to go against nature. She also admits that she is a coward to face the circumstances of life. She has chosen a path for herself wherein the toy donkey would carry her away from this world. The deceptive nature of life and death is known to her and she has now completely surrendered her life at the feet of death.

The idea of carpentry continues in the poem “Death King” (Words for Dr.Y 587) too. For a woman who faces problems in life the only solution that she finds is death. The poet dreams of hiring a carpenter to make her a coffin in which she rests her body from the pain inflicted on her by time. She has to come to terms with her death. She allows death to take away the last breath from her and waits for the decomposition process to start.

Death will be the end of fear
and the fear of dying, ....

Anne Sexton confesses how she is haunted by the fear of death and the only way to put an end to this fear is to die so that she enters another world which is free from the fear of death.

Apart from the theme of madness which resulted in obsession with self, Anne Sexton also talks about issues related to love and marriage. In fact, her poetry can be viewed as a
sensitive documentation of a woman’s life. Anne’s desire to lead a peaceful married life is expressed in an interview in 1968: “All I wanted was a little piece of life – to be married, to have children… I was trying my damnedest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can’t build little picket fences to keep the nightmares out” (“Kevles Interview” 3). Sexton could not come to terms with the multifaceted roles – such as lover, wife, mother – supposed to be played as a married woman and there was hardly any time and energy for creative impulses. Therefore, Sexton’s treatment of love and marriage is rarely positive and encouraging and it is no wonder that her marriage ended up in a divorce.

Sexton yearns for unadulterated love as revealed in the poem “From the Garden” (All My Pretty Ones 84). The poem is an invitation to her beloved to join her in the garden filled with lilies. The poet believes that the natural ambience is just congenial for them to enjoy each other’s company forgetting their mutual worries and clashes. The serene, happy mood is disturbed in the poem “US” because of the dominance of the man in their love relationship. It is the man who controls their affair and the woman is glorified as his “princess” so long as she allows him to rule over her. The image of a woman eventually becoming a slave to man in the name of love is a far cry from the illusionary notions of romantic love.

Woman becoming a slave in the name of the patriarchal institution called “marriage” is further explored in two significant poems, “Man and Wife” and “Housewife”. The poem “Man and Wife” (Live or Die 116) talks about the woes of marriage. The title is striking in that after the Justice of Peace solemnizes a marriage he declares that the two have become
“Man and Wife”. The identity of the man remains intact and he does not become a husband, whereas the woman has to transform herself into a wife. This is the main reason why marriage is a failure in the modern world.

We are not lovers.
We do not even know each other.
We look alike
But we have nothing to say
We are like pigeons… (1-5)

These are the opening lines of the poem and almost every line begins with “we” but the rest of the line questions or even negates the spirit of togetherness expressed by the word “we”. The couple, soon after their wedding, realizes that there is no ideal love which they had fantasized about in their dreams before marriage. Hence, the love which exists before marriage disappears after marriage and that is the reason they are not lovers anymore but mere strangers as they fail to comprehend and complement each other’s feelings and emotions. When they get married they believe that they are made for each other but after the marriage they become mad at each other and, therefore, they have nothing to say to each other, not even sweet-nothings. All their talk perhaps turns into arguments and hence they have stopped communicating with each other.

According to the poet, man and wife are like the pair of pigeons that has left its place in search of wealth. After blindly falling in love they are forced to live together. They both have been to various places in search of wealth and have managed to horde up sufficiently.
But all the money is eyewash to hide the fact they are nothing more than strangers. And their bodily functions slow down as they grow old. Then it is too late to realize one’s romantic dreams. While they wasted all their youth in search of wealth, now during their old age they realize that they have wasted their life. It is pathetic that they are even unable to render a song together.

The poem “House Wife” (All My Pretty Ones 77) gives the impression that the most unfortunate thing to happen in a woman’s life is marriage. But society has succeeded in hiding this truth and has fabricated a lot of fairy tales to make it look as if “they lived happily ever after” is real and that the woman can expect the same in her marital life. The poem portrays the life of a typical housewife. The first line “some women marry houses” and the line “Men enter by force” sum up the reality of married life especially for a housewife. The poet attributes human qualities to the house whose walls are “permanent and pink”. Pink is a color associated with feminine qualities. The walls signify the metaphorical walls in the mind of the housewife, walls that denote notions of femininity created by the society. The housewife sits all day “on her knees” - showing submission - “faithfully” - she does not desire anything outside her home and she is loyal to her husband – “washing herself down” – exhausting her energy, skills and creativity in doing what is required of her. The reference to Jonah of the Bible reflects the idea that men need a woman in the place of their mother after marriage. The poet concludes by saying that the major cause for her problem is “her mother”. A woman, as she grows up, watches her mother becoming the sacrificial goat for the welfare of the family and, therefore, the young woman believing this to be the way life has to be lived, follows suit. And there lies the tragedy. A striking feature of the two poems, “Man and
“Wife” and “Housewife” is that the usual use of the first person “I” is completely missing. Thereby, Sexton blatantly and readily universalizes the experience and fate of every married woman in the world.

Fairy tales, too, are revisited by Sexton in order to debunk the romantic notions of love and marriage. The poem “Cinderella” (Transformations 255) is a fabulous rewriting of the well-known Grimm’s Tale “Cinderella”. The real story is parodied in this poem by creating new characters like the dove that drops everything that “Cinderella” wants. Also this is a critique on the rags to riches stories which have a fairy tale ending that goes “and they lived happily ever after”. The poet explains that it is only in the fairy tales that the characters live a-happily-ever-after life. This is because after marriage they become frozen in time. Their role is over once marriage takes place. After that they do not know what to do with their lives. Again this is typical of youngsters who get married with all fairy tale-like imaginations and dreams about love and marriage.

The poem also presents the other characters like the step-mother, the step-sisters, the father and the prince in a different light. The fairy god-mother is replaced by a white dove. The prince, for example, craftily plans to find out about the princesses with whom he danced by placing cobbler’s wax. This shows the suspicious nature of men. But for a man who was able to locate the place where his princess had disappeared every day, it was so dumb that he was unable to recognize the falling drops of blood from the step-sister’s amputated big toe. A metaphorical amputation takes place in each woman whenever there is a need for her to please the man. And that the woman has gone through such a painful transformation is not
the man’s concern once he realizes that she is not the woman he was looking for. He can go on amputating each woman till he finally finds the one that suits him best:

He began to feel like a shoe salesman  
But he gave it one last try.  
This time Cinderella fit into the shoe  
Like a love letter into its envelope. (91-94)

Finally the wedding takes place between the prince and Cinderella and the last stanza sums up the reason behind the venture of having attempted such a re-reading.

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 timing of an egg,  
ever telling the same story twice,  
ever getting a middle aged spread,  
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity. (100-107)

These lines bring out the ironical contrast between illusion and reality with regard to marital life. One can almost visualize the sarcastic smile on the face of the poet as she writes these words. It is a result of the awareness of stark reality and as a married woman herself, Anne Sexton does not mince words at all when it comes to the portrayal of love in the context of
the relationship between man and woman. Even a casual reader cannot miss the contempt and anger when she mentions the ordinary, mean, mundane chores over which the couple argue. Thus, Sexton ends by stating that real life is in complete contrast to the notions of marriage created by the society.

Having exposed the sham of love and marriage in the context of the man-woman relationship, Sexton talks about her other relationships as well: Nana, her great-aunt, her mother, father, daughters and friends too. These are highly personal poems and, therefore, purely confessional in nature. Her biography reveals her fondness for her great-aunt, Anna Ladd Dingley, who tolerated her eccentricities. In a letter dated 1958 Sexton writes, “My Nana went crazy when I was thirteen … At the time I blamed myself for her going because she lived with our family and was my only friend. Then at thirteen I kissed a boy … and I was so pleased with my womanhood that I told Nana I was kissed and then she went mad…” (Letters 41). Anne Sexton always suffered from a feeling of guilt that she actually had caused the death of her dear aunt. The poem “Some Foreign Letters” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 9) reveals her love for the old woman whose memories continued to haunt her even after the woman’s death. The opening lines are as follows:

I knew you forever and you were always old,
Soft white lady of my heart… (1-2)

Though Sexton remembers her always as an old woman, in the poem she tries to see her Nana as a young girl who goes through the rituals of life till she is forced to vacate this world
by death. After her exit, Sexton goes through her old Nan’s letters and, in the process, she has learnt to love her more.

*All My Pretty Ones*, the second volume of poetry published by Sexton includes several poems dedicated to her kith and kin. The title poem “All My Pretty Ones” (*All My Pretty Ones* 49) is an address to her dead father who, according to the poet, has followed her mother who died just a month earlier. The speaker is both irritated and angry with her father as he has left her alone to “disencumber” his belongings which include “the residence you could not afford”. She also goes through “boxes of pictures” and a “yellow scrapbook” that reveal her father’s image in all his youth. It is a complex set of emotions which she experiences but the ultimate feeling is one of contempt as unfolded by the following lines:

Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator

my first lost keeper, to love or look at later (39-40)

Having learnt his “alcoholic tendencies” from the diary written by her mother, she hates him more for, as a grown up woman herself, she realizes that he had not been a good husband to her mother. Yet, the concluding lines show reconciliation with her father for Sexton makes an effort to forgive him:

Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,

bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you. (49-50)
Sexton’s relationship with her mother is again a strained one as she always believed that she was ignored and neglected by her mother, being the third daughter of her parents. Yet when she knew that her mother was suffering from cancer she was shattered because of two reasons: (i) Sexton thought that she gave cancer to her mother as her mother always believed, (ii) She was afraid that she would be infected by the same disease. In one of the letters she records her state of mind, “My life is falling through a sieve… I’m dropping out of myself. Partly because my mother is dying now and I …. I feel it is my fault… What do we do with our old hate?” (Letters 51).

The poem “The Division of Parts” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 42) deals with how the photocopy of Sexton’s will arrived by the mail bringing back old memories of her dead mother and how even in sleep she is disturbed by those thoughts, so much so that she has to curse her mother, “Dame, keep out of my slumber”.

The reflections on her mother continue in “Christmas Eve” (Live or Die 139) too. The speaker, who is thirty-five years old, continues to watch the portrait of her mother drinking the Christmas brandy. She looks intently at every feature of her mother and says that her face is as calm as a moon. Somehow thoughts of murder seeps into the speaker’s mind as revealed in the following lines:

You who led me by the nose
I saw you as you were
Then I thought of your body
as one thinks of murder…. (44-48)
The speaker immediately checks herself as she realizes the gravity of the problem of sin. So she seeks forgiveness and thereby the poem stands a testimony to show how confessional writing is therapeutic to the writer and vicariously to the reader at times.

Sexton’s relationship with her daughter is the theme of many poems like “The Double Image”, “The Fortress”, “Little Girl, My String Bean” and “The Pain for my Daughter”. “The Double Image” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 35), one of Sexton’s favourite poems, is “two-hundred odd lines of confession and art” (Letters 44). The poem is written in seven sections and it is addressed to her four-year-old-daughter, Joyce. Sexton experienced a sense of guilt as she was unable to perform her role as a mother, being hospitalized for her depression and suicidal attempts. The poet tells her dear daughter,

We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly three autumns you did not live here.
They said I’d never get you back again… (3-7)

Obviously enjoying the feeling of togetherness the poet looks upon herself as the yellow leaf – pale, withered and ready to die, and yet clinging on to life with the fear of her daughter being taken away.

The two previous, unsuccessful suicide attempts are mentioned by the speaker thus:
Death was simpler than I’d thought.
The day life made you well and whole
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead

Until the white men pumped the poison out. (23-27)

The witches are the “ugly angels” who blamed her as being responsible for the separation between the mother and the daughter. The speaker advises her daughter to love herself as it is the best way to deal with one’s life for “there is no special God”, she can recommend. It is natural for any to question the existence of God when she has gone through difficulties in life and Anne Sexton is no exception. Of course, Sexton became thoroughly helpless during those days of separation that she had to be taken care of by her mother, as she confesses in the poem, and the healing process was so slow that it took not days but years for her to recover her sanity. In the meanwhile, the daughter had forgotten her to the extent that she failed to recognize Sexton as her mother at their reunion.

The concluding lines of the poem establish Sexton’s love for her daughter and how she believes that her daughter would restore happiness in her otherwise sad and worried existence:

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

And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure.
Sexton looked for intensity in relationships as a means of security for one’s self. Her anxiety to do much better than her own mother constantly worried her. She regarded her mother as a failure and did not want herself to be one too. Despite her attempts to be a great mother, Sexton could not do justice to her role as a mother as she frequented the asylum every now and then. Perhaps, confessionalism also results from an extreme eagerness to excel oneself and be known to others. This, particularly, when one is conscious that one is a poet, one has a way with language and then one wishes to “confess” which in a way cures the person of a possible mental illness. This is common to both the American and the Indian poets. The poem “Pain for a Daughter” (Live or Die 163) shows how the relationship between her and her daughter, Linda, is frozen as a consequence of her frequent absences from home. The poem records the death of the mother-daughter relationship. The poem is divided into four sections and the first three sections of the poem are used by Sexton to prepare the grounds for what is to follow in the final section.

The entire opening section is devoted to the intense love the daughter has for horses. She is so adept at handling them that the poet declares “that she has mastered, any and all”. The way she tends “a pony and a foal” almost creates visions of fond mothering. Although basically squeamish by nature, she performs the unpleasant task of draining the boil of her pony suffering from distemper. The images employed in this section are striking. While the swollen jaw is likened to an “enormous grape”, the pus from the boil is seen as running “like
a milk on the barn floor”. The images are quite startling in the sense that they facilitate the speaker to enable the reader to see the disagreeable in terms of the agreeable.

If in the opening section the daughter is “Blind with love” for horses, in the second section, she is characterized as being “Blind with loss” at the death of her pony. The word “blind” suggests that both love and loss are strongly experienced. In order to overcome the loss of her favorite pony she visits her neighbor’s stable and tries to befriend his “flaming horses”. She coaxes and cajoles his thoroughbred with the hope of being able to ride him “thinking it will burn like furnace / under her small- hipped English seat”. But her efforts prove a disaster as the thoroughbred plants its hoof on her foot and the horseshoe tears her flesh, ripping off the tips of her toes. Hence “Blind with pain” she walks back home bleeding profusely.

In the final section the daughter comes home “Blind with fear” and “sits on the toilet” with the father cleaning the wound. She is in great pain and cries out “Oh my God, help me!” This is the crucial moment in the poem as the main theme of the poem, that is, the mother and daughter relationship, is revealed. The fact that the daughter did not cry out “mama” creates a feeling of alienation in the mother. She says, “where a child would have cried Mama! / where a child would have believed in Mama!” the daughter “bit the towel and called on God”. As a result of this cry of the daughter, the mother feels an outsider as she is also blinded by her own sense of hurt and guilt. The idea of alienation is extended to the last lines of the poem when the speaker imagines that even if death were to stare her daughter in the face, she would not seek her mother’s help.
I saw her torn in childbirth,
and I saw her, at that moment,
in her own death and I knew that she
knew… (49-52)

After detailing the death of the emotional bond between the mother and the daughter, the speaker recalls her daughter’s birth to show how this bond was ruptured at birth itself and says that the present incident only confirms the separation.

When relationships failed, both madness and thoughts of death made Sexton to contemplate on God. Her bond with God is again ambiguous as she seems to believe in the mercy of Christ sometimes and at other times, because of the overpowering nature of sin and guilt, she doubts his grace. Several poems talk about God: “The Year of the Insane”, “The Sickness Unto Death”, “Not So Not So” and “The Rowing Endeth”. The last complete volume of poems entitled Awful Rowing Toward God shows her search for God from the beginning till the end of her life as she knows that “To be without God is to be a snake / who wants to swallow an elephant” (“The Play” 25-26). Through this analogy Sexton not only highlights the significant role religion plays in one’s life, but also underscores the idea that one would befriend Satan or would be doomed like Satan if one does not embrace God, a theme Marlowe very forcefully dramatized in Dr. Faustus.

The poem “Not So. Not So.” (The Awful Rowing Toward God 472) confirms her belief in God when she says “I cannot walk an inch / without trying to walk to God” (1-2). After a series of search for God “in the graves of the Horses”, in the “frenzy of the bees”, “in
the tailor mending” her pantsuit, in “Boston”, in the “bird”, in the “potter”, she finally finds out his abode:

Look at your heart
that flutters in and out like a moth.
God is not indifferent to your need
You have a thousand prayers
but God has one (23-27)

Having located His place she would like to moor her life-boat safely. The sail towards Him is no ordinary one as revealed by the blisters that “broke and healed”.

I’m mooring my row boat
at the dock of the island called God
......
I empty myself from the wooden boat
and onto the flesh of the Island (“The Rowing Endeth” 1-13)

The realization that life is a journey and its goal is to comprehend the omnipotence of God finally takes place in the poet after she had failed to secure comfort in human relationships.

Francis Hart writes that “confession’ is personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self “(491). And Sexton’s poetry can be looked upon as an attempt to put the fractured self together. Preoccupation with the self may
be viewed as being subjective for a poet but in the case of poets like Anne Sexton it becomes a compulsion as “to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 25). Thus, in an attempt to keep herself physically and mentally alive, Sexton takes a peep into her ‘self’ and “Self in 1958” (*Live or Die* 158) is one such poem. The poem begins with a question: “What is reality?” This query has sent many a philosopher and a saint on a quest and each one has a unique view to offer. Sexton tries to tear the thin film which separates reality and illusion.

I am a plaster doll; I pose
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall
Upon some shellacked and grinning person,
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.

Am I approximately an I. (“Self in 1958” 2-6)

These lines exhibit the robot-like existence of a woman. When it is time to open her eyes she does so and when it is time to close her eyes she does that too. The fact that a woman has to play dumb before a man to please has not changed over time. This feigned ignorance is to be put on before her husband so that he remains pleased. Even her clothes and accessories are those that are advertised and considered popular and many times they may not be her choice.

The next stanza explains the space that is available for her to exist:

I live in a doll’s house
with four chairs,
The iron bed stands for her submission to the authority she finds in her bedroom. Her sexual experiences are given by the authority she is forced to submit to, which rules with an iron fist. The term “doll’s house” is very significant because of it’s reference to the character Nora of the play *The Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen. The space available for her is fixed and cannot be modified just as in a doll’s house. The objects therein are artificial and they exist for the sake of making the place look livable. The poet says that all woman end up living in such a place after their marriage.

The mundane domestic chores and acts to be carried out by the woman are highlighted in the following stanza.

Someone plays with me,
Plants me in the all-electric kitchen,
Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?
Someonepretends with me -
…..
They think I am me!  

The kitchen space is a place where power struggle takes place between the women who have access to it. It is a space where women compete for attention from the male world and also a place where she is forced to remain. “Someone pretends with me” is a line which sums up
the predicament of the couple, both man and woman, for after a while, they wonder why they are married and they also do not know what to do with their lives. The peak of irony is that the patriarchal world identifies her existence by all her exterior shows. They define her depending on how well she falls in line with their norms.

What is reality
to this synthetic doll
who should smile, who should shift gears,
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
and have no evidence of ruin or fears? (31-35)

According to the poet there is nothing real to her as she lives in a fantasy world where she is forced to hide her identity and to endure pain and suffering in silence. Despite all her struggle, she continues to smile, to carry on with her life and to entertain people at home. All the while she shows “no evidence of ruin or fears”.

The poem “Those Times…” (Live or Die 118) reveals the complete life story of the poet and thereby remains a testimony to Lowell’s conception of poetry as “the compelled activity of self-record” (Grossman 84). It is an autobiographical poem in which the poet recollects her unhappy childhood days and also her experiences as a woman and mother. The concluding lines of the poem unfold her fear of becoming just like her mother:

I did not know that my life, in the end,
would run over my mother’s like a truck
and all that would remain
from the year I was six
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
So that I might hear
the unsaid more clearly. (108-114)

In “Consorting with Angels” (Live or Die 111) the poet shows how her understanding
of the ‘self’ has nothing to do with the patriarchal notion of what a woman is.

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks. (1-4)

These opening lines express the idea that she is tired of being a woman. She frowns at the
various tasks and roles performed by a woman like cooking, catering to the sexual needs of
her husband and posing like a doll. The poet quotes the example of St. Joan who was burnt
at stake in men’s clothes. The problem that the society has is with women ‘arrogating’ to
themselves the power to transform society, which is a male prerogative. A woman wearing
man’s clothes is seen as a social anomaly. This clearly shows how society has defined roles
for men and women and those who fail to adhere to it will face a plight similar to that of Joan
metaphorically speaking. She also talks about angels – about how unique each one them is
and, therefore, there is no question of gender at all.
The third stanza talks about her “unsexing” herself in the terms of Lady Macbeth. She rides under the sun without a distinct identity of a woman. She is neither Adam nor Eve. Adam and Eve are depicted here in their created form – naked. In the act of creation there was nothing discriminatory about them both. But after the fall, they were clad and thus began centuries of gender discrimination. Clothes stand for guises created by the society to cover the essential fact that men and women are created as equal beings. Voiding herself of the notions of femininity has made the poet realize her equality:

I am black and I am beautiful
I’ve been opened and undressed
I have no arms or legs.
I’m all one skin like a fish.
I’m no more a woman than Christ was a man. (38-43)

These concluding lines of the poem bring in the analogy of a fish. The poet compares herself to the fish. The fish symbol was used by the early church to refer to Christ. It was a secret code to communicate the fact that one was a Christian during the time when Christians were persecuted. So also the real identity of a woman is known to none but herself. The poet thereby adds to the mystery of a woman who is “black” and “beautiful”. In fact, the poet goes beyond the very concept of gender when she places herself on par with Christ. The woman, here, is no more a woman than Christ was a man; just like Christ was not a man so also the woman is not a woman in the sense that the society looks at her.
Seeing herself as Christ and thereby going beyond sex and gender, does not prevent her from accepting her unique experiences as a woman. Female physicality is the other prominent theme dealt with by Anne Sexton. She celebrates her female body with pride. As Thomas Mc. Donnel writes: “...and these are almost always women’s secrets that do not, in the ordinary way of things, get hold … But she usually writes from the centre of feminine experiences…” (Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics 136). Several poems like “The Abortion”, “Menstruation at Forty”, “The Breast”, “Dreaming the Breasts” and “In Celebration of My Uterus” openly talk about her bodily parts and experiences as a woman in detail.

The poem “In Celebration of My Uterus” (Love Poems 181) celebrates femaleness. The uterus represents a powerful tool of women as it has the ability to create life.

Everyone in me is a bird,
I am beating all my wings.
They wanted to cut you out
but they will not. (1-4)

The poet’s realization of the power of her sexuality is revealed through the analogy of a bird. The uterus is not a symbol of suppression here but to an empowered woman it is a symbol of freedom. In a letter written to Robert Bly in 1966, Sexton describes the occasion of the poem: “Day before yesterday they were going to give me a hysterectomy but yesterday I went to some big deal specialist in Boston and I can keep it. So saved is a part of the soul of the
woman who lives in me. I thought today I would write a poem ‘In Celebration of My Uterus’ but …… you wouldn’t like it” (Letters 302). The poem, therefore, is a result of joy experienced by the poet as she need not bid farewell to the vital part of her physical and sexual self.

The second stanza is an exaltation of her uterus. She considers her uterus a “sweet weight”:

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. I dare to live. (11-15)

As an individual Sexton was aware of the dislike of other poets with regard to her treatment of the so called taboo subjects, but as a poet she seemed to have been inspired by every aspect of her “self” which includes her physical being too.

Then she goes on to explain how one uterus is enough to populate a nation. In other words, a woman contributes greatly to the human resource of a nation. That is the reason why at times of war women and children are not killed but taken away as captives. The poet lists out the various kinds of women from across the globe who are occupied with their different labors. In the view of the poet, the uterus is the only reason that a woman is spared. If not for the ability to bear and rear children she would have been one among the animal species. It is in the endowment of this capacity that a woman finds fulfillment in her life.
Having known that marriage and love are beautiful illusions created by the society a woman finds comfort in the real thing that is in her ability to create.

All confession cannot be poetry and it cannot be denied that there should be poetry before any confession actually takes place. Sexton talks about the craft behind the transmutation of confession into art in several poems: “Her Kind”, “The Black Art”, “Flee on Your Donkey”, “The Ambition Bird”, “Words”, “Said the Poet to the Analyst”, “The Witch’s Life” and “Kind Sir, These Woods”. Words are the tools of the poet which concretizes his experience, or emotion, or thought. In the poem “Ambition Bird” the poet says that it is “the business of words” that keeps her awake to the extent that even in the night she is restless “All night dark wings / flopping in my heart”. She would prefer a simple life spent in drinking cocoa but the poetic instinct is so strong that it cannot be contained.

The power of words is further explored in the poem “Words” (The Awful Rowing Toward God 463). The opening line is quite dramatic and it warns the person who deals with words:

Be careful of words

even the miraculous ones

for the miraculous we do our best,

Sometimes they swarm like insects

and leave not a sting but a kiss (1-5)

The swarm of insects, detestable and irritating leaves not a sting but a kiss. The psychical torture of words that could sting is mollified into kiss by the nature of poetry. The healing
property of the words is brought out when she calls them “miraculous ones,” for Sexton began writing as a therapy. As a genuine poet, who thinks of them day and night, she declares her love for words, though they fail her often. Therefore, the outcome is miserable and pathetic:

Yet often they fail me
I have so much I want to say.
So many stories, images, proverbs, etc.
But the words aren’t good enough,
the wrong ones kiss me.
Sometimes I fly like an eagle
but with the wings of a wren. (15-21)

The mighty eagle juxtaposed against the miniature wren indicates perhaps the wings of fancy being dampened by insufficient words. The poet feels lost at the limpness of words that the wrens before the eagle of poetic spirit. Much is lost in the process of translating one’s vision into words and the poet Anne Sexton is no exception. The analogy of eagle-wren brings out her frustration and disappointment as a poet as she believes that she is unable to do justice to her flights of fancy.

A woman who writes feels too much,

………

She thinks she can warn the stars.

A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl. “The Black Art” (1-8)

These are the opening lines of the poem “The Black Art” (All My Pretty Ones 88). According to the poet only a woman who feels too much can write and she writes because she happens to be one such woman. This statement is a confessional equivalent of the Romantic canon ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’. The spontaneity is inspired by Romanticism, it is excruciated in confession. In Romanticism there is bliss of solitude, in confessionalism it is the curse of solitude. Then she goes on to say how a woman is an instinctual being, guided by her instincts. She is able to foresee the future based on her observation of the present. Her inner sight watches for signs and clues that are captured and processed and will make her understand what future it will all culminate into. She looks upon herself as a “spy” who knows what others do not know.

The next stanza is devoted to the description of a male writer. While a woman writer “feels too much” the man “knows too much”, or at least he acts as if he knows everything. Hence his mind is not in a receptive state. He does not observe and judge. Politics, business, technology, wars, male sexuality, and aggressiveness are all that he is associated with throughout his life. He is such an adept that he can even make a tree out of used furniture.

With used furniture he makes a tree
A writer is essentially a crook.

Dear love, you are that man. (14-16)
“Never loving ourselves / hating even our shoes and our hats - we love each other” is the state of relationship between the female and the male writers. They hate everything about each other for their eyes are “full of terrible confessions”.

“Her Kind” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 15) is a poem which begins with a powerful claim of kinship between the woman poet and the “possessed witch” as social and sexual outcasts because of their powers.

I have gone out, a possessed witch
having the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil…

……...
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind (1-7)

Sexton has already talked about the way she is troubled by the “words” which prevent her from having a good night’s sleep and in this poem she shows how her “black art” takes shape and also how it does not allow her to lead a normal woman’s life. As she has chosen the “less trodden path” society views her suspiciously just as it looked upon women who had unique magical powers in the past, the witches. Hence, her plight is similar to that of the witches, that is, like the witches she too is misunderstood because of her poetic talents.

Sexton also makes it a point to state that she is like any person with flesh and blood, very much capable of ordinary human emotions and excitements.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.

I have been her kind (20-21)

She concludes by saying that her predicament is similar to that of the witches who were burnt at stake for their extraordinary powers. And they were not ashamed to die. In the same way, she is also not ashamed of herself or her art which delves into the forbidden territory of art.

Identifying herself with the witches completely in the poem “Her Kind”, Sexton goes on to talk about how they are treated as social outcasts in the poem “The Witch’s Life” (The Awful Rowing Toward God 423). The poem begins with a description of a woman who was branded as a witch by the society just because she did not have a voice like a woman, or socialize like a woman or keep herself beautiful like a woman. The poet remembers this old woman - witch and wonders whether she is becoming like her.

… It is the witch’s life,

Climbing the primordial climb,

a dream within a dream

then sitting here

holding a basket of fire. (31-35)

These lines define how unique a witches’ life is. The poet dexterously brings out the ordeal of a creator, how she wrestles with every vision, and how patiently she has to wait for
the vision-dream to take the form of words, and how the poet is on fire when she is in the grips of fiery imagination.

Sexton’s first collection of poems entitled *To Bedlam and Part Way back* contains the poem “Said the Poet to the Analyst”, which can be looked upon as a defence of her poetic credo. Since Sexton was aware of the criticism she might face because of her unique craft she felt the need to substantiate and assert herself as a serious poet. She begins the poem saying,

My business is words. Words are like labels,  
or coins, or better, like swarming bees. (1-2)

The poem is a critique of the act of writing and the act of interpretation. The poet has neatly summed up her vocation as a poet. She explains how she uses words to fashion a poem and how the work itself does not belong to the author once it is created. She also talks about the failure of language as a system to express one’s thoughts. The poet confesses how the words that appear actually are far removed from the original conception of the creator. Sexton’s comparison of words to “labels”, “coins” and “swarming bees” are significant in that all three are sources of profit. When the poet considers writing poetry as a business, the significance of words increases. The poet views them as branded products that fetch money, as coins that procure goods and as swarming bees that produce honey. Otherwise the same words are as useless as dead bees in the attic which serve no purpose.

The second stanza begins with the purpose of the psychoanalyst, on whom the figure of the critic is superimposed: “Your business is watching my words”. Although the
analyst/critic watches the work of the poet, the poet is unperturbed. The poet looks upon herself as a gambler and if she is lucky, she may hit the jackpot because of the interpretation of the analyst/critic. Her luck fails her if the analyst/critic underestimates her talent as a patient/poet.

The above analysis of some of the poems written by Anne Sexton reveals her unique treatment of themes like madness, death, suicide, love, hatred, God, female physicality etc., as a confessional poet. The analysis also reveals how successfully she has managed to transmute her personal, strange, unusual feelings and experiences into poetry. Thus, defying all conventions and traditions of what a poem should deal with, Anne Sexton’s poetry “marks her unashamed acceptance of her madness, not only as the normal response to this sick society, but also as the indicator of truth’s reachability” (Joseph 73). When Anne Sexton sought refuge in poetry as her haven, the confessional mode suited her as it facilitated the unraveling of her mysterious self replete with strange emotions and experiences and thereby restore sanity. Her poems almost seem to propagate the notion that sanity might bring peace to the woman but it would destroy the poet – as Diana Hume George, in her Oedipus Anne, remarks Anne Sexton is an anomaly, “She is a fish with wings” (Oedipus Anne xiv).