CHAPTER 2

THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON

The focal point of confessional poetry is poet's own life. Confessional poets create the mythologies of their self from their own life-experience. They raise their poetic fabric by weaving the events of their life. "Anne Sexton [also] believed that the most interesting poetry was written out of personal experience."¹ Her own creative impulse grew from the "need to make form from (the) chaos" of her physical and mental life.² In most of her poems, she removed even the thin veneer that stood between herself and her poetic persona, as she herself assumed the role of the speaker. Naturally her poetry can be understood only in terms of her life-experience i.e. in the light of the events which directed the course of her life and formed her mentality or even her poetic consciousness.

The first important factor to shape Sexton's career was her family background. Anne Gray Harvey later Anne Sexton was born in a prominent family of Newton, Massachusetts in 1928. Her parents May Gray Staples and Ralph Churchill Harvey belonged to a class of intellectuals, politicians, and businessmen. Her mother aspired for a literary career which she had to abandon after marriage. Her father owned a successful woollen business. The family background became one of the chief motifs of Sexton's poetry. Her diminishing status in life of which she speaks of in her poetry became the symbol of the diminishing of the American myth itself.
As a formative factor, Sexton’s childhood was no less important. She was brought up with her sisters Jane (born in 1923) and Blanche (born in 1923). During her childhood she lived in Boston suburbs including Cambridge, Wellesley, and Weston in spacious houses. In the summer, Sexton’s family moved to the Maine seacoast where the Harveys, Dingleys, and Staples, gathered. Sexton’s memories of these summers were rather happy. Nevertheless, even during this happy period of her life, she developed, in Hall’s words, “a flamboyant, willful pattern of behaviour.”3 “She had also developed a view of herself as outcast and unwanted.”4 “At six,” wrote Sexton in a 1963 poem, “I lived in a graveyard full of dolls.: I will speak of the little childhood cruelties,/being a third child,/and lost given/being the unwanted, the mistake...”5

However, during her childhood she had one of the most defining events of her life in the form of her close relationship with her maternal great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley. Anne called her “Nana” and became greatly attached to this “soft white lady of [her] heart.”6 Nana’s death in 1954, at the age of eighty-six became one of the most shattering events of her life. She was shocked because she considered herself guilty of her suffering and subsequent death. Anna lived with them and suffered for years from senility or madness. In a 1958 letter, Sexton wrote:

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.7

Sexton’s school-days were also crucial in the formation of her poetic personality. Interestingly her school-days produced a different Anne. Whether at
public school in Wellesley or at the Girl Boarding School Rogers Hall, or The Garland School in Boston, she appeared as an energetic, flirtation, vivacious, and popular youngster. But underneath this pleasant exterior their lurked the shadows of pain which made her a class rogue. Though a little careless, she was able to demonstrate her intellectual prowess to her teachers. Anne started her poetic career at Rogers Hall. But she abandoned writing poetry when her mother, though wrongly, accused her of plagiarizing Sara Teasdale.

Obviously the most crucial days of Sexton’s life were the days after her marriage. In the summer 1948, when Anne was nineteen, she fell in love with “Kayo” or Alfred Muller Sexton II, a sophomore premedical student at Colgate University. She eloped with him to Sunbury Cariolina, where the couple was eventually married. After marriage their life was a little unsettled as they had to move from place to place and join different jobs for their livelihood. Though, for five years they had run from pillar to post, their life was not so unpleasant. However, things dramatically changed for them after the birth of their first child Linda Gray Sexton on July 21, 1953. For Anne childbirth was a horrifying experience, so horrifying that she did not like to discuss it.

After Linda’s birth, their life became a little settled, as they purchased a house at 40 Clearwater Road in Newton Lower Falls. They continued to live there for the next eleven years. Kayo was now employed in the Sexton Woollen business. But for Anne the experience of motherhood was followed by a series of misfortunes. The next two years brought for her a series of emotional setbacks. As Linda Sexton and Lois Ames write, during the period Anne “was intermittently
hospitalized at Westwood Lodge, in Westwood, Massachusetts, for attempted suicide. Kayo's mother took charge of Linda. Equally devastating for Anne was the death in July 1954 of her Nana, Anna Ladd Dingley. This was loss that she never resolved and that she was to explore again and again in her poetry."

These experiences completely upset her life. Anna's death created a vacuum in her life which was never filled. "This was the loss," writes Hall, "that she never resolved and that she was to explore again and again in her poetry." The shocking experience of Nana's death was followed by yet another troublesome experience, the birth of Joyce their second child. According to Sexton and Ames, "Anne was unprepared for the responsibility of another infant, an inquisitive two-year-old, a household, and a husband... Her anger and concomitant depression deepened." Subsequently in March 1956, Sexton again hospitalized for depression. During her hospitalization Linda lived with her Harvey grandparents, while Joyce went to live with the Sextons. When Anne returned home Linda returned as well but Joyce did not do so. She remained with Sextons for three years. Subsequently the little child "ceased to recognize Anne as her mother." It was an emotional shock to her, so tremendous that she returned to it in her poetry again and again.

To resume our story, on November 9, 1956 Anne attempted to commit suicide. This attempt became crucial to her poetic carrier. For it led him to Dr. Sidney Martín who encouraged her to write poetry. With his persistent persuasion Sexton developed into a great poet. It is frequently observed that the throes of pain energize the dormant springs of creative sensibility and open the flood-gates of
poetry. The sufferer is transformed into a poet speaking about the wounds received from the callous world as well as the wounds of the suffering humanity at large. Naturally with these agonizing experiences, the poetic sensibility of Anne Sexton awakened from its psychical slumber.

Indeed Sexton's sickness became the springboard to launch her poetic career. Beginning to appreciate her poetic talent, she attended seminars, conferences, and workshops. However, her literary activities were interspersed with the bouts of mental sickness and tragic events. In September 1957, she attended a poetry seminar at Boston University. In the seminar she came in contact with Maxine Kumin and established a life-long friendship. In 1958, Sexton attended the Antioch Summer Writers' Conference in August where she met W.D. Snodgrass. In September 1958, she attended the poetry seminar taught by Robert Lowell at Boston University. This seminar was also attended by Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck. Then in the following year in August 1959 Sexton came to attend the Bread Loaf Conference.

Interestingly the years of her poetic training were also the years of sickness and sorrow, of suffering and acute guilt consciousness. She suffered from mental breakdowns and had to attend psychiatric sessions, so much so that mental institutions became her "summer hotel" or "sealed hotel." On March, 10, 1959, her mother died of breast cancer. Then just after three months, on June, 3, her father died of a cerebral haemorrhage. Both of these tragic events produced a sense of guilt in her. While her mother accused Sexton of giving her cancer, her father felt frustrated for her disapproval of his remarriage. Time and again Sexton
returned to express her guilt conscious in her poetry. In October 1959 she contracted pneumonia and underwent surgery to remove her appendix and ovary. At this time she developed a lurking fear of having cancer.

Nevertheless, these trying conditions did not dampen her spirits and did not extinguish the aesthetic spark. They rather provided grist to her poetic mill. According to Caroline King Barnard Hall, Sexton used “material from her psychiatric sessions,”¹² for her poetry. Even the death of her parents provided her with poetic themes. She wrote poems like “The Truth The Death Know” and “All My Pretty Ones.” Her surgery also became the theme of her poem “The Operation.” Obviously the experiences of this period awakened in her a poet of tremendous power and produced such a great work of confessional mode as To Bedlam and Part Way Back which was published in 1960.

This period was important not only for the development of poetic sensibility but also for the future course of her life. “The pattern of professional success,” writes Hall, “personal tragedy, and emotional difficulty characterized the rest of Anne Sexton’s life.”¹³ In the followings years, in the month of the publication of her first book, she lost her father-in-law in an automobile accident. Then she suffered from homesickness and depression after her abortive tour of Europe with Sandy Robert, her neighbour. Sylvia Plath’s suicide in early 1963 made her more miserable.

In the Fall, 1962, her second volume of poetry entitled All My Pretty Ones, commemorating dead members of her family, was published. It was nominated for the National Book Award. Around 1966, Sexton began work on a novel which she
described as "just a woman's story, another woman's story and so what." But she could never finish this novel. In the fall of the same year i.e. 1966, Sexton published her third volume of poetry, *Love or Die*. She was awarded America's highest literary prize, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. In February 1969, Sexton published her fourth volume of poetry *Love Poems*. During the same year, she also worked on "Mercy Street." After two years, Sexton published her fifth volume of poetry *Transformations*, in 1971. During the period, she received many awards, fellowships and scholarships, including the fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Ford Foundation grant, fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature, travel grant from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, honorary Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard, Guggenheim Fellowship, honorary Phi Beta Kappa from Radcliffe, honorary doctorates of letters from the universities of Tufts and Fairfield as well as from Regis College.

The tone and tendency of Sexton's last days was in no way different. Her life repeated the same tale of creativity alternating with emotional disturbances. In February 1973 Sexton asked her husband for divorce against the advice of her psychiatrist and many of her friends. She was granted divorce in November of the same year. Sexton was admitted to McClean Hospital during this last year for emotional disturbance. But in spite of depression she continued writing furiously, but with a difference. Sexton's gaze now turned gradually from her personal self towards the Supreme Self or Christ. In a 1970 letter, she 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."
The story of this transformation is embodied in the books which followed in close succession, *The Book of Folly* (1972), *The Death Notebooks* (1974), and *The Awful Rowing* (1975), the last being published posthumously. These books as usual incorporated the “familiar themes of Sexton’s previous poetry poetic considerations of death, particularly the death of poet’s close family members (her mother, father, and great-aunt) of the poet herself; of guilt over the lives and deaths of those people; of love for husband and daughters, and I suspect, for other as well; and of anger, especially towards certain men, chief among them the psychiatrist and the deserting lover.” However, these themes now produced an entirely different music since they were now attuned to the theme of the search for God. They announced Sexton’s hope of renouncing doubt and embracing faith. Though the poems were death directed, “but death often represented the beginning of new life.” It was only towards the end of her poetic career that Sexton was able to show the heights that her confessional poetry could measure.

A close perusal of Sexton’s life and works suggests that her poetic career marked certain progression. It had four distinct phases of apprenticeship, maturity, religious consciousness, and collapsing rationality. During these phases her poetic sensibility moved from the bare confessional candour to the depths of religious consciousness of a distinct Christian variety. Her buried self emerging from the dark caves of the unconscious, came to the fore to row towards the island of God and to bask in the sunshine of divinity. The confessions of buried self and its religious and mystic longings assumed the form of two distinct currents vying for supremacy. It was the confessional current which came to the fore during the
period of apprenticeship, while the religious current remained submerged, but was not entirely dormant. It frequently made its presence felt in some way or the other.

During the period of apprenticeship, Sexton was “preoccupied with learning her craft and finding her own voice.”¹⁸ This period began in 1957 and lasted till 1962, producing such momentous works as To Bedlam and Part Way Back and All My Pretty Ones. In these books Anne explored the themes self-identity, loss, guilt, and of course courage, therapy, purgation which are the flood-subjects of confessionalism. She dealt with two kinds of confession, physical as well as psychical. While in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, she poetized the confessions of the body, in All My Pretty Ones she delineated confessions of the mind to purge mental sickness.

In To Bedlam and Part Way Back Sexton described her experiences of those eventful years after her marriage during which she gave birth to Linda and Joyce, lost her parents and her dear Nana and was hospitalized for mental disturbance. The books has two parts: Bedlam and Part Way Back. While the Bedlam volume deals with her hospital days, her life in the “summer hotel” or “sealed hotel,” or about her madness, Part Way Back embodies her sense of loss intermingled with occasional hope.

Bedlam is central to the first volume, since it provides a perfect setting to the poems included in the volume. This Bedlam, though actual, assumes at times a symbolic character. Sexton, in spite of her low spirits, conceives of poetry, to be precise her confessional poetry, in eloquent terms as an instrument of enlightenment. For her the poet, just like a philosopher, is a relentless seeker of
truth. He is caught between the dauntless spirit of an Oedipus who wanted to know truth at every cost and compulsive inhibitions of Jocasta who begs Oedipus not to go too far. She makes this poetic dilemma quite explicit through Schopenhauer’s statement used as the epigraph of the volume:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta begs Oedipus for God’s sake not to inquire further.19

“The poet Sexton’s role,” comments Hall, “like the philosopher’s, is to seek enlightenment at any cost, at the cost of disapproval, disaffection, madness, death. But the poet also has a bit of Jocasta in her who whispers that the effort is not worth the cost. One may speculate as well that the Jocasta whom the poet carries in her heart speaks also in the person of her family, her friends, and her colleagues.”20

Indeed Sexton’s friends and relatives who did not approve of her candour and doubted the value of self-exposures tried to dissuade her from going too far, warning her against the pitfalls of shameless confessions and dangers of milking one’s unconscious too much. Obviously she was caught between the Oedipal Dr. Martin, her psychiatrist and the Jocastan John Holmes, her teacher. While the former encouraged her to make clean breast of her obsessions, the latter cautioned her advising her not to expose herself and her family. But the Oedipus in her proved stronger and she decided to fire burners in her defence. She wrote a poem “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further,” and followed it by a letter to
Holmes. Then she went on to write a letter, stating the value of the mode, to W.D. Snodgrass, who was also writing in confessional mode. “I am,” she stated, “about to write an article in defense of sincere poetry... I guess because I am starting to get attacked on my kind of poetry. I guess this always happens when you do something out of the norm. John Holmes thinks my book is unseemly, too personal, tho talented. So I have been firing the burners in defense of myself.”

At this time Sexton was fired with the spirit of a dare-devil and did not hesitate to tread the path which everybody feared to walk. The poem which she wrote came to provide a credo not only to herself but to all confessional poets.

She wrote:

Not that is was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind,
in the common places of the asylum

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there ought to be something special
for someone
in this kind of hope.

(Bedlam 51-52)

Sexton’s poetic mission is not simply self-exposure but seek to order in the chaotic world of Bedlam as well as to inculcate hope of finding a way back. Through her confessional candour she aims at achieving what Robert Frost calls “momentary stay against confusion.” However, unlike Frost, she seeks the state beyond confusion in an extremely perilous way. Sexton outlines her way to salvation in her poem “Kind Sir: These Woods,” with the metaphor of a spinning game. In this poem the poet presents her own condition. She has left her familiar
world. As she spins with her eyes closed, she becomes dizzy and finds in a nightmare world. Since this nightmare world now becomes a reality to her, she refuses to open her eyes and to return to her old world. Her inward world, even though full of thorny woods, also has sweet fruits. Interestingly, Sexton addresses this poem to Thoreau whose biblical statement in *Walden*, she uses as the epigraph of the poem: “For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost... Not til we are lost... do we begin to find ourselves” (*Bedlam* 5). Sexton poetizes the theme of finding one’s self through losing in the internal world in her characteristic way:

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind
I have turned around twice with eyes sealed
and the woods were white and my night mind
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.
And opening my eyes, 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.

(*Bedlam* 5)

In the concluding lines the poet expresses her hope that the exploration of the inward world would help her to find her way back from Bedlam. This theme of loss and gain energizes all the Bedlam poems. There is no denying the fact that some of Bedlam poems use shocking themes of madness, abortion, the birth of an illegitimate child, and suicide. But the focal point still remains the theme of self-discovery. It implies that Sexton does not indulge in self-exposure for its own sake, but for achieving some higher aim like self-purification and mental health. Sexton continues to portray her attempt to find order in a world of chaos in other
poems of Bedlam. Five poems deal with Bedlam experience directly and literally. Among these poem, the most important one is the first poem of the volume “You, Doctor Martin,” which explores the nature of her mental asylum, “evoking its sounds and sensations, describing its routines, and tracing its conflicts, frustrations, and hopes.” Moreover, the poem also goes on to suggest a way back or at least something like a way. The central figure of the poem is Dr. Martin who, as a father-figure, assumes the roles of a therapist, prince, and deity. The poetic persona also appears in the form of a priestess, queen, and beloved.

You, Doctor Martin, walk
From breakfast to madness. Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
Where the moving dead still talk
Of pushing their bones against the thrust
Of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel.

Though she realizes herself as the queen of his hospital, she is painfully aware of her real status. She is nothing more than an ordinary person, mentally sick and standing in a broken line just like others:

We stand in broken lines and wait while they unlock the door and count as at the frozen gates of dinner. (SP 9)

Naturally like other patients, Sexton is also given a therapeutic job to do. Incidentally, her job is to make moccasins – a fate which she readily accepts:

I make moccasins all morning. (SP 9)

Later on, Anne Sexton assumes the role of a priestess, for whom this hospital is her own temple. Her God is none else than Dr. Martin whom she loves and adores:
Of course, I love you;  
You lean above the plastic sky,  
God of our block, prince of all the foxes.  

That is to say, for Sexton Dr. Martin has a double image. He is the prince of the summer palace of which she is the princess and at the same time, the God of this temple of which she is the priestess. However, neither of these roles is real. Sexton goes on to introduce the theme of lostness in the poem, a theme that finds its most eloquent expression in “You, Doctor Martin:”

...Am I still lost?  
Ones I was beautiful. Now I am myself,  
Counting this row and that row of moccasins  
waiting on the silent shelf.

There are four other poems in Bedlam which are set in the mental hospital. All these poems explore the hospital experience and suggest the way back. But their approach is not inclusive. “Music Swims Back to Me” is important in the sense it “recreates the consciousness of speaker-as-patient.” Lost in the darkness of the mental asylum, the childlike persona tries to find the way home. The poet, speaking in the language and cadences of a child writes:

Wait Mister,  
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La la la,  

“Mister,” according to Hall is an authority figure which is capable of helping her. But it is music which is more helpful to the speaker. It gives her at least a temporary stay. It can remind her the moment of her arrival here, when she discovers that “everyone here was crazy:
Imagine it. A radio playing
and everyone here was crazy.
I liked it and danced in a circle.
Music pours over the sense
and in a funny way
music seems more than I.
I mean it remembers better;

(Bedlam 8)

In other poems the speaker finds herself firmly placed in the atmosphere of
the bedlam. Now she finds herself farther from the discovery of a way back. In
“Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn” the speaker feels threatened. She uses refrains
from the Twenty-third Psalm, as desperate talismans to ward off the danger from
the assailing environment. These refrains are used in the third line of every stanza
in italicized form:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow

I will fear no evil

In the presence of mine enemies

(Bedlam 39)

In “Lullaby,” Sexton, uses several images to describe her slipping from
consciousness, after taking sleeping pill. However, these images ensure only a
temporary erasure of the fear described in “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn”:

My sleeping pill is white.
It is a splendid pearl;
It floats me out of myself,
my stung skin as alien
as a loose bolt of cloth.
I will ignore the bed.
I am linen on a shelf.
Let the others moan in secret;
let each lost butterfly
go home. Old woolen head,
take me like a yellow moth
while the goat calls hush –
a-by.

(Bedlam 41)

According to Hall a childlike persona is central to most of the Bedlam poems. The speakers of these poems suggest that childhood and madness are nearly identical. The poem “Ringing the Bells” uses this childlike quality as its organizing principle.

The poems of the second part of the volume the Part Way Back are only a little different in tone and temperament. They revolve round the themes of loos, memory, and guilt. “Much of the poetry in this volume,” writes Barnard Hall, “then, reflects and gives expression to the speaker’s perception of a diminished present, a remembered, happier past, and a sense of guilt at having survived.”25 Obviously most of the poems are concerned with loss. This loss is of several kinds, including loss of friendship, innocence, love, time, connections, and happiness. This loss may the loss of Nana... (“Some Foreign Letters,” “Elizabeth Gone,” “The Waiting Head”), or mother (“The Division of Parts”), or father (“The Bells,” “The Moss of his Skin”), or innocence (“The Expatriates,” Where I Live in this Honourable House of the Laurel Tree”), or children (“Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward”), or youthful joys (“The Kite,” “Funnel,” “The Road Back”), or friends (“For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach,” “A Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston”).26

The memory of the poetic persona is “often tinged with guilt,” especially the guilt she felt at the loss of the close relatives. When Sexton was a school-girl, she lost her beloved great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley who lived with her family.
She felt herself guilty of her madness and death. In a 1958 letter, she wrote: "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... A thirteen, I was blameful and struck."\(^{27}\)

Besides, while she was writing her *Bedlam* poems, her mother died in March 1959. She again blamed herself for mother's illness and her subsequent death. In a 1958 letter expressing her sense of guilt, she went on to write: "I am depressed. My mother is dying of cancer. My mother say I gave her cancer (as though death were catching death being the birthday that I tried to kill myself, Nov. 9\(^{th}\) 1956). Then she got cancer... who do we kill, which image in the mirror, the mother, ourself, our daughter???

Her sense of guilt was acute that she began to lose her balance. This guilty consciousness became all the more intense, as Sexton saw her father crying at the death of her mother. She expresses this painful experience in her letter written in 1959: "My life is falling through a sieve... I'm dropping out of myself. Partly because my mother is dying now and I... I know it's crazy, but I feel like it is my fault... My father, since his shock, is not the same; he acts about ten years old, and keeps crying and begging my mother not to die."\(^{29}\)

In her poems written on Nana, Sexton uses the life of her dear Nana to dramatize her own distress and disappointment. She speaks of her present misery in the background of the youthful Nana – the Nana who wrote letters from Europe)
- and the old Nana whom she knew. In “Some Foreign Letters,” Sexton images Nana first as an old lady and second, as a youthful girl:

I knew you forever and you were always old,
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.

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----------------------------------------------- And I
see you as a young girl in a good world still,
writing three generations before mine. I try
to reach into your page and breathe it back....
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.

(Bedlam 13)

The poetic persona goes on to dally with the two images of Nana along with her own youthful image. Ultimately in the last stanza, she comes out to decipher the guilt of her Nana in loving the Count:

Tonight I will learn to love you twice;
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Tonight I will speak up and interrupt your letters, warning you that warns are coming, that the Count will die, ---
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------ And I tell you,
you will tip your boot feet out of that hall,
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------ letting your spectacles fall
and your hair net tangle as you stop passers-by
to mumble your guilty love while your ears die.

(Bedlam 15)

According to Barnard Hall memory and guilt combine on three levels. On the first level, Nana’s love is guilty, since the Count is married. On the second level, Sexton is guilty for her failure in rescuing Nana from her own diminished future. On the third level, she is guilty for Nana’s madness and senility. On the
whole the Nana poems bring out the pathos of the failure of memory to mitigate the sense of loss and guilt. “There is real pathos,” writes Hall, “in the speaker’s realization that rather than exorcise loss and guilt, memory can only perpetuate them.”

However, memory has its silver lining too. It has, as Sexton poetizes in “The Double Image,” tremendous potentials to deal with the past in a positive way. It can look beyond loss and sound a note of affirmation. The poem, described by Sexton as “two hundred odd lines of confession and art” and first titled as “The Double Image: A Confession,” presents the double image of the time past and present as well as the double instincts of love and death which run parallel to each other. The poem is, a dramatic monologue in which Anne Sexton, the mother of thirty envisions herself addressing something to her four year old daughter Joyce, with whom she is united after an absence of four year. The interval of four years has been full of pain and turmoil. In this duration, Sexton attempts suicide twice. She is hospitalized and stays with her mother for recovery. “The Double Image” is divided into seven sections. The first section describes the painful experiences of her four years which are lost. She, though pretending to address her daughter, explains the loss of four years to herself.

The poem opens with the mother speaker portraying her suicide attempt with the falling of a few winter leaves along with her long separation from her daughter.

I am... thirty this November
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,  
falling flat and washed. And I remember  
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.  
They said I’d never get you back again.  
I tell you what you’ll never really know,  
all the medical hypothesis  
that explained my brain will never be as true as these  
struck leaves letting go.

(Bedlam 53)

In the following stanzas, Sexton expresses her guilt of causing her infant  
daughter’s illness, her actual figurative death attempt and resurrection, her advice  
to the little girl to love her “self’s self,” her (Sexton’s) return to mother’s house  
after her first suicide attempt, her second suicide attempt, and ultimately her  
experience of identity and recovery. In the closing lines, Sexton combines the  
themes of “identity, guilt, and self-knowledge,” as Hall phrases them:

I, who was never quite sure  
about being a girl, needed another  
life, another image to remind me.  
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure  
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

(Bedlam 61)

“The Double Image,” which in its movement reminds us of Robert Lowell’s  
“Skunk Hour,” dramatizes Sexton’s partial emergence from the dark night  
experience of the soul, with the touching alchemy of love. The central theme of  
‘The Double Image,’ is guilt that brings darkness and guilt for having caused the  
ilness both of daughter and mother. Then it is love that heals. The poet then goes  
onto explain to her daughter the necessity to love one’s “self’s self.”

All the poems of Part Way Back are remarkable for the psychological  
consciousness of loss, guilt, and pain. But there is at least one poem, “The
Division of Parts” which goes on to deal with another variety of consciousness, that eventually comes to dominate Sexton’s later works. Introducing religious symbolism of Good Friday, Mary, and Christ, she announces the recovery of her faith in God – a faith she had questioned in “The Double Image.” In the poem she refers to her dead mother who had become like Christ to her. The poem begins with Sexton’s searching out her mother’s possession, remembering her (mother’s) painful past and her suffering from cancer. She is led to identify the sufferings of her mother with those of Christ. She comes to conclude that in suffering, she is united with Christ who suffered profoundly for the sake of mankind. The action Sexton wants to repeat is the experience of Christ’s suffering through words and by doing so, she wants to inherit the legacy of Christ’s suffering:

    And now, while Christ stays
    Fastened to his Crucifix
    so that love may praise
    his sacrifice
    and not the grotesque metaphor,
    you come, a brave ghost, to fix
    in my mind without praise
    or paradise
    to make me your inheritor.32

It is in “The Division of Parts” that Sexton clarifies her real aim of writing confessional poetry. Her act of writing is an act of confession. She does not expose her private life for the same of exposure or for creating a sensation to make herself famous. She lays bare her inner-self to purify her senses, her body, and her mind so that she can proceed on the Mystic Way which envisages purgation as a pre-condition to union.
On the whole To Bedlam and Part Way Back, is a blending of fact and fiction. There are poems which refer to the real experiences. There are also poems which are simply figments of imagination. We can cite at least two poems in the volume that are related to the persons who did not exist. For instance, Sexton’s portrayal of an unknown girl in “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” had no basis in reality. Likewise her reference to a brother in “For Johny Pole on the Forgotten Beach” and later in “The Papa and Mama” incorporated in Love Poems in questionable, since she had no brother.

Sexton’s second book All My Pretty Ones is also a landmark of confessional poetry. The volume, though continuing to deal with the consciousness of loss, guilt, and remorse, is suffused with Sexton’s confidence as a poet after her public recognition as an experienced poet. Imbued with new spirit, she takes her confessionalism to higher-stage, i.e. from the physical states to mental states of consciousness. If in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Sexton attempts to purge the obsessions of her physical self, in All My Pretty Ones, she goes on to purge her buried self, chiefly from the haunting memories of her departed friends and relatives. The poet by now discovers the role of a poem as an axe to cut the frozen sea within the buried self as well as the value of fiction in writing the biography of self. Sexton also develops a new poetic strategy of mixing literal truths or biological materials to reveal the emotional truth hidden underneath. Besides, Sexton reveals new directions of her poetry that makes explicit her growing interest in religion which will ultimately lead her to provide spiritual orientation to her confessional mode.
In order to define her thematic and formal concerns, she uses an excerpt from Macbeth and a quotation from a letter of Franz Kafka, as an epigraph. The excerpt from Macbeth is the source of the title of the book:

All my pretty ones?
Did you say all? O hell – Kite! All?
What! All my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?....
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me.  

At the same time, the quotation from Franz Kafka underscores the sharp edge of poetry “The books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation – a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.” Commenting on Sexton’s frozen sea within her, Diana Hume George observes that “the frozen sea within us,’ which keeps us from the depths of both pain and pleasure that arise from breaking the surface and plunging into the past, that creates the present.”

Although the volume contains many remarkable poems, the most representatives ones from the confessional point of view, are “The Truth the Dead Know,” “The Operation,” and “In the Deep Museum.” The volume opens with “The Truth the Dead Know” dedicated to her parents. It is centralized on poet’s grief of their sad demise. Their death diminishes her present:

.... where the sun gutters from the sky,
where the sea swings in like an iron gate.

(SP 43)
The absence of the parents not only changes her external circumstances but also weakens her courage to face the world. Subsequently she feels “tired of being brave” (SP 43). However, in the end, her mood changes, as she realizes that no one in this world is alone and that death is inevitable. She becomes conscious of the fact that none can protect oneself and one’s pretty ones from the cruel jaws of death. Ultimately, the dead ones are reduced to stones without human feelings:

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes in their stone boats. They are more like stone than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

(SP 43)

In the title poem “All My Pretty Ones,” Sexton mourns over the death of her father. She expresses the “raw emotion and bitterness” about the “dead.” The poem as usual, reveals Sexton’s intimate love for her father as also for her other dead relatives. The sight of his snap works like an “ax” to dig the memories of her father from her buried self. Envisioning the figure of her father, she writes:

But the eyes, as thick as wood in this album, hold me. I stop here, where a small boy waits in a ruffled dress for someone to come...

(SP 44)

However, in the end, the poet is overtaken as usual by the sense of guilt. She becomes conscious of her part in the sudden end or the sad demise of her dear father:

This year, solvent but sick, you meant to marry that pretty widow in a one month rush. But before you had that second chance, I cried on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died.

(SP 44)
These lines not only express Sexton's guilt consciousness but also reveal the Electra Complex which shows a morbid attachment of the daughter to her father and a morbid rivalry with her mother. It is no secret that Sexton despised her mother and developed an intimate love for her father. The Electra in Sexton feels relieved at the death of her mother but when she learns that her father is going to marry second time, Electra in her loses control. Hence, her outbursts against her father are not the outbursts of a normal daughter but that of Electra in Sexton. She is no longer prepared to share her love for father with any other woman. It is no wonder that Sexton's concern with her father's alcoholic tendency is identical with that of her mother as a wife:

I hold a five year diary that my mother kept for three years, telling all the does not say of your alcoholic tendency.

(SP 45)

Sexton's morbid tendency towards her father pervades throughout the poem. It is evident also in the image of the strange face which has raised some controversy. Let us quote the lines in which this image occurs:

The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

(SP 45)

The question is, why the face of Sexton has become strange to her father. It has been suggested that the face has become strange because of age. However, Sexton tries to suggest much more. For her, the image contains a sexual
implication which is quite unusual for her daughter. To quote her: “I would say it’s also got a kind of sexual thing there. You can understand that; you know, to kiss him then, to kiss death itself. My strange face – it was always pretty strange to him for actually not being pretty.”

In “Operation” Sexton attempts to reveal the emotional truth lying behind the literal truth of her abdominal surgery to remove an ovarian cyst, a fallopian tube and an appendix. Her operation involves an emotional truth as well. Undergoing this operation, Sexton associates her hospitalization and fears cancer. With the hospitalization of her mother and her actual death of cancer subsequently, she is overtaken by fear of her own death and a sense of deeply felt guilt. She expresses this truth through metonymy, or the substitution of words:

After the sweet promise  
the summer’s mild retreat  
from mother’s cancer, the winter months of her death,  
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,  
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath  
While I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,  
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate  
my ills with hers  
and decide to operate.

(SP 52)

The equation of daughter’s illness with mother’s continues figuratively in the following stanzas as well. Sexton continues to express her feelings in so many different ways by exploiting metonymical transfers. In stanza-2, she regards mother’s cancer as an evil, which grew in her mother’s womb in which she also grew. “The fetus-daughter shares a setting with the evil cancer, thereby sharing responsibility for the mother’s death.”

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After surgery Sexton finds herself floating between life and death and associates her experience with her mother's. However, in the resolution of the poem, Sexton introduces another strategy to manipulate the emotional truth. She no longer associates herself with her dad mother but with her friend Louis Simpson, who urged her to get well. She now comes to believe that the life and great beauty are still left in this world. Therefore she does not want to die but to recover and live. Thus she overcomes her death – wish with the assertion:

All's well, they say. They say I'm better.
I lounge in frills or, picturesque,
I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall.
I read a new book and shuffle past the desk
to mail the author my first fan letter.
Time now to pack this humpty-dumpy
back the frightened way she came
and run along, Anne, and run along now,
my stomach laced up like a football
for the game.

(Sp 55)

In “Operation,” M.L. Rosenthal finds all the characteristic qualities of the confessional mode, including the elements of autobiography and psychology. The poem is writes Rosenthal, “developed in the first person and [is] intended without question to point to the author [her]self.” It is “poetry of suffering” that makes the poet’s “psychological vulnerability... an embodiment of [her] civilization.”

The sudden pull of death which Sexton felt in “The Operation” finds a more prominent expression in two other poem: “With Mercy for the Greedy,” and “In the Deep Museum.” Sexton is not afraid of death. She rather welcomes it as it will pave the way for her union with God. In “With Mercy for the Greedy,” the
allurement to unite with God is the central theme. Sexton’s desire to unite with God becomes all the more intense in the poem “In the Deep Museum.” Fed up with the world, the poet longs for taking shelter in God. This longing reaches a feverish pitch. She goes on even to lose her consciousness, feeling as if she were dead. But she does not remain in this state for long. As the shadows of the painful world of reality encroach her mind, her dream-state is broken. She wakes to find herself in the Inferno of madness struggling for her own salvation.

My God, my God, what queer corner am I in?  
Didn’t I die, blood running down the post,  
lungs gagging for air, die there for the sin  
of anyone, my sour mouth giving up the ghost?  
Surely my body is done? Surely I died?  

(SP 59)

Sexton’s desire for death should be interpreted in broader context. Sexton does not love death for the sake of death. She wants to die as death will facilitate her to begin a new and eternal life with God.

Sexton’s desire to live is further reinforced in the poems belonging to the second phase of her poetic career, the Period of Conflicting Instincts. Though her life is still suspended between life and death, it is her will to live that comes to the fore. This conflict between life and death is embodied in her trilogy Live or Die (1966), Love Poems (1969), and Transformation (1971). Sexton’s recovery from her mental illness was only partial. All that her exploration of the self and consciousness of loss, guilt, fear etc. could give was only an uncertain balance of mind. She was still plagued with the question of “to be” or “not to be.” Continuously for four years i.e. from 1961 to 1965, she was condemned to an
emotional illness, suffering from the attacks of “fear, and despair, and suicidal depression.” During this period, she was involved in an intricate “journey in and out of the dark.” She had to endure the harrowing experiences, similar to the Dark Night of the Soul, described by the mystics.

For complete recovery she now switches as her attention from her personal self to her domestic self. Subsequently in the first book of this trilogy Live or Die she undertakes a “resolute dredging of a complex domestic past,” in search for self identity. The theme of this search, she underlines through the epigraph of the book taken from an early draft of Saul Bellow’s Herzog:

With one long breath, caught and held in the chest, he fought his sadness over his solitary life. Don’t cry, you idiot! Live or Die, but don’t poison everything.

Interestingly this quotation was sent by Saul Bellow as a piece of personal advice to Sexton, urging her to take a firm decision and not to disturb other men’s lives and poison their delights. Moved by this advice, she reconsidered the old questions of guilt, madness, death, love, cancer, sex, suicide, in order purge them and to take firm decision in favour of life.

Live or Die is a “diary like book” charting Sexton’s “inner and outer lives between January 1962 to February 1966,” rendering direct account of her father’s death, along with the death of her teacher John Holmes and the sad suicide of her friend Sylvia Plath. It also embodies references to her comforts of drug addiction, her attempted suicide, and her guilt-consciousness towards her mother and daughter. In the poems of this book, the personal and psychological notes are so
strong that they appear as "conversations with her psychiatrist," or "documents of modern psychiatry."

The first poem of the volume, "Flee on Your Donkey" derives its title from Rimbaud’s *Fetes de la faim*. It is structured on her own madness, life in the mental asylum, mother’s cancer, father’s alcoholic tendencies, doctor’s efforts, and her inner-most desire to escape from the drag-net of mental illness. In the hospital, Sexton is overtaken by a sense of loneliness and alienation, which becomes all the more acute, as she broods over her pretty ones who are dead and have left her alone in this world. Now there are no friends and relatives but only her poems to nurse her:

Everyone has left me
Except my muse,
That good nurse
She stays in my hand,
a mild white mouse

(SP 75)

Memories of her dead parents flit through her mind. She remembers with an acute sense of pain how her mother was carried like a doll:

Meanwhile,
They carried out my mother,
wrapped like somebody’s doll, in sheets,
bandaged her jaw and stuffed up her holes.

(SP 77)

She goes on to mention the alcoholic habits of her father:

My father, too. He went out on the rotten blood
he used up on other women in the Middle West.
He went out, a cured old alcoholic
on crooked feet and useless hands.

(SP 77)
Sexton continues to be obsessed with her ambivalent attitude towards her parents. The Electra in her hates her mother violently but as the normal daughter she treats the mother as her alter ego. Much in the same way like Electra, she is deeply attached to her father but like a normal daughter she shows normal feelings. This ambivalence also surfaces in her attitude towards her doctor who is at once, a Christ and a father-figure:

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
I was.

(SP 77)

She recalls how she was rescued by the doctor, when she collapsed outside his office:

I lay there
like an overcoat
that someone had thrown away.
You carried me back in,

(SP 78)

But Sexton’s mind does not brood over her past for long. It returns to the present but finds no relief. She feels that life in a hospital is rather intolerable. The cumulative experience of her past and present induces her to flee from the ugly life in the hospital.

Anne, Anne,
flee on your donkey,
flee this sad hotel,

Ride out
any old way your please!
In this place everyone talks to his own mouth.
That’s what it means to be crazy.

(SP 81)
Ambivalence marks Sexton’s attitude towards her teacher Holmes as well. He was a father figure as well as a butt of ridicule. But when he died of throat cancer, she commemorated her death in an elegiac poem titled “Somewhere in Africa” with reverence and piety in terms which anticipate her poem The Awful Rowing towards God. Sexton envisions her teacher being carried in a boat by the “female God.” In a master stroke, she blends the idea of mortality with immortality, asserting that “the funeral cannot-kill”:

Let her take you. She will put twelve strong men at the oars
for you are stronger than mahogany and your bones fill
the boat high as with fruit and bark from the interior.
She will have you now, you whom the funeral cannot kill.

(SP 82)

In Sexton, death is always linked with a sense of release and union with God. She welcomes death because it will free her from the bondages of womanhood. In “consorting with Angels,” she tells us how tired she is with the role of a woman:

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.

(SP 83)

Her tired spirit finds relief in a dream in which the poet finds herself in an unknown city. With chains fastened around her, she loses her common gender:

lying down on the gates of the city.
Then the chains were fastened around me
and I lost my common gender and my final aspect.

(SP 83)
The thought of death and womanhood leads her mind to Virgin Mary, whom she consciously or unconsciously identifies with her dead mother. In the poem “For the Year of the Insane,” subtitled “a prayer,” she conceives of death as purifying water:

In the mind there is a thin alley called death and I move through it as through water.  

(SP 92)

Purification, being a precondition to spiritual death also entails the realization of the futility of the female body:

My body is useless.  

(SP 92)

Like Many American poets including Hart Crane, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, Sexton does not consider death as a terrible devil, but as an agent of union with God. She wants to surrender her body to death as her friend Sylvia Plath surrendered her life to the oven. She comes to develop a precise philosophy of death, which she unfolds in the poems written in the aftermath of Sylvia’s suicide. The first, “Wanting to Die,” is a dramatic monologue, which explores the tools of death and expresses her grief of the sad end of her friend:

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

(SP 98)

She feels that Plath is waiting for arrival:

and yet she waits for me, year after year, 
to so delicately under an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison. (SP 98)

Sexton returns to ventilate her ambivalence towards her parents demonstrating her hatred alternating with her love. Her hatred towards her father and mother is rooted in her very childhood. She did not have the benefit of the parental love as she had been sent to a boarding school. This denial of parental love made her mentally and emotionally cripple, causing physical repercussions. Expressing her sense of frustration, she writes in “Cripples and Other Stories”:

I was an instant cripple
from my finger to my shoulder.
The laundress wept and swooned.
My mother had to hold her.
____________________________________
I knew I was a cripple.
Of course, I’d known it from the start.
My father took the crowbar
and broke that wringer’s heart. (SP 110)

Nevertheless, Sexton continues to worship her father for the perfection of his personality.

Sexton frequently accused her mother of her failure to establish a healthy communication between them. For the communication gap Sexton could never understand her mother. There were only two occasions on which she developed some sort of understanding with her. But it was too late:

My mother knew me twice
and then I had to leave her. (SP 111)

Likewise, Sexton finds a similar communication gap with her daughter as well. After a long absence, when her daughter Joyce returns to her house and meets her mother she does not recognise her. She mistakes Sexton as a stranger.
The girl is so terrified that she cries for help. Sexton is terribly upset and goes on to express her grief in the poem “Pain for a Daughter” with great emotion:

I stand at the door, eyes locked
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,
and then she cries...
Oh my God, help me!
Where a child would have cried Mama!
Where a child would have believed Mama!

(SP 113)

With this renewed sense of guilt and frustration and an instinctive love of spiritual death, the equilibrium of Sexton’s mind is again disturbed. The poet finds herself again in the mental asylum. However, after reading the letter of Saul Bellow, incorporating an except from his Herzog, the balance is restored. Sexton now leaves the thought of death and begins to knock the doors of life. In her poem “Live,” especially in its second part, Sexton visualizes a fresh opening of life:

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer.

(SP 117)

And this answer is

I say Live, Live because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift.

(SP 119)

This dream which now she dreams is the dream of an eternal life in God.

With her faith restored in life, Sexton’s attitude towards life becomes somewhat optimistic. Her tone becomes less bitter. Though she remains concerned with a sense of isolation, her mood changes radically. “She has abandoned,” writes Robert Phillips, “her previous preoccupations with ancestry,
madness, and partial recovery. Most of these latest pieces are ironic love poems, speaking more of alienation than of conciliation, more of loneliness than togetherness.\textsuperscript{47}

Nevertheless, Sexton’s attitude towards life still suffers from an imbalance. For her life remains a mixture of pain and pleasure. Undoubtedly there are chances of rebirth, but this rebirth is always paradoxical, since it involves the process of digging the buried self. In her new volume, \textit{Love Poems} (1969), Sexton shows “an awareness of the possibly good as well as the possibly rotten.”\textsuperscript{48} As she herself has commented, “inherent in the process is a rebirth of a sense of self, each time stripping away a dead self.”\textsuperscript{49}

The poems included in the next volume, \textit{Love Poems}, are love poems only in an ironical sense, since they speak more of the absence of love than its presence. Nonetheless they portray love in its different guises, “sensual, filial, adulterous self and the impossibility of reciprocal love.”\textsuperscript{50} Besides the different guises of love, Sexton also goes on to celebrate various states of womanhood and her loneliness. The opening poem of the volume “The Breast,” reveals Sexton’s laring spirit in celebrating the various part of female boys. “The Breast” expresses the sensuous feeling of a young girl at the touch of the hand of lover:

But your hands found me like an architect. \hfil (SP 123)

The speaker seems to become alive with the touch of lover’s fingers:

I am alive when your fingers are. \hfil (SP 124)
Sexual fulfilment makes the girl unbalanced:

I am unbalanced.

(SP 124)

The touch of lover’s fingers on her breast makes the speaker mad with over excessive sexual fulfilment:

I am mad the way young girls are mad,
with an offering, an offering....

(SP 124)

This sort of erotic body consciousness can also be traced in the poem titled “Touch.”

Another poem dealing with the female body is “In Celebration of My Uterus,” which surprised many readers. But for Sexton uterus is no longer a taboo, but a source of inspiration, since it embodies the “central creature” which gives her courage to live:

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.

(SP 125)

Among love poems, the most realized poem is “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” which poetizes the supremacy of the wife over the lover. While the wife is the emblem of permanence, the lover is the token of the ephemeral. As the embodiment of self-sacrifice, she offers flowers to her husband and takes all the thorns in her huge lap. She discharges her duty not only as a wife but also as a
mother, looking after their children who are like the delicate balloons resting on the ceiling. Thus wife is virtually a goddess or a symbol of reality:

She is so naked and singular.
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.

(SP 131)

While celebrating love and human body, Sexton also expresses her anger towards the male tribe for treating female bodies as the tools of sexual satisfaction. This anger finds one of its best expressions in “You All Know the Story of the Other Woman.” She writes how man neglects woman after the sexual act:

.........................Look
when it is over he places her,
like a phone, back on the hook.

(SP 135)

The value of the woman is limited to this act in which man and woman eat each other.

......................... They turn off the light.
The glimmering creatures are full of lies.
They are eating each other. They are overfed.

(SP 137)

The poems which treat Sexton’s anger against the male tribe are invariably the poems of loneliness. In some of these poems, she goes on to offer suggestion for overcoming the boredom of loneliness. One of these suggestions is embodied in “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator”51 in which the poetic persona says:

I am fed
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

(SP 136)
According to Phillips, it is “a pathetic vision.” Another poem, to exemplify this pathetic vision is “December 12th.” Here the poet overcomes her loneliness in the voluntary hospital work. But all the poems are not pathetic. Poems like “The Nude Swim” speak of spiritual isolation and hope.

The collection, Love Poems, also embodies a sequence of a dozen and a half short poems under the collective title, “Eighteen Days Without You.” These poems remind us of Snodgrass’s poems in “Heart’s Needle,” that like Sexton’s poems, “Confessional” cycles on the enforced absence of a loved one. Sexton’s Transformations, the third volume of the trilogy, is not confessional in the strict sense of the term. But, as Phillips thinks, there are verses which do at times strip the poet bare, as when she tries the wolf’s descriptions in ‘Red Riding Hood:

Quite collected at cocktail parties,
 meanwhile in my head
I’m undergoing open heart surgery.

In the third phase of her career Sexton turns her gaze from the confessions of the physical self to the confessions of the spiritual self. She uses surrealistic images to reveal the working of the deeper self. Purgative in nature, the poems of this period embody Sexton’s experience of walking from the world of madness to a world of spiritual illumination. During this phase she wrote only two books The Book of Folly (1972) and The Death Notebooks (1974). The Book of Folly includes, “Thirty Poems, “The Death of the Fathers” sequence, poems on “Angels,” and The Jesus Papers.

However, all these poems, though in different ways, combine to exemplify Sexton’s idea of purgation, which is a precondition to religious illumination. Her
idea of purgation is akin to Frost’s idea of purgation by fire and water, as expressed in his poem “Fire and Ice” which serves as an epigraph to *The Book of Folly*. But Sexton uses fire and ice in a figurative sense with fire standing for passion and ice for hate and death. Sexton begins this volume by expressing her desire to escape from this world just like a bird (“The Ambition Bird”). She wants to go to a world of peace and pleasure. But her escape can be cut short by the ghosts of her memory. Hence before her flight she has to exorcise these ghosts once for all.

First of these terrible ghosts is the doctor, her psychiatrist. Now the doctor, as exemplified in the poem “The Doctor of the Heart,” no longer kindles in her heart a feeling of love and reverence, as he did in earlier doctor-poems “You Doctor Martin” and “Flee on Your Donkey.” Naturally Sexton’s attitude towards him becomes rough and furious. For her doctor is a repulsive and unwelcome figure for she no longer needs his expert advice:

> Take away your knowledge Doktor
> It doesn’t butter me up.”

Another figure which Sexton finds standing in the way of her spiritual voyage is her mother. As portrayed in earlier poems like “The Double Image” and “The Operation,” she was obsessed with guilt consciousness. But now she wants not only to get rid of the guilt consciousness but also to remove her (mother’s) spectre of the mother from her mind. Sexton expresses this desire through the poem “Dreaming the Breasts.” She has now put a pad lock on her mother so that the white ponies go galloping and galloping:
I have put a padlock
On you, Mother, dear dead human,
so that your great bells,
those dear white ponies,
can go galloping, galloping,
Wherever you are.

(SP 179)

Sexton also writes about poetry which has been her liberating god throughout the period of her mental illness. Poetic words had been for long her protectors from the demon of death. But now the same poetry is failing her at crucial moments, as words become silent and “leak out of it like a miscarriage”:

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
and they come back like squash balls.
Yet there is silence.
Always silence.
Like an enormous baby mouth.

(SP 180)

Sexton also exorcises the ghost of her father in the “Death of the Fathers” sequence. Indeed the memories of her life with her father appeared as the most terrible ghost, stalking in the path of spiritual quest in her father who awakened the sleeping womanhood in her mind and killed her childhood and who made her sex conscious, producing in her the incestuous desire of an Electra. Her new attitude towards her father is radically different from the earlier one. It appears in such poems as “Oysters,” “How We Danced,” and “Santa.” After reliving the memories of the moments of intense erotic attachment with her father, she comes to visualize him as a saint and a signal man, symbolizing Sexton’s change of the track of her journey from physical to the spiritual. “She writes in “Santa”:
and large children hang their stockings
and build a black memorial to you.
And you, you fade out of sight
like a lost signalman
wagging his lantern
for the train that comes no more.

In “The Jesus Papers,” the religious note which appears as an undercurrent in earlier books, comes to the fore. The poems embodied in the volume celebrate Sexton’s close kinship with Jesus. Sexton always regarded Jesus as her companion, to be precise, her fellow sufferer and confessor. He made confession with his body much in the same way as Sexton made her confessions with words. The theme of their common suffering figures in “Jesus Asleep” which reveals Jesus’s intense desire to be united with his mother Mary. But Jesus’s desire was fulfilled only after his death. Likewise, Sexton also comes to realize that her union with Jesus would be possible only after her death. Therefore she resolves to accept death willingly:

.................. He had not known Mary
they were united at His death,
the cross to the woman,
in a final embrace.
poised forever
Like a centerpiece.

Her intense desire to realize God reaches its feverish pitch, when she expresses her longing to kiss God. In “Jesus Dies,” she writes:

I want to kiss God on His nose and watch His sneeze
I want God to put His streaming arms around Me

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Sexton’s attitude towards Jesus is ambivalent. Even though she does not regard Jesus, as God she regards him as her friend and fellow sufferer. But sometimes she considers him as her adversary and finds herself interlocked in a struggle. The cow envisioned by the poet in her dream is not a milk-giver but blood giver. Thus Christ for her becomes a double symbol, the harbinger of victory as well of danger:

We must all eat sacrifices.
We must all eat beautiful women.

(Sp 200)

However, it is not an ordinary physical death that can unite Sexton with Jesus or God, but an illuminated death which she goes on to define in The Death Notebooks, the book of her life time that incorporates her last will and testament. This illuminated death does not bring the tremors of terror but the music of life. Sexton reveals the secrets of the illuminated death chiefly through the poems and sequences “The Furies” and “O Ye Tongues.”

The opening poem of The Death Notebooks, “Gods,” reveal Sexton’s spiritual quest, a theme which also informs some other important poems. This quest takes several forms. In “Making a Living,” Sexton wants to follow the path of Jonah, as she finds striking similarities between her life and that of Jonah. Interestingly the Christian saint, one of the most popular biblical figures, recommended confession as an instrument for redemption and treated death as an instrument of revelation. In her attempt to identify herself with Jonah, she puts the following words in his mouth:
This is my death,
Jonah said out loud,
and it will profit me to understand it.
I will make a mental note of each detail. 55

Since death is an agent of liberation, Sexton is not fearful at all. She
welcomes death as her lover who will relieve her from the earthly prison. This
realization reinforces her death wish. Sexton's tender feelings for her lover (death)
surface in "For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open," in a remarkable way:

Now your beer belly hangs out like Fasto.
You are popping your buttons and expelling gas.
How can I lie down with you, my comical beau
when you are so middle-aged and lower-class.

(SP 204)

But in the sequence, "The Death Baby," Sexton conceives of death in terms
of Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," which treats it not only with
tenderness but looks at it with fear as well. In the last poem of the sequence
"Baby," she invests death with a double symbol, projecting it, as a delicate baby
with a terrible face:

Beware. Beware.
There is a tenderness
There is a love.
for this dumb traveler
waiting in his pink covers.

(SP 209)

The concluding lines of the poem envision the exact time when the speaker
would realize the necessity of hugging death:

Some-day,
heavy with cancer or disaster
I will look up at Max
and say: It is time.
Hand me the death baby
and there will be
that final rocking.

(SP 209)

The persona of the poem seems to devote herself to the seductiveness of the death baby. The phrase “final rocking” reveals Sexton’s conscious choice of her death in her own fashion. “Likewise the choice of the moment of death is an unconscious decision, by a living being.”

As Sexton tells us in the last two sequences, “The Furies” and “O Ye Tongues,” such a death is not physical, but spiritual, i.e. the death of “I-ness” or the ego-sense. Thus her conception of death is not physical but mystic. However, before realizing her mystic death, she has to pass through the memory lane of her physical experiences celebrating the beauty of male and female bodies. She also recalls different aspects of death and goes on to experience the dark night in which she eventually loses her faith in God. Sometimes she is overwhelmed with the frenzy of suicide which for her is the only way to end her life. Nevertheless, towards the end of the sequence, she recovers her faith in life and determines to cling to it. She resolves:

Not to die, not to die.

(SP 215)

Nevertheless, this victory over death is only short-lived. Sexton returns to her old position, believing that death is the only way to the eternal life. In “Clothes” she goes on to express her intention to commit suicide and to go to God as a clean one, wearing clean clothes:
Put on a clean shirt
before you die, some Russian said.
Nothing with drool, please,
no egg spots, no blood,
no sweat, no sperm.
You want me clean, God,
so I’ll try to comply.

(SP 216)

This cleanliness is only symbolic. Sexton longs for the liberation of her body from physical bondages and for the purification of her mind from guilt consciousness. In this purified condition, she wants to proceed on her journey towards the abode of the Almighty:

And I’ll take
my painting shirt
washed over and over of course
spotted with every yellow kitchen I’ve painted.
God, you don’t mind if I bring all my kitchens?
They hold the family laughter and the soup.

(SP 216)

With her ideas of death and divinity crystallized, Sexton now goes on to offer her prayers to God. In the ten psalms of the last sequence “O Ye Tongues,” modelled after Jubilate Agno by the eighteenth century English poet, Christopher Smart, Sexton praises God for the creation of this world and its objects. At the same time, she also feels a close kinship with Smart who enabled her to find the cure for the ills of her life. With him she also comes to understand the secret of death, realizing that death is not the end of life but the beginning of a new life. In the “Tenth Psalm,” she writes:

For death comes to friends, to parents, to sisters.
Death comes with its bagful of pain yet they do not curse the key they were given to hold.

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For they open each door and it gives them a new day at the yellow window.

Obviously, death is a monster from whose clutches, no body can escape. But for Smart and Sexton, it is a key which opens the door of God’s abode. Hence death is not the agent of disruption but of union.

The fourth phase of Sexton’s poetic career marks the period of collapsing rationality. It is a period in which she comes not only to realize the complete divinity of Christ but also her union with him. Jesus for her had been the ideal and goal of her confessional quest at one and the same time. Sexton embodies her experience of this union in her last poem of her poetic voyage, *The Awful Rowing toward God*. In this book Sexton provides universal dimensions to her confessionalism. *The Awful Rowing towards God* is the summation of Sexton’s spiritual journey which begins with the confessions of her body and ends with her soul’s union with Christ or God. She starts with the account of her childhood deprivations, loneliness, and her woeful ignorance of God hidden in her own self. She tells us that in spite of enormous impediments and obstacles, she continued her journey in the form of the quest for her father which eventually culminated into quest for God. She wanted to find key to open the door of God’s palace:

And a Key  
a very large key,  
that opens something—  
some useful door—  
somewhere—  
up there—

(SP 232)
In the beginning, Sexton believed that God was outside herself. But in “When Man Enters Woman,” she comes to realize the presence of God within herself. This realization, produces in her an intense longing for union with him for which she seeks the help of Virgin Mary. She prays her to remove all the obstacles in the way of her marriage with Jesus, telling the Virgin that she is tired of the cycles of death and rebirth, and now she wants a true rebirth or a true marriage to end this process of miserable life:

I have been born many times, a false Messiah,
but let me be born again
into something true.

(SP 237)

Continuing her journey, Sexton in her poem “Frenzy,” finds herself very close to the temple of God. With her unflinching faith and her sincere prayers, she overcomes all the hurdles and reaches the dock of the island. In “The Rowing Endeth,” she moors her “rowboat/at the dock of the island called God” (SP 242). At this stage she feels that all her wounds are healed with the surge of confidence. Subsequently she leaves her wooden boat to unite herself with God. At last, Sexton achieves the supreme moment of her life. This moment comes when God welcomes her to his abode:

“On with it!” He says and thus
we squat on the rocks by the sea.

(SP 242)

Sexton’s joy knows no bounds, as she is invited by God to play the game of poker. She accepts the offer with great pleasure. Interestingly, the game ends in a tie, in which both feel victorious. The poem ends with laughter, a characteristic
expression of the mystic joy, felt after the union with God. As the game ends, both
players begin to laugh:

    a game of poker.
    He calls me.
    I win because I hold a royal straight flush.
    He wins because He holds five aces.

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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.

(SP 242)

Sexton’s world which once was filled with darkness is now suffused with
light. She finds that their laughter reverberates throughout the universe. She goes
on to hear the echoes of that untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha – ha –” (SP 242). In
this way Sexton achieves the goal of her life, a union with God.

In nutshell, Sexton’s confessional poetry is both cathartic and religious. It is
inspired by a desire not only to purify herself from the physical, emotional, and
mental experience which make her ill but also to achieve union with God.
Evidently Sexton models her confessionalism on the physical sufferings of Jesus
Christ. She wants to accomplish with her soul, what Jesus accomplished with his
body. Sexton’s process of purification and quest for union passes through four
different phases or periods: of apprenticeship, conflicting instinct, religious
consciousness, and collapsing rationality.

In the first book written during the period of Apprenticeship, To Bedlam
and Part Way Back, Sexton embodies her experiences of mental illness, especially
madness and partial recovery from it. In the second book Pretty Ones, she describes the causes of this madness. Since she feels that she was driven to this state by her dear ones, she expresses a sense of remorse and guilt followed by a feeling of loss and fear. In the second phase, The Period of Conflicting Instincts, Sexton poetizes her dilemma, her constant wavering between life and death. In the poems of Live or Die, she gives expression to this tormenting experience. But ultimately she becomes tired of the thought of death and resolves to respond to the music of life. It is this optimism which informs Love Poems.

In the poems written during the third phase of her poetic career, Sexton celebrates her religious consciousness, which comes to the fore after her decision to confront life and to make religious confessions. She embodies this experience in The Book of Folly and The Death Notebooks. In the former, Sexton includes confessional poems using surrealist images. Exorcising the ghosts of parents and friends once again and underlining the limitations of poetic expression, she wants to seek refuge in Virgin Mary and Christ. Through the various sequences, incorporated in the book, she endeavours to cultivate the idea of God. However, it is only in the second book, The Death Notebooks, the achievement of her life time that she comes to understand the meaning of death and union with God. In the fourth phase, which marks The Period of Collapsing Rationality, Sexton achieves the goal of her confessionalism, union with God. In the poems of The Awful Rowing towards God, she sums up her life-long quest, her problems, difficulties, and ordeals that continuously punctuated her troublesome journey. In the end she gives expression to her tremendous joy felt after her union with God. Thus her
confessional poetry, which was seemingly shallow and meaningless, becomes the
vehicle of the deep experiences of the soul.
Chapter 2 — Notes

1Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 1: hereafter cited as Hall.


3Hall 3.

4Hall 3.

5Sexton, qtd. Hall 3.

6Sexton, qtd. Hall 3.

7Sexton, qtd. Hall 3.

8Self-Portrait 5.

9Hall 5.

10Hall 5.

11Self-Portrait 5.

12Hall 6.

13Hall 7.

14Self-Portrait 8.


16Hall 10.

17Hall 10.

18Hall 12.


20Hall 13.


23 Hall 16.

24 Hall 19.

25 Hall 19.

26 Self-Portrait 23.

27 Self-Portrait 22.

28 Self-Portrait 22.

29 Hall 22.

30 Self-Portrait 25.

31 Self-Portrait 25.


33 Shakespeare, qtd. Hall 42.

34 Franz Kafka, qtd. Hall 42.


37 Hall 39.

39 Rosenthal 79.


42 Robert Boyers, review "On Live or Die," McClatchy: 204. hereafter cited as Boyers.

43 Saul Bellow, qtd. Hall 55.

44 Philips 80-81.

45 Hall 55.


47 Philips 82.

48 Beverly Fields, qtd. Philips 82.

49 Beverly Fields, qtd. Philips 82.

50 Philips 83.

51 Philips 83.

52 Philips 88.

53 Philips 91.


56 George 183.