CHAPTER 3

ANNE SEXTON'S LITERARY TECHNIQUES

As a concept and poetic genre confessionalism might have been old; but as a form of expression it is most modern. In view of the inadequacy of the poetic conventions of Modernism to express the fragmentation of modern consciousness, it developed its own forms and techniques. It discarded the rational, objective, and indirect approach of Modernism and accepted an emotional, subjective, and direct approach. Most of the confessional poets rejected the practices of maintaining aesthetic distance, and anonymity, and the technique of finding objective correlative for a particular mental state. According to Irving Howe, they stressed self exposure and self assault as a gesture for authenticity. Confessional poets became attentive to their feelings rather than to their thoughts. It was the bared breast and not an active heat which became central to them.

In a way the confessional poets were engaged in a poetic revolution which aimed at knocking down barriers of subject matter and its expression. While in case of subject matter, they concentrated on the history of their own self, in case of expression they removed psychological barriers and poetic artifice that arrested the free flow of poetic consciousness. On psychological level the poet was confronted by such defense mechanism as repression, displacement, suppression, condensation, projection etc. On artistic level he was allured by such poetic devices as paradox, ambiguity, ellipsis, allusion, wit etc. Steering clear from both

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of them, he had to carve out his own poetic way to express the experiences of his untrammelled self. The confessional poets including Sexton turned towards open forms. J.D. McClatchy writes:

In general, it can be said of Sexton’s poems, as of other confessional poems, that the patterns they assume and by which they manage their meanings are those which more closely follow the actual experiences they are recreating – forms that can include and reflect direct, personal experience; a human, rather than a disembodied voice; the dramatic presentation of the flux of time and personality; and the drive toward sincerity. By this last concept is mean not an ethical imperative, but the willed and willing openness of the poet to her experience and to the character of the language by which her discoveries are revealed and shared.¹

That is to say, the new poets or for this matter confessional poets adopted personal history or autobiography as their central theme and direct expression as their method. According to Stephen Stepanchev they allowed their emotions to take their own form without the interference of reason. To quote him:

These new poets prized experience in all its rawness and directness allowing it to acquire meaning and form in the imagination. The poet placed himself with particularity, avoiding all obvious universality.²

The confessional poets went on to develop their own conception of poetry, their own poetical structures, language, technique, imagery and diction. On her part Sexton experimented with new techniques to express the divided sensibility of the modern era by her own example. Interestingly, she proceeded with a new interpretation of poetics. Traditionally, poetry had been regarded as an aesthetic experience, derived from aesthetic subjects that find expression in aesthetic terms. But Sexton moved away from this conception. Pleading that poetry should be concerned more with the ‘invisible’ than with the ‘visible,’ she gave us a new
vision. For her the central point of poetry should be not beauty but truth. For it is truth which reveals human personality. Nevertheless, Sexton did not stand for partial truth but the whole truth which hides nothing. For the poet, who is engaged in the persistent search for truth, there is no limitation, no taboo or forbidden subjects.

Sexton believed that the poet should ensure a free flow of sensibility. The walls which separate the conscious from the unconscious should be knocked down by the poetic effort. The poet should dig not only the conscious mind but also the unconscious part of it to know the mysteries of human personality. That is to say, poetry should flow un-impeded, unchecked from the conscious and the unconscious alike revealing the whole being of the poet. Sexton's confessionalism became a revolutionary attempt to bring under the aesthetic orbit subjects which were hitherto considered as unpoetic and forbidden. Poetry before Sexton was simply incapable of embodying the whole truth. It was Sexton who used poetry as an instrument for exploring the totality of human experience. Subsequently, she went on to define poetry as an "ax" to cut the frozen sea within the human psyche. She told Barbara Kevles:

As Kafka said about prose, "A book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us." And that's what I want from a poem. A poem should serves as the ax for the frozen sea within us.³

In order to melt, this frozen sea within, Sexton uses all the tricks of her poetic trade. Though she speaks of the full and free flow of unmediated experience, she uses poetic techniques to channelize it in a mediated direction to serve her confessional demands. No wonder, she thinks of a poet as trickster who
uses everything to cheat his or her readers as well as herself: Sexton minces no words when she confesses her practice of poetic cheating to Gregory Fitz Gerald:

And I cheat; or if I haven’t cheated, I’ll cheat later, so no one can see this dreadful dreck I’m doing.\(^4\)

As examples of her cheating she cites such poems as “The Double Image,” “The Division of Parts,” in To Bedlam and Part Way Back and “Eighteen Days Without You” in Love Poems. She goes on to reveal her trick or the way she deceives her readers in the following words:

I write the first stanza; here it is. Then I count out the syllables. I make it look like I feel it. If I want to, I can suddenly break it and go into something else. It’s mere dreckery to get the poem out, which is the important thing. At first I don’t plan anything out. But once it’s there, then I figure it all out. If you start going down the page, it’s very easy to see me cheating, writing eight or nine or four.\(^5\)

For Sexton, cheating is a double process in which the readers as well as the poet are deceived by poetic tricks. If the reader is deceived by the manipulation of verbal sounds or the rhyming scheme, the poet herself is deceived by the form of the poems. She wrote about this formal trick in an article for the Poetry Book Society: “Form for me is a trick to deceive myself, not you, but me.” Elaborating this idea, Sexton tells Patricia Marx:

I can explain that exactly. I think all form is a trick in order to get at the truth. Sometimes in my hardest poems, the ones that are difficult to write, I might make an impossible scheme, a syllabic count that is so involved that it then allows me to be truthful. It works as a kind of superego. It says, “You may now face it, because it will be impossible ever to get out.” Almost any accomplished poet can do this. The point is can you get to the real, the sharp edge of the poem? But you see how I say this not to deceive you, but to deceive me. I deceive myself, saying to myself you can’t do it, and then if I can get it then I have deceived myself, then I can change it and do
what I want. I can even change and rearrange it so no one can see my trick. It won’t change what’s real. It’s there on paper.6

Besides poetic tricks, another important feature of Sexton’s craft is the poetic process of expansion and revision. For her writing poetry is not a smooth process but something arduous and manipulative. In order to express herself properly, she expands her subject and also indulges in pruning. Her poetic slogan, as she tells William Packard, is: “Expand, expand, cut, cut, expand, expand, cut, cut.”7 She does not trust first drafts, presumably because they are incomplete. Her poetic strategy of expansion and cutting is meant to trap ideas and thereafter to undergo a process of selection. Explaining her real poetic design Polly C. Williams writes:

One of her fundamental approach to writing was that one should expand for the sake of expansion. Only when the pages were overflowing with ideas and images should one go back and slice, cut, alter, and delete. If the poem or story still was not right, one should again expand, expand, expand. It is the process itself, not the motivation or ultimate objective that enables one to discover the stimulating image and correct line.8

For Sexton writing poetry is a game which she has to play with full determination. She gives a very interesting account of this game to William Packard: “The game I do play is I say to myself. This poem is too hard to write. It is impossible for me, I can’t do it. Then I start fooling around with same stanzas, running a syllable count. I use syllables and rhyme. I get a good beginning to the poem. Then I say to myself. But I can’t do the poem it’s too hard. I use this as a kind of superego. Then I proceed to do the poem. I make up the game, and then I don’t follow it too carefully. Games don’t get me involved. It’s always the
content that gets me involved. I make up the game to go along with the content. I start every poem with a powerful emotion. I write in the morning. I use yellow paper, sometimes lined school paper. I write at the typewriter and make extensive corrections. I sit at a desk, my feet up on a bookcase. I have cigarettes, naturally, burned down to one long gray ash."

This game of writing poetry is not only tricky but also a long one. The process of expanding and cutting goes on for a long time. Sometimes Sexton had to revise her work for hundred times. In the beginning of her career she took several days, sometimes weeks to finish a poetic piece. For her the most difficult part of her poetic process was invariably its beginning. She took as she tells Patricia Marx, inordinately a long time to start a poem:

Oh, that’s a terrible question! I don’t know. Sometimes you get a line, a phrase, sometimes you’re crying, or it’s the curve of a chair that hurts you and you don’t know why, or sometimes you just want to write a poem, and you don’t know that it’s about. I will fool around on the typewriter. It might take me ten pages of nothing, of terrible writing, and then I’ll get a line, and I’ll think, “That’s what I mean!” What you’re doing is hunting for what you mean, what you’re trying to say. You don’t know when you start.

Even in short pieces like lyrics expressing a simple emotion, she had to waste hundreds of pages before shaping the poem in its finished form. The problems she forced ranged from realizing the central theme to the linguistic problems like selecting the images and metaphors. With each revision she had to go deeper and deeper into her psyche. Her poems, which were appeared as spontaneous emotional overflows, were actually the embodiments of her tireless exercises in composition, involving hard intellectual labour:
I work on it a very long time. For one lyric poem I rewrote about
three hundred typewritten pages. Often I keep my worksheets, so
that one in a while when I get depressed and think that I'll never
write again, I can go back and see how that poem came into being.
You watch the work and you watch the miracle. You have to look
back at all those bad words, bad metaphors, everything started
wrong, and then see how it came into being, the slow progress of it,
because you're always fighting to find out what it is that you want to
say. You have to go deeper and deeper each time. You wonder why
you didn't drown at the time – deeper and deeper.\textsuperscript{11}

Anne Sexton uses poetic tricks not only in the poetic process but also in the
manipulation of the subject matter. For her, as we have marked earlier, poets are
cheats, crooks, and liars. They are like carpenters who make a tree, with "used
furniture."\textsuperscript{12} Sexton also used literal truths to get at the roots of the emotional truth
which are central to her poetic endeavour. In the process of inclusion and
exclusion, she inserts many episodes and events which are from her world of
imagination and prunes away a number of events which form the part of her real
experience. She did it for making her poetry sharp-edged capable of digging out
her buried self:

Well, I think this is necessary. It’s something that an artist must to
do make it clear and dramatic and to have the effect of the ax. To
have that effect you must distort some of these facts to give them
their own clarity. As an easy example, in my long poem to my
daughter and about my mental illness, I don’t imply that I was ever
in an institution more than once, but that was the dramatic truth. The
actual truth was something quite different. I returned quite a few
times, and the fact that I have two children was not mentioned in
this, because the dramatic point was I had one child, and was writing
to her. It made a better poem to distort in this way. I just don’t
mention it. So you don’t have to include everything to tell the truth.
You can exclude many things. You can even lie (one can confess
and lie forever) as I did in the poem of the illegitimate child that the
girl had to give up. It hadn’t happened to me. It wasn’t true, and yet
it was indeed the truth.\textsuperscript{13}
However, in the field of poetic structure Sexton’s manipulative skills were somewhat restrictive. Her innovative faculty remained engaged with simply modifying traditional structures. Without discarding the freer or the strict forms of the traditional poetics, she went on to alter them, making them responsive to confessional moods. The most significant thing about her poetic forms is that she did not proceed with a preconceived form. But during the process of composition the poem took its own form. Thus, the form of the poem came to her automatically. In her interview with Patricia Marx, she went on to assert that “[t]he story writes itself and must find its right form.”14 This automatic process of finding forms is visible in the poems of To Bedlam and Part Way Back. While some poems of the volume were written in a very tight form, others were written in freer or loose forms. Sexton made her intentions visible from the very first poem of the volume, “You Doctor Martin.” Written in the form of a dramatic monologue, the poem reveals the female patients of the hospital. With the end rhymes like “walk,” “talk,” and “stalk,” the poet portrays Dr. Martin’s relations with her patients as also his separateness from them. She contrasts doctor’s purposeful activity with the purposeless frantic activity of the speaker of the poem, the activity which suggests the movement of death:

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
or the laughing bee on a stalk.

(Sp 9)
Sexton used this type of dramatic form for expressing her private experiences. The rhyming scheme which she used is traditional. It is written in six seven line stanzas. Each line of the first stanza ends with the rhyming scheme of a b c a d b c b. Both the end rhymes and internal rhymes together reveal the sense or the meaning throughout the poem. Interestingly, enjambment dramatizes the meaning. The rhythm of the poem is basically iambic. Sexton’s use of occasional sponde. Sexton used this dramatic structure in some other poems as well. For instance, in “Kind Sir: These Woods,” in the first stanza of the poem, she creates a dramatic situation of the game of children, while in the second stanza she goes on to draw out a lesson that in order to find oneself, one is required first to lose oneself. In her 1959 letter to Nolan Miller, she writes about her preference for this type of dramatic organization:

I do have a feeling for stories, for plot, and may be the dramatic situation. I really prefer dramatic situations to anything else. Most poets have a thought that they dress in... imagery... But I prefer people in a situation, in a doing, a scene, a losing or a gain, and then, in the end, find the thought (the thought I didn’t know I had until I wrote the story).15

Furthermore, the poem in its four quatrains uses the traditional rhyming scheme of a b a b, c d c d, e f e f, c c g g.

After making persistent efforts, it was only in the poem “The Double Image,” that Sexton found a new form by blending music with traditional or strict form. This new symphonic structure became her real form for time to come. However, before finding this form, she had to struggle for sometime. In her
interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, she tells us how she was able to develop symphonic structure:

"The Double Image" is written in very strict form, and that I didn’t know much I made up my own form I worked very hard from section to section, it being a long poem, to have a different pace. I didn’t think of it when I was writing it, but in retrospect I guess I was trying to give it a symphonic quality. Something in me said, jeepers, you’re not going to go on forever! Now let’s do this. I’m pushing for the reality, the truth, and yet I’m trying to change it a little – not just the rhythm – not anything that easy.\textsuperscript{16}

Many critics admired the symphonic structure of "The Double Image." May Swenson believed that the form of poetry should not be tortured but musical, as one finds in this particular poem:

The form of this poem is bare and pure, musical and not tortured. It is a revelatory and healing poem and quite different in tone from anything else in the book.\textsuperscript{17}

Sexton continued to introduce variations of the symphonic form in the poems of Live or Die as well. In this book she dallied with strict and free forms of the verse. One of the most important poems of this volume, "Somewhere in Africa," is written in the form of an elegy. Sexton offered her broodings over the sudden death of her teacher John Holmes. The elegy contains seven four line stanzas with the end-rhyming scheme of a b a b, c d c d, and a rhymed couplet. Sexton used yet another kind of structure which can be defined as episodic structure. She experimented with this structure in the poems of The Book of Folly, The Death Notebooks, and The Awful Rowing towards God. Through this structure, she ensures the free-flow of her poetic sensibility which later went on assume religious and mystic overtones. It is interesting to mark, while in her strictly confessional
poems, she presented a fusion of orthodox and free forms, blending music with the versification of the strict forms. But in her poems of spiritual consciousness, she gave up old forms and relied on some newer forms of free verse which were not without a musical content.

The musical quality of Sexton's verse naturally leads to the lyrical quality of her work. In spite of her liking for dramatic structures, the essential quality of her genius was lyrical. It was her lyricism which helped her to explore the deeper layers of her psyche. She found in lyric the best mode for expressing her own feelings and emotions. She made a persistent effort to master this form. Sexton's initial failure to handle the process of lyrical composition made her despondent. However, she did not slacken her efforts. In her interview with Patricia Marx, she admits that sometimes for giving a proper shape to a lyric, she had to rewrite it in as many as three hundred type-written pages. She had to make a lot of pruning and cutting. Sexton always fought hard to make her lyric poems the embodiments of her sensibility in a clear crystal way. One of the best poems to exemplify Sexton's lyrical genius is undoubtedly "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" in Pretty Ones, which incorporates her personal feelings and emotions in an imaginative phrasing. Commenting on the poem, Caroline King Barnard Hall writes:

"To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph"... demonstrates Sexton's growing versatility and sophistication as a poet. Partly by contrast, it helps to define the nature and characteristics of the confessional mode in which she wrote the majority of the work of her first two volumes. And yet this sonnet also shows the great adaptability of the confessional mode. Like any confessional poem, lyric "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" expresses
the individual and personal emotion of the poet and offers, in its imaginative phrasing, personal expression of subjective emotion.\textsuperscript{18}

Sexton was not only an artist of imaginative phrasing but also of metonymic expressions in which she used to transfer words and phrases in order to reveal the emotional truth lying underneath physical facts. One of the best poems to use metonymic phrasing is "The Operation" in \textit{All My Pretty Ones}. To take an instance:

\begin{quote}
After the sweet promise, 
The summer's mid retreat 
From mother's cancer, the winter months of her death, 
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet, 
it's 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\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

In a metonymy a word is substituted for something with which it is closely associated. Commenting on the poem, Hall finds out many such metonymic transfers functioning throughout the poem. In the mention of summer and winter, there is a shift from actor to setting. The ‘promise’ or the ‘summer’s mild retreat from mother’s cancer’ was ‘sweet.’ Here the rhyme of ‘sweet’ with ‘retreat’ points up the pleasant and quiet qualities of the time preceding the operation; for the daughter, the season before the surgery was fertile summer-time. Since Sexton’s mother died in March 1959, the daughter was freed in the following summer from the pain of her mother’s dying but was unaware during that same summer of her own approaching pain. In this opening stanza, however, the doctor
“equate[s]” the daughter’s illness with the mother’s and this equation of experience continues in the following stanzas.\textsuperscript{20}

Besides, the use of metonymy Sexton sometime made an effective use of synecdoche to make a part of experience to represent the whole. The mental illness through which she passed is not merely her private experience but the experience of the whole humanity. However, the poetic devices most central to her lyrics are the use of metaphors and imagery. Like most of the poets of third quarter of the twentieth century, Sexton used metaphors, as poetic instruments to weed out the bitter realities of her own life. Interestingly in her attempt to seek identities through her metaphors, she established some peculiar relations. For instance, she found a metaphorical relationship between the imagery of kitchen and the imagery of death and violence. To quote Ben Howard:

Her most characteristic kind of metaphor fuses imagery of violence and death with imagery of the kitchen, suggesting a close, even inevitable relationship between them.\textsuperscript{21}

Sexton frequently used a specific central metaphor to structure her poem. For instance, in “Some Foreign Letters” included in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, she uses the metaphor of life as a trick. Life, Sexton believes, is a trick, since it allures people into a dreamland, to throw them on the thorns of reality. In an extended sense, with the help of this metaphor she went on to express her sorrow for the passing character of youthful moments:

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{SP 14}
\end{quote}
The metaphor of life as a trick goes on to define the experiences embodied in some of the other poems.

Sexton continued with her habit of metaphor-making. In “The Double Image” (rather the triple image), Sexton employed the metaphor of double image to portray the complex relationship of grandmother, mother, and daughter. The poem begins with the portrayal of Sexton as a mother, relating something to her younger daughter Joyce, something which is beyond the comprehension of a child:

I am thirty thirty this November.  
You are still small, in your fourth year.  
We stand watching the yellow leaves to queer,  
flapping in the winter rain,  
flapping 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.

(SP 28)

The very first stanza develops a metaphor that becomes the controlling image of the poem’s first section; the suicide attempts of the mother-speaker (tenor) are identified with the falling of a few last winter leaves (vehicle). Her condition is similar to that of the yellow winter leaves, destined to die like her.

Sexton goes on to develop this metaphor in the second stanza as well. The mother feels herself guilty for her daughter’s illness. She is reminded of her guilt-consciousness by the green, vigorous, and active green leaves which serve as contrast to the lifeless yellow leaves with which the speaker associates herself:
I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucer;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old dept I must assume.  

(SP 28)

The third stanza further develops the governing metaphor of witches, that is
instrumental in making her guilt-conscious. The daughter is perfectly well now,
but the mother experiences her own death. The speaker is now mellowed after
undergoing painful experiences for a pretty long time. She has, by now, drawn
some conclusions from her sufferings. While the daughter pelts her with some
uneasy questions like the ultimate destiny of leaves as well as human beings,
Sexton goes on to enlighten her with the wisdom that dawned upon her mind after
her troublesome life:

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self’s self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice
when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow’s white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
He time I did not love
myself, I visited your shovelled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.  

(SP 29)

Evidently, the mother speaker has learnt a lot from the poignant experiences
of her life. In her opinion, an individual should be brave enough to face troubles
and hurdles that come in his way of life. In her mind groaning and complaining are futile, for there is no special or personal God to listen to his complaints and prayers. The only God known to her is one’s own self. Obviously, the message which Sexton wants to deliver to her daughter and people of the world is the message of self-love.

Sexton used metaphor not only to structure poems but also to lay bare her heart and portray emotional realities of her tormented life. We can find the examples of such metaphors in the Love Poems. In “The Break” she described her physical damage in a metaphorical language to mark her emotional damage. According to Robert Phillips, the literal fracture of bones goes all along with the fracture of the heart:

The physical and emotional aftermaths of an affair are conveyed in “The Break” where the literal fracture of bones parallels the metaphorical fracture of the heat. The break of the title refers, on a third level, to the severed relationship. The literal fall down the stairs, a reversal of the conventional Freudian metaphor for the sexual act, is rendered with the homely description of her fracture: I was like a box of dog bones.  

Interestingly, Sexton exploited metaphors to suggest for the most part two radically different meanings. For instance, in “Dreaming the Breasts” embodied in The Book of Folly, mother’s breasts are not only the source of life-giving milk but also of death-giving cancer. She writes:

The breasts I knew at midnight
beat like the sea in me now.
Mother, I put bees in my mouth
To keep from eating
yet it did you no good.
In the end they cut off your breasts
and milk poured from them
into the surgeon's hand
and he embraced them.
I took them from him
And planted them.

(SP 179)

The speaker of the poem further extends the metaphor which transforms the
guilt-consciousness into the consciousness of a new life. The breasts which were
once the source of milk and cancer becomes the source of dreams of hope and new
life beyond the life of guilt symbolized by mother's breast. She envisions her
mother disappearing from the scene, "galloping" on her "white ponies" (SP 179).

In some other books like The Awful Rowing towards God and 45 Mercy
Street as well, Sexton made an excellent use of metaphor. The spiritual journey
which she embodied in The Rowing was structured on a series of metaphors
derived from mystic and religious sources or developed by her imaginative
powers. In 45 Mercy Street almost every section is centred round a metaphor.
The second section of the volume "Bestiary U.S.A.," contains eighteen
masterpieces. Every single poem is titled after some or the other beast. Each
poem extends the theme by using a central metaphor. The metaphors, used in these
poems, in combination, give vent to Sexton's feelings of depression and rejection.

Besides metaphors, Sexton also excels in the use of imagery which form the
heart of her poetry. Her crystal images helped her in the portrayal of the
predicaments of an American woman and by extension, of the womankind of the
contemporary world. The rich variety of images that she used can hardly be found
elsewhere. While discussing Sexton's fantastic imagery in The Awful Rowing
towards God, Ben Howard writes:
If one of Mrs. Sexton’s purposes is, in fact to satirize her predicament as an American woman, she is well-assisted by her imagery, which in these last poems becomes a bizarre blend of Gothic and domestic. Here, as in her previous work, her metaphoric range is unusually wide. By turns her imagery is sentimental, sexual, violent, freakish, surreal, maternal, religious, and scatological.23

The most distinctive quality of Sexton’s images is their clarity and sharpness, capable of cutting the frozen ocean within the psychic depths. Sexton developed psychotropic images which were instrumental in digging the hidden layers of the mind. Polly C. Williams believes that the “brain storming” images of Sexton produce a tumult in the mind of readers:

Anne utilized an image provoking technique, similar to brainstorming, which revolved around the idea of approaching the image from the back door.24

In her search for new images to delineate the human condition of the contemporary world, Sexton went a little too far, crossing the limits of decorum and decency. Her images did not evoke aesthetic pleasure but horror, violence, and fear. Howard writes:

More seriously, Mrs. Sexton’s images evoke the horror of suburban sterility, the suppressed violence and irrational fear of a woman enmeshed in domestic routine. “Blood fingers” tie the poet’s shoe; she discovers blood in her gravy; and blood flows from the kitchen pump. Mrs. Sexton has travelled leagues from Dr. Johnson, who objected to the use of the domestic “knife” in tragic drama.25

As for the sources, Sexton drew imagery from varied sources of different areas. For instance, in Pretty Ones, she developed images from the domestic life as well as from the hospital life. These images covered the course of her life from the hospital to her home. All the images were so sharp that they continued to haunt the reader’s mind for a long time. These images included the image of “one black-
haired tree” slipping “up like a drowned woman into the hot sky,” (SP 49) in “The Starry Night” (All My Pretty Ones) and “A Canada Goose,” riding up and spreading out “like a grey suede shirt” (SP 47) in “Lament” of the same volume.

Sexton's imagery is also remarkable for blending religiousness sensibility with the psychology of fear. For instance in the title poem of the aforesaid volume, All My Pretty Ones, the sacramental imagery used to sketch the portrait of her father runs parallel to the celebrations of the fear embodied in the poem. The fusion of the radically different elements of piety and fear originate from Sexton’s equivocal attitude towards her father. This attitude surfaces in the poem in clear cut terms:

I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all she does not say
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,
she writes. My God, father, each Christmas Day
with your blood, will I drink down your glass
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for my 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)

According to Barnard Hall, for Sexton “her father is both her ‘god’ and her possible nemesis. Symbolically at Christmas, the daughter both celebrates her father and fears his alcoholic legacy.” Drinking the blood of father in the sacrament, “she becomes one with him for good and for ill.”

Furthermore, with the help of her imagistic patterns, Sexton overcomes her obsession with death. Her struggle to appease the fury of her death instinct finds
its best expression in the volume Live or Die. In “Live” after her dark night experiences, she ultimately emerges to visualize the dawn of a new life. She finds this life opening inside her like an egg. This image of fertility and rebirth, she provides her with three epiphanic experiences which eventually enable her to realize three roles of a woman as wife, mother, and poet. With this realization she feels as if she were an empress with a typewriter working in a perfect manner:

Here 
al long, 
thinking I was a killer, 
anointing myself daily 
with my little poisons. 
But no. 
I’m an empress. 
I wear an apron. 
My typewriter writes.

(SP 118)

Her realization is undoubtedly energized by the force of the metaphors of the sun, egg, dream, and flower which incidentally go on to structure this poem.

Sexton’s mastery of the imagistic patterns can also be marked in her Love Poems. In “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” she weaves a pattern of images to prove the superiority of wife over the beloved. For her sacrificing nature wife is “as real as a cast-iron pot,” “whereas the beloved is as unreal as a “watercolour” (SP 131). One of the conspicuous qualities of Sexton’s imagery is the use of modern images for old themes. In Transformations she adopts the metaphors of Hitler, and many such modern personages to portray the lives of old characters figuring in the old fairy tales.
Apart from metaphorical devices and imagistic patterns, Sexton also makes an effective use of such artistic instruments as irony and understatement. Robert Boyers mentions Sexton’s “twin capacities for irony and love.”27 This irony takes the form of “an attitude of sardonic anger,” which “intermittently erupts as a peculiarly laughable and better form of self mockery.”28 One of the best specimens of this sort of irony can be found in “The Addict” (Live or Die). With the help of this irony or mockery, Sexton tries to maintain a distance between her two selves, the real self and the thinking self. In other words irony enables her “to escape the self-absorption which has kept her a prisoner of her own fantasies and delusions.”29

Besides irony, Sexton also excels in the use of understatement. In the moments of emotional outbursts, she frequently exercises verbal restrain by holding back and by a tactful change of tone. With the intentional holding back of facts, Sexton embellishes truth. She allows poets not only to hold back but also to lie in order to reveal truth. In one of her poems Sexton had a brother killed in the war, though actually she had no brother. We should not be surprised to find imaginary brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, dream girls, and dream lovers in Sexton. Furthermore, she wanted to write even a disguised poem in which she intended to shift her sense of the pain of loss for one beloved to the loss of a fictitious beloved.

For laying bare her heart or open her emotional life, Sexton also makes the use of an open language, simple direct and colloquial. Generations of poets tried to hide their feelings and emotions under the dark screen of tough language. But
Sexton, and for that matter confessional poets, revealed their naked self with the help of open language almost in all the poems she wrote. She used it even in *Transformations* which is not a confessional poem but merely a poetic rendering of old stories. For instance, we can take an excerpt from “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and mark its simple and colloquial language:

> Looking glass upon the wall...
> The mirror told
> and so the queen dressed herself in rags
> and went out like a peddler to trap Snow while.  
> 
> (SP 151)

Sexton is aware of the important intricacies of punctuation in the use of languages. She notices that the prickliest part of the poem at the time of composition is punctuation, since, as she believes, it can change the meaning of the poem. In her interview with Barbara Kevles, she says:

> The punctuation, sometimes the punctuating can change the whole meaning, and my life is full of little dots and dashes. Therefore, I have to let the editors help me punctuate.  

In brief, Anne Sexton through her confessional poetry brings a revolution in the poetic world in which she not only introduces a new conception of poetry with new themes but also devises new poetic conventions knocking out the psychological and technical devices of the old poetry especially of the Modernist poetry. In order to ensure the free flow of her new poetic sensibility, incorporating the autobiography her self or rather buried self, she goes on to carve out open forms and unorthodox techniques.

Sexton conceives of poetry as an axe which cuts the frozen sea within the buried self and brings out the real truth. She frequently defines poetry as a lie and
the poet as a liar, but this lie is to reveal the essential truth. Likewise the poet is a liar but his or her lies are meant to reveal the naked truth. However, for sharpening the poetic axe, the poet has to develop relevant forms and techniques and to carve out a poetic diction which can provide a cutting edge to the confessional poems.

As for form, Sexton takes her own time in discarding tight forms of the old poetry. In many poems of To Bedlam and Part Way Back and All My Pretty Ones, she continues with strict forms, traditional structure, and traditional rhymes. This tendency is visible in such important poems as “Kind Sir: These Woods” and “The Double Image.” But even in these poems she adopts a new poetic process of expansion and pruning, of introducing freer forms, new metaphoric language and new imagistic patterns. However, it is in the poems of Live or Die that Sexton comes into her own and shapes a number of forms of free verse. This tendency surfaces in such poems as “Flee on Your Donkey” and “Cripples and Other Stories.” Sexton continues her experiments with free forms in her later volumes as well.

To sum up, Sexton regards poetry as a trick or rather tricky game in which the poet employs tricks to deceive readers. These tricks are the old tricks of form and structure as well as of tools and diction. Sexton takes full delight while playing her poetic game of persistent expansion of the themes and their details and constant cutting of the unwanted and irrelevant material and words and phrases. Although her poetry is ostensibly an unrestrained emotional outburst, it is not without poetic checks and balances. The emotional burst is channelled in a well
defined and purposeful direction with the help of structural and formal patterns and linguistic devices. Sexton habitually updates old and orthodox structure and forms. In addition she goes on to make a deft use of verbal techniques of metonymy to express emotional truth. One of the most remarkable specimens of metonymy comes in “The Operation” (All My Pretty Ones).

Sexton also excels in the use of metaphorical devices in structuring poems or in giving the central idea of the poems. Metaphor and imagery are two of the most defining principles of her lyricism. Poems like “Some Foreign Letters” and “The Double Image,” (To Bedlam and Part Way Back), “The Break” (Love Poems), “Dreaming the Breasts” (The Book of Folly), and “The Rowing Endeth” (The Awful Rowing towards God). Apart from metaphors, Sexton also excels in the use of imagery. We find a rich variety of images in her poetry. These images are not only crystal but also sharp enough to produce a storm in the brain of the readers. The images, Sexton uses in “All My Pretty Ones,” “The Starry Night,” and “Lament” (All My Pretty Ones) continue to haunt the mind of the reader for a long time. However, the most remarkable form of imagery appears in “Live” (Live or Die) in which images become instrumental in reviving and reinforcing poet’s will to live.

Furthermore, Sexton reinforces her confessional poetry with metonymy, metaphor, and imagery as well as with the orthodox tools of irony and understatement. As we find in “The Addict,” (Live or Die) she shapes irony as self-mockery for distancing her poetic self from her real self to escape self-absorption. Likewise she uses understatements to hold back truth in order to
reveal emotional truth behind literal facts. She also writes disguised poem to mitigate her personal suffering. In so far as the language is concerned, Sexton's intention is to use open language for expressing open emotions. By open language, she meant simple and direct language for complicated mental states. She does not hesitate to adopt colloquial language for expressing truth buried in the depths of human psyche. In short Sexton, even though therapeutic poet is a conscious artist who knows and uses the tricks of her trade.
Chapter 3 – Notes


5Sexton, Gerald, No Evil Star 183.


8Polly C. Williams, “Sexton in the Classroom,” McClatchy 98.

9Sexton, Packard, McClatchy 45.

10Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 33.

11Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 33.

12Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 34.

13Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 35.

14Sexton, Marx, McClatchy 33.

Gerald 182.


Hall 38.


Howard 182.


Howard 182.

Hall 48.


Boyers 214.

Boyers 215.

Kevles 20.