CHAPTER 5

EROS AND THANATOS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

The poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton dramatize and transform the personal situations into the metaphors for universal struggle with their binary world of death and love. Observing and objectifying the relationships of these poets with the aspects of reality one of which is death and another the hope, it is evident that their poetry is a personal process which demonstrate the initial metaphorical transformation of the environment into the world of death and reflects a transformation of the self from a state of symbolic death to the rebirth. In the universe of these two poets, life always stands opposed to darkness and loss. By balancing the life and death instinct, confessional poetry gives an external order to the artist. Suicidal urge and the purpose in which the poets are caught up become the active elements in this process. The private obsession and disorientation of the artists become normalized in their poems which are organized into a structure outside themselves, with layers and layers opening to the world of experience.

The instincts of love and death, Eros and Thanatos, find their expression in the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. With the heightening of autobiographical experiences, their poems represent the split nature of their universe. They talk about destructive parents, death-haunted generations and innocent children. Much as wind and water leave traces of their passage on the surface of the land, the autobiographical element in their poetry seeks to shape a contour in time. This chapter is an attempt to study the love and death instinct as depicted in these contours and to analyze it.
According to Freud, human life is a theatre of operations. In it, Eros [love-instinct or life-instinct] and Thanatos [death-instinct] keep battling for supremacy. While Eros or libido is the drive of self-preservation which aims at survival of the species, Thanatos is the drive or instinct of self-destruction and aggression. These two principal human instincts have been established as universal poetic themes. As soon as one chooses to limit one's attention to the treatment of love and death in the poetry of women poets alone, one is subjected to a thousand queries. Women poets of all times have chosen to concentrate on these universal themes. Often they merge the passion of love with the passion of death. Death has been an inexhaustible source of anxiety for men and women alike but the women writers concentrate on it more profoundly. A common thread runs through the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop and others like Adrienne Rich, and Sonia Sanchez but this study aims to concentrate on Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's poetry. These women poets link up love immediately with death because the horror of bereavement is basic to love. Death is the greatest obstacle to eternal togetherness. Though contradictory, love and death merge into one another at one point. Love becomes self-effacement and death-wish becomes the instinct to lie secure in the cold arms of grave.

Both Plath and Sexton have given importunate, macabre, and gothic treatment of love and death. They are obsessed with the limitations of the body and with its failure to be equal to the demands of the soul. In most of their poems, they have worked for the survival against death-like torments and death itself. Overflowing with their pains and passions, they are engaged
in a demonic quest for Love, Life, Art and intensity. The epigram of Sexton's "The Death Notebook" is a line from Hemingway's *A Movable Feast*—"Look, you cannot make a living out of your death," which aptly summarizes the poet's goal.

Among the pressures and strains of modern life, people lead a less privileged life, but what they offer any time is more fulfilling and moving and revealing. Love reasserts itself as a deeper human concern, as a commitment on all pervading cosmic force. Love emerges as a vision, as a revelation of desire, as a guarantee for each other's freedom, a tool for self-realization, and extension of the self. In its basics, love is a struggle against death. By leaving behind good associations and memorable deeds one tries one's best to conquer this painful realization that one is decaying day by day. Love rejuvenates, sets the right frame of mind and spirit; it recharges and overwheels with the forces of life. Love keeps building up cells both in the ethereal body and in the brain. When love ceases to recreate and re-fresh, love as well as life ceases to exist.

Love is a never-ending quest and a constant experiment with the self. In the modern world, love has lost its gravity. Hence, not only things but human beings have fallen apart as well, because the centre, the love cannot hold them. It has ceased to be the vital-most concern of life. Modern world is a fast-changing world, but human drives do not change though priorities keep shifting from age to age. They are suppressed, sublimated or sent to periphery, but they do not die, and they should not die if we really care for saving the world from total human disintegration.
Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, two vibrant women poets, reached straight to the arms of death due to the frustrations in love. In trying to woo life, they finally opted for death. In this world of chain-loves, betrayal is frequent. To lead a loveless life which is devoid of spirit and substances, is very difficult. It makes the life lose its essence. Because of its possessiveness, love arouses violent instincts to fuse and merge and suck in all that the other half is made of- his or her elements, organs, thoughts and dreams, passions, depressions and everything. Love aims at shedding all walls whether they are physical, mental or social. Therefore, all lovers are rebels. In love, not only the blood runs riot, but the man-made and even god-made barriers like skin and bone and nerves also want to break under acute instinctive pressures. The question that lies in the basics is that whether love is a life-time experience or a general human upsurge which comes and goes like a tempest.

Love involves decision, a kind of judgment. “Falling” in love matters less than “going on” or “standing” in love. When we touch somebody, some elements of his or her soul enter into ourselves and become a part of our soul and they exist till we exist. The first flush of love goes away leaving behind a deeper level of communion. Because the body can be penetrated but the mind is not so vulnerable, therefore, love ever remains a mystery. Rejecting love as a blind sexual drive, modern people reject softer sentiments related to it. They do not understand how love teaches grace and wisdom and renders a tender-hearted training in the art of raising softer sentiments in life-without being blind to social responsibilities.
Love raises our stature. Modernism refutes the classical concept of love as an eternal bond. Love has various shades. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s poetry reflects one aspect of the seismography of love. They express modern love in their poems which always poses basic existential questions and ends up in a "to be or not to be kind of conflict." In Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s world, love and death form part of the same reality. For them, life is a series of changes and struggles. The difficulties that a person encounters in life are necessary for strengthening the individual on his or her way through it. Their aim is to struggle to live creatively because a strong, vital and creative nature is an outcome of struggle, conflict and hardship. Plath and Sexton, like Nietzsche privilege the “pain and hurt” of the struggles of life and this attitude consciously formulates their personal philosophy.

Love as a threat to death, and death as a threat of love are philosophical questions, to which poetry can provide partial answers. The notions of Anna Wulf summarize the idea that love and death can be tested each against the other, and all against reason:

It is possible that in order to keep love, feeling, tenderness alive, it will be necessary to feel these emotions ambiguously, even for what is false and debased, or for what is still an idea, a shadow in the willed imagination only. . . or if what we feel is pain, then we must feel it, acknowledging that the alternative is death. Better anything than the shrewd, the calculated, the non-committal, the refusal of giving for fear of the consequences.¹
Death is an alternative vision as well as an extension of life. In religious philosophies, death is conceived as a comma instead of a full stop. In Islam there is Qayamat, the Day of Judgment, which is a post-death divine operation. The Bhagwat Geeta says, dying is merely shedding of old clothes [bodies] for new ones. Christianity views life as a never ending journey beyond death where the soul is purgated. Death works as a poetic appendix to life as the world beyond death has been a fanciful exercise of imagination since ages.

Schopenhauer had given the idea that the will to live is so universal, so strong, that no man can ever really say, "I'll kill myself." The body can be done away with, but the 'will' goes marching on. But this old notion of the immortality of the soul in another guise escapes judgement that the suicide wants and finally achieves. The suicide has a fascination with "death and what death invents" or what death erases. This attraction occurs recurrently in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Sometimes it is barely audible, sometimes it is strident, sometimes it is a sort of synthesis contrasting the will to live with the will to die. As Robert Mazzoco sees it, "A suicide is the ultimate bankrupt, he cancels all debts, wipes the slate clean, plays the last trump, what the analysts call the 'superlative bid'-he not only dies but sacrifices himself."2

Suicide is symbolic of the psychic disorder and death is a manifesto of change. The crucial question how Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who committed suicide, view death? Whether they consider it a culmination, a dead end or a new beginning? Whether it is their revenge upon frustrations of
life, a cool departure to escape the ironies of life or a brave rebellion? All the lovers are rebels. The person who attempts a suicide is a lover of death and a rebel too. Love is a rebellion and a break-through into the forces of life, and suicide is no less a rebellion for the availability of the non-available and non-existent. Walking out of life is not a normal decision but acute tensions usually offered by frustrations in love, lead the psychic lovers to continue their hunt for love even beyond life. At least the unconscious self aims at draining sympathy or love or pity or anything soft that death invokes. Cesare Pavese calls death an event "as natural as the fall of raindrops." But the idea of unnatural death; self-inflicted death or suicide has a kind of attraction and as Albert Camus Says: "An act like this is prepared within silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it."

The suicide of Sylvia Plath in 1963 and that of Anne Sexton in 1974 are, in fact, the outcome of the defeat of the human beings who found it impossible to suffer any longer the separation and isolation of their self. It took place in an atmosphere of misery and despair. Their arts (Sylvia's from her childhood and Anne's from the age of twenty-eight) had given them the way of being happy. Yet, the intensification and internalization of the forces and pressures proved that they would only be satisfied by the annihilation of the self. Plath is obsessed with the diametrically opposite powers of annihilation and salvation as Robert Phillips writes,

Critics have called her poetry of annihilation, place it in context with that of John Berryman, Randall Jarell and Anne Sexton and three others, who also took their lives. Horace Gregory even
suggested these poets were possessed by an Empedocles complex- with suicide constituting their final creative act, with the hope that like Empedocles, in their violent disappearances they might be taken for Gods.⁶

Her poetry, through varied subjects, moves in the patterns of death and rebirth; love and hatred in family relations, women's situation in marriage and the relation between self and nature. Jon Rosenblatt avers that the central focus of the poems of Roethke, Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Sexton is, "a heightened awareness of the individual's painful entrapment in contemporary society."⁶

Some people say that Sylvia Plath's suicide is revenge against her husband. She considers it a means to reunite in death with her father or its a "cry for help."⁷ Plath's earlier terror at death becomes a romance with it in her later poetry and her poems are yearnings towards that condition. Freud believed that the aim of all life is death and for Plath life was poetry. The source of Plath's creative energy was her self-destruction; her suicide which obstructs a clear and balanced reading of Plath's poems. Julia Kristeva has written on the suicides of twentieth-century female writers:-

For a woman, the call of the mother is not only a call from beyond time, or beyond the socio-political battle. With family and history at an impasse, this call troubles the world: it generates hallucinations, voices, "madness." Once the moorings of the word, the ego, the superego, begin to slip, life itself can't hang on; death quietly moves in . . . I think of ...Sylvia Plath, another of
those women disillusioned with meanings and words ... her silent departure from life.⁸

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s poems are replete with the emotions of love as well as the terror of death. Eros or the love instinct and Thanatos, the death instinct are the parallel strains in their major works. Plath’s extreme love for her father brought her near to her death. To bring together the different aspects of her experiences, she introduced her love through various complexes which were discussed in the previous chapter. Regarding Eros, Julia Kristeva has written to spell out the way love can confuse and conflate psychoanalytic categories:

The experience of being in love dissolubly binds the symbolic [what is forbidden, discernible and thinkable], the imaginary [what the ego holds up to itself to enable it to maintain itself and grow] and the real [which is what is impossible, when the affects aspire to everything and when there is no-one to take account of the fact that I am only a part].⁹

Several forms of love; Oedipal, Electra, Narcissistic and Neurotic are depicted in their poetry. Their love is so obsessive that the strong need for being loved led them towards mental breakdown. The love-hate relationship of Sylvia Plath with her father is a result of the insecurity of being unloved. She writes, “All my life I have been stood up emotionally by the people I loved most: Daddy dying and leaving me, Mother somehow not there.”(J 286). She wanted to die and to be reborn in love filled atmosphere. As Christian David argues and claims, love releases a “new soul born of the fusion of love” and
that “the state of being in love represents a new birth - not just the repetition and as it were the transposed melody of some forgotten experience.”

The extremity of her love for her father brought her near to Thanatos, the death-instinct. Several poems from her volumes; Ariel, Colossus, Crossing the Water and Winter Trees which will be discussed in this chapter, delineate her love for death and the dead ones. Her obsession for her father became the roots for the growth of the mighty stem and branches of her love and death poems.

Dostoevsky’s Kirilov says that there are only two reasons why we do not all kill ourselves: pain and fear of the next world. But the frustrations in love make us forget this pain and fear. Death is not a part of life, so man is unaware what to do with death. Freud considers that man gets aggressive by externalizing the repressed death instinct. Freud establishes that the inherent wish of every human being is to return to its original state of being which he called “Nirvana” or freedom from bondage. In his theory, Pleasure principle, the principle of tension, releases from tension. This release of tension stands in close resemblance with death. To be back to pre-tension is Nirvana which Freud called the death-instinct. Both Freud and Hegel consider that human history is the history of neurosis. The difference lies only in the fact that Freud relates it to repressed love-instinct and Hegel to the repressed death-instinct.

Poetry provides us two primary methods of facing life and death or love and death. First, the poems in which love and death emerge as contradictory impulses are an escape from death. Death is a hindrance. Love
wants to repress death, but the power of this greatest reality represses love itself. The repression of death-instinct is manifested in poetry but the repressed love-instinct reveals itself only in pain. The poems that stand against fear of death instead of being against love are not of romantic but modern sensibility and their treatment is totally different from the death-obsessed existential sensibility. The wish of the complete union by the lovers though they are thoroughly aware of the fact that they are two human beings, is the basic dualism of love. To achieve oneness one must shed human ego which is practically not possible. Love, thus, is death. Another dualism, that is the tension between possessiveness and self-surrender, goes with love. The way man plays with woman's body, woman plays with his sentiments. Modern poetry is especially sensitive to this dialectics of love: unison and separatism, self-surrender and possessiveness, the instinct to gain and to lose, to rule and to be ruled. The co-existence of all these make the treatment of love as paradoxical as the treatment of death and the truth remains that "each man kills the thing he loves" and as Proust suggests, "thus one acquires the habit of having as the object of one's musings an absent person. . . . Death does not make any great difference."

Sylvia Plath expresses antithetical attitude towards existence, alternately speaking for life and against it. At one moment, the poems become expressions of power and vitality; in the next they are suicidal and self-negating. They embody what might be called a negative vitalism, brilliantly extolling and simultaneously, harshly denying the claims of life. Plath both wants and does not want to live, both desires and does not desire
to die. Quite like Plath, Anne Sexton also has written a large body of poetry which is related to love and death. Her poems are dedicated towards the sanctity of life and its romance with love. The things between this Eros and Thanatos are deception, abdication and guilt. In love for death, life is betrayed; in love for suicide, body is betrayed; and beloveds betray their loved ones by leaving them alone. The person rejected in love opts for death. The need for love results in the losing of mental balance and such need is a guilt which results in death. Anne Sexton's poems in different volumes express her guilty love and the desired death especially the volume Live or Die reflects her obsessions with her body's limits and her search for reconciliation through love and the guilt that “She is always responsible for wanting and needing too much, for losing her balance, for loving insufficiently, for being born female, for being born at all. The punishment for guilt such as this is death.” Joyce Carol Oates has written about the love and death obsession in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton:

If Sylvia Plath has become a kind of minor legend, priestess of the cult of Death and madness who does not stint at sacrificing herself, Anne Sexton has already demonstrated a more durable talent and a willingness to explore in more detail the complexities of human relationships. For Plath, death is the most favored lover; for Sexton, life with its most agonizing contradictions is still preferable. Her self-preoccupation is tempered by a sense of humor.
Their poetry is rooted in the ceaseless efforts to reach a level of perception. They use the material from their own present, past and the unconscious. What Freud called frustration and Aristotle calls impediment makes sensuous advancements incomplete. The frustrations of these poets have their roots in childhood experience and they give birth to decay. They successfully carry their childhood experiences of love's stabilities and betrayals into the world of adult relationships and ironically declare that the art of losing is not hard to master.

(i)

Sylvia Plath's *The Colossus* manipulates the thematic opposition between a negative vision of death and a positive pattern of self transformation. The idea of reticence and self resistance that conflicts with the essentially volatile personal subject matter, dominates this volume. A series of her poems can be identified that directly confront the face of death in two conflicting modes of perceiving nature, animals, the family and women as either the frightening dead or the vital living, as objectified enemies or internalized friends. The poems about death in *The Colossus* talk about different areas of experiences like animals, nature, family, and corpses but they share a common imagery that allows Plath to treat death's omnipresent figure.

Love and death go hand in hand in her poems. The delicate mysteries of love embedded in the slow rhythm of decay are so patiently realized that they radiate an immediate willingness to touch the reader. "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" is a beautiful description of the death and the immortal love.
The poem is divided into two sections. While the first section is a third person narrative account of a girl’s visit to a dissecting room, where she sees “whitesmocked boys” working on four corpses which seem to the woman to be made of animal flesh “black as burnt turkey,” the skin and bones of one hand are “skull plates and old leather.” These transformations of the body reflect the poet’s disgust at the sight of death; in the first case, the corpse is nothing but “inedible meat;” in the second, it is the “worthless old leather.” The macabre line in which the foetuses embalmed in their jars are described: “In their jars the snail-nosed babies noon and glow” has the echo of “Prufrock.” Her friend hands her the “cut out heart like a cracked heirloom.” This terrible and gross love-token seems to foreshadow the morbidity of the lover hinted at in “Lady Lazarus.” This image of heirloom is created by her as cracked in the way love exists in this world. As a means of the continuation of the species, love has no importance in this hospital world. The act of her friend, as Robert Phillips avers, “seems the kind of male role which causes the spiritual death imaged in the opening poem. The dissecting room is a microcosm of the world, and Buddy’s is the ruling cold male intellect.”

In Plath’s novel The Bell Jar, her persona Esther Greenwood’s boyfriend Buddy Willard takes her to the dissecting room. “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” is an account of that visit. In her poems, Plath is concerned with the vulnerability of life. She is aware of the lurking death and awareness, by extension, becomes an awareness of her own insecurity, her horror of existence. Plath finds that nature is impersonally ruthless and she relates this fact to the human world. With her own insufficient sense of the self, Plath is
also terrified of the outside world as a child. With existential overtones, Plath expresses the need to relate the outer world of death to the inner and personal world of love. The gift that is akin to a cracked heirloom symbolizes that ontological insecurity which the poet is terrified of. Because she could not reject that gift and acceptance is beyond capacity, she moves the reader towards a contrasting second section.

The second section describes a Breughel painting of a war scene through which Plath has tried to develop the theme. The contradiction is that in it a romantic love-scene is painted in the lower right-hand corner showing two lovers absorbed in one another and "deaf to the fiddle in the hands of the death's head shadowing their song." (CO 6). By a simple juxtaposition, Plath has tried to relate a shocking personal experience of the brutal facts of death to the general theme of war represented in Breughel's "Panorama of smoke and slaughter" and that of a "carrion army" and to the transcendent character of art. Brueghel's painting "The Triumph of Death" is described by the art historian Piero Bianconi in this way:

Death.....triumph[s] over all sorts of conditions given. In the foreground are certain carefully defined examples: the King the Cardinal, the her distaff and her baby.....; a fashionable young couple... on the extreme right are still at their music-making, but the young man looks haunted, and a skeleton is accompanying them on a vial." ¹⁶

Concentrating on this couple, "blind to the carrion army" and in their momentary preservation she finds a stay against death. This second section
doesn't counter-balance the first section's negativity and fails to overcome the sense of a death world that has erased all feeling and human sensitivity.

"Suicide Off Egg Rock" combines a number of issues that concerned Plath during this period: her attempt to write realistically about a native landscape, to deal with deeply repressed experience of her first suicide attempt and her own sense of creative paralysis which led her to create an image of self-pity in the forgetful surf. In this poem, she poses a man who walks into the water to drown himself and reconstructs exactly how the suicide felt at that moment. His own body which is "A machine to breathe and beat forever"(CO 35) with the inexorable power of life, the public hotdog grills, the gas tanks and factory stacks in the near distance-"that landscape / Of imperfections his bowels were part of." (35). His blood "beating the old tattoo / I am, I am, I am,"(35) echoes maddeningly the seaside activity around him. But this man does not feel threatened. He feels both removed from this life, "smouldered, as if stone-deaf, blindfold" and curiously assaulted by it. The speaker is distracted at the hour of death by the fly who is both an image of vitality and a reminder of decay. He leaves nothing behind and his body becomes an inert object like the dead fish, which is the source of his suicidal impulse, his creative failure: "The words in his book wormed off the pages. / Everything glittered like blank paper." (CO 36). As he walks into sea, he hears only "the forgetful surf," the beat of ongoing life that has embittered his existence. For Jean Paul Sartre, this moment of suicidal mania, the moment of extreme anguish is also the moment of existential authenticity when one is
able to apprehend for oneself "at once as totally free and as not being able to
derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself." 17

The treatment of death in "Full Fathom Five," "Suicide Off Egg Rock" and "Lorelei" is different. In "Full Fathom Five," she symbolically wishes for her death while she says, "Father, this air is murderous / I would breathe water" (CO 48). To breathe water means to lose one's life, to commit suicide. In "Suicide Off Egg Rock" Plath holds out the possibility that the self may be "forgotten" in the water and the lost world of happiness will be rediscovered there. In "Lorelei," the images of stone and water symbolize a desired state of being, since death by water now seems attractive to the self. Plath's desire for and fear of death lies in her practice of reversing the symbolic charge of a given image. Her polarized view of reality, her alternating attraction to and repulsion from the natural world, her love of and hatred for the family is manifested in these poems.

In "All the Dead Dears," Plath reverses the sense of the family as a loving group whom death destroys and whom she wishes to recover. But these "dead dears" do not become the protectors of the self but seem to drag the poet into the watery underworld of the dead. In "Moonrise," she tentatively expresses faith in the process of birth, after many images of death and pain: "The white stomach may ripen yet" (CO 65). In it, she depicts death in the common biological fate of the women. Since each of them may die, spinsterhood is living death; motherhood may end in death or suffering because of childbirth. She creates images of redness to represent the forces of growth and images of whiteness to represent forces of death:
Death may whiten in sun or out of it.

..............................

Death whitens in the egg and out of it.
I can see no color for this whiteness.

White: it is a complexion of the mind. (65)

The speaker is in a field and compares the pervasive fact of death, the corpses underground; and the memories of her dead father with her own perspective delivery. Against her own sense of fertility, she balances the vision of cyclical and generational destruction but she is unable to avoid an intense fear of death. "Moonrise" releases personal images of death in a dynamic way as Plath works toward a resolution of the death-fear, allowing her to see her experience as part of a recurrent pattern in nature. Clarissa Roche has given a relevant account of Sylvia's death-obsession:

I have a recurring image of Sylvia lying on her back, indulging her nasty habit of smoking an opium pipe of death. She had picked up this habit when she was far too young. She had conscientiously hooked herself further, boastfully calling herself "connoisseur of death". Sylvia courted death to stimulate life. She fancied herself the temptress, not the tempted. Death might play the tune, but she was the libertist, and in control.18

"Blue Moles" is characteristic of Plath's dual relationship with the dead. In the first section, the poem objectifies the dead moles, where as the second section involves identification with them. "Blue Moles" along with "Two Views of Cadaver Room," "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor," "Medallion" and "The Burnt-out Spa" share the dualness of Plath's vision: they alternately keep the
dead, frightening bodies at a distance and attempt to humanize them either through direct identification or through the transformative process of art.

Plath ascribes same qualities to these dead moles as she assigns to hostile nature, to dead family members, and to victimized animals which are all the objects outside the self. In it too, she identifies white color with the death; "their white hands \ Uplifted, stiffen in a family pose." (CO 49). The qualities of stiffness, leatheriness, stoniness, neutrality and whiteness, ascribed to the moles belong to an objectified nature, a dead family, a petrified world. The dual view of nature, self and death in "Blue Moles" had been there in "Two views of a Cadaver Room" though its second section is considerably different. This ambivalency and duality of Sylvia Plath's attitude to death is observed by Robert Phillips in this manner:

Jung has also said that experience shows the unknown approach of death casts an adumbration and anticipatory shadow over life and dreams of the victim. Plath's poems in this sense were her dreams, and a preparation for death expressed through art . . .

The Ariel poems her greatest achievement, rather than conforming to Christian Orthodoxy, are formulated more on primitive thought drawn from outside historical tradition and taken from the psychic sources which have nourished religious and philosophical speculation about life and death since prehistoric times . . . her future suicide was casting its shadow back by arousing in her certain archetypes which usually dormant were tripped by death's approach. . . .
In "Medallion" Plath assigns all those negative qualities to the dead
snake that she normally assigns to the dead; hardness, blankness and
inertness: "The bronze snake lay in the sun / Inert as a shoelace; dead / But
pliable still," (CO 61). Similarly, though less intensely, "Mussel Hunter at Rock
Harbor" involves the characteristic negative rehearsal of the death like
qualities of the crab:

The crab face etched and set there,
Grimaced as skulls grimace; it
Had an oriental look,
A samurai death mask done
On a tiger tooth, less for
Art's sake than God's(CO72)

Plath's "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" is spoken by a creature who
lives near a pond. Winter coldness "comes sifting down" (CO 80) and the
covering reeds of summer are withering "like pithless hands." Almost all the
nature is about to sleep for the winter. The death seems to occur among the
worms, the reeds, and the insects but; "This is not death, it is something
safer."

The final poem of The Colossus, "The Stones" provide a fitting end to
the thematic drama of the volume. Throughout the volume the resistant,
ingiving force in the world is stone: the stone Colossus, the grandmother's
egg stones, the Hardcastle crags, the stony muses, and egg rock. The natural
and the human, including family members, had been turned to stone, but in
the final poem, the poet herself becomes stone, the death had trapped the poet’s self too. “The Stones” turns the drama of petrification into the self’s own struggle. In her poems, Plath proves that if poetry is a mode of living, a method of making existence bearable, then she commits much of her energy to destroy what exists for herself and rejects the relatives of the world for a more attractive universe of death. “The Stones” contains typical Plath imagery in its use of stone and pebbles to indicate the world of death and childbirth and babies to symbolize the presence of life. The poem is directly influenced by a tale of Paul Radin’s African Folktales and African Sculpture. The basic idea of the poem is derived from “The City Where Men Are Mended.” The story deals with an evil wife’s attempt to outdo a rival wife, who had a beautiful daughter. Once hyena killed the good wife’s daughter to bones. She takes the bones to the “city where men are mended” so that her daughter may get alive. It happened and now the evil wife planned to kill her ugly daughter and be benefitted with the city. She kills her daughter to bones by pounding her up in mortar and takes her to that city but when the daughter is revived, she becomes even more hideous than she was before her death. She is reconstructed with only one leg, one buttock, one hand, and one side of her body.

Plath begins “The Stones” with the speaker already in the magical city: “This is the city where men are mended. / I lie on a great anvil. / The flat blue sky circle.”(CO 82). The poem dramatizes a daughter’s salvation from a world of hardness and death. The speaker is not the good mother’s beautiful daughter, but the ugly daughter of the evil mother who is diminished to the
bones by "The mother of pestles": "The mother of pestles diminished me. / I became a still pebble. / The stones of the belly were peacable."(82). The sky, the city, the body, the stomach all turn into symbolic agents of death. The self returns to a world of childhood, through the image of sky as "the hat of a doll," the stomach as the "wordless cupboard."

Then the poem goes back past childhood to the condition of the foetus in the womb where the speaker is isolated and happy. She says, "Drunk as a fetus, I suck at the paps of darkness."(CO 83). Wordlessness or breakdown of communication is what we call death. The breakdown is complete here but the mouth hole cried out the locations of stones and "sucks at the paps of darkness." Plath here combines the condition of the foetus in the womb with that of the infant at the mother's breasts and gives up adulthood entirely. In this poem and the other poem, Plath deliberately imagines such returns to the womb as steps toward a more comprehensive self-transformation. The poet suffers the state of derangement which makes an object of attention like a child or a piece of stone in the hand of an artist, but she has nothing to prove that she has attained any substantial sense of being: "Dead men leave eyes for others. / Love is the uniform of my bald nurse. / Love is the bone and sinew of my curse."(83-84).

The last line identifies the root cause of her malady, that is, the inability to relate, to find a language of love. Through this sequence of images, Plath dramatizes the metaphoric conversion of the generation of life from death and ends up the volume in the discussion of love. The final line of The Colossus, "I shall be good as new" is even more discursive as it bears a
testimony to two contradictory emotional desires: to be reborn into a totally “new” self and to retain the “old” self with its hatred for itself and all others. Finally, the speaker is brought back from the womblike state. Like the daughter of the good wife in the tale “The City Where Men are Mended,” the speaker has been magically returned to life with a new and beautiful body. The poem identifies the speaker with the deformed daughter of the evil mother in the beginning and concludes with happy ending.

The poems after The Colossus envision form as a way of shaping the conflicting personal forces of the self. While the second last stanza of The Colossus talk about love as the bone and sinew of the speaker’s curse, the opening line of “Morning Song,” the first poem in Ariel, celebrates a real birth by using the same word; “Love set you going like a fat gold watch.”(A 3). The psychological distance between these two poems is immense, yet both treat love as an impersonal force, applied from the outside. “Love” is an autonomous mover, not my love, our love, their love. While in “The Stones,” love offers electric current, volt upon volt that lighted her up and is identified by her as the force of “the jewel master,” in “Morning Song” the love with its positive image is aided by the midwife’s slap, that bring forth the bald cry to take its place among the elements. “Lady Lazarus” is one of her finest poems about death but owing to avoid the repetition, it is not discussed in this chapter. “Tulips” is a monologue spoken by a woman in a hospital bed. Recovering from surgery she thinks of her hospital room as a white sea of death:

Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands. (A12)
She reduces herself into an inanimate object in which she finds the winter
world of the hospital desirable with its enveloping whiteness. She becomes a
nobody by merging herself into the hospital world: "I am nobody; I have
nothing to do with explosions. / I have given my name and my day-clothes up
to the nurses / And my history to the anesthetist and my body to
surgeons."(12).

Substituting the metaphoric reality of water, and cargo boats and her
own transformation into pebble, she wishes to throw off her life, with its
attachment to others and the weight of its sorrow and guilt:

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me
sleep.
Now I have lost myself. (12)

She sees herself blissfully undergoing the last rites and sinking into
water hence her death now takes a form of the return to the womb. The initial
stage of change places the self in a watery-womb to die, not to be born. Love
demands responsibility. But in the hospital world she doesn't have to love
therefore she can be irresponsible. There she reduces to a state of a mere
pulchritudinous body, a "thirty-year-old cargo boat."(A13). Further she says:
"They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations."(13). She feels
herself free, devoid of any wants:

I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free-
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on.(13)

In Plath's "Elm", the spirit of the tree transposes to a feminine voice
which takes on many attributes of the moon goddess. Her contact with this
female spirit of the elm tree is entangled and confused like the Plath's
personal relationship with Ted Hughes. The tremendous strain of the
separation, the misery of the imagined abandonment and the rage of jealousy
and hatred that is inspired, had the immediate effect of arousing her poetic
energies. The poem "Elm" develops as a dialogue between a tormenting tree
spirit and the speaker and later on they seem to merge into one. While
beating about the bush in the beginning, later on the tree speaks its own
secrets when speaker demurs. In the beginning the tree-spirit passes
comments on the speaker: "I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my
great tap root: / It is what you fear" (A17). But the speaker replies, "I do not
fear it: I have been there."(17). Again the tree inquires, "Is it the sea you hear
in me, its dissatisfactions? / Or the voice of nothing, that was your
madness?"(17). When the speaker doesn't reply, the female tree-spirit comes
closer, "Love is a shadow / How you lie and cry after it / Listen: these are its
hooves: it has gone off, like a horse."(17). It says, "I will gallop all night
impetuously, / Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf, / Echoing,
echoing." Then it asks, "or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?"(17).

The tree and the woman get identification through these death threats.
Both of them are opposed to sun, wind and moon; "I have suffered the
atrocity of sunsets" and with the violent wind "I break up in pieces that fly
about like clubs."(17). The final death imagined, through moon, is also
merciless: "she would drag me / Cruelly, being barren.\ Her radiance scathes
me."(17). Then she claims, "How your bad dreams possess and endow
me"(A18). But this tree spirit woman is curiously impregnated by this female
moon image "inhabited by a cry" although she is terrified by this dark thing
"its soft feathery turnings, its malignity." It looks "with its hooks, for
something to love" but what she finds is only the "pale irretrievables of
clouds. The woman in turmoil gives in "I am incapable of more
knowledge."(18). While the faces of love pass, there is a face "So murderous
in its strangle of branches" which petrifies the will with "Its snaky acids hiss."
And it is this kiss of death that seems to be the gift of the female moon tree
who is also the source of the woman’s cry.

“Ariel” is the name of the horse Plath rode, the “Pivot of heels and
knees!”(A 28). It is also a biblical reference to Jerusalem as the scene of a
holocaust that burned sacrificial victims². Plath identifies herself as the
sister to “The brown arc” of the neck, she also claims she cannot catch it, as
if it something racing out of control, instead of the Pivot. She moves through a
landscape of darkness that would cast its hooks into her, hold her, but she
Unlike the Godiva who rode naked through the streets in order to fill a
condition upon which her husband had promised to relieve the town of a tax,
this Godiva cancels personal debts. “Ariel” employs the image of the crying
child to indicate the reduction of self to its original, preadult state: "The child's cry / Melts in the wall." (A 29).

The evolution of Sylvia Plath's muse is a sign of the growth and clarification, within a brief span of months, of Sylvia Plath's peculiar awareness of the burden of her life in the whole context of modern existence. This poem reflects how the exhilaration of swift movement on horseback on the mere idea of it suggests to her every other kind of ecstatic movement and life awareness. Just for that very reason, the mood suddenly becomes a desolate realization of the plunge into death that is going on: "The child's cry / Melts in the wall / And I Am the arrow," then "The dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning." (29). It is a poem that moves from statis in darkness, "substanceless blue" to the "cauldron of morning." Though Plath has made use of the word "suicidal" the poem cannot be adequately described as an expression of suicidal impulses. The arrow and the dew, though they have the apparent opposition, do not reinforce each other. The arrow kills, the dew is killed, the arrow at one with the red eye is its apotheosis, while the dew is consumed by the sun. The dew melts like the child's cry and the unpeeling dead hands and even the foaming wheat and "glitter of seas" symbolizes all that will be overcome or sacrificed in this arrow's drive into morning. The speaker identifies itself with the arrow and instead of sacrificing itself absorbs the power of the avenging God, like the horse, "God's lioness" who is "at one with the drive / Into the red / Eye." (29). Death in Plath's world can be self laceration or salvation, agony or peacefulness. For her, death is a kind of spirit or god who incarnates himself
in the objects and forms of the world; a man visiting her in the hospital, with lidded eyes, a scald scar of water, and voracious desires. As Rosenblatt sees it:

The bondage of human being and organic life to death means, inevitably, a perpetual war against the nonliving universe. Plath sees God as the greatest enemy of man because either he controls or is, the exterior, inanimate blackness. Against the freezing sky or the darkness of the ocean, the animate self must exert its energies, rushing into destruction so as to affirm its own life.22

"Death & Co." which is considered as one of the Plath's extended metaphors for the reality of death, is derived from a visit in the hospital that she received from two acquaintances. Plath viewed the two aspects of the death as the businessmen who have come to pay a courtesy call. Once again a deal is on, in strict business terms. Failed relationships and the breakdown in communication are the themes that are heavily underscored. The old convention of the visit of death has been given a new energy:

Two, of course there are two.
It seems perfectly natural now-
The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded
And balled
He does not smile or smoke. (A 30)

Hence, the first figure is literally voracious and icy who "eats" people:
"I am red meat. His beak / Claps sidewise:" (A 30). The second uses people in order to be loved, he is a pure narcissist: "His hair long and plausible. /
Bastard / Masturbating a glitter, / He wants to be loved." (A 30). These two aspects of death, voracious and seductive, appear to the speaker in a kind of vision. And the vision is extended with the fusion into another brilliant vision that stresses the purely natural and automatic processes of death:

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.
Somebody's done for. (A 31)

The confusion of terror at death along with the fascination by it comes under all the other motifs of Sylvia Plath's work. The visions of the speaker as already dead are so vivid that they become yearnings toward that condition. In "Death & Co.," her mastery of dynamics enables her to escape the almost inert heaviness of "The Disquieting Muses." "Death &Co." is one of the several nearly perfect embodiments of this deeply compulsive motif of hers. The two faces of death are one of the candour and the other of the revolting but irresistible lover. These faces are seen in relation to a projection of herself as dead, as part of a possibly beautiful series of patterned objects; in which her own self, no longer exists.

Plath's poem "Nick and the Candlestick" dramatizes various images to suggest the world of death. The forces of death destroy the child's innocence. The poet imagines the child's cold room as a frozen, icicle-filled cave and herself as a miner carrying a blue light:

I am a miner. The light burns blue.
Waxy stalactites
Drip and thicken, tears
The earthen womb.
Exudes from its dead boredom (A 32)

While on the one hand, cave refers to child's room, on the other hand, it refers to mother's womb and the child is identified with the fish that form "A piranha / Religion, drinking / Its first communion out of my live toes." (32). These images suggest a world of death in which all familiar objects have been transformed into hostile ones. The child shown sleeping in the womb is oblivious to the mother's world of cosmic oppression and hostility, of freezing cold and natural danger. The child is unaffected by the terrible vision that visits the mother therefore the baby is ironically more "solid." The first seven stanzas of the poem establish the white world of death, the cave, and its dangerous animal. In the eighth stanza, the poem suddenly breaks the mood with a direct address to the baby, and we realize that the poem takes place in the baby's room:

O love, how did you get here?
O embryo
Remembering even in sleep,
Your crossed position
The blood blooms clean
In you, ruby.
The pain
You wake to is not yours.(A 32-33)

From eighth to eleventh stanza, there is a shift toward redness of the baby which stands for the warmth and beauty of the life force. In the final three stanzas, the death motif is reintroduced through the symbolism of blackness and it ends in the final image of the Christ child in the barn. The
poem is a beautiful balancing of the horrors and joys of Plath’s inner world as it moves effortlessly from the imaginary environment of the cave to the real world of the room and, finally, to the mythical reality of the manger.

"Getting There" is one of her most openly anguished death poems. This poem describes a train running across a war-torn landscape clotted with wounded soldiers and mutilated bodies. Participating in the violence of history, the speaker expresses the violence of her own life as she drags her own body from such horrible scenes and from the “Dynasty of broken arrows” (A 36).

The train is dragging itself, it is screaming-
An animal
Insane for the destination
The bloodspot, (36)
The wheels of the train are fixed to the “leash of the will- / inexorable.” The train drags with it; “the men, what is left of the men / Pumped ahead by these pistons, this blood / Into the next mile.” (36). The speaker creates a ritual space in the poem’s world of biological holocaust. The “blood spot” is such space where death and life converge. She is terrified of her situation. She determines: “I shall bury the wounded like pupas, / I shall count and bury the dead.” (36). The reference to pupa is suggestive of the possibility of renewed life which speaker finally attains for her. She discards her old form for a new body in the manner of an insect. Against the chaos of “old bandages, boredoms, old faces” death becomes a purifying experience. There is nothing beyond it. The train of death turns magically into a carriage.
"Stepping from this skin" is the ultimate act of salvation as well as
destruction. Death comes as a comfort:

The carriages rock, they are cradles.
And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces
Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby. (A 37)

Thus, her battle with the dismembered bodies ends in innocence. Plath's
sense of entrapment in a vulnerable body is reflected in her drive toward
self-transformation. She links death and birth so closely that they are
virtually distinguishable. As an alternative to the traumatic present, the
purity and innocence of infancy attracts Plath. This return is a cleansing or
purging experience as the death in "Getting There" which prepares the
speaker for a return to life.

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" begins by redefining the landscape in
terms of deathly coldness and alienation. The moon's light becomes "the light
of the mind, cold and planetary" (A 40). In this poem, Plath creates a mythic
drama in which the male figure is a particular demon. The poem names the
real source of creative sterility as the mother moon. The location given in the
first line is maintained till the end. The landscape perfectly mirror the mind
"cold and planetary" from where there is no escape. It reflects her existential
yearning: "I simply cannot see where there is to get to. / .......... / it is quiet / With the O-gape of complete despair."(A 40). When Plath's marriage with
Hughes broke up, Plath's poetry was inspired with the tremendous personal
strain of the separation, the misery of abandonment, and the rage of jealousy
and hatred. It aroused Plath's poetic energies towards a search for self-
identity. The speaker in the poem attempts to contact correspondent spirits
or messengers from the dead which represent both the other and also that
part of her that is silent or dead. In the mental light, the natural objects
represent images of father and mother. The moon is identified as the poet's
mother, full of despair and the blackness of the yew tree identifies with her
father. The tree points to the moon, but the moon does not open up to any
possibility other than the bleak scene before the poet. Plath says, "The moon
is no door"(40). Different colours used in the landscape take on a personal
meaning with the poem's progress. Black is the father's colour, indicating the
silence of the dead; white is the mother's colour, indicating despair and the
fear of death; and blue, the Virgin Mary's colour, indicates hopefulness.
Mary, the speaker says, she would like to believe in tenderness, in
resurrection, but how can she be blind to the fact that she is basically the
child of the moon, the heir to the despair, darkness and death of this pagan
moon goddess; "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. / And
the message of the yew tree is blackness-blackness / And silence.(A 41).
Death approaches with a blankness of despair, blankness of terror, and the
ultimate and eternal silence. Plath had written in an article in the London
Magazine:

My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a
child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not
about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the blackness of
moon over a yew tree in a neighbouring graveyard. For me, the
real issues of our time are the issues of every time- the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms- children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places.23

"A Birthday Present" is a fascinating contrast to "Fever 103°" which is one of the two finest dramatic monologues by Plath along with "Lady Lazarus." In this poem, terror and hysterical panic predominate. There is an obsessive focus on the birthday present brought by the speaker's friend. The speaker attempts to imagine what is brought by his friend: "What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?" (A 42). They 'talk' to each other in the kitchen, she identifies the present as a person, bones, a pearl, button and ivory tusk which define the nature of the birthday present she wants "I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want."(42). All the three white objects- bones, pearl and ivory tusk suggest death, once being part of living organisms. But when the persona speaks of the veils around the present, it perfectly symbolizes the death explaining what she really wants as a birthday present: "Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains, / The diaphanous satins of a January window / White as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath /O ivory! (42).She says that life itself is a veil concealing death. This veil causes her anxiety and fear. To remove this concealing veil, the speaker demands an end to the screening off of death from view. She rejects the veil that keeps death at a distance from human consciousness. Like this, she hopes to attain a state of non self-consciousness, of pure self transcendence. Towards the end, she compares
her life to the arrival by mail of parts of her own corpse. But its delivery stretches out over the span of sixty years until her entire body is dead. She prays, “Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger. / Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty / By the time whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it.” (A 44). She concludes the poem with the final image of death which gives dimension to the death-wish when she asks death as an apt ‘birthday’ gift for herself, instead of the symbols or figures representing death:

If it were death
I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.
There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife not carve, but enter
Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side. (44)

The poem, as a whole, dramatizes the ironic vision of this passage; her birthday becomes her death day, and death becomes a form of rebirth. “A Birthday Present” transforms a domestic, usually happy occasion of the visit of a friend carrying a birthday gift into a celebration of suicide. The poem captures the movement of the speaker’s mind into the sequence of steps that might lead her to kill herself. The poet projects the speaker’s death fantasies onto the veiled object. It gives the poem the status of a mysterious and brilliant drama which arises from her solitary imaginings of self-destruction.

Along with “Lady Lazarus,” one of her strongest poem about death and rebirth, “Fever 103°” dramatizes the complete destruction of personality and body. “Fever 103°” has a greater variety of images. Personal
perspectives on the speaker's sense of sin and her self-punishment merge
effortlessly with cosmic views of death and historical considerations of
Hiroshima. There are quick shifts of perception and address for which form
is provided by the dramatic monologue. In this monologue, the speaker is
terrified by her annihilation on the one hand and is exalted by it on the other.
At the beginning of the poem, the speaker answers her own internal question
about self-purification through suffering. She reaches to the heaven
imagined by a patriarchal religion, "Pure? What does it mean?" (A 52). She
rejects the idea of the purification: "The tongues of hell / Are dull . . .
incapable / Of licking clean / The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin." (52).

Plath rejects the Christian concept of purgatory, as the place where
sins are purified. But she accepts hell as the abode of the dead. It is guarded
by a "dull, fat Cerberus / Who wheezes at the gate."(52). He has the "triple
tongues" along with the lynx and the sow, the lioness. The sacrificial fires of
hell suffocate the speaker like "Isadora's scarves" and make her a victim of
her own individuality. Those "yellow sullen smokes" are "Choking the aged
and the meek. / The weak / hothouse baby in its crib."(52). Later on, those
smokes turn into "Radiation" which connotes both atomic warfare and the
flashy annihilation of Christian transcendence. By the repetition of the
words, "The sin. The sin" the idea of sin is reinforced to make the purification
more effective. She says to her darling that she continued "flickering, off, on,
off, on."(A 53) for "Three days. Three nights." like the Christ. Until, she tells
her husband, she became "too pure for you or anyone." In this purity, she
achieves a god-like status: "your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God."
Towards the end of the poem, she transforms herself into "pure acetylene / Virgin" (53) who can reject all attachment to others. The speaker is aware, however, of her fantastic imaginative leap. The metaphoric flights are gaudy and self-conscious. Unlike the violent self-transformations of "Lady Lazarus," here are smooth, physical transformations of the body.

"Fever 103°" moves effortlessly through a great range of positive and negative possibilities for the self: from Isadora Duncan to Hiroshima, from the virgin to "whore petticoats." She reaches to a female apotheosis at last in which she casts off the masculine world and her own sexual identity in it: "My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats." (A 54). Hence, "Fever 103°" may be regarded as a rejection of the man and the selves that man created, in favour of the purely female identity in which the light is not transcendent light but heat, a flush, a red camellia. Plath brings death and rebirth into close proximity which releases profoundly contradictory feeling towards existence. Plath strategically uses the death impulse to generate a received desire to live. While Plath seeks death because life appears unbearable, guilt ridden and worthless, she simultaneously desires it for a renewal of her life through the release of the reservoir of love that will refresh the self. In this poem, she immerses the nightmare of radiation poisoning with the fantasy of religious salvation. Hence, the poem gives the most balanced version of Plath's striving towards a purification of self in the midst of the world of death.

The next poem of this volume, "The Bee Meeting" is the symbolic embodiment of the speaker's own death in a bee box which terrifies her:
“Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have I accomplished, why I am cold.” (A 55). In “The Arrival of the Bee Box” she herself orders the box and changes it immediately into an emblem of death:

I ordered this, this clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby (A 58)

In order to escape from the violence of the death world, the individual undergoes drastic self transformation in the form of physical destruction, including self mutilation, dismemberment or symbolic annihilation as turning into a “cold” being. The experience of pain or pleasure in such transformation depends upon the psychic motive that accompanies the particular image or action. Plath often switches from a horrified awareness of disintegration to an intense longing for it.

“The Munich Mannequins” and “Totem” represent the two vivid impressions of the world of death. Written during the last month of her life, both of them confront the dead void of space. As Jon Rosenblatt analyses: “‘The Munich Mannequins’ makes a complex metaphoric equation between the external snowy night, which brings whiteness and cold to the earth, and the naked, bald mannequins in a shop window in Munich which symbolize the perfection and sterility of death.” Plath says, “The blood flood is the flood of love, / The absolute sacrifice” (A 69). The snow and mannequins are silent and mindless and are contrary to the human procreative urge and the generational cycle. Human life will grow with new seeds and eggs, but the death world is already perfection and has no need to grow: “Perfection is
terrible, it cannot have children.”(69). Therefore, blood encounters the perfection of death all around it. There is an absolute loneliness and isolation for the human being in the universe. The silence of the white snow, the baldness of the mannequins, the horror of German history and the voicelessness of black unused telephones merely reflect it: “And the black phones on hooks/ Glittering/ Glittering and digesting / Voicelessness, The snow has no voice.”(A 70).

In “Totem” Plath domesticates the violence of history in the eating habits of men. There is a continuous devouring of the universe. The universe is depicted as a voracious mouth which consumes its own body. The relationship between one thing and the other is a relationship of blood, of killing and eating. The poem opens with the image of the train which recalls the train-ride metaphor of “Getting There.” Here, “The engine is killing the track”(A 71) but the speaker assures us that “It will be eaten nevertheless. / Its running is useless.”(71). In a series of associations, the railroad track is eaten by the engine; the pigs and hares are eaten by the farmers; men are roped in and eaten by the spider death. All move through an existential catharsis, a horror of existence. The poem becomes an intense statement of the primordial relation between blood and death. But speaker’s knowledge makes her not to be scared by this principle at the heart of things: “The world is blood hot and personal / Dawn says, with its blood-flush. / There is no terminus.”(A 71-72). The final images of the poem deny that the train of life can ever find a “terminus.” Plath perceives that death devours all organic life just as flies are eaten by a giant spider:
I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms.  
And in truth it is terrible,  
Multiplied in the eyes of the flies.  
They buzz like blue children  
In nets of the infinite,  
Roped in at the end by the one  
Death with its many sticks.(72)

The poem portrays a cosmic voraciousness and clearly renders Plath's agony in the face of a cannibalistic universe. Unlike "Getting There," there is no redeeming self-transformation. Rather than reaching the "terminus" of rebirth, the self simply continues to unfold from suitcases like a suit full of old papers and tickets. The image of old papers and tickets suggests, of course, the self's inability to be reborn. "Totem" reflects the despondency and hopelessness of Plath's final months. The closing metaphor of "Totem" indicates the hopelessness of the human situation in a death world. Human beings are flies caught in "nets of the infinite" and their "eyes" always reflect the spider of death. The eating chain, the slaughter of the hares, the movement of the train toward a terminus, all these are ritualistic elements but the ritual ends in nothingness. The imagery of the last poems is particularly suggestive of death and dissolution: bloodied mouths, balloons squeaking like a cat, the blood jet, the sea sucking obsessively in a pit of rock, a rose closing when the garden stiffens, a white skull eaten by weedy greens and the sheeted mirror.

"Poppies in July" reflects Plath's fascination with blood. Not only her spilling blood but this blood-hot world has a fascination for her. The flowers here are clear red, like "the skin of a mouth. / A mouth just bloodied. / Little
bloody skirts!" (77). She wishes, "If I could bleed, or sleep! - If my mouth could marry a hurt like that." (77). In "Kindness," the "dame kindness" assures her, "Sugar can cure everything, / Sugar is a necessary fluid." (78). The speaker knows that there is a more necessary fluid: "The blood jet is poetry. / There is no stopping it." (78). The image of blood is suggestive of a life that is being drained out of her. Poetry is part of that hemorrhage.

Margaret Dickie Uroff writes:

In these late poems, Plath is working out an image pattern of bloody violence that derives directly from the female situation in which bleeding may be either a normal, healthy issue, evidence of a natural rhythm, or a sign of sterility and wounds. The woman's more numerous blood relationships give these images a particular density.25

In "Contusion" Plath concentrates on that moment when "Colour floods to the spot" while "The rest of the body is all washed out." (79). Blood is the evidence of vitality while rest of the world is blank and silent. Alongwith "Contusion"; "Edge" and "Words" also connect death with absorption and water. "Contusion" chillingly describes the body in terms of the purely physical motion of the sea around a rock. The stark metaphors for death leave no room for hope: "The sea slides back / The mirrors are sheeted." (79). In "Edge," the suicide that is implicit in "Contusion" and "Kindness" becomes rather explicit. Death is seen as satisfying: "The woman is perfected." (80). "Edge" may be read as the final statement of the woman perfected in "Fever 103°" The finality of her situation is comparable to that of a Greek tragedy:
"Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment, / The illusion of a Greek necessity / Flows in the scrolls of her toga."(80). The "scrolls" of her death robe and the "scrolls" of her poetry are artistically united. In these final poems, her art becomes equated with her life as well as her death. "The smile of accomplishment" that her dead body wears folds back into all that she has created: her love, her art, her children. The inner violence that occasions the poetry and the poetry that sustains her life become one. In the scrolled image of "Edge", she folds each child as "a white serpent," hence not only her art but her children too get engulfed by the hurt: "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent, / One at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty."(80).

Through this image she identifies herself with Cleopatra and she becomes the proud and fated queen who is both destroyer and destroyed. She folds her children into her body, as they have drained her into theirs, and thus she reclaims the self split into lover and mother. The perfected woman closes "as petals / Of a rose close when the garden / Stiffens and odours bleed / From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.(80). She has become a bleeding rose. This woman at the end of Ariel has accomplished far more than the woman who considers herself at the end of The Colossus, "The vase, reconstructed, houses / The elusive rose." (CO 84). Now she has become that rose who realizes its elusiveness in her children, her fatal love, her poetry all now absorbed into herself. This folding rose becomes the metaphor of ultimate violence, death. The self merges into the order, obliterating all tensions. The folded night flower looses itself in darkness. Whatever method of dying has been used by Plath, she confronts a structural
obstacle to any attempt at overcoming the dualism of self and world: The self will not become spontaneous and vital because it is frozen in its fear of death. And if an attempt is made to lose the death-fear by a plunge into death, it will be a dénouement of all vitality.

(ii)

Along with Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton's life is also engulfed with the terrible longing for love as well as death. The poetry of Anne Sexton also reflects the decaying existences, desire and love for death but there is a difference that ultimately she completes her vision of death in the awful rowing towards God's kingdom. She herself says in an interview with Patricia Marx, "Any writer, any artist, I am sure, is obsessed with death, a prerequisite for life I am afraid they are quite repetitive, but I think that's all right. I don't think you need too many different themes." Even the most enthusiastic readers and critics of her had encouraged her inability to separate her depression and her obsession with death. Robert Lowell views the political dimensions of her struggle. Her story becomes that of a victim instead of a political participant. He writes,

Anne Sexton the well-to-do suburban housewife, Anne Sexton in Bedlam, Anne Sexton "half-way back", Anne Sexton the glamorous performer, Anne Sexton timid and insecure, Anne Sexton saying she had always hoped to publish a posthumous volume, Anne Sexton in her garage breathing in the deadly fumes, was- whatever the clinical description of her depression-caught in history's crossfire.
Anne Sexton, like other gifted artists who have been distorted into an alienated individualism, strives for purity, integrity, love and energy. This alienation becomes a self preoccupation, not individuation, not maturation. The death of near and dear ones, the sudden loss of one on whom a person emotionally depends, forces him into a gloom and nostalgia from where recovery is not possible. As Anne Sexton puts it, "The dying are slowly being rocked away from us and wrapped up into death, the eternal place. And one looks for answers and is faced with demons and visions. Hence one comes up with God."28 When something like death happens, she accepts that she gets pushed over the brink of disbelieving into believing: "For a while, but it can happen without a death. There are little deaths in life, too- in your own life- and at that point, sometimes you are in touch with strange things, other worldly things."29

There are many times when one has to face death-like existence in life and the person is pushed towards a vacillation between the belief and disbelief and the identities are at stake. At that time, one comes in touch with such strange things. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and George Starbuck were the members of Robert Lowell's writing class as well as good friends, and their togetherness led them towards the intensity of the suicidal element in their poetry. As Anne Sexton herself has stated in an interview with Barbara Kevles: "Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicide, in detail and in depth . . . Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites. We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb, sucking on it."30
In his reflection, "Light Up the Cave," Denise Levertov has written about the startling effect caused by Anne Sexton's suicide. He admitted that it was her intense struggle with her own self that dissolved the precarious aesthetic distance between creativity and self-destruction. This confusion has caused many to fall prey in the cruel hands of self-annihilation. Levertov claims that it was that dissolution of distance between Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath's identity which added powerfully to her malaise. Though the assumed conception that there are unavoidable links between depressions, anxieties and creativity was denied by Anne Sexton, she could not keep herself aloof from the after-effects of her dilemmas and anguishes and annihilated herself.

The first poem of her first volume, To Bedlam and Part Way Back reflects along with her madness, her indication of herself on the verge of death. She writes in "You, Doctor Martin:"

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
   of death. (SP 9)

In "Elizabeth Gone" she writes of her Aunt whom she called "Nana."

Through the depiction of her dead self, she tells how she craved for her aunt: "You lay in the nest of your real death, / Beyond the print of my nervous fingers / Where they touched your moving head;" (SP 13). She wishes not to believe that her aunt has gone: "You lay in the crate of your last death, / But were not you, not finally you." (13). She doubts, "They have stuffed her
cheeks, I said; / This clay hand, this mask of Elizabeth / Are not true”(13). But when she was handed over her ash and bones, she yearned to have a look of her "Nana":

They gave me your ash and bony shells,
Rattling like gourds in the cardboard urn,
.... I waited you in the cathedral of spells
And I waited you in the country of the living. (13)

She fumbles her remaining things; somehow she wants to have a feel of her:

So I threw out your last bony shells
And heard me scream for the look of you,
Your apple face, the simple crèche
Of your arms, the August smells
Of your skin. Then I sorted your clothes
And the loves you had left, Elizabeth,
Elizabeth, until you were gone.(13)

The poem “Ringing the Bells,” has a menacing flat accent of life-in-death in where self is reduced to an almost infantile regression, as M.L. Rosenthal puts it:

And this is always my bell responding
to my hand that responds to the lady
who points at me, E flat;
and although we are not better for it,
they tell you to go. And you do.(SP 23)

“The Double Image” which has been discussed earlier in chapter three is a poem about the poet’s suicide attempt, the death of her mother by cancer and about her guilt complex regarding her child. “The Division of Parts” will be discussed in this chapter. In it, the poet writes about the experience of her mother’s death and her own love towards her mother. The excruciating
experience of watching her mother's disintegration from cancer and her own helplessness at it, forced her to confront her own belief in God or religion:

This winter when
cancer began its ugliness
I grieved with you each day
for three months
and found you in your private nook
of the medicinal palace. (SP 36)

She is loaded with the memories of her mother and remembers her: “I fumble my lost childhood / for a mother and lounge in sad stuff / with love to catch and catch as catch can.” (36). She wishes to remain as a child:

I have tried
to exorcise the memory of each event
and remain still, a mixed child,
heavy with clothes of you,
Sweet witch, you are my worried guide.” (SP 37)

The memories of her mother disturb her in her nights and she yearns for her:

What was, is gone
Mother, last night I slept
in your Bonvit Teller nightgown.
Divided, you climbed into my head.
There in my jabbering dram
I heard my own angry cries
and I cursed you, Dame
keep out of my slumber,
My good Dame, you are dead. (SP 38)

And in spite of her curses, that lady of her first words comes to her:

While Christ stays
fastened to his Crucifix
so that love may praise
his sacrifice
.................................
you come, a brave ghost, to fix
in my mind without praise
or paradise

to make me your inheritor. (SP 39)

In the poems of this volume, though she portrays death but they lack that intensity that was to come in her later poems as Ralph J. Mills, Jr., observes,

Since she is a poet without mystical inclinations, but rather is earthbound, committed to a vision that shocks by its unvarnished realism, it is hardly surprising that she should approach religious belief through the person of Christ. . . . He is the one who reminds her again of the destiny to which all flesh is ordered-death.31

Sexton’s second volume, All My Pretty Ones is a continuation of the themes of death and ruin, guilt and morality. “The Truth the Dead Know” is an account of the death by cancer of her mother at fifty-seven, in March 1959, and of her father by heart-attack, at fifty-nine, in June 1959, only three months later. Dedicated to her parents, the poem is a recuperation of soul in working out of her personal idiom. She expresses her breakdown and thinks about dead:

Gone, I say and walk from church,
Refusing the stiff procession to the grave,
Letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.
It is June. I am tired of being brave

.................................

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.(SP43)
Laying away her past to us, she strides into a sunlight earned through grief.
She assumes the hard and perilous attempt of putting down the primary
horrors of life, along with a good many of those secondary horrors which the
imagination is able and willing to conjure up. In “The Starry Night,” she
explains the soliciting manner in which she wants to die: “The town is silent.
The night boils with eleven stars. / Oh starry starry night! This is how / I want
to die.”(SP 49) And again, “The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars. / Oh starry starry night! This is how / I want to die.” (49)

“The Operation” written after the death of her mother is an expression
of her anguish after the death of mother and her own desire to die. The first
stanza expresses how she came to hospital for her own treatment after
mother’s death:

After the sweet promise
the summer’s mild retreat,
from mother’s cancer, the winter months of her death.
I came to this white office

.................
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate
my ills with hers
and decide to operate.(SP 52)
Then she remembers how cancer made its place in her mother and how they
were scared to think that she is about to leave the world. This vulnerability of
man, where one can’t escape, one has no way to get rid of this eternal fear of
losing the person one loves, is the ultimate predicament of the mysterious
human life: "It grew in her / as simply as a child would grow, / as simply as she housed me once, fat and female." (52). They pretended to be normal in front of her: "that face we wear in the room of the special smells of dying, fear / where the snoring mouth gapes / and is not dear." (52). Though the sick incense their death, yet the family members try to hide the fact of their approaching death as Anne Sexton had by trying "to enter with the outside / air stuck on my skin, / to enter smelling her pride, / her upkeep, and to lie / as all who love have lied." (52). She reminds herself of the death as a fact of life. It's not the death of someone she knows dying which forces her into a vision but her own realization of the death fact, her own madness at it: "All that was special, all that was rare / is common here. Fact: death too is in the egg. / Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat." She doubts the surety of everything: "nothing is sure. No one. I wait in doubt." (53). Along with the description of birth and remarking about the women in labour, she comes back to the hospital scene. Thinking herself on the verge of death, she calls her mother:

I soar in hostile air
Over the pure women in labor,
over the crowning heads of babies being born.
I plunge down the backstair
calling mother at the dying door,
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn. (SP 54)
She had thought that she would die, but she comes home triumphant and recalling her mother:

God knows
I thought I'd die- but here I am,
recalling mother, the sound of her
good morning, the odor of orange and jam.


All's well they say. They say I'm better. (SP 55)

Making use of her personal grief, Anne Sexton drags the reader into her individual experience to feel one by it. Anne Sexton had once shouted at her friend Lois Ames by way of admonition: “You should use your grief. No matter what happens, you should swim out of the pain with a finished book held high in your hands!”

“In The Deep Museum” conducts us through several kinds of hell and hallucination in which she deliberately deals in horror. Mrs. Sexton sees the dead as the lost baggage-gone, beyond recovery, yet stuffed with the aspects of the self. As in this poem, she expresses “both nostalgia for and denial of absolute love.”

She thinks herself dead and meditates whether she is in hell:

My God, my god, what queer corner am I in?

Didn't I die, blood running down the post,

Surely my body is done? Surely I died?
And yet, I know, I'm here. What place is this?
Cold and queer, I sting with life. I lied.

If this is hell, then hell could not be much,
Neither as special nor as ugly as I was told. (SP 59)

In “Old,” she writes about the beginning of the death-dream inside her:

I'm tired of faces that I don't know
And now I think that death is starting.
Death starts like a dream,
Full of objects and my sister's laughter. (SP 63)
What May Swenson writes on *All My Pretty Ones* defines this volume in a good manner:

Her material was startling and it had been lived through, in her own person or through persons closely around her; mental breakdown, accident, death in war, abortion, suicide and "no special god to refer to"... she transposed her experiences out of their private realm and made them mesh with the instinctive knowledge we all carry of grief, guilt compulsion, self-disintegration.\(^{34}\)

*Live or Die* (1966), the Pulitzer Prize winner book of Anne Sexton reveals her search for reconciliations, her obsessions with the limits of the body and its failure to be equal to the demands of the spirit. Commencing with her father's death, the book covers the time period when Death ['that old butcher'] hacks away at her dear ones again, this time taking her teacher John Holmes and her friend Sylvia Plath. During this stage of her life even nature seems malevolent: the rain "drops down like worms". Weary of the flesh again, she thirsts for the water of the spirit. Yet formal religion continues to fail her, and in its collapse she grows scornful.... and she turns from the church to the comforts of drug addiction, and attempted suicide.\(^{35}\)

"Somewhere in Africa" which is an elegy for John Holmes, reflects her vision of death and God, for John Holmes who did not pray in his life:

Must you leave, John Holmes, with the prayers and psalms
You never said over you? ........... ...........
... If this is death and God is necessary let him be hidden
From the missionary, the well wisher and the glad hand.
Let God be some tribal female who is known but forbidden.(SP82)
Her imaginative vitality redeemed her death vision from both terror and
perversity:

Let there be this God who is a woman who will place you
upon her shallow boat, who is a woman naked to the waist,
...........................................................................
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 “Sylvia’s Death,” a compassionate elegy for Sylvia Plath, Sexton depicted
her own (and her dear friend’s) suicidal longings with sardonic good humour:

Thief! -
How did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,

the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
the one we talked of so often each time
we downed three extra dry Martinis in Boston:36

In “For the Year of the Insane” she feels that the hour of her death is
approaching near:

Closer and closer
comes the hour of my death
as I rearrange my face, grow back,
grow undeveloped and straight haired.
All this is death.
In the mind there is a thin alley called death
and I move through it as
through water
My body is useless.(SP 91-92)

Then she explains how she feels in that lane which she calls of death:

I am in the domain of silence,
the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper,
There is blood here
and I have eaten it.
O mother of the womb,
did I come for blood alone
O little mother,
I am in my own mind,
I am locked in the wrong house.(SP 93)

Acquainted with the recognition of herself, her mind, she needs an escape from it and that escape is death. In "Menstruation at Forty" she again reclaims her death wish and that too on her birthday:

In two days it will be my birthday
and as always the earth is done with its harvest.
This time I hunt for death,
the night I lean toward,
the night I want.
Well then-
speak of it! (SP 96)

In "Wanting to Die" she expresses her intense belief that suicides are special people like Sylvia Plath and she herself is. Both of these young, gifted and very attractive women spend hours exchanging details of their suicide attempts, and after Sylvia Plath's successful attempt some years later, Anne
Sexton wrote this poem which belongs to the most terrible and yet the most intelligent and convincing work of what is loosely called the “confessional mode.” This poem makes the familiar charges of “hysteria” quite irrelevant:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Suicides have a special language
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build. (SP 98)

She writes that suicides even when contemplating the act have already betrayed the body:

Suicides have already betrayed the body.
Still born, they don’t always die,
But dazzled, they can’t forget a drug so sweet
That even children would look on and smile.
To thrust all that life under your tongue!
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.
Death’s a sad bone; bruised, you’d say. (98)

Suicidal impulse waits for the poet to commit the act to undo that old hurt which has been hurting her since years. In the manner of suicide, one would easily get oneself free from the prison of this physical form. And when two suicides meet to discuss their visions as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton did, they abdicated all other things in life:

and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
raging at the fruit, a pumped up moon,
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,
leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
something unsaid, the phone off the hook
and the love, whatever it was, an infection.(SP 98-99)

Leaving everything as it is, suicides leave the world, leaving a lot to be said, a lot to be understood. Maxine Kumin, a close friend of Anne Sexton writes about her:

She lived her poetry, poetry was her life. It had saved her life in a real sense when, in the mid-1950s, she began to write poems as a therapeutic act urged on her by the current psychiatrist. The clear thread that runs through all the books of poems is how tenuous that life was. She was on loan to poetry, as it were. We always knew it would end. We just didn’t know when or exactly how.37

And later on, everyone came to know how it was. Albert Camus writes regarding suicide: "In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it."38 When life gets too much with a person, the result is the ultimate end of the self in suicide which becomes the confession of the suicide; that the circumstances were so unbearable, that the life was so intolerable, that the love had become a torturer, an infection and the riddance of it is just to cease to be, just to put an end to what forces to face such circumstances, such love, and that is to end the life. "The Addict" is another
poem in which she writes about her desire for death and her addiction for sleeping pills along with the self promise for death:

    Sleepmonger,
    deathmonger,
    with capsules in my palm each night,
    eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
    I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
    I'm the queen of this condition
    I'm an expert on making the trip
    and now they say I'm an addict. (SP 114)

That she was living on loan, is cleared in this stanza where she claims:

    I promised to die!
    I'm keeping in practice.
    I'm merely staying in shape.
    The pills are a mother, but better,
    every color and as good as sour balls.
    I'm on a diet from death (SP 114)

She admits that sleeping pills have become a habit, an addiction for her and she has been turning into "something of a chemical mixture". She defines this addiction as a kind of marriage where she prepares for the explosive death:

    My supply
    of tablets
    has got to last for years and years
    I like them more than I like me
    Stubborn as hell, they won't let go
    It's a kind of marriage
    It's a kind of war
    where I plant bombs inside
    of myself. (SP 114-115)
Then she writes that taking sleeping pills is like a small scale killing and that too silent:

I try
To kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupation
Actually I am hung up on it.
But remember I don’t make too much noise (SP 115)

She defines her eight pills as eight loaves and then as eight chemical kisses and then “two pink, two orange, / two green, two white goodnights” and its effect is “Now I’m borrowed / Now I’m numb.” (SP 115). Lost in the magic of pills, she feels overwhelmed by her numbness and feels herself borrowed by death. Though Anne Sexton has clearly explored the pills and suicide, she still find in life, values worth living for. Between the two choices affirmed in the title, she opts for life quite unlike Sylvia Plath though she opted for death later. The poem “Live” though apparently a decision-making poem whether to kill or not, the eight Dalmatian puppies, is really a poem to make a decision about her life. Because of Sexton’s dependence on others, pulling the self into a passive sense, the resolution of “live” sounds unconvincing. By accepting her “Dearest three,” “her husband and daughters,” she has at least soothed her guilt if not resolved. In the poem, she accepts that she had been in the domain of death since a long time:

Well, death’s been here
for a long time-
it has a hell of a lot
to do with hell
and suspicion of the eye

..................
The chief ingredient
is mutilation. (SP 116)

Even then she gives an evidence of survival though the life she is living has
been dragged upon by her:

Even so,
I kept right on going on,
a sort of human statement,
lugging myself as if
I were a sawed-off body
in the trunk, the steamer trunk.
This became a perjury of the soul. (SP 116)

She asks herself whether the life is a play of which she wants to get riddance:

“Is life something you play? / And all the time wanting to get rid of it?” (SP117)

Then she makes a choice between life and death and got the answer:

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer.
What a bargain! (SP 117)

The life-giver sun becomes the answer for her question:

There was the sun
her yolk moving feverishly,
tumbling her prize-
and you realize that she does this daily!
I’d know she was a purifier
but I hadn’t thought
she was solid,
hadn’t known she was an answer.
God! It’s dream,
lovers sprouting in the yard
like celery stalks
and better,
a husband straight as a redwood,
two daughters. (SP 117)

And her reply is:

O dearest three,
I make a soft reply.

I come with kisses in my hood
and the sun, the smart one,
rolling in my arms.
So, I say *Live*
And turn my shadow three times round. (SP 118)

Finally she says, "I am not what I expected. /................./ I say *Live, Live*
because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable gift." (SP 119)

Anne Sexton's *Love Poems* examine love in its many guises: sensual, filial, adulterous, self and the impossibility of reciprocal love which shows the loneliness of the individual. It opens with a statement of theme in the poem "The Touch":

For months my hand had been sealed off
in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railing:
Perhaps it is bruised, I thought,
And that is why they have locked it up. 39

Then she portrays the victory of love over death:

Then all this became history.
Your hand found mine.
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.
Oh, my carpenter, the fingers are rebuilt.
They dance with yours.
They dance in the attic and in Vienna.
My hand is alive all over America.
Not even death will stop it,
death shedding her blood.
Nothing will stop it, for this is the kingdom
and the kingdom come.\textsuperscript{40}

In the poem "The Kiss," she manifests how the love has brought about a
change in herself:

Before today my body was useless

Where there was silence
The drums, the strings are incurably playing. You did this.
Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped
into fire.\textsuperscript{41}

There are even the poems of narcissistic love, of the breakage, of the
wounds. The poet transforms acrid experience into her own words and her
own touch and reaches another person. Her poem "Suicide Note" starts with
an epigraph from Artaud, that defines the narcissism of her poetry, "You
speak to me of narcissism but I reply that it is a matter of my life."\textsuperscript{42} Her
poems always rise steady again, furious and seductive; in her "The Nude
Swim" the woman is swimming, lying on the water,

The walls of that grotto
were every color blue and
you said, "Look! Your eyes
are seacolor. Look! Your eyes
are skycolor." And my eyes
shut down as if they were
suddenly ashamed.\textsuperscript{43}
This movement brings the poems through the narcissism. The feeling of love, though physical, reaches the reader superbly. In “Loving the Killer,” she represents domestic love in the midst of wilderness and danger and then the ultimate unison:

   tonight our skins, our bones,
   that have survived our fathers,
   will meet, delicate in the hold
   fastened together in an intricate
   lock. Then one of us will shout,
   "My need is more desperated!" and
   I will eat you slowly with kisses
   even though the killer in you
   had gotten out. (SP 129)

The poems “Us,” “Now,” “Barefoot,” and “Song for a Lady” can be categorized as the poems of sensual love. In the poem “Us,” she concludes with an almost Biblical sexual metaphor:

   And we rose like wheat,
   acre after acre of gold,
   and we harvested,
   we harvested.”(SP 140)

An almost similar metaphor is used in “Song for a Lady” where she describes the act of sexual mating as the fermentation and rising up of bread which is a miraculous image of male virility:

   On the day of breast and small hips
   we coupled, so sane and insane.
   We lay like spoons while the sinister
   rain dropped like flies on our lips
   and our glad eyes and our small hips.
You are a national product and power.
Oh my swan, my drudge, my dear wooly rose,
even a notary would notarize our bed
as you knead me and I rise like bread.(SP 142)

In "Eighteen Days Without You," she explains her waiting for death in

"December 2\textsuperscript{nd}:

I slept last night

..................

waiting for slow
death in the hateful December snow.
Mother's death came in the spotlight (SP 143)

In "December 11\textsuperscript{th}, she reaches to the feeling of physical love and expresses

her feeling on one of the days of absence:

Then I think of you in bed,
your tongue half chocolate, half ocean,

.................................

How you come and take my blood cup
and link me together and take my brine.
We are bare. We are stripped to the bone
and we swim in tandem and go up and up
the river, the identical river called Mine
and we enter together. No one's alone. (SP 144)

In "December 18\textsuperscript{th}, she invites her lover, "Catch me. I'm your disease." She

wants to be drawn like a child and says:

Draw me good, draw me warm.

.................................

Lock in! Be alert, my acrobat
and I will be soft wood and you the nail
and we will make fiery ovens for Jack Sprat
and you will hurl yourself into my tiny jail
and we will take a supper together and that
will be that. (SP 145)

Here she calls his sex organ "Jack Sprat" and her sex organ "my tiny jail."

Anne Sexton was always considered energetic, always brimful of herself, her
pains, her passions etc. She is always about to leap out of her own skin in her
ironic / demonic quest for Love, Life, Art, Intensity. In *Love Poems*, the
survival is achieved through rebirth. She praises it and the self-celebration
tends either to avoid or to invent the experience behind it, or revolves on
minimal events like a hip fracture, a summer safari.

Anne Sexton's "narcissistic" preoccupation with death which started
its manifestation from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, gets fully surfaced in
*The Death Notebooks*. As Sandra M. Gilbert avers,

Sexton's thoughts of death were expressed with a breathless and
often comic vitality that lightened what might otherwise have
been unmitigated gloom. Death-the deaths of friends and
relatives, her own death, domesticated as suicide- rose yeastily
in the oven of her mind, like a loaf of exotic bread.44

Her goal becomes to make a living out of her own death-obsession as the
epigraph of this book suggests. Moreover, the largeness of her metaphysical
ambition is notified in this book. Such ambition reduces the effects of the
seductions of suicide for her and in doing this,

she has inevitably to define the death that is neither a handful of
ills nor somebody else's funeral but, in a sense, a precondition of
life itself. And so she joins the company of writers who have
asserted with Gertrude Stein that "being dead is not ending it is being dead and being dead is something", or with Wallace Stevens that "Death is the mother of beauty, mystical / Within whose burning bosom we devise / Our earthly mothers, waiting, sleeplessly."\(^{45}\)

The poem "For Mr. Death Who Stands With His Door Open," displays her obsession with death. The poet's imagination plays not upon forms of suicide or its effect upon her survivors but upon the necessary preparations for the final event. At the center of those preparations lies the imagining of that event. She portrays herself dying like a nice girl. She presents Mr. Death as an actor and wants to lose herself in his charms:

Mr. Death, you actor, you have many masks.
Once you were sleek, a kind of Valentino
with my father's bathtub gin in your flask.
With my cinched-in waist and my dumb vertigo
at the crook of your long white arm
and yet you never bent me back, never, never,
into your blackguard charm.(SP 203)

Then she explains how she is fascinated by the bait that Mr. Death held to attract her towards him:

Mr. Death, you held out the bait
during my first decline, as they say,
telling that suicide baby to celebrate
her own going in her own puppet play
I went out popping pills and crying adieu
in my own death camp with my own little Jew.(SP 204)
There is the indication of her final and successful suicide attempt which she might have contemplated by the time she wrote this poem:

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
Yet you'll press me down in your envelope;
pressed as neat as butterfly, forever, forever.(204)

She refers to the suicides of Sylvia Plath and John Berryman respectively by burning in oven and by drowning. Then she talks about her own abortion and desires her death to come slowly:

Mr. Death, when you came to the ovens it was short
and to the drowning man you were likewise kind,
and the nicest of all to the baby I had to abort
and middling you were to all the crucified combined.
But when it comes to death let it be slow,
let it be pantomime, this last peep show,
so that I may squat at the edge trying on
my black necessary trousseau.(204)

In "The Death Baby" sequence, she writes in "SevenTimes" about her recurring death seven times and the experience of getting rolled over by it. She adds a note of shabby self-consciousness to her last peep show of death:

I died seven times
In seven ways
letting death give me a sign,
letting death place his mark on my forehead,
crossed over, crossed over.(SP 207)

In the poem "Madonna" of "The Death Baby", she writes about her mother's death. There is a contradiction between the single death of her mother and
her own death seven times. That she was being rocked by the ice baby but her mother died unrocked, with cancer's baby:

My mother died
unrocked, unrocked
Weeks at her deathbed

her rocking horse was pain (207)

Every hump and crack was lessening the life and energy of Sexton's Madonna until she ultimately ended in the strange labour. This death of her mother gave her the view to beat down the death and to build it according to her as she writes in "Max": "Max and I / two immoderate sisters,/ ........ / made a pact." and that pact was "To beat death down with a stick. / To take over. / To build over death like carpenters."(SP 208). Because Sexton and Plath had seen how cruelly and coldly death laid its hand on their dear ones, they decided: "When death comes with its hood / We won't be polite."(208). The cancer's baby that grew in the stomach of Sexton's mother and took her life, gave Sexton an image for her poem "Baby," the image of the death baby: "Death / You lie in my arms like a cherub / as heavy as bread dough."(208). From this masochistic image, she reaches to the baby and exclaims: "Beware. Beware."

I rock I rock
You are my stone child
with still eyes like marbles
There is a death baby
for each of us.
We own him
His smell is our smell
She warns others, but she herself loves the dumb traveler of her "pantomime": "There is a tenderness / There is a love / for this dumb traveler / waiting in his pink covers." (209). And before any cancer or disaster reaches her, she wants to own the child because its time: "Hand me the death baby / and there will be / that final rocking." (209)

In the last books, Anne Sexton has expressed herself more and more obsessed with death in a strangely religious way. This obsession made her lose control of the language at the same time that she lost control of her life. Throughout her poetry she tried to identify the grapes and the thorns and then to choose one. For her, thorns were tempting, not only for their obvious suicidal attraction, but, as one version of sexual identity.

Most of the poems in her The Death Notebooks are meditations on her own death. They tend to fantasize forward rather than remember back. They have a frequent sense of having been written from beyond death. The poems have a retrospective character that continually catches up long memories and fragments of experience. In the poem "Clothes" she tells us how cleanly she wishes to reach to god, she wishes to be a nice girl while dying yet she will die full of questions:

Put on a clean shirt
before you die, some Russian said.
Nothing with drool please
no sweat, no sperm.
You want me clean God
so I'll try to comply.
it suits to die in something nostalgic.

do to die like a nice girl
smelling of Clorox and Duz
Being sixteen -in- the- pants
I would die full of questions. (SP 216-17)

The book's powerful confrontation with death tries to work its way toward the accommodations of understandings; as she puts it in "Fourth Psalm": "For, I am an orphan with two death masks on the mantel and came from the grave of my mama's belly into the commerce of Boston." (220) She describes imaginary brother Christopher as living in death: "For I lay as single as death. Christopher lay besides me. He was living." and then "For birth was a disease and Christopher and I invented the cure." (SP 221)

In the "Eighth Psalm" the death as a baby is carried and nourished for a life time, delivered slowly and rocked into darkness: "For she is nourished by darkness. / For she is in the darkroom putting bones into place." (SP 222) As the baby of the death lives, the mother moves towards her death: "For the baby lives. The mother will die and when she does Christopher will go with her. Christopher who stabbed his kisses and cried up to make two out of one." (SP 223) In the "Tenth Psalm" she writes how everyone takes death for granted and doesn't cry of its pain: "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." (SP 224)

In her posthumous books, the very fury of love is so moving that it distorts its own force. The concerns of these poems are always the human intricacies of need and belief, and their context is Sexton's need for belief and
her inability to believe, as that dilemma interacts with her relationship to herself and others, the dead and dying. Yet, these poems remain as flawed evidence of Sexton's steady boldness, her readiness to risk new experiments to record the various new experiences of our life, quite in the manner of Emerson who pleads art as an effort to indemnify ourselves for the wrongs of our condition.

Though both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath wrote of the cruelty of life and the cruelty of the people, particularly the ungriving nature of their parents, yet unlike Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton always seems to have been asking to be forgiven. Plath was a genius with a cold heart and such mind which wrote fiercer, purer poetry. While Plath had refused to forgive the world and remained victorious in her refusal, she had always been ready for enormity, crossing the frontier, with no carols to be sung, no Whitmanian salutations to accompany the hearse and one has to honour her. Ultimately she is a conqueror of her demons towards which she was faithful. Anne Sexton's biggest enemy was her own mind which led her into dangerous, sometimes thrilling places, away from love of herself, away from life but if she had not led such a dramatic and tragic life, and if Robert Lowell's pioneering "confessional" writing had not preceded her work, she wouldn't have gained her present stature. Moreover, the current morbid and destructive fascination with the connection between creativity and suicide also helped it.

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath have been called as the poets of suicide by their critics. But the reality is that their poems embody not only their faith
in the transforming powers of art but also their despair of altering their psychological condition and their relation to others. Death, as well as love is manifested as adventures in their poetry, which bear the risk of extinction. Love results in the extinction of the basic ego that constitutes the individual self, and death results in the extinction of the remaining half; the body, and Id and the super ego. Evils that men do live after them, but the good is right away buried with their bones. And even if the contrary is true, in both the cases, death offers an opportunity of departure from reality.

These contradictory emotions in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton provide great dynamic power simultaneously undermining any consistency, of intellectual or philosophical attitude. Though with love they try, linguistically at least, to summon a reality that will supplant the world of death, yet the result is contradictory. The fear as well as love of death produces shrillness in their life which led them towards greater depression and even greater efforts at self-negation. On the whole, love and death, though being contrary human drives, have a common denominator.

Offering us alternative visions of life, both love and death are a comment upon and a creative distortion of reality. Love immortalizes the lovers, and the loving moments in memory and do not always remain at war with death. Death sometimes generates a greater passion for life as in the case of Anne Sexton where the pressure to make the most of the life is always at work. Both the poets have searched out the mystery of love in the terrain of death. The greatest mystery of love, in fact, is that it survives in the human hearts despite all deathful blows and against all odds. Death is only an
individual reality, something as private and as individual, as love. The end of
love is the end of life but only for the individual, not for the collective self. This
reality makes the men all the more lonelier; shattering its self and allowing
the self-negation to spread from the self outward to the other, and ultimately
to the entire cosmos engulfing all in the terrains of mysterious love that
proves fatal.
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