CHAPTER 2

EXISTENTIAL ANGST IN THE CONFESSIONAL POETRY OF
SYLVIA PLATH AND ANNE SEXTON

The sense of eternal torture, has ever since the existence of humanity acutely troubled man as can be expressed in the words of Catullus: “I hate and love / And if you ask me why / I have no answer, but I discern / Can feel, my senses, rooted in eternal torture.” The ancient artists reflected this sense of torture in their works and confessional poetry too has its roots embedded in it. St. Augustine who has acutely reflected these sensations of pain and anguish, stands in the vanguard of the confessional literature. The Existential dilemmas deftly resolved by him create a concern for the intense awareness of evil in the modern poets for which they resorted to existentialist methods.

Existentialism is a philosophy which doesn't aim at system-building. It is a psychological approach which analyzes the living experience of an individual existentialist philosopher with depth but it doesn't prescribe a code of analysis. Existential philosophy analyses dread, anguish, despair, fidelity, hope and love. It attempts to uncover the meanings of these emotions underlying the human heart. This search for the roots of meanings is the characteristic psychological phenomenon of Existentialism. As Stephen Priest observes, Existentialism is the movement in nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy that addresses fundamental problems of human existence.

Existential philosophy makes an in-depth study of individual life. It emphasizes an individual's intimate relation with his own body and his
interpretation, evaluation and active response towards the world and the human society. It attempts to establish the subjectivity of man and condemns objectivity as a hurdle to the study of the subjective inwardness of individual. Though not defined as a self-conscious homogeneous school, the existentialists include, as Stephen Priest has compiled; the Danish Protestant theologian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard[1813-55], the iconoclastic German Atheist Freidrich Nietzsche[1844-1900], the German fundamental ontologist Martin Heidegger[1889-1976], the French Catholic philosopher, critic and playwright Gabriel Marcel[1889-1973], the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers[1883-1969], the French feminist philosopher and novelist Simone De Beauvoir[1908-86] and the French phenomenologist and critic of "objective thought," Maurice Merleau-Ponty[1908-61].

In literature, the works of Mikhail Lermontov, Fyodor Doestoyevsky, Andre Marlaux, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus and Jean Genet and many other reflect existentialist themes. Most of the existentialists are interested in some main problems: "What is it to exist? Does existence have a purpose? Is there an objective difference between right and wrong? Are we free? Are we responsible for our actions? What is the right sort of religious, political or sexual commitment? How should we face death?" In their search for existence and freedom of the individual, they become one with the general psyche of the world struggling between the essence and existence. St. Augustine's Confessions, which establishes him as an existential theorist, resolves the existential dilemmas underlying the heart of the poet's complex concern for the self and acute awareness of
human nature. Probing deeper into Christian metaphysics, it explores the existential perspective for the treatment of self contradictions and the complex phenomenon of human psyche. Hence, his autobiography becomes an "evolution of the self" in its description of the creative experiences of the poet, through which he gains an understanding of himself. Conceiving the life as an unending series of affirmations and negations, Augustine meditates on the basic questions of life such as the reason for sinning, the real nature of evil and of faith. This movement towards spiritual evolution is operated in an existential framework of his mind.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions* made the concept of sincerity an essential quality of literature. Sincerity towards one's innermost nature, search for the true self, made autobiography a means of affirming one's existence. While St. Augustine's oeuvre speaks of the guilt complex, Rousseau has written of sins against his own "authentic self" by confessing some of the terrible incidents of his life. He was fascinated by the psychic drama of his own inner world and the manner in which he treats the theme of sexuality, anticipates modern trends in psychological criticism. With the deeper probing into his mind, his double image became evident to him and he realized the necessity of this divided self. Existential philosophy's first post-war wave was led by Jean Paul Sartre and the text of his October 1945 lecture *Existentialism and Humanism* [L' Existentialisme est un Humanisme] remains an excellent introduction to Sartrean themes. His influence made existentialism the leading ideology of the time. Sartre saw the world as "absurd" and irrational. According to him, the world lacked guideposts for
humans adrift in a meaningless universe. Sartre said that people only know that they exist and are free to make choices. If people make a commitment to a course of action, they can give their lives a meaning.

In Sartrean Existential philosophy, to say that something exists is to say that it is and to state something's essence is to state what it is. In his 1938 novel Nausea, Sartre speculates on the relation between existence and essence, which makes evident his thoughts on existentialism. Antoine Roquentin, the existentialist anti-hero and voice-piece for Sartre's philosophy, as Stephen Priest views, discovers that existence cannot be reduced to essence: "To exist is to be there; what exists appears, lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it." But the disclosure of existence itself has an overwhelming, strangulating effect: "I'm suffocating: existence is penetrating me all over, through the eyes, through the nose, through the mouth... And suddenly, all at once, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen."

Albert Camus, another existential philosopher and a great rival of Jean Paul Sartre, also thinks that the world is an absurdity. But he differed from Sartre because he insisted that even in an absurd world; commitment must rest on clearly defined ethical principles like the need to resist oppressors and fanatics and to respect the shared humanity of all people. Camus viewed the world as replete with absurdity and perceived the human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe of no inherent truth, value or meaning. The human being fruitlessly searches for purpose and meaning to represent human life, and the life moves from nothingness towards
nothingness and ends in nothingness, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. As Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile... this divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity." 5

In this world of absurd relations, existential philosophy emphasizes human existence. It lays stress on the importance of man as an individual and his freedom and responsibility. While Naturalism and Idealism deny human freedom, Existentialism is a reason against this statement. According to Idealism, man's sense of freedom is illusory. The mind, spirit or consciousness is the ultimate reality. The Absolute is the ultimate ground of everything including the human minds. All the human wills are swallowed up by the Divine Will. But existential philosophy is a liberal approach because it stresses the freedom of the individual. Man's vital experience is his intimate relation with his body. The world and society is important in it. It gives a special concern to man's interpretation and evaluation of an active response to the world and the human society.

In spite of the individual will being determined by the body, the world, the society, the past and the present, history and culture, Existentialism gives him the freedom to choose his goal and realize his limitations. His decision and choice, his end or ideal, his moral affirmation gives a meaning and value to his life. He makes of himself what he chooses to be. A distinction between "essence" and "existence" is drawn in the existential philosophy. Idealists regard "essence" as prior to "existence" but existentialists regard existence
as prior to essence. In Existentialism, the existence of human being is constituted by his vital experience as he lives. Its depth has to be deciphered. According to Existentialists, man as he is, as he lives with his actual experience in all its layers, has to be analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated.

Existentialism is the only philosophy which emphasizes subjective inwardness of human experience. It is a doctrine that does render human life possible and affirms that every truth and every action implies both an environment and a human subjectivity. It condemns pan objectivism. On the contrary, all types of contemporary realism reduce mind, subject, ego, self, to objects and miss its distinctive character and subjectivity. Existential philosophy is necessarily a personal interpretation; it is limited by the limitation of the author. The modern poet's dilemma is to establish his own identity in this disintegrated world. The "sense of eternal torture" in the existential world motivates all poetry, but more specifically the confessional poetry. The acute sensitivity of the poet towards the conflicts and problems of the inner life makes confessional poetry an eclectic genre embracing all psychological and philosophical arenas. Hence, it relates itself to the existential philosophy.

The first principle of Existentialism is that Man is nothing else but that what he makes of himself, hence the subjectivity of this approach. Before everything else, Man is something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that he is doing so. Nothing exists before Man projects its self. Man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Therefore, man is responsible for what he is and the first effect of Existentialism is that it puts
every man in possession of himself as he is. Of all the actions that a man
takes to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which does not
create his image as he ought to be. When a man chooses between the two
options, it affirms the value of that which is chosen. The choice will always be
for the better and nothing can be better for an individual, unless it is better for
all. In an endeavour to establish their own identity and to integrate their self in
this disintegrated world, confessional poets step into the existential struggle
of better choice.

Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing
himself beyond himself that he makes himself to exist. Though Existentialism
proposes itself as a form of humanism and as a philosophy of freedom, its
purpose remains undefined. In these days, human nature expresses itself in a
social framework that is undergoing disintegration. When all the centers of
dependence have been removed, the problem is to find a structure to rely on
and when one's own self is not established as an identity, the fear is to lose
one's own self in the whirlpool of the decaying existences. Therefore, an urge
to establish the identity is a crucial feature of the poetry of modern
confessional poets. This search for identity and existence is a philosophical
approach with a psychological base. Albert Camus writes that in the
existential attitude, "The struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has
nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused
with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be
compared to immature unrest)."
Allen Ginsberg considers that the sole motivation of confessional poet is, to reveal everything whatever is in the heart. He says that confessional poetry is born of the self-confidence of a person who knows that his existence is not better than any other subject matter. The expression of self, the pain of love and the obsession with death is a common recurrent theme of all confessional poetry. Failure in love, failure in marriage all lead toward the deterioration of the existence which is the central issue of the existentialistic confessional poetry. The poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, being confessional, are expressions of the loss of their identities as a feminine self. Hence, they refer to a large hunt for selfhood, for a feminine self. Their poems become a perception of their new creative experiences, as well as the embedded anguishes. Life, for them, becomes a conscious and continuous process of affirmation and negations. As Joyce Carol Oates puts it regarding Sylvia Plath:

Miss Plath is an identity reduced to desperate statements about her dilemma as a passive witness in a turbulent world...There is never any integrating of self and its experience, the self and its field of perception. Human consciousness, to Sylvia Plath, is always an intruder in the natural universe.7

In fact, both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton unusually treat the peculiar feeling of being shut out from an alien world. All confessional poets are "exiles" who fail to conform to the establishment. Instead of making definite statements in terms of traditional and cultural values, the confessional poets reject the American myth of perfectibility and cast themselves in a role not
prescribed by this society. Of all the women writing poetry in United States, Anne Sexton is the one who has made her womanness felt one with her poems. The want of love, loneliness and anxieties led Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton toward their mental breakdowns. Their uneasiness with the conventional life, and up-growing demands of the family responsibilities stuck them to the labyrinths of suicide attempts.

Bound in the existential web of self’s evolution, the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton romanticizes the search for identity involving death. They spent their lives searching their own identities which they couldn’t find and at last they ended up in the fumes of suicide out of which as Plath writes in “Lady Lazarus,” “I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.”

Theodore Roethke had written in an essay that the basic human problem is to find out one real self, one’s existence and if the existence is possible. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s poetry has a radical sensibility that probes the limits of the self-world. To probe the possibility of existence, their poems rise above the natural and depict mental states which involve guilt, fear, love, hate and shame.

The issues that never got settled regarding Plath and Sexton’s poetry are the extent to which their life is involved into their art and the nature of their final achievement. These two issues relate to the more fundamental question of their vision of the world which is existential and nihilistic. Their poetry addresses itself to a “basic schism” in the nature of experience. 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. 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. Plath writes in “Lady Lazarus,” “What a trash / To Annihilate each decade.” (A 8). Yet she takes pleasure in trying for suicide because it gives her a sense of integration and she feels perfection in it: “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well.” (A 9). Anne Sexton too had written in “Her Kind,” a poem from her volume, To Bedlam and Part Way Back: “I have gone out, a possessed witch, / haunting the black air, braver at night; / dreaming evil,” (SP 18). She knows that “A woman like that is not a woman.” Yet she identifies with her, “I have been her kind.” (SP 18).

The existential and confessional poetry of these two poets brings reality and imagination, love and hate, autonomy and dependence, nature and self together to interact with other and produce the poetry of continuous becoming. Their poetry has its roots in the ceaseless efforts to reach a level of perception of their self using all available material from their immediate life, their past as well as their imaginative plunges into the unconscious. Since most of this is psychological, their poetry answers to the studies making use of psycho-analytical methods. Again, since most of this partakes of an existential vision of life, Plath and Sexton’s poetry becomes intelligible in terms of existential vocabulary. Underlying the psychological and existential components is the dialectics of confession that makes such a dual approach possible. Now a discussion of the horror of existence, “the
existential angst’ and dilemmas as expressed in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton will be made respectively.

(i)

Sylvia Plath was deeply impressed by the sense of crisis conveyed by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* and Theodore Roethke's green house poems. Moreover, the circumstances of her life heightened the effect of that impression. Plath did not have a consistent viewpoint. She perceived both men and women at different moments as either supporting or harming the integrity of herself. In fact, the extent to which men or women embodied a threat to her existence is a central issue in her poetry. "Water Color of Granchester Meadows," which belongs to the earliest group of the poems in her first collection, *The Colossus*, is the first significant poem in which the shift from the descriptive to the subjective stands most remarkably pronounced. Here Plath defines existence as a form of contingency, "where each moment is a crisis." She tries to find out "the irreducible minimum of our experience." The world has turned absurd. Out of this emotional turbulence of the universal chaos, a poet works to resurrect its self through the innovations. Beginning as a conventional sketch, "Water Color of Granchester Meadows" turns out to be an existential quest for authenticity. Through the pastoral landscape, Plath shows the shift from the outer to the inner, from the descriptive to the subjective. The poem was written when after the marriage Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes stayed at 55, Ellis Avenue, near the Granchester Meadows in Cambridge. She begins with describing the rural landscape in first two stanzas. In the last stanza of the poem, she marks
a sharp contrast in the same and comments on its reality. Describing the landscape as a country on a nursery plate, she abruptly jolts us from a feeling of nature's complacency to its brutality in "Water Color of Granchester Meadows":

Droll, vegetarian, the water rat
Saws down a reed and swims from his limber grove,
While the students stroll or sit,
Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love-
Black-gowned, but unaware
How in such mild air
The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.¹¹

In this poem, the conventional landscape takes the form of an existential quest. The personal existence becomes a form of contingency to express the world that spreads in pain, the pain of love, the pain of death, the pain of de-personalizing existences. The death that lurks in the nature, the impersonal ruthlessness of it, all indicate toward the insecurity of the person. De-personalized existence is the ultimate horror of an individual who works to recover his identity. In a tame landscape of external calm, the poet perceives the vulnerability of life and relates it to the external world. Whether her poems take place inside a house or in the countryside, the identical metaphorical relationships are established between a vulnerable speaker and a destructive environment.

In The Colossus poems, Plath views the world as split between two warring principles, the binaries of death and life that limit her desires and control the possibilities of existence in general. She divides the visible
universe into those objects or people which help the self in its struggle for survival and those that are a threat to the survival of the individual or race. In the "Water Color of Granchester Meadows," Plath had confronted us with the opposition between Edenic innocence and the natural violence. This opposition parallels with the polarity of a dreamlike happiness, usually found underwater or in sleep, and the waking state of pain and disillusionment.

"The Ghost's Leavetaking," originally entitled "Departure of the Ghost," deals with the same polarity that has been discussed above. Plath takes us into the chilly no-man's land of 'sulfurous dreamscapes and obscure lunar condrums'.(CO 42). They all are the characteristics of the nature's reality, the "no-color void". The ghost of the title is the spirit of the dream-world, "ghost of our mother and father, ghost of us, / And ghost of our dreams' children"(CO 43). He belongs to the "kingdom of the fading apparition, the kingdom in which everything is suffused in a dream aura, "Which seemed, when dreamed, to mean so profoundly much"(CO 42) but which quickly loses its snare in daylight. This otherworld, which is blankness, points towards the blankness of the human predicament itself. The reality's void which is always waiting to ensnare the solitary self is, in fact our own existential reality that suffers the threatening indifference or the actual hostility of this absurd world.

Whether the nature or this world momentarily looks like heaven, these appearances of peacefulness are deceptive; the reality that awaits us is suffering and blankness. In fact, the existential quest for self-knowledge forces the poet to pursue the nature for the knowledge of self and the
establishment of her own identity. The poet, in her pursuit of self-realization reaches with the ghost, to the point where two worlds meet in two entirely incompatible modes of time. But, at last, the ghost takes the leave to enter in those sheets which signify our origin and end. The poet loses the other world by merely waking up and is left in a state of blankness and the threat of her own existence.

Plath's speakers have a heightened awareness of the enchanting power of the landscape. This awareness reduces them to a sense of their own vulnerability. The polarity of the nature depicted in her nature poems marks existence as a continuous feeling of crisis, a perpetual contingency. Her "The Manor Garden" explores different threats to existence. A sense of finality and doom pervades this poem which is addressed to an unborn baby. The baby with its "Head, toe and finger \ Come clear of the shadow" (CO 3). The baby is yet to be born but is addressed; "The fountains are dry and the roses over. / Incense of death. Your day approaches." (3). These three statements proclaim death and birth at once. Water, a symbol of life and regeneration has ceased to flow. The period of bloom is over and in the place of the fragrance of roses there is only the incense of death. Even before the arrival, the child is threatened with this horror of existence. "Incense of death" pervades the manor garden even as the child's "day approaches." The new life forming comes literally into a dying world. Not only this, the poem seems to suggest a larger deadliness. While the child comes clear of the shadow, he enters a world that is itself darkened,

Some hard stars
Already yellow the heavens.
The spider on its own string

Crosses the lake. The worms
Quit their usual habitations.
The small birds converge, converge
With their gifts to a difficult borning. (CO 3-4)

Plath recognizes the treacherousness of the existence and acknowledges its pervasiveness, but she places the vulnerability of the emerging child against it. "Hardcastle Crags," the first of the poems about nature in The Colossus, demonstrates that the natural world can hurt the poet even when she merely wants to walk about and observe it. Perception itself can threaten the sense of a stable, strong selfhood. The poet walks in this stony non-human sense in a "blank mood," that is in a state without the comforting shapes of dreams or the companionship of human beings. These lines make us feel the oppressiveness of the inhuman and the alien,

All the night gave her, in return
For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
Of her heart was the humped indifferent iron
Of its hills and its pastures bordered by black stone set
On black stone (CO 15)

This subjective inwardness and personal interpretation of nature brings her poetry in the existential domain. The nature is indifferent towards her. She begins to fear that her human flame cannot survive in the "antique world" of the landscape. She is frightened of losing herself totally; therefore she turns back from the landscape to the town from which she came. She writes in "Hardcastle Crags": "before the weight / Of stones and hills of stones could
break / Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light / She turned back."

Like an existentialist, she makes an effort to establish her identity in the disintegration of the nature. Plath writes obsessively about nature not because of her love for it but because of her overwhelming terror in the face of it. In "Suicide Off Egg Rock" she treats the connection between the death and the sea in a complex manner. While in this third person narration of a young man's suicide, the surrounding industrial landscape of Massachusetts shore is shown as dead, the young man's corresponding inner feelings are dead as well. He feels himself made out of steel or metal. "His body beached with the sea's garbage, / A machine to breathe and beat forever."(CO 35). His identity, like the girl in "Hardcastle Crags" suffers from a perpetual blankness. It is liquidated in the identity of rock, Egg Rock which has gained its solid identity at the price of non-responsiveness. From this de-centered, non-integrated world which is hard and meaningless, the young man descends into the water of forgetfulness, "The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges" (CO 36). The water conceals a double meaning below its surface- both the fear and the escape from fear of the existence.

Besides these nature poems and those on animals, Plath has written exquisite poems dealing with the family in The Colossus which represent the struggle between weak and strong, human and non human, intensified and complicated. The death of family members exposes the brutality of death more intensely and personally. It also urges the poet to discover a means of escape from annihilation. In "Point Shirley," "The Colossus," "All the Dead
Dears," "The Disquieting Muses," "The Bee Keeper's Daughter," and "Full Fathom Five," death is represented as both the enemy of everything that the self loves and the ultimate escape from this painful life. The family helps her to understand the death's power to undo the entire web of loving relations with the world.

"Point Shirley" deals with Plath's conflicting feelings towards the death of her grandmother. She tries to recover her grandmother's self through the fragments. She says, "Steadily the sea \ Eats at Point Shirley:" The labour of love is lost in the "sluttish rutted sea" and poet is left with a desperate hope;

I would get from these dry- papped stones
The milk your love instilled in them.
The black ducks dive
And through your graciousness might stream,
And I contrive,
Grandmother, stones are nothing of home
To that spumiest dove.
Against both bar and tower the black sea runs. (CO 25-26)

But the poem ends with the bitter realization that the stones cannot be humanized and grandmother will not return. Its the fact of life that lost love and lost relationships are not recoverable.

The central poem of the volume, "The Colossus" represents an identical situation, an imagistic play on the hardness of the stone and lost love. In this one of the most celebrated poems of her since marriage, Plath thoughtfully selects the ancient role of the female who mourns the dying god. Plath imagines that the Colossus, which once dominated the harbour at Rhodes, is her father's dead body, now lying broken in pieces on a hillside,
fragmentary as the life itself. The Colossus is a creator, a father, a mythical being, a ruined idol, pithy and historical as the Roman forum, a huge idol with "immense skull plates, fluted bones and acanthion hair, a natural wilderness covered with weedy acres" (CO 20) and "a hill of black cypress" (CO 21). This disintegration of father's body reflects her terror of the fragmentation in her own life and her existential angst and traumas. The father's ancient power and size have been destroyed through time. The person in the poem crawls over him, squats in his ear, eats her lunch there. These are intimate activities that hardly seem the rites of a priestess. She has laboured thirty years "To dredge the silt from your throat" (CO 20) and worshipped him as the private god of poetry but that's all vain for he is basically the "mouthpiece of the dead" (20).

The absurdity of the contemporary world creates difficulty for her to prove herself. She mourns that her hours are married to shadow for she wants to marry the god of poetry who could fertilize her. But she admits that she is married in fact to darkness and creative silence. She wonders of the catastrophe that produced the crumbling of the idol: "It would take more than a lightening stroke / To create such a ruin." (CO 21). In fact, what Plath mourns is not her father's death but her inability to extricate herself from the psychological involvement with his death. Her tragic involvement with her father could not let her develop her own identity as she writes in "The Colossus."

Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
Of your left ear, out of the wind,
Counting the red stars and those of plum color
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow. (21)

Plath suffers from a creative paralysis and a sense of collapsing order. It is evident that her tragedy lies in her relation with him and in the predestination that she can define herself only with respect to her father. Hence, the dissolution of her self, her identity, in that of her father confirms the base of her existential predicament. Her inability to relate herself to her father, and to express or grasp the dimensions of the anarchic presence which her father excites in her, defines the problem of Plath. Just as she delineated in "Point Shirley," the broken statue in "The Colossus" indicates that the dead man cannot be recovered through piercing him, though the poet continues to gaze in fear and love at him:

I shall never get you put together entirely.
Pierced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard. (CO 20)

Another significant poem of this period "Full Fathom Five" deals with the same complex of knowledge, fears and eventual passivity. In contrast to "The Colossus," the father's image is un tarnished and the water is not represented as a force that has destroyed the family members forever, but as the living environment for the dead. Plath, unable to distinguish clearly between the dead father's shape in imagination and the cold actuality of death, symbolically wishes for her own death to preserve her identity that is merged with her father: "Father, this air is murderous / I would breathe water." (CO 48). This angst of existence brings out the futile search for
identity and a purpose of life. Through breathing water, she would enter father's underwater world, but also lose her own life. She is attracted by this world, but relents in the end, "I walk dry on your kingdom's border / Exiled to no good." (CO 48). The futility of the efforts to gain her identity proves the futility of the life itself and she chooses the eternal exile. As Margaret Dickie Uroff writes,

The "Sisters" and "Father" of her dream life may promise her a world more full and clear; but they have lived beyond mundane order, in a world inscrutable, unimaginable, unfathomable. This world is for her ultimately attractive but frightening, since she must sacrifice to it all that is safe, imagined, ordered. ¹²

"All the Dead Dears" is a meditation on the relation between the poet and her family. The gruesome sense of cosmic oppression parallels in the familial oppression. Her family members rather than protecting the self of the poet seem to drag her into the watery, undesired underworld of dead where they exist. Instead of representing the family as a loving group whom death destroys and whom she wishes to recover either from their frozen, entombed state or from their watery graves, she identifies it with the hard, crushing world of nature and death outside her that threatens her selfhood and her continued existence. As Jon Rosenblatt avers: "She recognizes that by loving the dead, she is imprisoned in dream of regained childhood that can never be realized. The family becomes a persecutory agency representing the cosmic forces of death and cyclical destruction." ¹³
In “The Disquieting Muses,” Plath again blames her family for leaving her in a world of stone. The poem is split between two attitudes of the poet; joyous, for having successfully banished the mother's image and despaired, for having failed to destroy the Three Disquieting Muses, who are the symbolic substitutes for the mother's negative image. Quite similar to the absurdity of the world, the attitudes have also been reflected as divergent and meaningless. Like so many threatening and dangerous objects in The Colossus, the muses are made of stone and haunt the poet everywhere:

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down. (CO 60)

The stoniness, blankness and unchangingness of the muses associate them with those aspects of the natural world and of death that Plath fears most. The feeling of existential nausea runs through Plath's poetry. Its an experience of feeling physically soiled and humiliated by life in Theodore Roethke's view. According to Jean Paul Sartre, this existential nausea is "the taste of facticity and contingency of existence." Through her poetry, Plath works to find out a way out of this claustrophobic nausea which threatens her own existence. To resurrect herself, she engages herself in the creative work to fulfill the task of relating the outer world of nature to the inner world of mind, the past of her childhood with the present of her youth, the phantasy of myths with the reality of dream-like experiences and
the 'neutrality' of everyday life with the freedom of creative imagination. As the poems progress, they seem to cross over to the netherland of a personal world...there is a deepening of the personal voice and a descent towards a subjective centre where the father-daughter relationship becomes a central concern.\textsuperscript{15}

This father-daughter relationship takes the poems to existential implications affirming the identity of poet through physical suffering. Plath's \textit{The Colossus} represents throughout the volume that the house of self is menaced by nothingness in a universe from which people have withdrawn leaving the world in the grip of dangerous, fading shadows-the presences of "The Disquieting Muses." The poet's personality is vulnerable to hostile forces from within and without and this is at the core of her poems. The last poem of \textit{The Colossus} "Poem for a Birthday," is a sequence of seven poems, which, like many other poems of \textit{The Colossus} deal with the body and its shape. This poem sequence was written during a period of emotional stress while Plath's stay at Yaddo. Memories of her experience in a mental hospital, pregnancy, rejection of the academic career, her twenty-seventh birthday, all combined the onrushing images of birth and death, fear and expectation in her mind. The meaning of this poem sequence lies in the constant slippage of both image and theme. The nature of "Poem for a Birthday" is fragmentary and a unitary examination of its themes and concerns will destroy its vitality. All the four aspects of the poem relate more or less directly to the search for identity.
The title of the first section, "Who," prepares the reader, for the poem's instability of both identity and location. This instability relates directly to the mother. In the first stanza, the speaker states that she is 'all mouth' and mother's stomach that is described as the devourer and storer of the October fruit could well be the speaker's. Later on, the speaker becomes less than a mouth, and desires to be only a tongue to the mother’s mouth. In "Poem for a Birthday," the boundaries are existentially blurred between the self and the mother or infant. This blurring of identification is the result of the "psychic osmosis," the strong bond that Sylvia Plath felt with her mother, as Aurelia Plath puts it. Her writings and life are influenced with this maternal bond. The fragmentary nature of this poem results from the lack of boundaries. The speaker is not so much seen as mother and then child, but as somehow inhabiting both states.

In the section "Dark House," the speaker describes her own burgeoning pregnancy in animal terms and notes the stirring in her belly. Yet this "bowel of the root" is a place she finds comfort within. Moreover, the title refers to the paper house the speaker builds herself. Yet the speaker is also burrowing within a house, describing its numerous cellars. This shift of location and identity keeps on. Julia Kristeva, as Elizabeth Grosz has studied, theorizes maternity as a betrayal of identity: "Woman, the woman-mother does not find her femininity or identity as a woman affirmed in maternity, but, rather her corporeality, her animality, her position on the threshold between nature and culture. Her 'identity' as a subject is betrayed by pregnancy . . . 'she' does not exist as such." Elizabeth Grosz has pointed the relevancy of
the dual interest of Kristeva in abjection and maternity: "Like the abject, pregnancy is a borderline state in which there is an indistinction between subject and object."¹⁷

When the speaker in "Dark House" describes the developing foetus, it is unclear whether the speaker refers to herself or something inside herself. The poem declaring the arrival of the mother in its final line emphasizes its own shifting nature because identities are still instable. There is no clearance whether the mother is the speaker or speaker's mother. This makes the poem existential in sense that its instability of location and identity results from the difficulty in establishing boundaries between the self and the other. In "Dark House," where the speaker states that she needs to make maps, her existential undertones of both describing and then crossing the boundaries find a vent. She wishes to make maps and define boundaries of the cellars of the "Dark House." In the next line, the cellars get transformed into tunnels burrowed by the speaker. Then the maps define the tunnels which transgress boundaries. These poems take us to a peculiarly Roethkean world in which the crisis of identity is expressed in terms of the self's encounter with nature. When she writes, "Let me sit in a flower pot. / The spiders won't notice." (CP131), she borrows Roethke's imagery of being enclosed in constricted places or being devoured. Roethke's search for his identity through his association with the human and the natural world, finds expression in Plath's poem.

In "The Stones," the last poem of the sequence "Poem for a Birthday" in The Colossus, Plath is eluded by the essence of her existence. The despair
and horror of nothingness becomes the condition of her existence: "Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows. / My mendings itch. / There is nothing to do. / I shall be good as new." (CP 137). In her confessional poems, Plath reaches out to the heart of the matter and locates the nature of her hurt. Such poems, instead of tracing the hurt to an external event or context, enact the pain and come to terms with it. Crisis of freedom, the alienation and isolation frightens the individual who often becomes victim to sadistic and masochistic desires. In fact, all life is the struggle to be itself. The difficulties which a person meets in realizing his existence are precisely what awaken and mobilize his activities and capabilities.

In her hospital poems of Crossing The Water, such as "Face Lift," "Insomniac," "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.," and "In Plaster," she reflects her concept of body as a constructed piece as she had done in "Stones." In "Face Lift" she says, "Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper. / When I grin: the stitches tauten, I grow backward."(CP 156). The alteration of appearance becomes a horror for Plath. Just as skin is reduced to paper, the eyes are reduced to bald slots and the insomniac's head has become "a little interior of gray mirrors": "The bald slots of his eyes stiffened wide open / On the incessant heat-lightning flicker of situations." (CP 163). The body lends itself to the humiliation of being reduced further into the objective world. The surgeon proudly asserts: "It is a status that orderlies are wheeling off / . . . . . . . . . . / A pathological salami."(CP 171). The helplessness of the body and its total dependence on external help, gives the surgeon the sense of triumph. To develop the inherent contradictions of human existence, Plath uses the
hospital experience as a metaphor. Death and rebirth is the main concern of all her hospital poems: "As usual there is no face. / . . . . . . . / Like a ship's light." (171). The body becomes a mechanical piece and hence, loses its identity. She herself becomes a mirror which is incapable of reacting to the world it reflects. Her "Mirror" speaks: "Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike." (CP 173). The mirror is unable to invest the world with human meaning. As David Holbrook commented, "The mirror's attitude, we realize gradually, is one of hate: its faithfulness is that of a hate that has the intensity of love." 18

Her last volume Ariel may be read as an autobiography of Sylvia Plath which represent that the purpose of her last years of life was to come to terms with the various female roles and identities into which she had been split full of wrong leads, frustrated efforts, obscure and private battles that attest to the difficulties she had to face and to the energy she expended on them. To face these hardships directly and to leave a record of that confrontation was her final poetic accomplishment. In his The Savage God, A. Alvarez has expressed the belief that the self-exposure and self-dramatization of Ariel and Winter Trees fatally exacerbated the psychological dilemmas that became the reason of Plath's suicide. In his view, Plath is destroyed by her own existential quest, the quest of self-knowledge, in which she heroically pursues the sources of her own inner torment. He reflects that in the mass of brilliant poems which Plath poured out in the last few months of her life, she took Lowell's example to its logical conclusion by systematically exploring the relation of anger, guilt, rejection, love and
destructiveness, which made her finally take her own life. It appears as if she had considered that for the validity of her poetry, her death is imperative and she seriously moved on those lines. It is as though she had understood that by tackling her death she can bring to her poetry a greater wealth of invention and sardonic energy than many other poets who managed it in their lifetime:

If the road had seemed impassable, she proved that it wasn't. It was, however, one way, and she went too far along it to be able, in the end, to turn back. Yet her actual suicide, like Lowell's breakdown on the private horrors of Berryman and Hughes, is incidental; it adds nothing to her work and proves nothing about it. It was simply a risk that she took in handling such volatile material. 19

A. Alvarez believes in art as a potentially self-destructive and therefore, existential activity. The commitments and risks that are involved in writing could be called "existential" but as Jon Rosenblatt observed, Plath's suicide was not the consequence of her commitment to "tackle head-on . . . her own death." 20 Plath had been obsessed with suicide since her early life and the reason she destroyed her own life was her childhood that shattered under non-adjusting family situations. Her existential predicament led her towards her suicide attempt in 1953 and her actual suicide in 1963. In 1953, she was perturbed by the prospect of separation from Smith College in the following year. She was about to suffer the loss of the security and approval that she acquired in the college. In 1963, her sense of loss was even greater
Sylvia Plath could never attain a secure identity through the imitation of initiation, but her poetry reaches out toward the fulfillment which this ritual promises. Her importance in recent American poetry lies in her dramatic approach to the representation of a threatened and violent self. Her mixed, violent world of nostalgia and hatred, of self-transformation and negation is forceful because of her conversion of fantasy and memory into dramatic expression and encounter. The meeting between self and destructive other occurs frequently in a symbolic space. In this space, those aspects of existence that consciousness normally separates and opposes come together as one. Darkness encompasses and merges death and birth, self and other, good and evil. This darkness takes the form of the womb frequently in Plath's poems. She wishes to imitate the condition of unity that existed before the differentiation of consciousness which took place in her childhood. Her vision of sea which juxtaposes the violently contrasting attitudes of the sea confirms her existential dilemma of being and non-being. In "Ocean-1212-W," her childhood memoir, she writes of the sea as having many faces, as both nurturing and a terrifying 'mother' for her:

Breath that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath? The breath of my mother? No, something else, something larger, further, more serious, more weary. So behind shut lids I
float awhile;— I'm a small sea captain, tasting the day's weather... There might be a hiss of rain on the pane, there might be wind sighing and trying the creaks of the house like keys. I was not deceived by these. The motherly pulse of the sea made a mock of such counterfeits. Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill.  

Plath consistently finds in her adult relation to the external world the same opposing qualities that she had discovered as a child in her "filial" relation to sea. Mother, nature, and ultimately life is replete with such opposition. The world too has such veils as sea, "delicate" as well as terrible at the same point of time as she had showed in a late poem, "A Birthday Present."

Sylvia Plath's poems "The Couriers," "The Applicant," and "The Jailer," dramatize the female victimization and suffering. They give a negative representation of marriage. In these poems, the woman is either trapped in her family situation or attempts to escape from that situation. In her novel, The Bell Jar, Plath writes about marital situation: "I began to think that when you were married and have children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a stone in some private totalitarian state." Marriage is a form of imprisonment, an identification which Plath confirms in her poems. The image of women's condition is identical in Plath's poetry to the condition of mankind as a whole.

"The Couriers" objectifies Plath's personal vision. It has the double object of dissociating the poet from the symbols of married life and of
projecting a vision of love outside of marriage. The couriers bring the opposing symbolic messages to the reader. The first set of images—“snail on a plate of a leaf,” “acetic acid in a seal tin,” and “a ring of gold with the sun in it,” condense the values and qualities of married life that the speaker has come to detest and reader is instructed not to accept it. These images respectively stand for a dull domestic life, sourness and lying promise of bliss. Instead of these symbols of wedded life, the poet prefers images of self-sufficiency and self-expression. The dull and sluggish snail is replaced by the cold, harsh beauty of a frosted leaf. The open cauldron of self-expression replaces the enclosed tin of repression. The poet embraces the loneliness of the Alps as opposed to the shared life of marriage. Finally, the image of shattered reflections, as in the broken surface of the sea, takes the place of the smooth mirror of the wedding ring that once held the sun’s reflection in it. In other words, the outward calm of marriage is destroyed when conflict and violence surface from below.

Finally, the poet affirms her true “season” as love which is symbolized by the extreme climatic oppositions, cold and heat, frost on a green leaf, and fire in the freezing Alps. These images appropriately stand for her love of the self-sufficient, the anomalous and the repressed. This poem aptly represent the personal world of conflict and process that the poet experiences. Its metaphors and the opposed image-sequences are the appropriate and the natural methods of conveying the tense, deep contradictions involved in marriage and love. The poem moves from the familiar world of statis and death to a new universe of life and energy.
"The Jailer" goes even further than the "The Couriers" in its negative representation of marriage. Here Plath equates the woman's entrapment to the victimization of all men by the hostile universe. The intense images of physical torture inflicted upon the female speaker by her "jailer," the fantasized relation between prisoner and jailer clearly reflect the sadomasochism of a husband-wife relation. The poem describes the woman's sleeping with her jailer, his sexual abuse of her, her addiction to pills, his dependence upon her for security, and finally, his jealousy for any diversion of her attention from him. The mail jailer's need for his victim whom he rapes, starves, burns, and humiliates is the central theme of the poem. Like the Nazi torturer of "Daddy" who is a father-husband figure, this jailer is sadomasochist. But the daughter in "Daddy" can get rid of it while the woman in "The Jailer" is not capable to liberate herself. The cosmic analogies used by Plath in "The Jailer" imply that the universe is constituted as a mechanism of torture:

What would the dark  
Do without fevers to eat?  
What would the light  
Do without eyes to knive, what would he  
Do, do, do without me?  

In her journals, she records her fears about marriage:

Some pale, hueless flicker of sensitivity is in me. God: must I lose it in cooking scrambled eggs for a man... hearing about life at second hand, feeding my body and letting my powers of
perception and subsequent articulation grow fat and lethargic with disuse.24

Along with the repression and entrapment in marriage, she records her fears of losing her identity: "I am afraid ... the demands of wifehood and motherhood would preoccupy you too much to allow you to do the painting and writing what you want."(J 45). While in "The Jailer," she creates a prison of such monumental proportions that the jailers are divested of the manly qualities and are shown as light and dark, the basic elements of the universe. The human encounter between man and woman, husband and wife, jailer and prisoner becomes identical to cosmic confrontation between life and death. "The Applicant" also represents the sense of woman's entrapment in marriage. The future bride in "The Applicant" is a convenient domestic helper, "a living doll", as Plath puts it:

Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of that?
Naked as paper to start
But in the twenty-five years she'll be silver.
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk. (A 7]

Through her "Tulips," she represents her own inner violence that has occasioned her present state of dependence and helplessness: "They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down, / Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,"(A13). While floating in the external world, Tulips also drown in her inner world. Contrary to her unsure and weak
hold, they have a complete hold on the world. While she sees herself "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow," the tulips become the red lead sinkers which feed on her existence:

    And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
    Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
    And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself,
    The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.(A 13)

This perception of correspondence between the tulips and her own hurt indicate her existential fear. The albatross image makes it abundantly clear that the abyss writer carries in herself is what makes her existence precarious. Her loss of identity is the result of this existential predicament.

Her feeling of guilt and her personal past, a wound in her heart, render her the sense of authenticity. That hurt, the wound, is represented by the tulips as the escape from it. By identifying her hurt, the poet is able to transform it into a unique experience that will give her a sense of identity and individuality.

Thus, she gain both privilege and deprivation from the tulips. In a final act of identification, the tulips become the heart and the poet locates herself in the hospital ward:

    And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
    Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
    The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
    And comes from a country far away as health.(A 14)

Marjorie Perloff observed the centeredness of the whole poem organized around two central images - white and red- the white of human extinction and the red of living matter, of non-human vitality. The move from the winter
whiteness of hospital to the heart, "bowl of red blooms" contains a private connotation of life. Thus, the bedridden persona emerges from her watery grave-womb to the possibility of a new life. This associative imagery of the "Tulips" makes it possible for her to react to the outer world of the nurses, needles and flowers while being engaged in the internal drama of resurrecting one's selfhood.

Within the context of her own struggle for survival, Plath's personae embody extravagant versions of desire for self-creation. The "I" in Plath's work is always on the way toward a new state of being; the poet's task is to externalize the self without mediation in the objects and processes of the outer world. The images and ideas she uses in her poem reinforce the movement toward a new personal identity. Her poem "Cut" is occasioned by the cut of thumb by the poet "instead of an onion." She watches the cut thumb with its "top quite gone" and "the red plush" of blood, with thrill. Thereafter, a series of breath-taking images take place: "Little pilgrim, / The Indians axed your scalp. / Your turkey wattle" and then "Carpet rolls / Straight from the heart. / I step on it, / Clutching my bottle / Of pink fizz." (A 15). First, the thumb is the scalped pilgrim, the founding father who is beheaded by the native Indian. She is the Indian who resists the invasion of her inherited territory. She steps on the red carpet of blood with a bottle of champagne. She describes her inner wound as a part of history and the objective world. She has to take a stand against it but she confesses her inability: "O my / Homunculus, I am ill. / I have taken a pill to kill / The thin / Papery feeling." (A 15-16).
Plath has represented Homunculus, a miniature man, as an image of fear. In situations of potential threats, Plath magnifies (The Colossus) or diminishes (Gulliver) the dimensions of a figure. Now she fears that the self-mutilation that she has encountered in her quest for identity might bring out her own extinction. The cut turns into an enemy as images of revulsion proliferate: “Saboteur, / Kamikaze man- / The stain on your / Gauze Ku Klux Klan / Babushka / Darkens and tarnishes.”(A 16). Here Plath implies that she has been tricked and ensnared by a treacherous face. The treachery comes from within, "it is an inside job, a little suicide"25 as Garry Lane suggests. With the image of “Kamikaze man” she represents the suicide squad of the Japanese air force during the Second World War Then she transforms the thumb in to a woman whose “Gauze Ku Klux Klan / Babushka /Darkens and tarnishes.”(A 16). This refers to the racial turmoil of the late fifties and early sixties. Her wounded condition symbolizes her divided mental world. She has to be personally responsible for what she makes of her life. She rejects a sociological interpretation in favour of a personal one: “The balled / Pulp of your heart / Confronts its small / Mill of silence” and asks “How you jump- / Trepanned veteran, / Dirty girl, / Thumb stump.”(16). The balled pulp of the wound’s heart confronts its “small mill of silence.” The confrontation is between the feigned feeling of elation and the deeper feeling of mutilation in which the latter wins. It indicates Plath’s self-hatred and internal violence. The cut thumb now becomes a "trepanned veteran" and she becomes a "dirty girl." Trepanned veteran presents the image of the thumb as “a miniature man with a wounded skull” or a veteran.
Plath’s marriage was an experiment to glue together her sense of being which had fallen apart on account of her father’s death. When her husband deserted her, she felt in it, more poignantly this time, her father’s desertion of her. Now she is through with her experiments and disconnects herself from her father. In “Daddy,” she accepts this desertion: “So daddy, I’m finally through. / The black telephone’s off at the root, / The voices just can’t worm through.” (A 50). Earlier she had been searching for her roots, her ancestry. Now that search has failed and her attempt to relate herself to her father and to forge an identity, has, once again, come to nothing. After this break-down in her communication with her father she has nothing to fall back on, except hatred. She imagines a new form of existence and changes herself into a vampire-killer, which is a poetic strategy to resurrect her:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two-
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now. (A 50)

Judith Kroll, in her Chapters in a Mythology, finds a dialectics of rebirth in “the ritually enacted destruction of the male.” She considered that the death of Plath’s father occasioned a fundamental division in her sense of herself and Plath came to imagine that her true self was buried with her father. Kroll sees the last poems of Plath as “exploratory attempts to release to true self and to establish an authentic existence.” In this poem, Plath subjects her roles as daughter and wife to personal analysis, only to reject them. It exemplifies the ruthless honesty a confessional poet is
capable of. 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. Even the Colossus had, in some way, stolen part of her whole self as the other half; the competing other, and the double.

In her last phase, Plath wrote a series of "Bee Poems" in which she dealt with the twin themes of identity and relationship. In them, she turns to the queen bee as her model. These bee poems serve as a preface to the last period of her poetic activity. While in the earliest bee poem "The Beekeeper's Daughter" in The Colossus, Plath had her father as a figure of power, as she did in "Daddy." In the later bee-poems she changes her role and becomes the bee-keeper. In "The Beekeeper's Daughter," the speaker goes to hunt the queen bee in the company of the rector, the midwife, those public agents of marriage, birth and death, the world in which she must now define her identity. Through moving the virgins who would kill the queen bee, the villagers are actually preserving the queen bee. Left behind, the speaker at last identifies herself not with the flying bee but with the empty box which is an emblem of survival.

In all the bee poems such as "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "Wintering," and "Swarm," the bee as a personal symbol refers back to Plath's father who was an expert on bees. Bees combine in themselves the dreaded sting and honey, a blind fury of hate with a creative freedom of love. The first poem of the "Bee Series" in Ariel, "The Bee
Meeting" is about how a group of villagers come and remove the queen bees which can be a potential threat to the stability of the swarm. The speaker keeps looking for the ominous significance of the village ritual in progress. In the villagers' hunt for the queen bee she feels herself attacked:

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers -
The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?

David Holbrook comments in his Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence that "This is a quite normal rural event, in North Tawtons, but to Sylvia Plath it is an exhausting trial of identity, involving deep threats of death." She feels extremely vulnerable and in an effort to escape the bees, she transforms herself into milk-weed silk: "Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice. / They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear." In "Tulips" and "The Stones," she withdraws herself into a depersonalized state because she feels threatened from the outer world but in such a state as is there in "The Bee Meeting," very nature of the activity that is taking place around her becomes blurred.

When the search for the queen bee begins, Plath identifies herself with the queen-bee which is part of the swarm. Here, again, her world is divided between isolation and identification. The queen bee symbolizes an authentic self and characteristically the queen-bee never shows up: "The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?" The entire exercise of the
bee-meeting is designed to save the queen-bee from death because the new virgins in the hive “dream of a dual they will win inevitably.” But the queen bee is not grateful to this act of kindness. She is old and has no desire to live. In fact, after Ted Hughes’ desertion, Plath must have felt old with humiliating experiences and may also have felt the compulsion to live another year. Her feminine self was divided between the conflicting demands of her husband’s estrangement and the children’s presence. Against a mounting sense of inadequacy she has to assert herself, in order to prove her worth. The search for queen bee here symbolizes the quest for a feminine self. But in the end, she experiences a failure in her search for identity: “I am exhausted, I am exhausted / Pillar of white in a blackout of knives, / I am the magician’s girl who does not flinch.”(57). She imagines herself as the girl at whom knives are hurled. She locates herself in a nexus of violence from which she cannot free herself. This image conveys a sense of precarious existence, the feeling of being at the edge. Then she suggests the cold deep feeling of death: “Whose is that long white box in the groove, / What have they accomplished, why am I cold.”(57). The long white box appears as the coffin. This experience of bee meeting deepened her sense of inadequacy. She is unable to cope with the situation in which she finds herself.

In “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” she views herself as the owner of the bees, loses her fear, decides to be sweet god, and sets them free with the rampant life of the box. Plath begins to develop a familiar situation in her poetry: inner turmoil and outer form. Except for the “din within,” “the swarmy feeling,” the owner feels that the “clean wood box” would be a coffin. The
owner wonders what would happen if she freed the bees, “I am no source of honey / So why should they turn on me?”(A 59). To open the box is to open the possibility of attack by its contents, a warning she seems anxious to ignore while earlier she had accepted: “The box is locked, it is dangerous.”(A 58). In her poem “Stings,” she looks for a sense of substance in her relationship with her father while hunting for the honey within the hive. The search becomes complicated because she cannot locate the queen bee in the hive:

Is there any queen at all in it?
If there is, she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed to its plush
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.” (A 60)

The speaker can recover her authentic self only through her “feminine self” which the queen bee represents. But, the eluding queen bee is an unauthentic being, “unqueenly and shameful.” The speaker identifies herself with the queen bee and then the “red” comet flying through the mysterious activity between the bee seller, the bee and a third person watching with white smile who has nothing to do with the bee seller or the speaker. That third person is “a great scapegoat” who is attacked by bees: “The bees found him out, / Moulding onto his lips like lies, / Complicating his features. / They thought death was worth it.” (A 61). In fact, the violence that the creative self suffers by the drudgery of the roles it is made to play prevents it from attaining any sense of substantial self. Through the creative act of collecting honey, Plath describes her desertion by Ted Hughes. He is the person against whom the bees (symbolically Plath) have shown their revenge for troubling
them. The bitterness in Plath's mind at Hughes' desertion reduced her to the level of a mindless being, making her creative experience of joy in life into a senseless act of revenge. The act of writing a poem is an attempt to recover that joy, and thus, to become herself: "They thought death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen." (61). The curious and existential decision of choice between revenge on the man which means death, and recovering a self which signifies life introduces a prophetic note into the poem.

In her next poem "Wintering," Plath tells us how the bitterness she has accumulated in her mind isolates her. After Hughes' desertion Plath was left alone to face a cold winter which was a period of recurring depression and haunting isolation in London. In this poem, Plath identifies herself completely with the bees. Looking at the bee who winter inside her wine cellar, Plath imagines that they occupy the dark center of reality. The cellar in which she symbolizes the inner world of the self:

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light
But the torch and its faint
Chinese yellow on appalling objects-
Black asininity. Decay.
Possession. (A 63)

The speaker now enters with her "torch" lighting "appalling object": "Black asininity. Decay.\ Possession." This open confrontation with the blackness at the center of her own existence without any outside threat is a painful recognition of her survival which reflects Plath's situation. As Jon Rosenblatt
observes, “The blackness of the bees in the dead of winter symbolizes for Plath the organic zero point from which new life will emerge.” She feels that she is owned by the atmosphere of possessive decay. In the winter world of the bees, there are no males. She accepts the activities of women who "have got rid of men, / The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors."(63). Plath herself reverts into the role of a woman in winter, knitting “her body a bulb in the cold, and too dumb to think.” Still she doubts her survival: “Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas / Succeed in banking their fires / To enter another year?”(A 64).In fact, Plath seeks her own survival through the blind force that sees the bees through the winter. The bees represent a feminine force that will come out from the long white winter and be reborn through their instinctual attachment to natural forces: “The bees are flying. They taste the spring.” (64). The bees taste the spring of rebirth. The poem’s note of re-emergent life after the experience of winter’s death is an attempt to forge dialectic of survival through the metaphor of the bees.

“The Swarm” is quite unrelated to other bee poems. In it, she draws Napoleon into her private world so that the “dull pom, pom in the Sunday Street” of her own town, where a swarm of bees is being shot down, becomes an attack not only on the bees but also on Napoleon and on the furnace of greed which burns through history. “The Swarm” may be an attack on Hughes as well as on Napoleon. Ted Hughes was fascinated with the kind of god or the powers that fused the universe. In poem after poem, he examined the evidence of its violence. Like Napoleon and Ted Hughes, the swarm thinks the bullets are “the voice of God / condoning the beak, the claw, the
Therefore, it is doomed to be duped by its trust in destruction. The principle behind all the poems is that they all exist through the reduction of themselves or something else. The bee sequence divulges the search for a female identity in a world without men, without stings, without knives. Plath's insight is that any search for identity has to be a personal quest. "The Swarm" is a search for an insight into the blind urges that occasion violence. It is a poem where the search for identities ends in disaster.

Plath's "Getting There," "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Cut" amply show that history for Plath was a metaphor for external violence that is forever present in our world. As she visualized herself as a victim, the historical violence becomes a metaphor for her inner violence. "The Swarm" is an admission on her part that this violence of the self does not impart any identity. By its very nature, it is incapable of giving any authenticity to life. David Holbrook suggests that the poem is united by the anguish of identity and quest for insight and not by a historical perspective. The bee-poems progress toward an impersonal world of violence. They mark a dead end. The search for the queen bee ends in the dissolution of the swarm.

The poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton reveal again and again their tremendous violent struggle to gain control of their psyche. This struggle is common with all poets whether they are confessional or not. Confessional poet recognizes the existence and suffering of the soul. Like Plath, Anne Sexton's poetry as well is the autobiography of the psyche itself.
As Thomas P. Mcdonnell views it: “Anne Sexton very early wrote a kind of poetry in which you were not always sure whether the center was in motion and the periphery still, or the periphery in motion and the center still- with a stillness not of tranquility but ineffably, at the point of fear itself.” Her poetry is a perfectly valid kind of poetry and surely in keeping with the journey backward as well as with the one that probes the present and the future tense, of the woman who “Did not know the woman I would be / Nor that the blood would bloom in me / Each month like an exotic flower.” The sentimental literature of the past makes us participate in feeling of a rather idealized and genteel character; the sentimental literature of this century proposes violent feeling as a permanent mode of existence. One stumbles from disaster to disaster for the sake of the excitement which the disasters provoke, and in the case of Anne Sexton’s poetry, Thomas P. McDonnell writes that her poetry is

Not a poetry of spasmodic revelation or of occasional incident transformed from similitude to artifact: in its continuing wholeness one perceives the suggestion of a journey. The journey is not a calculated one, marked with clear directions along the way ("... here are no signs to tell the way"), but a journey in and out of the various dark. The poems are the fragments of light that illuminate not so much the general landscape as parts of the immediate terrain-and that only now and then."
In Anne Sexton’s poems of the first volume, "Her Kind," "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," we begin to recognize certain tensions that later inform, though in larger freedoms of organization, the stark yet delicate impact of Anne Sexton’s poetry. In the poem “Kind Sir: These Woods,” which is addressed to Thoreau, she writes:

Kind Sir, lost and of your same kind
I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed
And the woods were white and my night mind
Saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course
To look- this inward look that society scorns-
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse
Than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.(SP11)

Her poems, in the more useful terms are not only poems, they are documents of modern psychiatry and their publication is a result of the confusion of the critical standards in general mind.

In All My Pretty Ones, Anne Sexton reaches into full power of the autobiographical poem, at once, with "The Truth the Dead Know," on her mother’s death by cancer at fifty-seven, her father’s death by heart attack, at fifty-nine, only three months later. The whole poem manages to recover itself in the working out of her authentic idiom. The title poem "All My Pretty Ones" expresses her anguish on the loss of the lovingness. Though the poem ends disconcertingly: “Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you, / Bent down my strange face to yours and forgive you.” (SP 45). But unfortunately we cannot get close enough to her personal anguish to disabuse ourselves of the notion that to forgive the dead is the ultimate condescension of the living.
One of the remarkable poems of its kind is "The Operation." In it, she writes about her mother, her mental sickness and her sense of the loss of being, "Nothing is sure. No one. I wait in doubt."(SP 53). This journey into her own self continues in "The Abortion" in which she introduces her to the angst of her life that she has lost a life which she could bring into the world. She says, "Woman, such logic will lead / To loss without death. Or say what you meant, / You coward... this baby that I bleed."(SP 56).These poems are followed by the epigraph of "With Mercy for The Greedy" : "For my friend, Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment for the sacrament of Confession."(SP 57).This journey is carried on further in the poem: "Concerning your letter in which you ask / me to call a priest and in which you ask / me to wear the Cross that you enclose;"(57).Then she says in the last stanza: "My friend, my friend, I was born / doing reference work in sin and born / confessing it. This is what poems are; / with mercy / for the greedy, they are the tongue's wrangle, / the world's pottage, the rat's star." (58).

Anne Sexton's journey in and out of the dark is carried on with other poems which appear like a flash of light on the landscape of Anne Sexton. These poems are: "For God While Sleeping," "In the Deep Museum," "Water," and "Letter Written on a ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound." Thomas P. McDonnell has written:

Anne Sexton is one of the few woman writing poetry in the United States today of whom it is possible to say that her womanness is totally at one with her poems and poetically, in " Consorting With Angels," denies it: "I was tired of being a woman. . . . I'm no more
a woman / than Christ was man." But if a woman alone, in the psychological sense could have written a poem like "Menstruation at Forty", then also a woman alone, in the fullest possible sense, could have written so exquisite a poem as "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman."\(^{34}\)

He considers Sexton's poetry as deeply religious in the existential sense of that depleted term: "It daily involves one's struggle to survive, to somehow come to terms with the terrible mystery of existence and at last to find a measure of salvation in the life one has to live."\(^{35}\)

Her later poems, in *Live or Die*, are powerful "meditations" of the kind the saints might reveal if they were poets, as well as humanists caught in the terrors of the modern world. Only a person, who thoroughly belongs to this century of nervous excitement, facing the existentialist trauma, could write such kind of poems as "Live." She laments the loss of her expectation to die and claims that life is worthwhile to live because of "the sun, / The dream, the excitable gift:"

I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann,
The poison just didn't take.
So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
Repeating the Black Mass and all of it.
I say *Live, Live* because of the sun,
The dream, the excitable gift. (SP 119)

This excitable gift of life is transformed by art as personal catharsis. In this age of dehumanization, Anne Sexton's is a necessary kind of poetry to have on the record. She is a woman and a poet who kept on going as a sort of human statement in that long and intricate journey where the dark is neither
all nor forever. In this volume, there is an expression of the acute sense of entrapment and the sceptre of violation is equally pervasive. In her poetry, there is a succession of images which does not hammer one into painful submission before the spectacle of humanity furiously plundered and abandoned.

Therefore, we cannot really be inclined to insist that she got beyond the relatively narrow range of problems that haunt her. Her evocation of these problems gives them a resonance which is unmistakably general, universally relevant. Anne Sexton is very uneasy with her femaleness. Her attempt to identify "myself" when it sprung free of what caught it, is very interesting. She writes to her daughter in the poem "The Double Image":

I, who was never quite sure
About being a girl, needed another
Life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
Nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (SP 34)

Though Sexton herself becomes a mother, she sees it as a means of remaining a daughter, clarifying her childhood or redeeming it. She was always full of doubts over the essential conventional truths of maturity, yet she was never an iconoclast looking for answers. She knew that she would die full of questions. Sexton's acceptance of the uncertainty of her identity as a girl, is a subject of most of her poems. She writes about her body and offers it rather than claiming it, men often create it for her. She writes in her fabulous poem "The Kiss":

Before today my body was useless
Now it's tearing at its square corners.
Now it's shot full of these electric bolts
Zing! A Resurrection!  
She exclaims how her useless, feelingless body became full of sensations:
Once it was a boat, quite wooden
It was no more
Than a group of boards. But you hoisted her, rigged her.
She's been elected.  
She feels and expresses the jouissance of writing this poem when she moves on:
My nerves are turned on. I hear them like
Musical instruments. 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.  
Stepped into the fires of love and sensations, she feels that her body has been resurrected but her pain returns back when later on, she is alone with her body, with no lover beside her. In the poem “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,” she depicts herself angered, abandoned, betrayed:
I break out of my body this way,
An annoying miracle- Could I
Put the dream market on display?
I am spread out. I crucify. (SP136)
In “Again and Again and Again,” Sexton becomes more vindictive when she writes:
Oh the blackness is murderous
and the milk tip brimming
and I will kiss you when
I cut up one-dozen new men
And you will die somewhat,
Again and again. (LD 29)

Women, more often than men, tend to seek identity through sexual relationships. The social pressure simply to find a mate is heavier on women because they have always been told that theirs is the domain of love, affection and intimacy; that is their share of the marriage pact. Sexton differed from most of her successful peers in that when she was not in the hospital, she lived in comfort behind the white picket fences. She was neither urban nor academic, nor really an intellectual. She lived very comfortably, in suburban Weston, Massachusetts: the look of the country, the convenience of the town. But this life worried her; she felt personally at odds with its rather dismal comforts though she played her part, "I... answered the phone, / served cocktails as a wife / should, made love among my petticoats / and August tan..." (SP 32).

Though she was in comfort, she was also concerned with the pressure of isolation and uneasiness with the particular kind of social expectation that forces a suburban housewife, especially one who is also a poet. She defined her alienation as witchery, and as a "middle-aged witch," she had the magic of words which helped her to transform even the calmest and most orderly of suburban lawns into a landscape of both nightmare and vision. In fact, only the self like hers which is broken and invaded by madness, surgery, doomed love, and fractured bones could have provoked such poems as is "Self in 1958." She feels herself as a zombie, a lifeless doll who searches for her identity, her reality:

What is reality?
I am a plaster doll; I pose
With eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall
Upon some shellacked and grinning person, (SP 106)

Her physical attributes become a form of artificiality to her:

I have hair, black angel,
black-angel-stuffing to comb,
yarn legs, luminous arms
and some advertised clothes. (106)

Like a non-living being she lives in a doll’s House as she puts it: “I live in a
doll’s house / with four chairs, / a counterfeit table, a flat roof / and a big front
door.”(106). She accepts that she adopts artificial smile and works
mechanically: “What is reality / to this synthetic doll / who should smile, who
should shift gears, should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder, /
and have no evidence of ruin or fears?”(107). These lines reveal her broken
self which is in search of an authentic existence.

The broken self which is fatally yoked together by will but which is
permanently scarred, reflects the pain not only of a broken heart but also that
of a broken hip. For a greater purpose even than to know herself, she
expresses her wounds in words just to heal them up with the magic and true
morality of her verse. She wants to revive a mode of being which is fatally
estranged from her as she expresses in “Courage”:

when you face old age and its natural conclusion
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,
each spring will be a sword you’ll sharpen,
those you love will live in a fever of love,
and you’ll bargain with the calendar
and at the last moment
when death opens the back door
you'll put on your carpet slippers
and stride out.\textsuperscript{39}

Anne Sexton's voice is the voice of a woman defiled by the very life she
would expose, and whose knowledge has been granted by her defilement and
is thereby partial, momentary and changing: caught between a shape and a
shape and then returned to her. Anne Sexton yearned for that larger
experience, that rush of near-divine certainty that the self is immortal; she
knew it existed but she could not reach. Trapped within her specific, private
self, she seems to have despaired of any remedy short of death:

\begin{quote}
I have a body
and I cannot escape from it.
I would like to fly out of my head,
but that is out of the question.
It is written on the tablet of destiny
that I am stuck here in this human form.
\end{quote}

That being the case
I would like to call attention to
my problem\textsuperscript{40}

Dramatizing their own emotions, these artists give life to the world
outside the self by means of these emotions and in so doing often draw up
into conscious those aspects of the collective human self that would
otherwise not be tapped. Though the process appears mysterious to us, most
artists understand it intuitively. As poets, they tried neither to prescribe, nor
to negate, nor to denounce an existing order, exacting no demand for reform.
Theirs is the poetry which takes up the challenge to prove the total
meaninglessness of the existence. The absolute clinging to the faith permeates their poetic sensibility with the existentialist approach. The life of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton meandered through successes and sufferings to reach their goal of ultra-achievement which is almost beyond human reach and sustainability. Caught mercilessly in the cycle of change, they could only wish for the spiritual realization that opens up the gates of eternal glory from the ruined past towards the glowing future. As Plath puts it in "Black Rook in Rainy Weather":

Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.\(^1\)

In the passionate urge to move on, Plath and Sexton did away with all the pretensions, whether artistic, moral or social. They plunged deep into the recesses of their innermost being in search of a guileless identity that transcends all human bondage. Instead of being devoured by the acute agony of their passion, they plunged into the vortex of confusing elements; not only of their psyche but also of the cosmic circumference as such to resolve the bewildering questions of existence, terror and alienation.
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4-Ibid. 18.


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31- Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.153.


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