

# The Enquiring Talent of Anne Sexton: A Study of Three Early Books, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, *All My Pretty Ones*, and *Live or Die*

FUKUDA Shiho

**Abstract:** Anne Sexton's early poems provide indications of how a simple housewife made the transition to becoming a conspicuous figure in the American literary world in spite of a susceptibility to a variety of developing mental problems. This paper examines three collections of her poems – *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, *All My Pretty Ones*, and *Live or Die* – in order to clarify the poet's personal struggles and the confrontations she faced with the circumstances of her life – the primary spotlight being focused particularly on her relationships with family members – which eventually contributed to a gradual transformation from relative mental instability to be able to create poetry in which a positive acceptance of her own existence was expressed.

## I. "This Inward Look"

... 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.

– "Kind Sir: These Woods"

Anne Sexton's (1928–74) first book – *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) – provides subtle indications of the eventual outcome of Sexton's attempts to introduce a degree of clarity into her chaotic mind through the writing of poetry. It was completed during the period of her life when her psychiatrist was the most prominent influence in both her personal and artistic lives. An examination of the collection suggests how Sexton was able to form a definitive identity while sequestered within the haven that was the mental institution. An example of the transitional process as it gradually had an effect on poet is the poem "For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further" that starts as follows:

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was

a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning  
in that narrow diary of my mind,  
in the commonplaces of the asylum  
where the cracked mirror  
or my own selfish death  
outstared me. (TB 51)<sup>1)</sup>

Having already started writing poetry as a part of the treatment by the psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne, Sexton was advised to take formal writing lessons so that she could broaden her abilities. As a result, she daringly decided to enroll in a poetry workshop given by the poet and critic John Holmes at the Boston Center for Adult Education. Holmes, who was then a star poet in the Boston area, became acutely aware of Sexton's heretofore concealed ability and helped her to develop it by encouraging her to submit her works to local magazines for publication. This writing workshop was, in fact, a comfortable place for Sexton at first – it was where she met such persons as Maxine Kumin and George Starbuck who became close friends.

As Sexton evolved and began to incorporate more and more of the facets of her own life, however, Holmes began to disapprove of what she wrote. In fact, he disliked the manner through which she disclosed what he felt were too many incidences of personal privacy in her

poems. When she first attempted to gather her poems to include in what later became *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, he dissuaded her from publishing it at the time by telling his student: "This record will haunt and hurt you. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now" (98)<sup>21</sup>. This censure was the impetus for the poem "For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further" that reported the poet's dismay at such reproof as well as initiating her determination to separate herself from this teacher. Indeed the epigraph *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* itself may well have been coined under the influence of the determination that caused Sexton to spread her wings and fly from the nest Holmes provided. Quoting Arthur Schopenhauer in a letter written to the German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Sexton makes an unambiguous declaration at the start of her artistic life of how she is determined to face confrontation:

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

It is supposed that the vast majority of people would rather avoid confronting misfortune head on—that they would tend to sympathize with Jocasta who committed suicide upon learning she had married her own son, Oedipus. There are, however, those who—like Oedipus—face mishaps directly even knowing that the outcome could be disastrous. The above quotation indicates that Sexton—as opposed to the path chosen by her teacher, Holmes—favored the Oedipus—like approach to her life. In the poem "Kind Sir: These Woods," the speaker concedes that she "[is] afraid of course / to look—this inward look that society scorns" but eventually "find[s] nothing worse / than [her]self, caught between the grapes and the thorns" in the foggy forest (TB 5). In order to discover herself—or simply the purpose of her life—she chose "to enquire further" through the act of writing poetry no matter how terribly she might be hurt.

One of the central themes the "enquirer," Sexton,

dramatized in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was the mixed feelings she had for her forebears. She was an heir to the legacy of her "straight Maine clan" ("Funnel," TB 28) which was well-to-do and influential in art:

The family story tells, and it was told true,  
of my great-grandfather who begat eight  
genius children and bought twelve almost new  
grand pianos. . . .

Among the "genius children" were those who became "moderately famous," those who "married," one who "died a pinafore child" as an infant, one who became "a concert pianist," and another who "wrote" (TB 28). In comparing her grandfather's writings with her own "short marginal notes," the speaker "fingers [her] accounts" (TB 28) overwhelmed by the magnificence of her ancestor's remains. A visit to her great-grandfather's grave forces her to "question" her diminished way of life that "feed[s] a minimum / of children their careful slice of suburban cake" (TB 29). With the diminution in the number of family members, she wonders if the quality of art that previously ran through their blood had also petered out. Similar to the shape of a "funnel," her ancestors' heritage appears to be tapering off. It can be supposed that Sexton experienced not only a feeling of nostalgia for the artistic talent she had inherited, but also a sense of guilt for not having fully utilized that inheritance. In fact, it is probable that she felt she had—at least partially—squandered the gift so graciously passed on to her.

Among all Sexton's family, however, "Nana"—her great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley—was the most intimate. As one of the "genius children," Nana was not only an inspiration, but also became a favorite subject of her niece's poetry. At one time a foreign correspondent writing for the family's newspaper<sup>22</sup>, Nana had been left homeless upon the death of her brother-in-law, Arthur Gray Staples, with whom she had been living. A bachelorette, Nana, began to live with the Harvey family around that time. The timing was fortunate for the eleven-year-old Anne as she had grown quite lonely due to the fact that her mother had normally been absent in order to take care of her own father, the very same Arthur Gray Staples. Though her real mother had come home at the same time, Anne became attached to Nana as a mother substitute. Consequently, the two lonely souls, Anne and Nana, shared a great deal of time together for about two

years. As Anne's interests in boys grew, however, she tended to spend ever less time with her great aunt. About the same time, Nana – probably due to the loss of hearing – gradually withdrew into herself to the point that she was committed to a mental hospital and underwent electroconvulsive therapy. For Nana the prognosis was not totally unfortunate, but other family issues – such as Anne's father's drinking and the birth of the baby of Anne's sister – resulted in Nana being sent to a nursing home where she ended her life.

Although Anne was not directly responsible in any manner for Nana's illness or death, she developed a guilt complex resulting from her great-aunt sliding into madness and then dying a lonely death. Eventually, those unsettled feelings were included in some of her poems. "Some Foreign Letters" is a notable example. It was elderly Nana who was "always old, / soft white lady of [her] heart" (TB 13) that Sexton actually knew, but reading Nana's letters written when she was a correspondent in foreign countries let the poet ruminate over a young Nana's life. The speaker talks to the young and old Nana alternately:

How distant you are on your nickel-plated skates  
in the skating park in Berlin, gliding past  
me with your Count, while a military band  
plays a Strauss waltz. I loved you last,  
a pleated old lady with a crooked hand.  
Once you read *Lohengrin* and every goose  
hung high while you practiced castle life  
in Hanover. Tonight your letters reduce  
history to a guess. The Count had a wife.  
You were the old maid aunt who lived with us.  
(TB 13)

It was not the submissive and weakened Nana who resided with the Harvey family that Sexton found when reading between the lines of the letters. Rather, it was a dashing female who consorted with a married count in a strange land. For Sexton, Nana's letters "reduce history to a guess" – in other words, blur the concept of time. By reading those letters, Sexton was able to emotionally experience Nana's own life happenings.

From London, through Berlin, Lucerne, Paris, Verona, to Rome, the postmarks on the envelopes traced Nana's European trip "sixty-nine years ago" (TB 14). Special occurrences during that trip included when Nana "climb

[ed] up Mount San Salvatore" with the count in Switzerland as well as enjoying autumn in Rome while visiting "the ruins of the palaces of the Caesars" by herself, cheering the Pope at the Vatican, and being permitted to go into the private chapel because of her "student ticket" (TB 14). These lively verbal snapshots of her great-aunt were completely novel to Sexton. Even as excited as she became over the new perspective she had gained of Nana, the poet did not actually take a fancy to Nana's youth. She had come to know that "life is a trick" (TB 13). Even for the "young girl in a good world still" (TB 13), the future could be harsh and in actuality it was. The last stanza of the poem warns the young Nana by saying "that wars are coming, / that the Count will die" (TB 15), that she will come back to America, and that she will eventually go mad – a warning through which it is possible to perceive how upset the poet was about the progress of her great-aunt's life. Like Sexton who once was an active young girl, Nana had also led a lively life in her own youth. Thereafter, however, Nana had been tricked by life – she had to put up with living "like a prim thing / on the farm in Maine," "to see the blue-nose / world go drunk each night" and to "feel [her] left ear close / one Friday at Symphony" (TB 15).

From the age of thirteen when she told her great-aunt that she had been kissed by a boy, Sexton was convinced that Nana eventually slipped into madness due to this confession. In a letter to Snodgrass, she wrote that "at thirteen, I was blameful and struck" (L 41)<sup>4)</sup>. But the last part of the poem reveals her realization that the fate that had befallen upon her great-aunt was not actually her fault. The subdued life in Maine as a bachelorette, the move to Boston in her old age, life with a drunken parent and noisy children, physical diseases – all these factors were heaped upon Nana and eventually contributed to the onset of her madness. Here we see both the poet's relief and uneasiness: she was relieved to know that she had not actually driven Nana to madness, but at the same time she felt uneasy about whether or not she herself would one day follow a path similar to that tread by Nana – both were lively when young, both were writers, and Nana eventually turned into a mad, battered old lady. The poet addresses Nana saying "Tonight I will learn to love you twice" (TB 15). She will love both the young Nana that she recreated through her poem and the old Nana with

whom she had resonated. The more she loved her great-aunt, unfortunately, the more she became anxious about what awaited her in the progress of her own life. Nana, whom Sexton had been convinced she drove to madness, had haunted her since she was thirteen only to be replaced by being haunted by the ghost of Nana's whole life.

It was not only her great-aunt who haunted Sexton. There were also her parents, Mary and Ralph Harvey, who had instilled in their youngest daughter a wide range of mixed emotions that found their way into her poetry. In her younger years, Mary Gray, who "got the highest marks ever recorded in I. Q. test at Wellesley College"<sup>55</sup>, was not a published writer. Rather, under the tutelage and influence of her father, Arthur Gray Staples, who ran a newspaper, she wrote family poems and letters with the result that she attained the status of brilliant writer within the family. Her subsequent pride as a writer consequently became a stumbling block in her relationship with Anne. Mary Gray accused her daughter of plagiarism when she published two poems in her high school yearbook<sup>61</sup>. The mother's pride that required she be the only writer in the family resulted in her not only failing to encourage Anne's talent, but also to go on to shatter her young daughter's artistic aspirations to the extent that the mother/daughter relationship suffered serious damage.

Indeed, there is no record of Mary Gray having ever apologized for her groundless accusation or for the damage she caused to her daughter's artistic growth. On the contrary, about ten years later when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, she delivered the *coup de grace* to the relationship by claiming that the stress caused by Anne's hospitalization was responsible for the onset of her illness. A few months before her mother's death, Sexton wrote to Snodgrass saying:

My mother says I gave her a cancer (as though death were catching – death being the birthday that I tried to kill myself, Nov. 9th 1956). Then she got cancer . . . who do we kill, which image in the mirror, the mother, ourself [sic] our daughter????? (L 40)

Owing to her mother's hurtful words, the dismayed poet suffered while her mother was alive and then went on to carry the burden of bitterness after her mother died.

One of the poems that displays Sexton's anguish over the flawed mother/daughter relationship is the monologue

"The Double Image" in which the then thirty-year-old poet addresses to her child, Joy, who is "still small, in [her] fourth year" while they "stand watching the yellow leaves go queer, / flapping in the winter rain, / falling flat and washed" (TB 53). In the poem, Sexton reveals to her daughter how her mother, Mary Gray, betrayed her confidence:

Part way back from Bedlam  
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,  
Massachusetts. And this is how I came  
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.  
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.  
And she never could. She had my portrait  
done instead. (TB 55)

As yet unable to live independently, Sexton – who was only "part way back from Bedlam" – was subjected to the care of her mother. Unable to accept her daughter's mental illness on an objective level, Mary Gray subjectively focused on blaming her daughter for the attempted suicide rather than playing the role of a caring mother who should actually be helping her daughter work through self-destructive mental anguish. The mother could not bring herself to accept the possibility of her daughter seeking to escape this world in such a negative manner as through suicide.

During the uncomfortable stay at her parents' house in Annisquam, therefore, Sexton "tried to mow the lawn" in order to "help time pass" (TB 56). It was also during that time that her portrait was completed by order of Mary Gray – possibly as an image of life that would offset the dishonorable suicidal attempt in the mind of the mother, that would satisfy the mother's desperate pleading for her daughter's everlasting life, or that would provide the perfect image of the daughter the mother had envisioned when giving birth thirty years prior. The completed portrait, however, displayed "in the chill / north light" (TB 56) presented an ominous appearance. Mary Gray's cancer struck with ever greater vengeance.

The conviction that her daughter "gave her cancer" allowed the mother to mentally justify the act of freezing her daughter out of her life "as if death were catching, / as if death transferred, / as if [Sexton's] dying had eaten inside of her" (TB 56). Her own mother in such a manner alienated the daughter and virtually left her speechless: "They carved her sweet hills out / and still I couldn't

answer" (TB 56). Sexton was totally unable to feel the compassion and understanding a daughter would normally experience for a mother's fear of sickness or death. Instead, this woman who went on to become a great American poet was aghast at her mother's fruitless efforts to cling to life.

With the prognosis after mastectomy being poor, Mary Gray decided to "[have] her / own portrait painted" perhaps as an attempt to outwit death by hanging the finished image "on the south wall" (TB 57). To the daughter who readily contemplated suicide, the mother's exceptionally strong attachment to life was probably uncomfortably inexplicable. The disturbed frame of mind Sexton experienced as a result of the events of that time was succinctly expressed when she later wrote that "two portraits hang on opposite walls" (TB 59) – words indicating that the mother and daughter were on opposite sides concerning the coming of death with one hopelessly attempting to hold it off while the other deliberately accepted it.

The "two portraits" are described near the end of the poem as "the cave of the mirror, / that double woman who stares / at herself" (TB 60). As Mary Gray's death approached, the mother and daughter who separately "chose [their] foreknown separate ways" (TB 60) were eventually identified with each other in the mind of the poet. To the daughter/poet, Mary Gray's portrait had turned into "[her] mocking mirror, [her] overthrown / love, [her] first image" (TB 60). The perception which underlies such a drastic change of attitude towards her mother can be found in the lines where Sexton refers to the relationship with her own daughter in the same poem. Sexton – "an outgrown child" (TB 55) herself and unable to exert any control in the act of raising her youngest daughter, Joy ("until a fever rattled / in your throat and I moved like a pantomime / above your head" [TB 53]) – tried twice to end her own life. As a result, Joy was not allowed to live with her mother for her first three years after birth. Although Sexton understands well that it is "[t]oo late to be forgiven now" (TB 55), she sincerely repents her abandonment of motherhood in the apology she pens to her daughter.

Her reflection upon the reason "why [she] would rather / die than love" (TB 58) leads her, in the last section of the poem, to the time when Joy was born:

I remember we named you Joyce  
so we could call you Joy.

....

I needed you. I didn't want a boy,  
only a girl, a small milky mouse

....

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

And this is my worst guilt; you could not cure  
nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (TB 61)

Emotionally, Sexton needed the birth of a daughter – a source of "Joy" – because she was not at all certain if she herself had been "a small milky mouse" to Mary Gray. Lacking confidence as to whether or not she had been a satisfactory daughter, she pinned her hopes on giving birth to a female child that would be the ideal daughter that she herself could not be in the past. The "worst guilt" mentioned here, therefore, is not about her failure to participate in bringing up Joy as a baby, but simply about the act of giving birth. In an attempt to overcome the feelings of inferiority she had had as a daughter, Sexton egoistically chose to have this baby with the unfortunate consequence that she also came to feel a sense of inferiority as a mother, one liable to ruin her daughter's early years. As a mother who expected the birth of a baby girl to bring joy by being the ideal image of a daughter, she failed to recognize what her real job should have been – to be a source of comfort and joy to her child.

In the poem, Sexton's "worst guilt" forces her to confront the image that she shares with her mother. Both mother and daughter were guilty of pursuing a perfect image of womanhood that included being a good daughter, a good wife, and a good woman. However, neither of them felt they had succeeded. In the end, both – feeling deficient as women – felt forced to undertake ineffectual actions. Both felt that as they had not yet satisfactorily attained perfect womanhood that they needed to take further steps to achieve it even if such steps seemed to be taken out of desperation. Whereas Sexton finally committed suicide, her mother clung to life with one of her most futile actions being to have the portraits painted. Sexton likens the portrait of Mary Gray to the picture of Dorian Gray: "I rot on the wall, my own / Dorian Gray" (TB 60). The more Dorian Gray repeats

debauched acts, the more the portrait hung on the wall is disfigured. Likewise, the more Sexton repeats guilty misconducts, the portraits – hers and that of her mother who are the image of the “double woman who stares / at herself” (TB 60) – are distorted.

The mother/daughter relationship as portrayed in “The Double Image” exposes the poet’s sense of guilt derived from interactions with both her mother and daughter. On the one hand, her mother had accused Sexton of being the cause of the cancer from which she suffered. On the other hand, the poet suffered feeling that she was incapable of instilling into her own daughter the joy of living. This, then, was the “worst guilt” that passes from mother to daughter. At the end of the poem, the poet cries out that she is constantly tormented by “[her] worst guilt” as long as she remains alive. The sense of guilt instilled by Mary Gray remained horribly overwhelming. As Greg Johnson relates, “the final lines speak of the daughter’s [i.e. Joy’s] inestimable value for the poet’s present self . . . as a hopeful foreshadowing of her own developing selfhood”<sup>7)</sup>. But at the same time, what lied beneath the self-development was her fate to have to suffer from a guilty conscience throughout life. The triple image of mother/speaker/daughter Sexton discovered through writing was catastrophic enough to add another burden to her life. Hence even after she became a “graduate of the mental cases, / with [her] analyst’s okay” (TB 58), the poet was urged to “enquire further” into her past, her present, and her future through the restoration of her relationships towards her family and herself.

## II. “Lost Baggage”

*Dearest,*

*where are your letters?*

*The mailman is an impostor.*

*He is actually my grandfather.*

. . . .

*Now he is gone*

*as you are gone.*

*But he belongs to me like lost baggage.*

—“Letter Written

*During a January Northeaster”*

As the Fifties were coming to a close and just when

Sexton was taking her first steps upon the road to recognition as a poet, some of her family members left this world. The first was her mother, Mary Gray, who succumbed to complications from breast cancer on March 10, 1958 – only a few days before her fifty-eighth birthday. Although Mary Gray’s prognosis after the radical mastectomy she underwent in 1956 had supposedly been positive, she had an unforeseen relapse which led to her demise after suffering a great deal of pain during the terminal stages. When her mother’s surgery had been pronounced a success, Sexton was not as pleased as she should have been as I have mentioned before. She found herself unable to offer her sympathy as she was still feeling the emotional anguish brought on by her poetic originality and creativity having been egotistically rejected by the woman who had brought her into this world. Then, Sexton became so disturbed by her mother’s appearance of recovery that she attempted suicide for the second time. Among Dr. Orne’s notes from that period is a notation about when Sexton confided that “part of [her] would be free if she [i.e. her mother] died”<sup>8)</sup>. Later, however, when her mother became too weak to sit up in bed, this antagonism finally began to wane. The underlying affection Sexton felt for Mary Gray was demonstrated by the daily visits she made to the hospital. When the time came, death “free[d]” her completely; at the same time, however, it instilled in her not only a feeling of sorrow from the loss of her parent, but also a sense of guilt regarding the harsh stance she had taken towards her own mother.

In that same year, Sexton lost her father, Ralph Churchill Harvey. The beginning of his end began when he – out of the concern he felt as a result of his wife’s dejection following the loss of her breasts – thought to encourage his mate with a trip to Europe. On the day he received the tickets, however, he suffered a stroke so that what would have been the couple’s first trip to Europe had to be cancelled. Although Sexton’s father escaped death at that point, his wife’s relapse and consequent death caused him to feel a sense of loneliness. He was, in actuality, despondent enough to “understand how [his daughter] had felt when she tried to kill herself”<sup>9)</sup>. But as the days passed, the mists of loneliness gradually swirled away so that a couple of months after his wife’s funeral he sought a relationship with a widow residing in the

same neighborhood. In outrage, the Harvey daughters totally rejected this liaison. Shortly thereafter, Ralph Harvey suffered another stroke that took his life on June 3, 1958. At first, Sexton felt guilty about having opposed the remarriage. But when the will was read, she learned that because her father had sold his shares in the Harvey firm to maintain his luxuriant lifestyle, her husband, Kayo, would no longer be in line to succeed as president. Though she mourned her father, it was with a taste of bitterness caused by resentment as well as guilt.

In March of the following year, Kayo's father, George Sexton, was killed in a car accident on a trip to Florida. In her letter to Snodgrass, Sexton says that her father-in-law "paid one half of all [her] psychiatric bills for [the] past 4 yrs" and also, "one time that [she] tried to kill [her]self he was the one who stayed at the hospital" instead of her parents who "said they wouldn't come" (L 100). By accepting her unconditionally and making the efforts necessary to understand her agonies as well as he could, he played a more effective parental role than did her own parents. Because of this, the impact of his passing varied vastly from that experienced with the previous two losses. It was as if Sexton—who longed for the cessation of life—was being mocked by death who instead of calling on her visited her parents and then stopped by to take George Sexton in an unforeseen, savage manner. As if that wasn't enough, death continued to tease and taunt the poet. Upon getting pregnant, she issued an invitation to death by way of undergoing an abortion—a decision that on the surface seemed to have been made using her lack of good health as the excuse, but which in reality was undertaken as she did not want a baby that might not have been fathered by her husband, Kayo. The result was yet another seed of guilt being planted in her mind. The accumulating feelings of bitterness and guilt brought on by this string of loved ones passing away only added impetus to her struggles with suicidal impulses.

It was primarily these losses experienced only in two years that formed the basis of *All My Pretty Ones*—Anne Sexton's second book—that was published in 1962. That title was derived from the first line of a quotation to be found on the title page from Act 4, Scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

What! all my pretty chickens and their dam

At one fell swoop? . . .

I cannot but remember such things were,

That were most precious to me. (PO i)<sup>10</sup>

With the realization that Macbeth had turned into a monstrous person with no conscience, Macduff had fled to England leaving his family behind in Scotland. Enraged by that act, Macbeth had Macduff's entire household slaughtered. This lament, then, was uttered by Macduff upon hearing the news that his wife and children had been murdered by Macbeth—he was tormented by his inability to anticipate Macbeth's vengeance. However, persuaded by Duncan's son, Malcolm, to avenge himself ("Be comforted. / Let's make us medicines of our great revenge, / To cure this deadly grief")<sup>11</sup>, Macduff managed to pull himself together and join in the campaign taking place in England to overthrow the brutal king. For "all [his] pretty ones," he was able to overcome his troubled mind and go forward with his life.

This poet's story surrounding the "pretty ones" totally varies from that of Macduff. Though no bloody drama unfolded, her tormented feelings of loneliness resulting from the deaths of her "pretty ones" was no less as unspeakable as those experienced by Macduff. It is easy to imagine that she, like the Shakespearean character, could have exclaimed to herself: "Did you say all? . . . At one fell swoop?" The following discussion examines how Sexton managed to come to terms with the emotional difficulties she suffered when her "pretty ones" departed from this plane of existence one after another and how the process of overcoming grief gave her a channel to find peace with the deceased members of her family whose spirits haunted and tormented her as she wrote her first book *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

With its references to her mother's death, "The Operation"—drawing upon an uncomplicated surgical procedure Sexton herself underwent to remove a nonmalignant ovarian cyst a few months after the death of her parents—provides an excellent starting-point. By its very nature, that surgery was nothing to worry about. Yet just the thought of it appears to have contributed to the fear the poet felt before and after she went under the knife as well as causing her to consider whether or not she might have developed cancer like her mother. In

addition, it was a primary cause for dredging up memories of the time when her mother was engaged in the fight against a recurrence of cancer. These intertwined factors are simply captured in a few lines of the poem:

After the sweet promise,  
the summer's mild retreat  
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her  
death,  
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,  
...  
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate  
my ills with hers  
and decide to operate. (PO 12)

There are parallels drawn between the seasons of the year and the seasons of life. In winter, the poet's mother writhed in pain before passing on. The "summer's mild retreat" refers to both the tranquil period her mother experienced following the mastectomy and to when Sexton found release from the emotional pain she had suffered when her mother's life ended. The seasons inevitably follow one after the other—autumn after summer and then winter. Just as inevitably, Mary Gray—in spite of the strong fight she put up—expired. Then Sexton learns that she—like her mother before her—has ovarian cyst, she falls prey to the imaginative concept that she will follow in the footsteps of her mother.

The metonymy used to describe cancer in this poem is worthy of mention. Sexton's mother's breast cancer "grew in her / as simply as a child would grow / as simply as she housed me once, fat and female" (PO 12). From another point of view, the cancer, "that embryo / of evil" (PO 12), took shape in her mother's body in much the same manner that Sexton herself—as an embryo—developed within her mother's uterus. As previously noted, Mary Gray blamed her daughter—as a result of the bother she caused when she brought the news of an attempt to commit suicide—for being the source of her cancer. That placing of blame, however, was only the latest perceived incidence of being a bother—the first being, in Sexton's mind, of having been born. This may have contributed to her believing that the developing ovarian cyst—her own "embryo / of evil"—was a form of punishment. In that frame of mind, the speaker of the poem falls under the threatening influence of the guilt she has felt for her own birth together with a fear of death

even when her "almost mighty doctor" tries to convince her with his "almost mighty" effort that there is "no reason to be afraid" (PO 13). While in her hospital bed awaiting surgery, she speaks to herself saying: "Fact: death too is in the egg. / Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat. / And tomorrow the O. R. Only the summer was sweet" (PO 13). With the cozy days of summer slipping into the past, she manages to accept her approaching "winter," the season when death comes into its own within her "dumb" raw body. She anticipates the operation "like a kennel of dogs" caged and "jumping against their fence" (PO 14) in a panic.

The panicky patient/poet is overwhelmed by doctors and nurses dressed in green in the operating room ("The great green people stand / over me" [PO 14]). Like "a terrible sun," the surgical lamp is considered to have charred her external shell with her inner self—her consciousness—floating up from the surgical table in such a way as to offer a glimpse of the path the soul takes on the journey between life and death. Under anesthesia, her tormented self "floats out over [her] own skin," and "soar [s] in hostile air" searching for a sign of life even while inviting catastrophic death ("over the pure women in labor / over the crowning heads of babies being born" [PO 14]). As Caroline Hall points out, being anesthetized is "a kind of temporary death"<sup>12)</sup>.

With the operation a success, the speaker's consciousness "rush[es] back to [her] own skin, tied where it was torn" (PO 14) so that she is "lifted into [her] aluminum crib" as if she were reborn with a new life beginning. And yet, as the word "aluminum" implies, she comes back to life in a sterile, mechanical environment that fails to comfort her with the result that she continues to feel that her life—while limping through "lame days" (PO 15)—is lacking in its very essence. About leaving the hospital, she says:

Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty  
back the frightened way she came  
and run along, Anne, and run along now,  
my stomach laced up like a football  
for the game. (PO 16)

A properly laced up football is ready for the rough handling it will encounter in the game. Though the speaker's body has been properly "laced up like a football" at the conclusion of the operation to prepare it



to face the next phase in the game of life, her consciousness – which “float[ed] out” her body – no longer fits as it should so that in her mind she becomes a fragile, easily cracked, forever incomplete “humpty-dumpty.” Further, her memory of “the frightened way” can never be put away. “Frightened” by the possibility that she can become cancerous like her mother, until her death she is tormented by the guilt that results from being the “embryo / of evil.” Her discharge from the hospital may indicate an assisted ability to “run along” and leave her dreadful past behind her – at least for the nonce, but a mother-related sense of guilt and fear caused her to be so mentally fragile that like “humpty-dumpty” it was essential to remain vigilant if she were to avoid a future fall.

Although Sexton does not succeed in overcoming the negative feelings creeping through her troubled mind in “The Operation,” she confronts them more successfully in her poem “All My Pretty Ones” – the title of the poem reflecting that of the book in which it is an integral contribution – in the process of addressing her dead father. Following the successive deaths of their parents’ (“Father, this year’s jinx rides us apart / where you followed our mother to her cold slumber” [PO 4]), the three daughters dispersed to go their own ways. However, the speaker of the poem, Anne, now returns for a nostalgic visit to the family home in an effort to gain perspective. As she looks about herself, there are reminders of her past wherever she looks – among them, old photos of her father and of her paternal ancestors. What she sees in those visual remnants of family history are totally inanimate shadows held captive on the surfaces of long-preserved pieces of paper (“their cardboard faces” [PO 4]). In the process of viewing them, she is disturbed by such captured scenes from out of yesteryear as the one of “a small boy [who] waits in a ruffled dress for someone to come,” the one of “[a] soldier who holds his bugle like a toy,” and the one of “[a] velvet lady who cannot smile” – all unknown personages who – though related in some unknown way – are totally foreign to her. She will “never know what these faces are all about” (PO 4). This adds yet another dimension to her perceived inability to directly communicate with her deceased father. In fact a sense of being totally isolated from her family’s past probably contributes to an almost overwhelming sense of

frustration that causes her to seriously consider severing all ties with the past. She reports that “I lock them into their book and throw them out” (PO 4). And yet, those old photos also contributes to developing an understanding of the relationships between the past and the present – between her dead father and herself – to eventually make it possible for her to find comfort in the heritage bequeathed to her by her father.

In her father’s “yellow scrapbook” filled with clippings from the year of her birth – the speaker-poet finds articles relating such news as to how “Hoover outran / the Democrats,” “where the Hindenburg went / down,” and “where [her father] went flush / on war” (PO 4–5) – historical events that may have contributed – even in a relatively minor way – to the circumstances shaping life as it develops for her family and thereby making her the person able to meanly object to her father’s remarriage – a momentous occurrence that was followed only three days later by his death (“you meant / to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush. / But before you had that second chance, I cried / on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died” [PO 5]). It is also possible to consider that the manner by which family life was shaped through the years contributed significantly to the poet’s father acquiring an “alcoholic tendency” – an inclination her mother insinuated at in her “five-year diary” – that was a pervasive influence on the poet’s childhood.

In seeking to address her father after he passed away, Sexton writes: “My God, father, each Christmas Day / with your blood, will I drink down your glass / of wine?” (PO 5). In this instance, the term “My God” is not merely an exclamation; it is a reference to. This insinuates that the act of drinking the “blood” of her father/God at Mass at each Christmas – whether or not she is willing to believe in the Christian God – will enable her to not only atone for the feeling of guilt she has acquired as a result of opposing his remarriage, but also to celebrate the heritage he has bestowed upon her. Unfortunately, that same heritage includes such a negative factor as his “alcoholic tendency.” In any event, as the poem comes to its conclusion, Sexton declares: “Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you, / bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you” (PO 5). In the hope of making a fresh start with her dead father, she appears to positively accept whatever it is she inherits from him.

Another poem that depicts Sexton's constructive stance is "The Abortion" that describes an appalling journey the speaker makes that has a dreadful outcome. It takes place in spring: "Just as the earth puckered its mouth, / each bud puffing out from its knot, / I changed my shoes, and then drove south" (PO 20). It is a time of new beginnings – of new life such as the embryo in the speaker's uterus. On the way to her destination in southern Pennsylvania, she finds the roads are "sunken in like a gray washboard" and "the ground cracks evilly" (PO 20). Walking along roads that to her are reprehensible and lined with "grass as bristly and stout as chives," she wonders "when the ground would break" to swallow her up and "how anything fragile [and fine] survives" in the process of navigating those "stout" obstacles (PO 20). Obviously, she fears what awaits her. At her destination, she is met by "a little man" who dispossesses her of the new life that has been growing within her ("the fullness that love began" [PO 20]). At first, the "little man" originally reminds her of Rumpelstiltskin – a character in a tale by the Brothers Grimm who demands a baby from the queen. However, it is "not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . ." (PO 20)<sup>13)</sup>. On the contrary, it is the speaker herself who requests the removal of the new life with the mythic "little man" being only a doctor who is willing to help her obtain an illegal abortion<sup>14)</sup>. The aborted fetus only adds to her sense of guilt and casts a new light on her perception of her surroundings. As she returns home, therefore, nature no longer seems fresh and lively: "Returning north, even the sky grew thin / like a high window looking nowhere. / The road was as flat as a sheet of tin" (PO 20).

It is interesting that this poem is structured in such a way as to enable the use of two voices – the first admonishing the second in the final stanza: "Yes, woman, such logic will lead / to loss without death. Or say what you meant, / you coward . . . this baby that I bleed" (PO 21). Earlier in the poem, the first voice only chants the italicized phrase, "*Somebody who should have been born / is gone*" (PO 20), three times like a magic spell. In a perfect world the fetus "should have been born," and should not have been aborted by its mother. However, Sexton's world is anything but perfect. In an attempt to evade the reality of the situation, the second voice seeks to sugar-coat the unpleasant aspects of what happens, but

Sexton is unable to attain peace of mind as the abortion is shrouded in mist and regarded as "loss without death" by the second voice. She eventually chooses to face and atone for what she considers her sin with the use of the first voice in order to be able to start her life again. Instead of simply continuing to solemnly chant "*Somebody who should have been born / is gone*," she makes up her mind to reveal her abortion, admit the passing of the fetus, repent of such selfish conduct, and reconcile with that departed soul. Accordingly, she attempts to put all this into the past and move on to the next phase of her life – to reconciliation with her "pretty ones."

### III. "A Woman Who Writes"

*A woman who writes feels too much,  
these trances and portents!*

. . . .

*She thinks she can warn the stars.*

*A writer is essentially a spy.*

*Dear love, I am that girl.*

— "The Black Art"

Sexton's most remarkable act of reconciliation with her family members is found in "The Fortress" which she wrote for her daughter, Linda, while "taking a nap with [her]" (PO 31)<sup>15)</sup>. Not only does she clearly state the love she holds for her daughter, but also completes the reconciliation with her mother and accepts the legacy to which she is heir from her maternal line. The poem starts with the picture of a mother and a daughter enjoying a peaceful, languid afternoon ("I think the woods outdoors / are half asleep, / left over from summer . . ." [PO 31]). Protected by her mother who is lying beside her "under the pink quilted covers" (PO 31), the child experiences a feeling of being safe without anxiety. And yet, the poet, a mother, knows well about the dangers that can reveal their ugly head in this world – dangers from which her daughter cannot be fully protected. Whilst there seems to be nothing that can harm the innocent child at the moment, the fact is revealed that life can be cruel. To teach Linda about such a reality, her mother quietly states:

We watch the wind from our square bed.

I press down my index finger –  
 half in jest, half in dread –  
 on the brown mole  
 under your left eye, inherited  
 from my right cheek: a spot of danger  
 where a bewitched worm ate its way through our  
 soul  
 in search of beauty. . . . (PO 31)

At the time, Linda is quite free from any immediate danger. And yet, she is menaced by the hazardous work of nature (“a bewitched worm”): she “inherit[s]” a mole. “The brown mole” is “a spot of danger” that threatens the “soul” which loves to pursue “beauty.” Sexton – whose own body is blemished by a mole on her face – realizes the impossibility of guarding her daughter from the same fate. The mole, a seemingly minor physical impairment, is but a negligible danger which secretly lies in wait for Linda. Sexton, therefore, feels the necessity to share more knowledge about the reality of life with her daughter:

Darling, life is not in my hands;  
 life with its terrible changes  
 will take you, bombs or glands,  
 your own child at  
 your breast, your own house on your own land.  
 (PO 32)

“Bombs” drop to bring unexpected damage during a war or in a terrorist attack. “Glands” can also be responsible for unexpected physical damage bringing “terrible changes.” For Linda, her “own child” who may one day suckle “at [her] breast” can bring future torment – just like the torments Sexton was accused of giving her own mother. As the legacy Sexton has inherited from her maternal line lied heavily on her, Linda in her “own house” – a legacy inherits from her parents – can be responsible for hurt and change. Even her “pretty ones,” the poet tells her daughter, can inflict pain.

In this manner, Sexton predicts that many difficulties await her daughter – difficulties that she will be unable to protect her daughter against. In frustration, all she can say is: “Child, I cannot promise that you will get your wish” (PO 32). However, one thing that she has learnt through personal experience: the family legacy may bring pain, but it can also provide the cure. This is revealed when she refers to her relationship with her dead mother:

Outside the bittersweet turns orange.

Before she died, my mother and I picked those fat  
 branches, finding orange nipples  
 on the gray wire strands.  
 We weeded the forest, curing trees like cripples.  
 (PO 32)

Whereas “the bittersweet” is a plant with ovoid red fruit that thrives in the wild, metaphorically, it implies the “bittersweet” past the poet and her mother shared. Gnawed at by breast cancer (“orange nipples”), her mother turned antagonistic to the poet who wrote in a similar style. And yet, the literary talent that ran in their blood – from Arthur Gray Staples (“on the *gray* wire strands”) – was clearly fostered by both (“We weeded the forest”). Even though they failed to cooperate, they cultivated the family legacy in their individual ways. Distorted by the bigotry towards each other that made them emotional “cripples,” they were eventually cured by their writing skills – one facet of their family legacy. Linda is given “Gray” as her middle name – a type of self-fulfilling prophesy as she becomes heir to the Gray legacy whether or not she likes it<sup>16</sup>). Facing this, Sexton teaches her daughter that the same legacy that inflicts conflict and pain will also be the cure for all the damage inflicted.

The last part of the poem in which the poet remembers a day at the aquarium reveals that the legacy is sustained by the love that passes between the members of the family – just like the love that passes between Linda and her mother:

A pheasant moves  
 by like a seal, pulled through the mulch  
 by his thick white collar. He’s on show  
 like a clown. He drags a beige feather that he  
 removed,  
 one time, from an old lady’s hat.  
 We laugh and we touch.  
 I promise you love. Time will not take away that.  
 (PO 32–3)

The “thick white collar” of the pheasant reminds Sexton of a time at the aquarium when a seal had some rings around its neck and played the role of “a clown” to amuse the spectator. Hand-in-hand, the poet and her daughter were so amused by the seal’s performance that it became one of the most peaceful and loving moments they ever spent together. The poet’s message to Linda at

the end of the poem is that love between family members is “the fortress” – even if their family legacy is sometimes accompanied by pain. In this way, Sexton – in the form of giving her daughter a lesson – indicates the completion of her reconciliation with her family legacy.

Those who had gone on before with death leaving Sexton behind with her legacy are, of course, unable to respond to Sexton in her unilateral attempt in reconciliation with her “pretty ones.” As a result, a sense of alienation streams her book *All My Pretty Ones* as a counterpoint. In the opening poem “The Truth the Dead Know,” for instance, she cannot help but delineate her sense of estrangement from the dead. Dedicated to her parents (“For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959 / and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959” [PO 3]), this work focuses on their deaths. On the day of her father’s funeral (“It is June.” [PO 3]), the speaker-poet admits that she is “tired of being brave” (PO 3) after the successive funerals. Various feelings towards the dead – including sorrow, anger, guilt, and compassion – surge up from within her and exhaust her. As a result, she “refuse[s] the stiff procession to the grave, / letting the dead ride alone in the hearse” (PO 3) in a vain attempt to retrieve mental equilibrium. On the contrary, she is dismayed by the discovery of the distance separating the living and the dead. Whereas the living remains upon the globe “where the sun gutters from the sky,” and “where the sea swings like an iron gate,” the dead lay “more like stone / than the sea would be if it stopped” (PO 3). Whereas the living “touch” each other as if to convince themselves that “[n]o one’s alone,” the dead even “refuse / to be blessed” and keep still (PO 3). Sexton laments the loss of her parents and reveals a sense of alienation from the dead here. Even “elegies” are found unworthy according to the title of the first poem in the second section of the book – “A Curse against Elegies.” In fact, dead people “are busy being dead” and are also “bored with the whole thing” (PO 19). The poet’s experience of death brought about her discovery of the immense estrangement between the living and the dead.

Sexton explained that her first book – *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* – “was given over to her experiences with madness” while her second book – *All My Pretty Ones* – examined “the causes of madness”<sup>17)</sup>. As previously noted, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* does indeed delve into

how she began to confront her past as the result of that treatment in a mental institution. Though “giving the experience of madness” in her poems was probably a vent for her pent-up feelings, it neither completely cured her illness nor took away her suicidal tendencies. To accomplish that, Sexton came to feel that it was necessary to enquire into one of “the causes of madness” – namely the friction between family members – in her poems as well as in her psychiatric sessions so as to retrieve an adequate level of sanity. This was becoming clearer about the time she finished her first book when the members of her family died one after another so that it seemed to her as if her family was going to disintegrate in front of her eyes. In *All My Pretty Ones*, therefore, she consciously attempted to explore the relationships she had with dead family members. In that they had already passed on, any attempt at reconciliation could only be unilaterally approached. But fortunately, the efforts she made were effective enough for her to be able to not only to develop an acceptance of her existence, but also to lead her to become ever more productive and thereby have a more positive life style that she gradually came to love.

#### IV. “Turn My Hungers!”

*Turn, my hungers!*

*For once make a deliberate decision.*

—“*Flee on Your Donkey*”

Such a love for life as declared in *All My Pretty Ones* is revealed in the third book, *Live or Die* (1966), which, in fact, won the Pulitzer Prize. In the opening, the book discloses Sexton’s stance concerning life and death by borrowing lines uttered by the main character in an early draft of the novel *Herzog* (1964) written by her friend, Saul Bellow:

With one long breath, caught and held  
in his chest, he fought his sadness over  
his solitary life. Don’t cry, you idiot!  
Live or die, but don’t poison everything. . . .  
(LD ii)<sup>18)</sup>

This “message” from the novelist whom Sexton considered to be “the greatest living writer”<sup>19)</sup> pulled at her heartstrings. For one who had been holding such a fascination for death that there was a serious consideration

of severing all ties with life but at the same time was finding it hard to justify leaving this world in such a manner, the words brought a realization that a noncommittal attitude towards life and death was malevolent. This led to an examination in *Live or Die* of life and death by the poet who was still sought a clear choice between the two alternatives.

In the process of writing *Live or Die*, Sexton experienced the loss of some of those who were close to her. That death continued to be an attraction as well as a threat is apparent in the poet's memorial verses in the work "Somewhere in Africa" that describes the death of her mentor John Holmes as well as in the work "Sylvia's Death" that deals with Sylvia Plath's suicide. Another loss which caused Sexton's anxiety was that of her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne, who had departed Boston to continue his practice in Philadelphia. Individually, these incidents acted to sadden Sexton. Together, they had the effect of driving her into trances as well as impelling her to further suicidal tendencies. Suggestions of such are to be found in some of the poems in *Live or Die*.

As the title clearly suggests, "Wanting to Die," for example, succinctly expresses the poet's desire for death: "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember. / I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage. / Then the almost unnamable lust returns" (DN 59). When such a bout of "unnamable lust" cannot be subdued, Sexton's mind, as the poem "Self in 1958" implies, is plagued with a negative image of herself—an image that had its origins when she was yet only an struggling apprentice in the literary world. In 1958, the year when Sexton had just started attending Robert Lowell's seminar at Boston University, her "self" as a poet was not yet fully established so that she was out of touch with her own life to such an extent that she compared herself to "a plaster doll." The doll-Sexton, who "lived in a doll's house / with four chairs, / a counterfeit table, a flat roof / and a big front door" was unable to answer the question "What is reality?" (LD 73). Unsure of reality, she naturally could not explain how to survive in real life. Basically, she felt that her life had been and was still being manipulated by others ("Someone plays with me . . ." [LD 73]). While enduring the inquisitive and inimical gazes of those who looked upon her ("They pry my mouth for their cups of

gin / and their stale bread" [LD 74]), the "synthetic doll" (LD 74) strove to establish for herself a sense of reality. Her efforts to achieve this goal contributed to a preoccupation with the concepts of death in which she attempted to find the answers she was seeking. In fact, the morbid interest in the concepts of death that started when she was younger continued even as she was working on *Live or Die*. As if emphasizing that she has repeatedly gone through the same afflicted moments, the poet looks back to the "self in 1958" in these lines.

In *Live or Die*, however, Sexton does not dwell solely on death: rather, listening to Bellow's counsel she considers—instead of ending her life without delay—reaching out to grasp the light of hope to make it possible to go on living. Such a relatively positive attitude is to be found in many of the poems in the book. One of them is "Cripples and Other Stories" in which Sexton addresses her psychiatrist, Dr. Orne:

My father didn't know me  
but you kiss me in my fever.  
My mother knew me twice  
and then I had to leave her.

But those are just two stories  
and I have more to tell. . . .

Father, I'm thirty-six,  
yet I lie here in your crib.  
I'm getting born again, Adam,  
as you prod me with your rib. (LD 82)

The speaker-poet seemed to feel that—compared to her parents—she used to be "a cripple": her father was "a perfect man" and her mother was "a brilliant thing" (LD 81). In the world of the couple that had joined to give her life, she, the "cripple," had an uncomfortable and unpleasant past. But the "Father" referred to in this case is Dr. Orne, who she felt was responsible for giving her another life—one that had its origins upon the psychotherapy couch ("in your crib") in a manner such as when Adam formed a new life using a vital part of his inner self—his rib—to create Eve. The conflicts between the poet and her parents are a part of her past that she sought to escape to seek what would be coming as a freshly-born woman, Eve. Although J. D. McClatchy asserts that this poem is one of the "ambivalent love song

[s] to her doctor”<sup>20)</sup> on the ground that it contains the expression “father-doctor” (LD 80) in its initial part, it would be more appropriate to interpret that the speaker here regards the “Adam”-doctor as a savior – the creator of her rebirth – who inspired her to reconstruct her past to pull her into a more positive present and thereby go forward into the future.

The influence of Bellow’s words on Sexton is also noticeable in “Live,” the final poem in *Live or Die*. The lines triumphantly exclaim the fact that the seed to bring forth a new life has been planted: “Today life opened inside me like an egg / and there inside . . . / I found the answer” (LD 88). And inspired by the birth of eight Dalmatian puppies at her house, the poet goes on to emphasize the significance of life:

So I say *Live*  
and turn my shadow three times round  
to feed our puppies as they come,  
the eight Dalmatians we didn’t drown,  
despite the warnings: The abort! The destroy!  
(LD 89)

Sexton, who had been seeking to end her life at her own hands, attained the determination to face life – at least for the present. She relates to the recently whelped puppies whose life is welcomed with excitement after having passed through the crisis of possible extinction. The luck brought to those puppies symbolizes the choice for life the poet was striving to come to terms with in her struggle between life and death. Once she made the decision not to “poison everything” and to maintain the newly-held respect she had for life, her existence became relatively brighter. After the completion of the book *Live or Die*, influenced by emerging feminist ideology, as well, Sexton would come to terms with mental instability and thereby develop a degree of faith in her own abilities and express such positive “hunger” for life.

#### Notes

- 1) Anne Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton, 1960). Henceforth the book will be indicated by TB, followed by the page numbers.
- 2) Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1992). The poet’s biographical facts referred in this paper have been disclosed mainly by this biographer.
- 3) Arthur Gray Staples, Anna Ladd Dingley’s brother-in-law

and Anne Sexton’s grandfather, was the editor and publisher of *Lewiston Evening Journal*, a local newspaper in Maine.

- 4) Quotations from *A Self-Portrait in Letters* edited in 1977 by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991) will be indicated by L, followed by the page numbers.
- 5) Diane Middlebrook, “Becoming Anne Sexton,” in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Truth*, ed. Steven Colburn (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 7–21), 14.
- 6) Sexton revealed that “[her] mother said as [she] graduated from high school that [she] had plagiarized Sara Teasdale” and as a result the girl who as woman would become a poet ceased writing at that time to avoid hurting her mother’s feelings. See Middlebrook’s *Biography*, 21.
- 7) Greg Johnson, “The Achievement of *Anne Sexton*” in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Truth*, ed. Steven Colburn (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 170–87), 177.
- 8) Middlebrook, *Biography*, 47.
- 9) *Ibid.*, 116.
- 10) Anne Sexton, *All My Pretty Ones* (Boston: Houghton, 1962). Henceforth the book will be indicated by AO, followed by the page numbers.
- 11) The quotation is from *Macbeth, The Arden Shakespeare*, 8th ed. (London: Methuen, 1957), 139.
- 12) Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne-G. K. Hall, 1989), 39.
- 13) Sexton appears to have been fond of the story of Rumpelstiltskin. In *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton, 1971), there is a poem entitled “Rumpelstiltskin,” in which she projects the image of the “Doppelgänger” that secretly resides in everybody.
- 14) Before *Roe vs. Wade*, the landmark court case regarding abortion in 1973, very few states in the U. S. legitimized abortion.
- 15) Linda Gray Sexton discloses a small event that triggered her mother’s impetus for writing this poem. See *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994), 16.
- 16) Sexton appointed her daughter Linda – who had shown an interest in reading and writing since childhood – as the literary executor of her estate when she was an undergraduate student at Harvard.
- 17) Anne Sexton, *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1985), 94.
- 18) Anne Sexton, *Live or Die* (Boston: Houghton, 1966). Henceforth the book will be indicated by LD, followed by the page numbers.
- 19) Middlebrook, *Biography*, 162.
- 20) J. D. McClatchy, “Somehow to Endure,” in Diane Hume George, *Sexton: Selected Criticism* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988), 55.