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**At A Loss For Words:  
Probing Subjectivity in Anne Sexton's *The Book of Folly***

© Julie Richardson  
61117

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*for my brother, Paul*

**"I promise you love. Time will not take away that."**

*All My Pretty Ones*  
Anne Sexton

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### Abstract

After receiving the transcript of one of her interviews, Anne Sexton archly commented to D. M. Thomas: "It's fascinating to read though in places highly inaccurate. I am known to lie, and I never let myself down" (M 279). The overlapping spaces between biography and confessional poetry are immediately vexed, particularly when Sexton's confessions relate directly to a problematic self, a multifaceted personality. The genre of confessional poetry, by definition, demands an intense use of personal experience, and Anne Sexton's *The Book of Folly* does indeed spill out the secrets of personal failure, emotional pain, sexual abuse, and mental illness; but the self that is created through art, the self that is expelled onto a page, vacillates between a number of ostensible truths and threatens to undermine the very core of confessional American poetry.

What become finally the tenuous "truths" of the body emerge through questions of maternity which are ultimately important to Sexton. She variously interrogates the relationships with her own mother and her two daughters and articulates the mother/daughter theme into visions which redound significantly on the division between the Imaginary and Symbolic stages of psychoanalytic development. Sexton plays out this distinction in images of language, hunger, and excrement, all of which hold a central focus in *The Book of Folly*. Accessing these realms through the theory of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, and peripherally through Mary Douglas' anthropological investigations, allows one to interrogate the fictional coherence of these notions more closely and to perceive the inevitability of Sexton's final act of self-sacrifice.

### Acknowledgments

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Diana Wood Middlebrook’s biography of Sexton has been an invaluable resource and stands testimony to the distinct allure and creative excellence of Anne Sexton.

I am indebted to my parents for their continued support and understanding throughout my “foreign” education.

And, finally, to Mark. Thank you for your patience and your confidence in my ability to finish what I had started. With my love.

Note on Citation

Works frequently cited are abbreviated as follows:

*BF*: Anne Sexton, *The Book of Folly* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972)

*Colburn*: Steven Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988)

*CP*: Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

*Letters*: Gray Sexton, Linda and Lois Ames, eds. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977)

*M*: Diana Wood Middlebrook. *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991)

*McClatchy*: *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978)

*Oedipus*: Diana Hume George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987)

## Preface

### Who Is She? Where Is She?

#### "Is It True?"

Confessional poetry, defined by Paul Lacey as “a new openness, a willingness to make poetry of experience unmediated by such doctrines of objectivity as the mask, the persona, or the objective correlative, a preoccupation with extraordinary experiences” (217), adheres to the Modernist sensibility that prioritizes the autonomy of the self. The identification, therefore, of Sexton’s “self/body” bifurcations, elucidated so clearly by Diana Hume George’s “The Zeal of Her House,” directs the reader to an appreciation of the “psychic fragmentation” that characterizes even as it distorts a portrayal of the subjective persona that was Anne Sexton. Despite the forceful and candid determination with which Sexton attempted to draw the contours of her self--“naked and quivering on the examination table of her art” (Gray Sexton 280)--her “vision of unification [of body and self] remained nostalgic or wistful, projected more often than achieved” (*Oedipus* 57). Nevertheless, the quixotic and impassioned personality with which Sexton attempted to negotiate the triumphs and torments of her existence, through her intricate weaving of psychic and artistic strains, valorizes Sexton’s distinctive position within the confessional canon.

Throughout her life, Anne Sexton grappled with identity. Her long-term psychotherapist Dr. Martin Orne expressed his concern that she tried to “live up to the 1950s image of the good wife and mother,” but found the task inordinately difficult. She was “helpless,” resentful, and embittered about her

inability to cope with the roles demanded of her (M xiii). In an interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton describes her mental state at the onset of her writing career:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down. I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself. (McClatchy 3-4)

Psychotherapy provided the springboard from which Anne Sexton was able to gain the strength to fuel a purpose and determination she had not yet known. She began to write poetry, resolute on developing her skills in order to articulate the painful experiences of her life, ultimately, to examine her own identity but, primarily, to "help other patients" (M xiii). The emergence, then, of a specific persona, "Anne Sexton--Poet," saw the beginnings of a prolific and exciting writing career in which "all of her arts converged ... on the mystery of identity" (McClatchy viii). Although this brought Anne Sexton to new levels of personal fulfilment and freedom of expression, it did little to consolidate the family unit. As far as Sexton's mother-in-law Billie was concerned, there was

no distinction between Anne Sexton's psychic malaise and her poetry: "Anne was getting rewarded for writing about an illness which had brought her family to its knees" (M 374).

Close inspection of Anne Sexton's poetic canon identifies the family, both nuclear and extended, as nourishment for her art; as Diana Hume George so convincingly notes, the family came to symbolize for Sexton a "microcosmic analogue of the social and psychic structure of her culture" (*Oedipus* 24). She bemoans traumatic childhood experiences with her parents, problematic relations with her two daughters, and a contrary dissatisfaction with her marriage. These provide the stimuli for many of her most confessional poems.

At the end of 1957, there was, as Middlebrook notes, "a decisive change of identity." Sexton had stopped indicating her title when submitting poems for publication, but instead simply signed Anne Sexton (65). By the time Sexton came to publish *The Book of Folly* in 1972 she had appropriated the appellation "Ms. Dog." She had finally discovered "an authentic social presence" that held no label or presupposition (M 40); she could move away from a perception of herself as a wife, daughter, and mother towards a redefinition of her role--that of writer and poet, which brought with it a new type of freedom. As Sexton asserts: "When writing you make a new reality" (M 62). This freedom permitted the adoption of a more objective stance from which Sexton could contemplate, more astutely, her major relationships.

Up until her divorce in 1973, Sexton remained firmly anchored in the familial unit. The independence that the divorce occasioned, however, prompted insufferable loneliness and isolation. Sexton began to realize, as Middlebrook notes, that "family life had upheld a sense of security that she had confused with inner strength" (379). With the family gone, Sexton becomes

more introverted, frantic, and demanding; it cannot be mere coincidence that within eighteen months of the breakdown of her marriage, Sexton committed suicide. She had constantly valorized her need for these close personal relationships: "I need my husband ... and my children to tell me who I am" (McClatchy 17). In this respect, the family does stand as an essential yardstick from which one may measure the extent of Sexton's "new" articulation of selfhood. This measurement is problematized, however, by Sexton's deliberate disorientation of the reader; one never knows the true extent of her sensationalism. Priding herself on an ability to entertain alternative forms of reality, she confesses that "poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical. It is truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life" (McClatchy 22). Here lies the allure of Anne Sexton; one which excites the reader into a thorough voyeuristic probing--Who is She? Where is She? "Is It True?"

**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?  
But I would cry,  
rooted into the wall that  
was once my mother,  
if I could remember how  
and if I had the tears.**

**“Self in 1958”**

### Introduction

The prefatorial comments accentuate the importance, for Anne Sexton, of the family unit. One is alerted, therefore, to the relationship between Sexton and her mother, which provides an appropriate and potent basis for enquiry and lends itself to a stimulating exploration of her poetry. The mother/daughter relationship foregrounds, as George notes, the “richness of feminine heritage as well as the pain” (*Oedipus* 59), and locates the female body as the “nexus for meaning and meaninglessness, for nurture and deprivation, for wholeness and fragmentation” (*Oedipus* 57). Feelings of guilt, love, disappointment, hunger, and desire centred upon the maternal presence emerge and submerge throughout Sexton’s oeuvre in metaphor, symbol, and imagery. Approaching *The Book of Folly*, one witnesses the arrival of a more tangible Mother figure that surfaces through a distinct pattern of binary oppositions and engages questions of masculinity/femininity, activity/passivity, sexuality/celebrity, and hunger/fulfilment.

*The Book of Folly* is generally regarded as an example of Sexton’s complete return to the fully confessional mode, because although “the subjects she recircles are familiar, ... her angle of attack and attitude is new: more self-conscious, often more strident and defiant, more searching” (McClatchy 279). What emerges is a sense of the speaker’s probing and yearning for a definitive subjectivity based on the almost vampiric need to feed from maternal sources and the indecorous desire to excrete all paternal associations. Thus, Sexton is continually trapped within a paradoxical conundrum, where she is always facing the question of whether her interiorized subjectivity may ever be fully and satisfactorily articulated.

The work of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Mary Douglas provides a

useful theoretical framework for analysis of Sexton's text. Surrounding the recurrent motif of the body, images of appetite, desire, language, and excrement cluster, emphasizing at once the central focus of the digestive tract and its association with fundamental human activity. French psychoanalytic theory, therefore, forms a useful point of departure from which one may begin to analyze the text to which Sexton herself referred as "very surreal, unconscious poems" (*Letters* 361). "Poetry, after all," remarks Sexton, "milks the unconscious" (McClatchy 5). If, as Sexton believed, poetry "should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us" (McClatchy 26), her verb--"milks"--may well be the sought-after tool. The generic symbol of food and maternal sustenance directs the reader to Mary Gray Staples Harvey, the mother to whom Sexton "[a]t twenty-eight ... was still agonizingly attached" (M 37), and for whom Sexton, throughout her life, entertained ambivalent emotions. Rather than having any confrontational ax to grind, Sexton merely wishes "[t]o take our warm blood into the great sea" (*CP* 506), to melt the icy waters, and to bring to the level of consciousness and language the troubled mental experiences borne in early childhood. In a letter to Mary Gray Harvey, dated Christmas Day 1957, Sexton writes: "I don't write for you, but know that one of the reasons I do write is that you are my mother" (*Letters* 33).

The first chapter, "Mother, Father, I'm Made Of," takes as its central thesis an investigation of Sexton's troubled relationship with her mother, and one perceives the desire for an emergence of an ideal maternal figure--the conflation of Mary Gray Sexton and Great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley--which stands in marked contradistinction to the figure of the father. This dynamic lends itself appropriately to a cursory consideration of Lacan's theoretical studies concerning a child's psychological development through the Imaginary

to the Symbolic stage. This redounds significantly on questions of desire for the mother, paternal rupturing of the maternal bond, and the acquisition of language. As Sexton's poetic vision unfolds through the layering of the poems, her speaker's regressing to the maternal body accelerates. The main obstacle encountered in this attempted reversion is language, which is continually problematic for Sexton. On the one hand it provides the means by which she may begin to confront many of the emotional issues that underpin her mental illness; on the other, it represents that intrinsic connection with the Lacanian Symbolic, the father she needs to repel and deny.

Lacan regards the Imaginary as a phase to be endured as a prerequisite to one's access into the masculine oriented "entire world system" (Lacan *Seminar III* 177), and it is here that the second aspect of Sexton's project emerges: a willingness to challenge the phallogentrism of extant Symbolic systems. Chapter 2, "This Business of 'Dirty' Words," considers Sexton's exploitation of language through her moving away from a mere celebration of the female body toward a more candid exploration of how the female body functions. This necessitates her recalling, not always accurately, intimate incidents of breast-feeding, potty-training, and sexual indiscretion at the hands of both her mother and her father.

The whole process of delving deeply into past experiences is akin to thrusting a bare arm down a rabbit hole. Indeed, Sexton's introspective disclosures *were* both shocking and painful, and they occasioned a highly ambivalent response. To Sexton's more empathetic critics, these "revelations [were] always forceful because of their intimacy, and valuable because of their authenticity" (McClatchy viii). For Sexton's family, however, throwing private vignettes out for public scrutiny was a humiliation they could not tolerate. As

Sexton's elder daughter Linda Gray recalls, "none of [the family] could understand why Anne wanted to breach the code of old Boston ethics upon which they had been raised by making family matters public" (35). Sexton would protest, however, that her discoveries were never intended to cause pain to her family (McClatchy 8), but she asserts: "I've / got to dig because there is / something down there" ("The Hoarder" *BF* 34). She explains: "On the one hand I was digging up shit, with the other hand I was covering it with sand" (6); yet, "I ... dare[d] myself to tell the whole story" (McClatchy 9). Clearly, the "shit" was there, symbolically in the form of dirt, vomit, blood, excrement, and disease. More acrimoniously, perhaps, from the family's perspective, the "shit" emerged literally in each autobiographically suggestive word of published poetry. Sexton's "brutally frank poetry," writes Linda Gray, "spared no one in its effort to bring enlightenment about the most human of experiences" (192). As Diana Hume George contends:

If your mother and your father - your culture - hate you for smelling up the hearth, then you will try to keep your waste inside. By analogy, the effort to push it out, to speak, will meet with equal contempt, because the woman's waste, her special evil, is the bodily reminder of mortality and creatureliness. ("Feeding" 361)

Recurrent in Sexton's work is this emphasis on dirt, disease, and excrement--notions which threaten to rupture what Catherine Clément describes as "the *stabilizing* element through which runs the split between nature and culture" (29).

Cixous and Clément's *The Newly Born Woman*, in conjunction with Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture," provides a useful

outline of the cultural and social ideology that has effected the marginalization of women. Cixous' "Sorties," in particular, focuses on moments of rupture in and break-out of the culturally defined binary economy, as women give birth to themselves in writing. An investigation of Cixous' imagistic use of menstrual blood and breast milk as part of a network of textual signifiers, coupled with the contamination implied by the use of such metaphors, serves as a relevant introduction to the discussion of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which deals specifically with the threatening potential of bodily fluids. Kristeva also highlights the paradoxes inherent in a subject's craving to privilege the matriarchal narrative. The mother is the first victim of abjection for the child, after which the child may ascend to the Symbolic order. Problems arise when the self desires to reject the Symbolic phase in order to effect a regression to the mother, but one of the ways Sexton attempts this impossibility is to disrupt the status quo through an articulation of images of defilement.

Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* approaches the subject of defilement from an anthropological perspective. In her chapter on "The Abominations of Leviticus," Douglas introduces the Hebrew word *tebhel*, which may be translated as "confusion," that which needs to be harmonized, excreted, and denied in order that an integral and unified subject may emerge. Anne Sexton, undertaking to intellectualize the unintellectualizable, desires identification with the mother, yet finds herself subsumed by language. Thus, for Sexton, language is the *tebhel*, the abject; language is the Other, which has to be expelled.

Sexton's project was singularly unsuccessful. Such was her determination to find the truth, however, that Sexton makes one final attempt at seeking identification through an other--this time it is Jesus, a topic that is

developed in Chapter 3, "The Truth the Dead Know." Sexton approaches this task primarily by considering the relationship between Jesus and His mother, in an attempt to illuminate the nuances in her own relationship with Mary Gray. She then tries to perceive Jesus/God as the ultimate father figure because, as Susan Kavalier notes: "This view of God was the ultimate for Sexton, seen through little girl eyes of her own father" (106). Sexton also detects a parallel between herself and Jesus as they both play to a captivated audience. Finally, she acknowledges that, as Christ sacrificed Himself to redeem the sins of the world, her own self-sacrifice is the only path open. This posits an interesting connection between the symbolic resonance of the Christ figure, who appears in the "Jesus Papers" sequence, and the whole question of sacrifice and the surrender of the female body that is increasingly apparent in the latter section of *The Book of Folly*.

As Sexton moves toward her own untimely, yet ultimately controlled, demise, one is led to assume that the return to the maternal body for which she has constantly striven, coupled with the subsequent peace and forgiveness such a state would afford, may only be achieved through death. Indeed, the idea of death was a theme not only of Sexton's last years but a preoccupation of her entire poetic career. Yet, her language will remain. "Only a fool," writes Linda Gray, "would accept the idea that the woman who had made a documentary out of her life would leave this world without a word" (4). Poetry has been the means by which, as Michael Burns notes, Sexton "internalize[d] ... rage and guilt for lack of an outlet" (134), and it is her voice, manipulated into a pursuit for self-definition, in the form of questions rather than answers, as a means of exorcizing the ghosts within, that reaches out to readers of her poetry, evoking a powerful sense of empathy and recognition:

It is, they say, the voice of a woman, newborn and yet archaic,  
 a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage. (Gilbert  
 ix)

Tracing along the same lines, but with a different conclusion in sight, Sexton  
 would put it another way:

In my dream  
 I milked a cow,  
 the terrible udder  
 like a great rubber lily  
 sweated in my fingers  
 and as I yanked,  
 waiting for the moon juice,  
 waiting for the white mother,  
 blood spurted from it  
 and covered me with shame. ("The Author of the Jesus  
 Papers Speaks" *BF* 105)

The frustration and revulsion of the infant's suckling mouth is also the  
 frustration of an inability to form words. Sexton's attempts at expurgation are  
 persistently overshadowed by her struggles with an antipathetic response to  
 language, a response born in hunger and one which anticipates the necessity  
 for her ultimate act of self-sacrifice.

*“The great theme we all share is that of becoming ourselves,  
of overcoming our father and mother,  
of assuming our identities somehow.”*

**-from Anne Sexton’s early introduction for “The Double Image,”  
used during readings from her poetry.**

## Chapter 1

### Mother, Father, I'm Made Of

"I would sink into the great mother arms / I never had"

from "In Excelsis"

April 1, 1974.

Even within the already loquacious and candid confessional poetry movement, Anne Sexton's work divulged deeper and more intense levels of personal experience. Through a celebration and valorization of the female body, Sexton broadens the experiential territory, sparing no details about breasts, menstruation, abortion, miscarriages, and masturbation--indeed, sexuality in general and "genitals," her father's "serpent," and her "tiny jail" of a vagina in particular. Needless to say, she remained resolute, perhaps even perversely defiant, despite the chagrined response of outraged sensibilities in mid-twentieth century America. Robert Lowell, a proponent himself of the confessional genre, was moved to note: "Many of [Sexton's] most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author" (24).

*The Book of Folly*, considered by some to be Sexton's "most shocking and subversive work" (Ostriker 267), takes as its thesis the speaker's spiritual quest. This begins as an attempt at identification with and through significant others within a close familial and social network. Initially, Sexton resurrects the remembrances of childhood and adolescence, specifically associated with her mother and father, as a means of interrogating the feelings of confusion, guilt, and abandonment that her parents' memory evokes. Sexton's plaintive cry is audible throughout her poetry, and one bears witness to her desperate

search for the answers that constantly evade her. The psychoanalytical import of such a quest directs one to Jacques Lacan and, in particular, his theory respecting a child's psychological development from the Imaginary to the Symbolic stage. One is able to detect the yearning for a strong but caring maternal presence that would offer mental and physical nourishment to the needy subject; the poetry evidences the speaker's willingness to risk all to effect this end, ultimately prompting her desire for the metaphorical death of the father. Sexton's quest is intrinsically linked to the implication of what it means to be female. The introduction, therefore, of the mother-daughter relationship into the text, with its emphasis on the somatic and psychological connotations of femininity, serves as a useful point of departure.

During her childhood, Sexton experienced two important maternal influences, both of which were to play significant roles throughout her poetry. Sexton's biological mother, Mary Gray Staples Harvey, was an assertive, strong-minded woman, fiercely independent, and one who "tended to squelch Anne or to compete with her, and ... doled out approval parsimoniously" (M 37). Sexton told Dr. Orne, "I know I was dependent - but Mother didn't want to be motherly. I clung to her" (Therapy Tape: May, 9 1961). On the other hand, Great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley, "Nana," provided the warm and caring refuge for Sexton in the midst of a troubled childhood. Nana and Sexton called each other "twins," and spent much time together; Nana was lonely and Anne wanting and they offered solace for one another: "While they lay together under Nana's blue-bordered quilt, Nana would stroke Anne's back and ... reminisce about the old days" (M 15).

The deaths of these two figures prompted intense feelings of guilt for Sexton. She believed that her own apparent selfishness, through inexpedient

remarks and actions, had effected the irrevocable separations between herself and her two “mothers,” as the proceeding biographical anecdotes elucidate. When Sexton was about thirteen, she told Nana about her first kiss with boyfriend Michael Bearpark. Shortly afterwards Nana went insane and was institutionalized. Sexton associated her own sexual awakening with Nana’s illness and subsequent demise (M 16-7), a subject that was to emerge over and over again throughout her poetry and in her therapy sessions. “The Hex” (BF 24) is a direct response to these childhood events, and the imagery reflects the irrational echoes of the “Nana-song” where purity and innocence are substituted with evil and disease: “a sonnet turns into a dirty joke, / a wind turns into a tracheotomy.” The repetition of Nana’s words--“You did it. You are the evil”--leads to the speaker’s seeking comfort in “Brandy” and “Librium,” but the guilt remains and the “old woman’s shriek of fear” continues to haunt the speaker: “I am still the criminal” (BF 25).

Feelings of guilt feature prominently again with the death of Sexton’s mother. Mary Gray died of breast cancer, a disease Sexton believed was caused by the stress associated with her own twice attempted suicide and immortalized in an early poem, “The Double Image”:

She turned from me, as if death were catching,  
as if death transferred,  
as if my dying had eaten inside of her ...  
On the first of September she looked at me  
and said I gave her cancer. (CP 38)

From this perspective, Mother, the generic representation of a child’s primary caregiver, is ensconced in a psyche riddled with guilt and regret. The speaker’s attempt at coping with these shameful emotions is to effect a regression to

childhood, specifically herself as a suckling baby, with the intention of recreating the infantile bond.

During the countless psychiatric sessions that began in 1956, Sexton attained some understanding that her inability to separate from her mother was a central issue in her psychiatric treatment; yet she longed for the comfort such a union would afford: "I am going out of my mind, is there no place that is calm, a pool of milk. I want my mother" (M 174).<sup>1</sup> One is tempted to question exactly which mother it is for whom Sexton yearns. In a letter written to Lois Ames during Sexton's trip to Europe, she concludes: "Capri is like a beautiful mother ... Capri is the mother we never had, young, beautiful, exotic, accepting and loving arms" (*Letters* 299-300). Certainly, Mary Gray does not fit this description and one is alerted to Sexton's possible desire for the conflation of Mary Gray and Nana into a single ideal. Nana clearly offers unconditional love and support, but perhaps her love was unfulfilling because it came too easily. Mary Gray, coded more as a patriarchal presence due to her manipulative, distant, cold, and competitive nature, presents more of a challenge.

The externalization of Mary Gray's love and encouragement was a rare sight. More often than not, Sexton wallowed in despair at her mother's frequent repudiation and apparent nonchalance, as the following vignette illustrates. Mary Gray accused Sexton of plagiarism and sent some of her writing to a college professor in New York for his expert opinion. Despite his conclusion that "the work was probably original and showed a lot of promise," Sexton was devastated by her mother's doubtings (M 21). No one else's encouragement would have mattered to her; as Sexton announced to interviewer Barbara Kevles: "My mother was top billing in our house" (24). Any kind of attention was welcomed, therefore, and when Mary Gray ignored her daughter, she would

witness “outlandish fits of rage” (M 37). Sexton was also the victim of enemas and genital examinations at the hands of Mary Gray, and recalled her own childhood as “a time scarred with incidents of emotional pain” (Gray Sexton 15). In this light, one may confidently assume that it is not Mary Gray in isolation for whom Sexton yearns, but rather a “mother figure” comprising the superlative qualities of Nana and Mary Gray.<sup>2</sup> It is hunger for this mother, inherent within the poetic symbolism, that produces, as Steven Colburn attests, “fertile ground for exploring the interconnectedness of suffering and love, particularly across the generations of women in a family” (19). This fertile ground initiates a focus on the female body and centres upon images of hunger, desire, and fulfilment.

A posthumously published poem, “Food,” helps explain Sexton’s presentation of hunger for the maternal body. Following the motif of the digestive tract, one is encouraged to begin by considering the many images that pertain to feeding: “I want mother’s milk / that good sour soup” (CP 488).<sup>3</sup> The portrayal of milk as “feminine and cosmic grace,” clarified by Stephanie Demetrakopoulos’ “The Nursing Mother and Feminine Metaphysics,” confirms the “strength of the symbol of milk as [one of] transcendence and celebration” (435). Middlebrook is moved to comment that, for Sexton, “[m]ilk became her personal sign for the grace that could flow from and toward her” (353). During one therapy session, Sexton related a troubling incident to Dr. Orne: “There I was curled up like a little girl,<sup>4</sup> right back in the womb, on your mother’s couch”<sup>5</sup> (Therapy Tape: February 26, 1963). One would not be surprised to learn that, at the time, Sexton was drinking from a carton of milk (M 175).

In “Food,” Sexton’s speaker desires the mother-love that emanates from suckling as well as the nourishing milk to sustain her mental and physical

hunger. There is an appreciation of the mother's body as a "transmutation system," holding the power to "change [the] body to food which becomes in turn the physical and psychic energy of her child. She is creating an incarnate soul, assisting its growth" (Demetrakopoulos 434). The maternal nourishment for which the speaker yearns, however, is not forthcoming. In "Food," her wants and needs are unfulfilled, since

Your nipples are stitched up like sutures  
and although I suck  
I suck air  
and even the big fat sugar moves away. (CP 489)

Throughout *The Book of Folly*, images of "mother-food" are clearly discernible. In "The Ambition Bird" (BF 3), the speaker is drinking cocoa, "that warm brown mama," which helps to temper the neurotic flutterings of inspiration that aggravate her insomnia; and, within the "milky" world of "The Doctor of the Heart" (BF 5), the speaker finds herself "sucking up the biological breast." The emphasis remains on the warm, soothing properties of such food. Desire for the mother, however, is most clearly developed in "Dreaming the Breasts" (BF 26). Here, the mother is specifically associated with a "strange goddess," who exudes transcendental grace. It is useful to juxtapose "Dreaming the Breasts" and "Jesus Suckles" (BF 93); in the latter, Jesus is humanized into a projection of Sexton's ego, because like Sexton, Jesus is obsessed with His mother and His own sexuality. They both share a need for maternal nourishment but the intrinsic difference indicates Jesus' suckling as a positive experience: "I grow. I grow. I'm fattening out." The Virgin Mary produces milk, and the symbiotic bond between mother and child is very strong: "You give me milk / and we are the same / and I am glad" (BF 93).

In "Dreaming the Breasts," the speaker's needs result in a figurative consumption of her Mary: "I ate you up. / All my need took / you down like a meal"; but the ineffective breast is once again central: "In the end they cut off your breasts" and, despite the fact that "milk poured from them," it flows straight "into the surgeon's hand." The poem is charged with futile attempts to hold on to the mother figure. By planting the cancerous breasts, the speaker believes "I have put a padlock / on you, Mother, dear dead human." It is, however, too late and feelings of guilt are clear: "I put bees in my mouth / to keep from eating / yet it did you no good." The speaker's recollections of the tender moments in childhood are as vague and foggy as a dream, and the "milk home" is lost forever (*BF* 26-7).

"Anna Who Was Mad" (*BF* 22) is imbued with feelings of guilt again, which stem from the belief that Sexton was responsible for her Great-aunt's death: "Am I some sort of infection? / Did I make you go insane?" The need for maternal love and affection is very clear: "Speak Mary-words into our pillow. / Take me ... into your sunken lap." This time, however, in a direct inversion of "Dreaming the Breasts," the speaker offers herself as a source of nourishment, in an act of repentance: "Eat me. Eat me up like cream pudding. / Take me in." The speaker beseeches Anna for forgiveness: "Give me a complete statement of my actions ... Say I did not ... Forgive. Forgive." There are hints of eroticism through mention of "our pillow" and emphasis on the embracing, physical aspect of the relationship.

It is illuminating to consider, at this point, the psychoanalytical implications of Lacanian theory as it concerns a child's progression from the Imaginary to the Symbolic phase. The Imaginary stage corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period when the child--between 6 and 8 months old--perceives

him/herself as an incorporated self whose identity and presence come from an association with the mother, or mother figure. There is, thus, no separation between the child and the world, and no sense of a separate self:

The child's world ... is manufactured out of a container - this would be the body of the mother ... In the course of the development of his instinctual relations with this privileged object, the mother, the child is led into instigating a series of relations of imaginary incorporations. He can bite, absorb the body of his mother. The style of this incorporation is one of destruction. (*Seminar I* 81)

One may determine the parallels extant between Lacan's theory and Sexton's verse. The image of a child "absorb[ing] the body of [the] mother" recalls Sexton's adoption of infantile characteristics, through her poetic persona, due to a desired return to the pre-Oedipal state.

To remain within the Imaginary is synonymous with becoming psychotic and unable to function within society. Sexton was diagnosed as a psychotic personality, yet it is not clear to what extent Sexton's psychotic symptoms in themselves would influence her desire to return to the mother; however, psychosis, defined as an inability to distinguish reality from imagination, would promote a confidence in the belief that the impossible is possible, the unattainable is attainable. Indeed, as Kathleen Spivack professes, "[Sexton's] striking gifts as a poet were those of an image maker, somewhat related to the open, imagist state of psychosis" (Colburn 27).

One should note, however, that during the 1950s and 60s relatively little was known about mental illness. As well as psychotic, Sexton was also diagnosed as manic depressive and schizophrenic; she was prone to insomnia,

and also exhibited suicidal and anorexic tendencies associated with a postpartum depression. Whatever the symptoms, Dr. Orne encouraged Sexton to do some writing about her experiences, to turn the sickness inside her into a helpful message for other mental patients. She naturally adopted the confessional genre--the voicing of guilt. *The Book of Folly*, specifically, is an almost direct record of Sexton's psychotherapy and of her preoccupations at the time of its writing--preoccupations with guilt and separation which were to haunt her for the remaining years of her life:

I struck out memory with an X

but it came back.

I tied down time with a rope

but it came back.

Then

I put my head in a death bowl... ("Killing the Spring" *BF* 36)

Freud himself advocates the benefits of writing as a potential psychoanalytic cure to rid patients of their visions and nightmares. During the treatment of hysterics, for example, Freud asserts: "The patient is, as it were, getting rid of [the memory picture] by turning it into words ... the picture vanishes like a ghost that has been laid" (2: 180-1).

Linda Gray, Sexton's elder daughter, had always understood and appreciated her mother's use of "Language," which represented "the power of words to communicate a wealth of nuance and meaning" (Gray Sexton 116). Indeed, this "power of words" was the legacy, handed down in the "Gray" chain of talent from the essayist Arthur Gray Staples to his poetry-dabbling and letter-writing daughter Mary Gray Harvey, from Mary Gray to Anne Gray Harvey Sexton, and finally to Linda Gray, poet and novelist. Language came

to symbolize the strand of artistry that bound the generations together. The theme of genetic as well as material inheritance occupies a central focus in “The Red Shoes” (*BF* 28). The shoes are specifically associated with an innocence that is tarnished and unrecognizable by its being passed down through the generations. The speaker, tying on the red shoes, is haunted by forthcoming disaster and disease:

Everything that was calm  
is mine...  
the stove long before it boils toads,  
the parlor, white in winter, long before flies,  
the doe lying down on moss, long before the bullet.  
I tie on the red shoes. (*BF* 28)

There is an emphasis on shame--the shame of womanhood, of sexuality, of independence--and denial, both of which find a public voice through language:

They are not mine.  
They are my mother’s.  
Her mother’s before.  
Handed down like an heirloom  
but hidden like shameful letters. (*BF* 28)

Women should remain in “[t]he house and the street where they belong”; venturing into the public world, seeking fulfilment for their ambition, can only result in “the death dance,” being caught up like a whirling dervish in the inevitable fate of womanhood.

Undoubtedly ambition, as the opening poem of *The Book of Folly* suggests, is dangerous. The predictably masculine personification, reminiscent of Icarus, foresees himself being “dropped / from a high place like Tallahatchie Bridge” or

sealed in the elaborate paintwork of the Sistine Chapel, all because “He wants” (“The Ambition Bird” *BF* 3). Through the enactment of this paradigmatic drama, the speaker faces two options: She may continue struggling with this “business of words” or opt for “a simple life.” Neither offers solace: it is not “Dear God ... good enough to just drink cocoa,” yet she acknowledges that her Siren-like Muse is luring her to death--“my lay-away plan, / my coffin.” Art wins and the “death dance” commences, hurling the poet/speaker, like Icarus, toward the inexorable cycle of destruction that is inherent in the quest for truth.

Questions of female limitation posed by “The Ambition Bird” are predicated once again on the symbolic resonance of the body--the palpable, passive Mother. Hélène Cixous passionately denounces the equation of femininity with passivity and death, which allows no positive space for woman. Indeed, the options for active, public-voiced woman may well be, as Kathleen Spivack proposes, “suicide or madness” (Colburn 37), because, as these poems suggest, “self-sacrifice is the condition of self-acceptance, and to be feminine is to be either powerless or punished” (Ostriker 275). Returning to Cixous, one may, through her provocative phrasing, identify the root cause of the fatal legacy that is womanhood:

Whenever it is a question of woman, when one examines kinship structures, when a family model is brought into play. In fact, as soon as the question of ontology raises its head, as soon as one asks oneself “what is it?,” as soon as there is intended meaning. Intention: desire, authority - examine them and you are led right back ... to the father. (Cixous 64)

To refer once again to Lacan, one appreciates the significance of the

father through his role in the Oedipal crisis, which “thrusts” the child from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The father thus causes a disruption of the child’s unity with the mother, symbolically forbidding further access to the maternal body. In this light, it is not surprising perhaps that as Sexton desires self-identification with the mother, she anticipates the necessity for expulsion of the father because, according to Lacan, the phallus, which represents the Law of the Father, comes to signify loss and separation for the child.

Themes of feeding and sexuality, this time with masculine connotations, are evidenced throughout *The Book of Folly*, but the emphasis moves away from nurturing and caregiving; Sexton’s speaker implicates male figures in her drama, holding them responsible for draining much of her sexual, emotional, spiritual, and linguistic energy. Diana Hume George notes that the portrayal of the father-daughter relationship is equally as impassioned as that of the mother-daughter motif. Where the mother had strongly advocated a perpetuation of the stereotypical silent, passive female role, the father emerges as the personification of sexual desire. The father violates his chaste daughter, but ultimately fails in his role as her champion. The “mythopoetic music” of the father’s seduction dance echoes, for Sexton and her speaker, in the dying “swan song” that permeates the poetry and her personal life (George “Danced” 179).

Sexton’s recollection of the relationship with her father includes incidents of fondling and kissing. In one therapy session, she remembers: “He is holding me. He says to press up against him, sort of wriggles and asks if I like it. And it feels good” (Dr. Orne’s notes, May 13, 1958). There are many reminiscences of abusive remarks directed at Sexton by Ralph Harvey, which have distinct sexual overtones. Although Sexton’s mental condition resulted in her

sexualizing significant relationships, there is still sufficient evidence to suggest that the events recalled so vividly and frequently throughout her therapy may have a basis in truth. As Lois Ames was moved to comment: "I could never believe anything *but* that Anne was a victim of child sexual abuse by ... her father" (M 58).

Sexton explores the love and desire for her father in the narrative sequence "The Death of the Fathers" (*BF* 41-53). Here the father becomes increasingly unavailable to the daughter as the sequence progresses. Initially, he is unattainable sexually because he is the father. He then emerges as a drunkard which renders him impotent; this is succeeded by his being dead. Finally, the father is usurped by another figure, Azel Mack, and doubt is thrown over the speaker's legitimacy: "Father me not / for you are not my father. Today there is that doubt" (*Begat*" *BF* 50).

It is apropos that the beginning of the sequence, "How We Danced" (*BF* 42), reintroduces the tragic swan theme and culminates in the two dancers "bent together / like two lonely swans." The oxymoronic imagery of this final line identifies the isolation and dependence of the characters, providing what George terms "a structural outline for the psychic biography of a gender" ("Danced" 179). The psychoanalytic basis, here, points particularly to what Phyllis Chesler calls "woman's 'dependent' and 'incestuous' personality" in relation to her father (41). A dependence on father-figures pervades much of Sexton's work. After her own father's death in 1959, she resurrects the father figure in many forms: husband, lover, psychiatrist, God. The "real" father who emerges in *The Book of Folly*, however, assumes the identity of a determined seducer.

Death and resurrection of the father, in all of his personas, figure

prominently throughout Sexton's canon. As one moves through "The Death of the Fathers" sequence, the character of the seducing father metamorphoses into the "stranger" upon whom she wishes death. Julia Kristeva, in her recent publication, *Strangers to Ourselves*, outlines the notion of the stranger: one who is alien, foreign; one who is the Other (1). The paradox therefore stems from an unwillingness to attempt assimilation with the father, because in his role as stranger he emerges from Kristeva's text as "the hidden face of our identity" (*Strangers* 1):

It is through unravelling transference - the major dynamics of otherness, of love/hatred for the other, of the foreign component of our psyche - that, on the basis of the other, I become reconciled with my own otherness - foreignness, that I play on it and live by it. Psychoanalysis is then experienced as a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable. (*Strangers* 182)

Kristeva advocates the need for a recognition of one's own otherness before one may reach any reconciliation with a separate other. The ultimate symptom of an inability to assimilate the other--as a prospect of self-relation in Kristevan terms--is a "destruction of the self." This may enforce symptoms of psychosis since the "uncanniness" or "*Unheimliche*" that results occasions the boundaries between one's perception of the imaginary and one's perception of the real to be obliterated (*Strangers* 188).

As one analyzes the "Death of the Fathers" sequence, one is prompted to recollect Sexton's confusion between fantasy and reality. The memories evoked in "Oysters" and "How We Danced" are focused on desire and a sexual

awakening by the father. Thus, it is through the father that the speaker gains an awareness of passion, sex, and death. What begins, in "Oysters," as a simple meal results in the speaker's first sexual experience: "I was fifteen / and eating oysters / and the child was defeated." The food motif has been introduced, but this time it is definitively labelled "father-food." This food--oysters and martini--served chilled, becomes the antithesis of the warm milky mother-food for which the speaker has so desperately yearned. Father-food is much more readily available, requiring no preparation other than to refrigerate before serving. There is no disappointment, no waiting, no begging. The oysters, renowned for their aphrodisiac qualities, served with acidic lemon and spicy Tabasco, are fearful to the child but laughable to the woman. As the child forces herself to swallow the "sweet blue babies," the father laughs at her attempts:

I was afraid to eat this father-food  
and Father laughed  
and drank down his martini,  
clear as tears.

It was a soft medicine  
that came from the sea into my mouth,  
moist and plump.

I swallowed. (*BF* 41)

The speaker's successful passage into womanhood is dependent upon her passing a test. Is she willing to swallow this alien food? The challenge hovers between sexuality and sensuality, and implies fellatio under the mandatory yet thinly veiled masquerade of eating oysters.

Once the inauguration is complete, the speaker rejoices with laughter at

the “death of childhood.” One is alerted to the playful attitude the speaker exhibits as she emerges from her chrysalis. This is a victory tinged with sadness but devoid of guilt, and it echoes Sexton’s emotional response to her own father’s impending death. In a letter to W. D. Snodgrass, dated November 26, 1958, Sexton writes: “My father is now ill with a cerebral hemorrhage and so I have that to worry about, now. Though I shan’t write a poem about it. No guilt there - sorrow is easier than guilt” (*Letters* 44).

Guilt, associated with the father, is an emotion Sexton rarely experiences. This may be investigated, in psychoanalytic terms, through a discussion of Sexton’s hysteric tendencies. As Rosemary Johnson professes: “An hysteric ... cannot truly experience guilt, for if one perceives events to be outside one’s control ... then one cannot possibly be to blame or in any real sense responsible. The fault must lie elsewhere” (100). For Sexton, the fault lay with her father, in all of his poetic manifestations. The father certainly controlled events in “Oysters”; and “How We Danced” finds the father, once again, at the centre of the action, monopolizing his daughter and disregarding his wife. The scene takes place at a cousin’s wedding, and the speaker dances with her father to the somewhat ironic tune, “Oh how we danced on the night we were wed.” The father-food takes the form of champagne, which he uses to lure his daughter into a closely embracing dance during which his “serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against [her].” The father’s penis speaks of desire and union, while he, observing propriety, “never say[s] a word.” “The Boat” (*BF* 44) sustains the sexual imagery, but this time the tenderness has been invaded by a forceful aggression:

Now the waves are higher;  
they are round buildings.

We start to go through them

and the boat shudders.

Father is going faster.

I am wet.

I am tumbling on my seat

like a loose kumquat. (*BF* 44-5)

The daughter inevitably replaces the mother, a theme that emerges as the boat “speeds out past Cuckold’s Light,” and continues in “Santa” (*BF* 46).

In “Santa,” the speaker and her father are “conspirators, / secret actors,” who play out the roles of mother and father for the children and grandchildren, but “[t]he era closes” and the father is dead. Sexton’s need is to believe in a genuinely true and caring father; but, like the need to believe in Santa Claus, the childhood fantasy fades:

Father,

the Santa Claus suit

you bought from Wolff Fording Theatrical Supplies,

back before I was born,

is dead.

The white beard you fooled me with

and the hair like Moses,

the thick crimped wool

that used to buzz me on the neck,

is dead. (*BF* 46)

George’s “mythopoetic” theme is still prevalent through the family’s desire to maintain its festive traditions, maintaining a distance between the child and the adults through this Santa Claus lie. The emphasis remains focused on

deception and disguise throughout this sequence, and it is the association of the father with falsehood that the speaker wishes to dismiss. She equates lack of trust and belief with death: "The year I ceased to believe in you / is the year you were drunk." The father becomes further distanced by doubt as the sequence continues, until he is literally rendered "that stranger / who knew mother too well" (*BF* 49).

By the final poem, "Bogat" (*BF* 50), a clear affiliation between the dismissal of the father and the rejection of a patriarchal discourse has been established. "Santa," "the old Rumpelstiltskin," "God," "the Devil," and "Good King Wenceslas" are the figures who have become "my history." The man who "ate my heart in half" must be rejected; despite the "familial resemblances," the speaker instructs this "Stranger" to "go your own way" and, by implication, to take with him the dominance of patriarchy:

I say take your sperm,  
it is old,  
it has turned to acid,  
it will do you no good. (*BF* 52)

"The Doctor of the Heart" (*BF* 5) is not dismissed so ruthlessly; however, the speaker challenges her psychiatrist forcefully. She no longer allows him to maintain the position of authority as the man who soothes her mental anguish and solves her personal problems. The speaker no longer needs this man to help her make sense of the information trapped within her psyche: "Here is a sponge. I can squeeze it myself." She is in defiance of the death that she feels the doctor is leading her toward and, with a deliberate reference to her perception of him as a German dictator, she dismisses him: "Herr Doktor! I'll no longer die / to spite you" (*BF* 6).

Within *The Book of Folly*, the three principal poems that perpetuate the myth of feminine victimization at the hands of a series of violent male figures are “The Wifebeater” (BF 13), “The One-Legged Man” (BF 16), and “The Assassin” (BF 18). The aggression of the wifebeater stems from a hatred of his mother “who kept him chained to the food tree.” His inability--or unwillingness--to detach himself from this domineering maternal figure results in violence toward all women, who emerge as the ceaseless “enemy.” The one-legged man, with his “broken tool, poor ornament,” symbolizes the plight of impotent, worn, and useless men who are perceived as a burden on society: “Once there was blood / as in a murder / but now there is nothing.” “The Assassin”(BF 18), however, personifies the temptation of sexuality: “He is my evil and my apple,” yet “I will see him home.” All of these “castrated figures” are, as Ostriker notes, “*animus* figures” for Sexton (275)--figures whom she tries to assimilate but ultimately rejects.

Rejection is further emphasized in “The Other” (BF 30), which is an attempt at confrontation with the alien self from which the speaker cannot escape, the other self who insanely possesses her. Predictably, the other assumes a masculine identity: “Mr. Doppelgänger. My brother. My spouse.” Through this confrontation, the speaker acknowledges that, in the end, “truth comes spilling out like peas.” The truth identifies subjectivity as needing otherness against which to define itself, but the speaker disregards the warning and determines to exorcize the enemy. What emerges from the text is an appreciation that while the speaker yearns for self-identification through an other, the prerequisite is that the other must assume a feminine persona.

Attempts at restoring the maternal bonds with Mary Gray and Nana have been unsuccessful, and Sexton’s attentions are then directed toward a

refiguring of the maternal bond between herself and daughter Linda. Linda emerges through the poetry as yet another conflated figure, who engages both maternal and paternal qualities. On the one hand, she nurtures and cares for Sexton: "At nine I was required to *be* the mother ... because she became so sick she could not take care of herself" (60), but Linda also "revel[s]" in "Language" (Gray Sexton 301) and, in her mother's eyes, sustains highly charged sexual associations. Sexton is able to trap her young daughter in a web of cross-hatched sexuality where she may easily assume control as the crude seductress. The incestuous nature of this relationship has until recently been merely a subject for speculation; homoerotic images pervade much of Sexton's poetry. Middlebrook's biography and Linda Gray's recent memoir *Searching for Mercy Street*, however, have thrown considerable light onto this disturbing subject. Only after many years of harboring the shame and horror associated with her mother's inappropriate behaviour has Linda Gray been able to confront what happened and verify it through her writing: "Her tongue - it's in my mouth. Wet and slimy. She's putting the poison down deep inside!" (Gray Sexton 267). After such incidents, when Sexton would openly masturbate over Linda and passionately caress her, Sexton would then return to the role of mother, soothing her daughter with a cool facecloth and tender words.

In light of this, one may appreciate the desperation inherent in "Mother and Daughter" (*BF* 11) evidenced through the speaker's growing sense of abandonment and frustration with her daughter's increasing independence and developing sexuality. These two concerns are so poignantly expressed in the poem's ambiguous opening imagery: "Linda, you are leaving / your old body now." Linda has outgrown her own child-body, but there is also the speaker's

inherent perception of herself as an “old body,” which affirms the physical role of the female body; yet, it is a body that is useless and barren: “I am motherwarm and used.” Linda, akin to a “burglar,” has “picked my pocket clean / and ... racked up all my / poker chips and left me empty.” Linda is no longer willing to divulge her innermost thoughts, and mother’s probing questions remain unanswered. The “womanly leggy semaphore” is free to taste the “fruit” of sexuality, while mother contemplates the “gray lips” of death (*BF* 11-2).

Paul Lacey argues that Anne Sexton envisioned herself as “the kind of parent who sets her children free and thus breaks the cycle of guilt and shame which has marked her family history” (Colburn 238). The poetry and Linda Gray Sexton’s memoir, however, stand testimony to the very difficult and oftentimes demanding relationship between this mother and daughter, a relationship branded by feelings of remorse and humiliation. The kind of separation caused by her mother’s death, that traumatized Sexton, was forced on Linda at a much earlier age. Because of Sexton’s increasing depression, Linda, at age three, was sent to live with Blanche, Sexton’s sister. Linda recalls:

I was taken away from my mother at the period of childhood in which separation anxiety is acute for even the most secure, beloved child. This rupture in the fabric of our family was the event that defined my childhood, just as her responsibility for casting me out was the event that defined her motherhood.

(Gray Sexton 11)

Linda believed that somehow, even unconsciously, the deliberate separation from her mother that was subject of “Mother and Daughter” was a means of

seeking revenge for the abandonment Anne had felt as a child (Gray Sexton 146).

The speaker hopes to transfer to her daughter many of her own idiosyncrasies as well as the conflicts and inadequacies of the past with which she can no longer cope. She is passing on the fatal legacy of womanhood:

Now that you are eighteen  
 I give you my booty, my spoils,  
 my Mother & Co. and my ailments...  
 ...Keep on, keep on, keep on,  
 carrying keepsakes to the boys,  
 carrying powders to the boys,  
 carrying, my Linda, blood to  
 the bloodletter. (*BF* 11-12)

Linda also featured prominently, in Sexton's psychological life, as an object of projection--one onto whom Sexton launches often contradictory aspects of herself. When Sexton was unable to cope with the demands of motherhood, she cajoled Linda into adopting the senior role while she reverted to being a helpless child. Sexton named this procedure "playing nine." Linda Gray recalls:

Playing nine means that I - the real nine-year-old - slide up in the bed and she slides down, puts her head on my chest while I pat her head. "Now you be the Mommy," she says. "And I'm your little girl." (Gray Sexton 58)

When Linda, unable to maintain the pretence, pleads for her mother's return to her true role, she hears the inevitable response: "I can't be thirty-four - I'm just a little girl. Don't you want me anymore?" (Gray Sexton 59). This episode

redounds significantly on questions of projection and its prominence in Sexton's psychoanalytic therapy, and recalls earlier role reversal incidents. Both Nana and Sexton's parents engaged a trading of places as their sicknesses accelerated: Nana "got sick and just wanted to be my mother's child" (M 15), and "Mary Gray and Ralph were diminishing, turning as needy and helpless as little children" (M 102). Within four months of each other, both of Sexton's parents were dead, leaving only a small legacy for their daughter: a fur coat, a diamond, a few rare books. The richest inheritance, however, was "an abundance of unvoiced emotion which would fill Anne's poetry for years to come" (M 31).

The disturbing unconscious that emerges through Sexton's confessional poetry takes her on a journey of self-realization, which extends into the realm of revisionary feminist theory--which is developed in "This Business of 'Dirty' Words"-- and a rewriting of the Christian myth--which is a central focus in "The Truth The Dead Know". Language offers Sexton the means by which she may explore the buried but simmering emotions of her troubled psyche, in an attempt to "overcome [her] mother ... somehow."

Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds. (Cixous 72)

Be careful of words,  
even the miraculous ones.  
For the miraculous we do our best,  
sometimes they swarm like insects  
and leave not a sting but a kiss.  
They can be as good as fingers.  
They can be as trusty as the rock  
you stick your bottom on.  
But they can be both daisies and bruises.

Yet I am in love with words.  
They are doves falling out of the ceiling.  
They are six holy oranges sitting on my lap.  
They are the trees, the legs of summer,  
and the sun, its passionate face.

Yet often they fail me.  
I have so much I want to say,  
so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.  
But the words aren't good enough,  
the wrong ones kiss me.  
Sometimes I fly like an eagle  
but with the wings of a wren.

But I try to take care  
and be gentle to them.  
Words and eggs must be handled with care.  
Once broken they are impossible  
things to repair.

**"Words"**

*The Awful Rowing Toward God*

Chapter 2  
This Business of “Dirty” Words

Anne Sexton never applied the word “feminist” to herself; indeed, whilst considering the pursuit of a career, she articulated her leanings toward the starched white apron perception of womanly duty, proclaiming: “I am a woman, ... it should be the children, or my husband, or my home - not writing” (M 63). Her disclaimer, however, tinged as it was with guilty reluctance, did not stifle or conceal her wholehearted commitment to poetic art. Furthermore, one may with retrospective insight perceive that the emergence of Anne Sexton’s subjective persona flaunts her prominent departure from what Sandra Gilbert terms the “phallogratic, patriarchal ‘hierarchization’” that has, with persistence and efficacy, assumed and maintained the subordination of women within a male-oriented social climate (x). In support of this claim, one is encouraged to consider that Sexton, writing from the perspective of physical life in a *female* body, bombards the reader with imagery and metaphor centred upon corporeal experiences and explanations, details which threaten to unveil the mystique of womanhood. By so doing, she gives public voice to notions of filth and defilement that, standing in opposition, effectively challenge the phallograticism of extant Symbolic systems.

Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* and Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* offer valuable insights into the literal and metaphorical significance of dirt, disease, and excrement. In anthropological terms these notions constitute the border between nature and culture, and in psychoanalytic terms, they hover on the threshold between matriarchal and patriarchal discourses. In both cases, images of filth and defilement operate as a source of intimidation to and

potential rupture of the sacred, patriarchal centre, and are worthy of extensive explanation; this is particularly valid in light of Kristeva's theory of abjection, which redounds significantly on questions of gender roles and social taboos, juxtaposed with the acquisition of language and subjectivity.

Addressing, primarily, the issue of gender roles allows one to determine that the female/male dichotomy that pervades Lacanian and Kristevan psychoanalytic theory is rooted in the marginalization of the female position. Woman, particularly the mother, aligned as she is with nature and therefore subservient to the cultural male, must be rejected before the child may take up a position within the Symbolic order. In other words, the mother must assume a passive role to allow for the child's acquiring Symbolic language and a relatively stable enunciative position. Kristeva's theory of abjection articulates her particular investment in the way through which stable identity is dependent upon the expulsion of the unclean aspects of a subject's corporeal existence, elements commonly considered taboo: excrement, vomit, and bodily fluid. Concluding that it is impossible to expel these elements with any finality, Kristeva acknowledges the constant threat they pose to the speaking subject, a threat that may, in extreme circumstances, result in the clinical diagnosis of a subject as psychotic.

Juxtaposing Kristeva's theory of abjection with Anne Sexton's *Book of Folly* provides an unprecedented perspective on the latter's contestatory relationship with language. Sexton's exploration of the shock value of "dirty" words, in conjunction with her disrobing of the female body, is integral to her desire for a return to the maternal body but, although she may break new ground by attempting the exploitation of language to attain this end, she is singularly unsuccessful. Sexton's manipulation of language and resistance to

the Symbolic order ultimately effect an unfettered dislocation of her own identity, and thus while she is able to threaten Symbolic systems, she cannot finally defeat them. In the end “language fails” (CP 453).

The nature of the Symbolic systems against which Sexton battled is essential to an understanding of her purpose as a whole. Both Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva approach the subject of defilement firmly from within the domain of a sanctioned binary system in which male and female are always diametrically opposed. By way of introduction, therefore, one is directed to Hélène Cixous’ oft-quoted rhetorical question that illuminates, most effectively, this constructed power dynamic:

Where is she?

Activity/passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Head/Heart

Intelligible/Palpable

Logos/Pathos

Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.

Matter, concave, ground-where steps are taken, holding-and  
dumping-ground.

Man

---

Woman. (63)

Cixous convincingly argues that “[p]hilosophy is constructed on the premise of woman’s abasement.” This leads inevitably to a “[s]ubordination of the

feminine to the masculine order, which gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's functioning" (65). Sherry Ortner's extensive anthropological studies, however, remind one that if "the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women ... were not so persuasive, people would not keep subscribing to it" (68) and it is time for women to stop their "nearly universal unquestioning acceptance of [their] own devaluation" (76).

Ortner identifies three main causes for the universality of female subordination: cultural ideology, symbolic devices, and social structural arrangements. All of these notions hold exclusion and inferiority as *de facto* concepts upon which female devaluation is predicated. Cultural ideology deems that women's social roles, employment potential, and creative ability be less "prestig[ious]" than male accomplishments; the particular attribution of female defilement, as a symbolic device, encourages the "inferior valuation" of women; and prevalent socio-structural arrangements endorse the exclusivity of "some realm in which the highest powers of society are felt to reside" (69). Arguing irrefutably against the biological determinism that suggests there is something anatomically and genetically inherent that dominates the male sex and that something lacking effects female subordination, Ortner concludes that "biological facts are [not] irrelevant ... but these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems" (71).

One of the main value systems against which Sexton was writing, of course, was the core of patriarchal concepts of poetics. As Christine Brooke-Rose contends: "Men have peopled their heavens either with objects erotic *ad aeternam* or with sexless angels, and their utopias have never imagined much

of a role for women” (309). There were two main obstacles that women writers faced: a belief that women lacked the cognitive ability necessary for the production of serious art, and the objectification and inscription of the female body, in poetry, as Woman. From this perspective, one may deduce that Sexton’s project was to dismantle these cultural constructs, to engage a plausible and polished artistic persona, and to retrieve the female body from objectification by the male gaze.

To turn momentarily to Emily Dickinson, one perceives the initial conception of feminist awareness. Dickinson, writing toward the latter half of the nineteenth-century, was forced to align herself with a patriarchal culture and appropriate a masculine persona. This is clearly manifest in her 1863 poem, “My Life Had Stood - A Loaded Gun” (Dickinson 349), in which Dickinson refutes her feminine values: “And now We roam in Sovereign woods - / And now We hunt the doe,” positioning herself against a feminine subject position--nature--that has been created by culture. Dickinson acknowledges the notion of feminine sacrifice through her allusion to “the Eider-Duck’s / Deep Pillow,” and expresses her desire for equality, by aligning herself with rather than positioning herself under “My Master’s Head.” Nevertheless, her needful appropriation of the masculine persona, a voice that will be heard, perpetuates women’s subordinate position within the nature/culture dichotomy.

There is a justifiable link between Dickinson and Anne Sexton through their respective attitudes to patriarchal dominance, but Sexton reveals much more than a latent feminist stance. In her poem “The Assassin” (*BF* 18), Sexton at first appears to be sustaining women’s appropriation of masculine tropes: “I am the bullet and the hook. / I am cocked and held ready.” Yet, rather than passively accepting that her potential cannot be fully realized

without masculine ownership, her speaker asserts: "I have a blood bolt / and I have made it mine." Rather than using the gun to destroy nature/femininity, Sexton's power tool--gun, language, social position--will effect a reevaluation of the feminine: "[W]ith this gun / I take in hand the newspapers" (BF 18). As Ortnner explains, culture is characterized by its ability to transcend natural conditions and turn them to its own purpose (73); clearly Sexton aspires to a transcendence over male-oriented language, with which she will empower herself. In 1962, Sexton perceived that to "write like a man" was the most flattering compliment a female poet could receive. By 1969, however, her view had changed: "As long as it can be said about a woman writer, 'She writes like a man' and that woman takes it as a compliment, we are in trouble" (M 173):

You who have inhabited me  
in the deepest and most broken place,  
are going, gone. (BF 20)

The results of Sexton's re-evaluation erupt through the lines of "Sweeney" (BF 9). The speaker courteously acknowledges "Mr. Eliot," but respects paid to the male canon are short lived, as the female voice takes centre stage: "*Your words, Sexton, are the only / red queens.*" Sweeney is firmly coded patriarchal; reminiscent of a father figure, Sweeney feeds from the speaker's sexuality. "*You are the altar cup and from this / I do fill my mouth,*" and he offers, in return, the patented father-food: "Dom Perignon" and "caviar." In a neat ironic twist, however, this "big dollar man," this "gangster," "flies through bookshops ... buying up my books / by the dozen," and offers himself in an act of devotional worship: "*I am your priest.*" This gesture anticipates the progression of "father figures"--the father himself and later Jesus--from stranger to saviour, a particularly pertinent theme within *The Book of Folly*,

and one that will be considered more fully in Chapter 3.

Like Eliot's, Sexton's "words will continue," because she will use these "weapons" to make her own mark in the canon. Unlike Eliot, however, she will leave behind the whole truth, the full gory tale of life in a female body. Instead of the fragmented body parts evidenced in, for instance, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"-- "the eyes," "[t]he arms ... white and bare," and "the skirts that trail along the floor" (Norton 594-7), one is faced, throughout Sexton's canon, with the female body as a whole, working unit. Although a woman's body, more involved as it is with reproduction and nurturance, may seem to place her closer to nature (Ortner 73), it is Sexton's jarring use of imagery, concerned with female physiological functions, that threatens to disrupt the status quo. It was Sexton's prosaic exposition of the female body that attracted critical interest. Reviewers' comments ranged from "frightening intensity" to "clear, touching and human," from a genuine approval of the ability "to talk at last about the untalkable" to James Dickey's attack: "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience" (M 173).

Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* may help to identify the revulsion felt by some readers to Sexton's "body" poems. Douglas defines the contours of the body in terms of established cultural codes and perceives the body as a source of power and danger, particularly at its margins where "excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest" are exuded (115). She asserts that "sacred things ... are to be protected from defilement" (7), and this may only be achieved by emphatically identifying "natural" boundaries, such as bodily orifices and the permeability of skin, that in themselves effect specific social taboos for defining the limits and modes of exchange that are considered appropriate.

**These boundaries and margins are retained by rituals of separation:**

**... ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (Douglas 4)**

Douglas reads the body as a microcosm of society. Rituals, therefore, defined as an “attempt to create and maintain a particular culture, a particular set of assumptions by which experience is controlled,” give visible expression to methods of separation, which “work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body,” and allow people a sense of order and offer a code of ethics to be followed that will create order within their own society (Douglas 128).

By way of an answer to Mary Douglas’ question: “Why should bodily margins be thought to be specially invested with power and danger?” (121), one is directed to the psychoanalytical studies of Julia Kristeva. More abstruse, certainly, than Mary Douglas’ investigations, but nevertheless worthy of thorough analysis, is Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, in which she presents her theory of abjection. Crucial to Kristeva’s conception of abjection is Douglas’s idea of the necessity of exclusion:

**Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. (*Powers* 2)**

Kristeva’s notion of abjection is situated at the threshold between matriarchal

and patriarchal discourses and describes the process by which, through the delimitation of the “clean and proper” body (*corps propre*), the symbolic order and the acquisition of an identity within it become possible. Kristeva’s analysis demonstrates, in Butler’s terms, a “boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion” (133).

Kristeva’s premise rests on the precarious hold of the subject on its identity as this identity is constantly at risk from the improper, unclean elements associated with a corporeal existence. Kristeva concedes that what must be expelled from the subject’s corporeal functioning can never be fully obliterated, as it is impossible to exclude these threatening or anti-social elements with any finality. These elements hover at the border of the subject’s identity threatening it with disruption and dissolution.

The abject, itself, inhabits that ambiguous space between the inside and outside of the body, subject and object, self and other--spaces which are only made meaningful by the child’s taking up a position, albeit provisional, within the symbolic order. The subject must “abject” part of itself in order to achieve a stable self, but this abjection defines whatever identity it acquires as insecure and open to breakdown and instability:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful

- a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself [*sic*]. (1)

The hazard posed by the abject may be extended to an investigation of the dangers associated with excrement, a subject rooted in the psychoanalytic studies of Sigmund Freud.

In an explicatory footnote to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud claims that the “cultural trend toward cleanliness” originates in an urge to rid oneself of excrement, “which [has] become disagreeable to the sense perceptions” (52n1), and Mary Douglas, of course, has suggested that “[d]irt offends against order” (2). To return once again to *Purity and Danger*, and specifically Douglas’ chapter on “The Abominations of Leviticus,” one perceives the introduction of the Hebrew word *tebhel*, which may be loosely translated as confusion, and which closely resembles Kristeva’s concept of the abject. The *tebhel* is that which needs to be harnessed and excreted to allow for the successful emergence of a unified subject. Relating this to the Jewish dietary laws, Douglas asserts:

[H]oliness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused ... To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind. (53-4)

Douglas' structuralist distinction conforms to an idealist dichotomy that is not so easily applied to psychoanalytic theory, but the *tebhel*, as the unruly boundary between nature and culture, does tentatively correspond to the division between what Kristeva terms the semiotic and the symbolic, recognizing that even in the most holy and sacrosanct institutions, one should protect oneself against the unclean and the improper.

The sacred, patriarchal space in which religious ideology is firmly embedded provides, therefore, a useful basis for investigating the significance of Sexton's emphasis on corporeal detail within *The Book of Folly*. The *Angels of the Love Affair* sequence (BF 55-62) posits filth and defilement within a pseudo-religious framework and complicates, even further, the delineation between defilement and purity. The ambiguity identified in Sexton's title extends throughout the series, and the poems which Middlebrook perceives as "prayers to the spirit of paradox" expose, with a final irony, the speaker's offering her self to Logos: language (350-1). The prologue extends the theme of the other: "*Angels of the love affair, do you know that other, the dark one, that other me?*" and although the speaker attempts to assimilate the threatening otherness--"slime," "boils," and "bedbugs"--the milieu of despair finds her lost in "that hole" where "the sea has turned into a pond of urine" (BF 57-60).

A Kristevan analysis suggests that these objects generating abjection are expelled from the body through a corporeal threshold between what is part of the subject--mouth, anus, genitals-- and what is the object-- food, faeces, urine, vomit. As Judith Butler's clarification proposes, this indefinite, marginal space--the dangerous boundary of the body--causes objects that had once been an integral part of the subject, offering nutrition, energy, and heat, to be thrust into a "defiling otherness" that threatens the subject. This "transvaluation"

system establishes “the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject” (Butler 133). Kristeva explains:

*nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself. (*Powers* 3)

The speaker’s emergence from the *Angels of the Love Affair* series, as one of the “unmatched people out in the cold,” therefore, confirms the threat to identity that may result from an inability to control and master the abject, the conclusion of which is clearly evidenced throughout *The Book of Folly*.

The first poem of the sequence, “Angel of Fire and Genitals” (*BF* 57), draws a clear parallel between “slime” and “mama,” and proceeds to inculcate the mother for her influential role in the “pantomime / of brown.” Sexton’s fascination with the significance of excrement is once again highlighted. Within this first poem, the speaker personifies the evil by acknowledging that “[t]he devil is down that festering hole,” and it is he--the other, the stranger--wallowing in the dirt and disease of the toilet bowl, who comes to signify an incessant threat against subjectivity: “he bit me in the buttocks and took over my soul” (*BF* 57). This establishes the precedent for the remaining poems; incompatible and self-defeating images pervade in an intellectual attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. Fire and ice, for example, are thrown together and result in a “cracking up of your brain,” the “clean sheets” are infested by disease-ridden “bedbugs,” and the “Angel of flight” is held fast in cement.

More effective even than the subject matter of this sequence, however, is Sexton's ironic undertone which speaks specifically to a subtle but disruptive element at work within the actual structure. Sexton exploits the sonnet form, with its ritualized rhyme scheme--ababcc-dedeff-gg--by employing it as the vehicle through which she approaches her examination of conflict and chaos. The "Angel of Fire and Genitals" introduces the mother as "[f]ire woman," and proceeds to associate her with a number of traditionally male-oriented technological inventions: "the Bunsen burner," "the blast furnace," and "the fierce solar energy," which execute an almost direct inversion of Cixous' masculine/feminine dichotomy. The final reference to the sun, however, has clearly masculine properties, and Sexton's cunning use of the Renaissance *double entendre* on "dies" hints at a very powerful female sexuality at work in the text:

Mother of fire, let me stand at your devouring gate  
as the sun dies in your arms and you loosen its terrible weight.  
(BF 57)

This strong opening poem reinforces the domineering mother image, and as the sequence continues the "terrible weight" of such a figure is manifest. "Angel of Clean Sheets" (BF 58) finds the speaker locked up in an asylum where images of disease, death, silence, and darkness are interspersed with "soap and Clorox." Once healthy, life giving blood has "dried," producing "[o]ne hundred marks upon the sheet," and the speaker is reminded of a childhood incident of sexual defilement. She alludes to snakes and spiders' webs in an attempt to create a squalid and dirty atmosphere within the infrastructure of insanity.

Mental illness is specifically mentioned in the third sonnet, "Angel of Flight

and Sleigh Bells" (*BF* 59). Here, the speaker refers to herself as "that lady with the brain that broke." The lust for strength and power has drained away and she only "passively resist[s]" perceiving herself as some inanimate object that "you can pick up or drop at will." The mother's culpability is clear as the speaker resigns herself to "stand[ing] in stone shoes as the world's bicycle goes by" (*BF* 59).

Images of disease and defilement once again emerge as the fourth sonnet, "Angel of Hope and Calendars" (*BF* 60), enunciates utter despair. The dark hole of the speaker's existence offers no solace because it is dominated by tears, paralysis, and death. Furthermore, within this world of misery there is a distinct absence of cleanliness: "There is no place to wash and no marine beings to stir in." Both mother and father are present, but the father appears more sinister. He is "digging her grave," while replicating the role of the oft-misquoted French Queen, Marie Antoinette. The allusion to the luxurious food, cake, is in distinct contrast to the wretchedness that permeates this sonnet. The speaker identifies the effects on herself:

Your mouth is clay.

Your eyes are made of glass. They break. You are not brave.

You are alone like a dog in a kennel. Your hands

break out in boils. Your arms are cut and bound by bands

of wire. (*BF* 60)

There is also the first hint of a problematic relationship with language: "Your voice is strange." The speaker's inability to recognize her own voice anticipates her ultimate fate; not only has she lost touch with reality, perceiving events in her own life as beyond hope, but also the speaker is increasingly unable to differentiate between her self and the significant others

who are intrinsically connected to her own life. Everything and everyone merges into an incomprehensible chaos.

The only respite is to effect a mental regression and recall childhood memories. "Angel of Blizzards and Blackouts" is imbued with nostalgic imagery focused upon the natural world: "raspberries ... of my grandfather's garden," "the snow," and "the spongy dawn" (BF 61). The speaker voices her desire to "[l]et me be ten," and once again to be safe and comfortable outside the world of adult responsibility. The final request, "take me back to ... that July 21st place" vindicates this claim, because it is the date of elder daughter Linda's birth and signifies the transition from Sexton's role as daughter to that of mother which is so pertinent and clearly articulated in her 1961 complaint: "I'm trying to be a daughter, not have one" (M 88).

Desperation returns in the final sonnet. *The Angel of Beach Houses and Picnics* finds the speaker alone and culpable. The fact that she is within familiar surroundings, yet playing "solitaire," merely exacerbates her already troubled condition. As she remembers happier times, the speaker laments that "[o]nce I was a couple. I was my own king and queen," but by comparison she is now one of "hundreds of unmatched people out in the cold" (BF 62).<sup>6</sup>

Sexton's attempts at reconciling her feelings of inadequacy and impotence take a dramatic turn. One is reminded of the epigraph to the *Angels of the Love Affair* sequence where Sexton identifies "the dark one, that other me." While the sonnet sequence has provided a useful introduction to Sexton's world of defilement and chaos, positing the mother figure as the most pernicious character, it does not suggest a means of resolution. Sexton is trapped between her acknowledgment of the fatality of holding on to the mother and her obsession with reconnection to the mother. Instead of rejecting the maternal

body and permitting herself ascension to the Symbolic order, Sexton ensconces herself firmly within the indistinct and chaotic juncture between the Imaginary and the Symbolic phase. Language, and by implication subjectivity, becomes the “other” which Sexton is increasingly unable to predicate and which she determines to expel.

Before focussing on the fatality of such a consequence, one may interrogate its essential purpose because, while Kristeva advocates the impossibility of excluding the abject, its recurrence as a threat to the subject is a necessary step in the production of literature and art. One is, therefore, able to postulate a correlation between the consequences of abjection and Sexton’s poetry, both of which are predicated on the notion of the maternal body:

“Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want, and the aggressivity that accompanies it, by *saying*” (*Powers* 41).

The first threat against the child’s taking up a position within the Symbolic order is the mother who becomes the object of “primal” repression; she must be “abjected” and the mother, as “abject,” thus poses a recurrent threat to the subject, which demonstrates “the instability of the symbolic function in its most significant aspect” (*Powers* 14). The pulsions, rhythms, and mobility of the pre-Oedipal maternal *chora* may be reproduced in poetic language: “A representative of the paternal function takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting. There is language instead of the good breast. Discourse is being substituted for maternal care” (*Powers* 45). Sexton’s formulation of poetry itself, however, appears to be an inadequate substitute. Her devising of elaborate internal rhymes and rhythms loses potency when compared to the subject matter. Rather than rejecting the

mother, the poetry implies an obsession with reconnection. For Sexton, the required border that should “protect the subject from th[e] abyss which beckons and haunts it” is ineffective, and the abjected mother “entices and attracts the subject ever closer to its edge” (*Powers* 89).

It is ironic that writing, which had initially been proposed as a treatment for Sexton’s mental illness, should exacerbate her already troubled psyche. An awareness of her own plight emerges through the desire to excrete language-- indeed to abject words--as a final attempt to disengage herself from the Symbolic order. Within *The Book of Folly*, “The Hoarder” (34) and “The Silence” (32) are the poems that evoke, most strongly, Sexton’s urge to expel language. “The Hoarder,” deliberately unpunctuated in defiance of traditional literary practice, identifies the need to “dig down” to discover the truth: “I am digging I am digging I will / win something.” There is a definitive connection between absorbing experience and discharging information through the analogy with feeding and excreting: “it / was my first doll that water went / into and water came out,” and this effectively exposes the synonymy of language and excrement: “I am a hoarder of words / I hold them in though they are / dung” (*BF* 35).

It is useful to consider Freud’s hypothesis on toilet training which will throw some light on a subject’s coprophobia. Freud asserts that a child’s retention of faeces is “for purposes of autoerotic gratification and later as a means of asserting his [*sic*] own will.” Freud maintains that a child should “part obediently with his [*sic*] faeces, ‘offer them up’ to his [*sic*] love,” but this will only occur “on persuasion by a loved person” (*Civilization* 206).<sup>7</sup> Further analysis of “The Hoarder,” therefore, identifying the mother’s repulsion and disgust at the child’s soiled diaper, offers a plausible explanation for the

speaker's desire to "hold ... in ... dung":

... and it was the diaper I wore  
 and the dirt thereof and my  
 mother hating me for it and me  
 loving me for it but the hate  
 won didn't it ... (BF 35)

The mother's hatred of dirt positions her firmly within the Symbolic order as she has retreated from the defilement that threatens her. The speaker, on the other hand, adopting the persona of a small child, may be excused the love of dirt. As Freud notes: "excreta arouse no disgust in children. They seem valuable to them as being a part of their own body which has come away from it" (*Civilization* 52n1). When the abhorrent and abominable dirt is indistinguishable from language, however, and language is the consequence of the speaking subject's successful accession to the Symbolic order, one may perceive that the source of disturbance and disruption is, in fact, the speaking subject. As Kristeva's poetic phrasing suggests: "... the unleashing of drive as such, without object, threaten[s] all identity, including that of the subject itself. We are then in the presence of psychosis" (*Powers* 44).

"The Silence" (BF 32) identifies death as the sole alternative to psychosis and anticipates the dreadful choice between suicide and perpetual madness that Sexton will ultimately face. The poem centres upon three colours: the white of deadly pallor; the black "burnt ... char" of death; and the blood red of sacrifice. The speaker associates the silence with an "enormous baby mouth." The use of metaphor here is somewhat ambiguous, as a baby mouth is not usually associated with silence but rather with screaming inarticulacy. This noise is preverbal in the Imaginary sense as it is unintelligible and powerless.

The Lacanian Imaginary, as a state of silence and lack of sexual desire, is further evoked in the image: “obscene virgins, / pushing out their rubbery tongues / but saying nothing” (*BF* 32).

Language is evident, and again is synonymous with expulsion:

I am filling the room  
with the words from my pen.

Words leak out of it like a miscarriage. (*BF* 32)

Although the desire for expulsion is there, the speaker acknowledges the futility of such an attempt: “I am zinging words into the air / and they come back like squash balls.” Words, which had been protective against despair, are losing their beneficial properties. The final horrific image aligns the speaker with Prometheus who is subjected to an eagle’s pecking, not at the liver, but at “the vibrating red muscle / of my mouth.” The failure of words propels the speaker into a state of panic as she realizes her fate: “The silence is death” (*BF* 33).

Effectively, the language has been excreted and, although that results in silence/death for the subject, language remains as text. Language is the very thing that offers Sexton an identity; through the process of excretion, identity becomes an other against which she may define herself. Yet, the impossible paradox of this presentiment suggests that while language offers an identity, it is an offer she cannot accept, as her ultimate act of suicide confirms.

“Is It True?” (*CP* 453) provides a useful summation of Sexton’s ordeals with language:

No language is perfect.  
I only know English.  
English is not perfect.

When I tell the priest I am full  
of bowel movements, right into the fingers,  
he shrugs. To him shit is good.  
To me, to my mother, it was poison  
and the poison was all of me  
in the nose, in the ears, in the lungs.  
That's why language fails. (*CP* 453)

“[L]anguage fails” because it has become the “poison,” the abject, that has consumed Sexton’s whole being, and its expulsion results in the necessity of abjecting her own self.

Firmly established within Sexton’s abjection of language is the desire to turn the mundane matter of life into art for the purpose of sublimation, and for the most part she has been successful. As Ann Mikhail Long notes: “[Sexton’s] poems clearly reflect her understanding of, and attempt to come to terms with, her mental illness and suicidal behaviour” (27); she had used the medium of poetry to re-examine the conflicting emotions prevalent within her familial relationships, and by so doing she had effected a tangible threat against extant patriarchy, and it is this triumph for which Sexton is most admired. Maxine Kumin is moved to comment:

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter ... Anne delineated the problematic position of women - the neurotic reality of the time - though she was not able to cope in her own life with the personal trouble it created. (*CP* xxxiv)

Toward the end of her writing career, Sexton realized that the answers for which she had searched and her obsessive desire for the return of the maternal body were no longer so easily accessible through the business of words--an enigma Kristeva clearly elucidates:

Fear and the aggressivity intended to protect me from some not yet localized cause are projected and come back to me from the outside: 'I am threatened.' The fantasy of incorporation by means of which I attempt to escape fear (I incorporate a portion of my mother's body, her breast, and thus I hold onto her) threatens me none the less, for a symbolic, paternal prohibition already dwells in me on account of my learning to speak at the same time. (*Powers* 39)

Language, to which *The Book of Folly* stands testimony, has become more of an encumbrance than a relief:

Poetry contained the magic of temporary healing. But, with her unerring instinct, [Sexton] knew that her writing had slipped. The old tricks of expansion and identification worked less and less as the poetry lost its center of gravity and began to spin out of control. Soon even the old black art brought no comfort to its creative witch. (Gray Sexton 295)

Despite the acknowledgement that abjection of language can only result in silence and death, Sexton chose to pursue her course. She had metaphorically effected the expulsion of language through her own writing and literally relinquished her words by electing Linda Gray to the position of literary executor. In a letter to Linda Gray dated July 23, 1969, Sexton writes: "You are my extension ... For better or worse you inherit me" (*Letters* 342). The

main component of that inheritance was language. It was “my bobolink,” “my special Linda Gray” (*Letters* 424), the one whom Sexton had trained in the tricks of the language trade, who would permanently relieve this burden of words:

I can only sign over everything,  
the house, the dog, the ladders, the jewels,  
the soul, the family tree, the mailbox.

Then I can sleep.

Maybe. (*BF* 30)

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.  
 And if I tried  
 to give you something else,  
 something outside myself,  
 you would not know  
 that the worst of anyone  
 can be, finally,  
 an accident of hope.  
 I tapped my own head;  
 it was glass, an inverted bowl.  
 It is a small thing  
 to rage in your own bowl.  
 At first it was private.  
 Then it was more than myself;  
 it was you, or your house  
 or your kitchen.  
 And if you turn away  
 because there is no lesson here  
 I will hold my awkward bowl,  
 with all its cracked stars shining  
 like a complicated lie,  
 and fasten a new skin around it  
 as if I were dressing an orange  
 or a strange sun.  
 Not that it was beautiful,  
 but that I found some order there.  
 There ought to be something special  
 for someone  
 in this kind of hope.  
 This is something I would never find  
 in a lovelier place, my dear,  
 although your fear is anyone's fear,  
 like an invisible veil between us all ...  
 and sometimes in private,  
 my kitchen, your kitchen,  
 my face, your face.

"For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further"  
*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*

Chapter 3  
The Truth The Dead Know

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's 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 ...

*From a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe, November 1815.*

The epigraph to Sexton's first book of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, quoted above, becomes, with the privilege of hindsight, ever more poignant by its being positioned at the beginning of *The Complete Poems*. Sexton, identifying herself with the heroic Oedipus, strives for the truth and pursues the "indefatigable enquiry," even while she comprehends that this truth may reveal a "terrible fate." The symbolic significance of this mythical legend resonates throughout Sexton's canon; Oedipus' patricide and maternal marriage are echoed metaphorically through the parental conflicts Sexton recreates in her poetry. These unhappy and oftentimes traumatic experiences prioritize the need for a refiguration of these influential parental figures, but an inability to reconcile the familial discord leads to Sexton's reaching out to the Christ figure and to God through her dabblings in Christianity. Here, she makes a last ditch attempt at resolution through the eyes of the Christ figure, and this is worked out on four levels. First, Sexton contemplates the relationship between Jesus and Mary in order to understand the role that this

maternal icon played in Jesus' life. This may, by extension, shed light on the problems and inadequacies prevalent in her own relationship with Mary Gray. Second, Sexton envisions Jesus/God as the ultimate father figure, one who will fulfil the role of protector and comforter. In her early poetry, Sexton articulates her suspicion of the Christ figure, referring to Him, as she did to her own father, as a stranger. While the relationship with her father proved problematic, "The Jesus Papers" evidences Sexton's welcoming Jesus' progression from "*my stranger*" (CP 43) to the symbol of redemption. Third, Sexton perceives a parallel between her own and Jesus' performative talents. They both employ tricks--miracles with deeds or with language--to impress their respective followers. The ultimate performance is, of course, the dramatically staged death scene, and this anticipates Sexton's final and most vehement stance, which is to effect an analogy between her own suffering and that of Christ. In Sexton's version of Christian theology, writes Middlebrook, "Christ's death, like her own deathwish, is meaningful to others as a source of symbolisms ... She is the hungry woman we eat as we read her words" (Colburn 461).

Before considering the significance of religion and the creative presentation of Jesus in the text, one is encouraged to identify Sexton's truth-seeking quest, a search which lends itself primarily to an interrogation of Sexton's nature/artifice contradistinction. Joan Nucifora, in her discussion of Sexton's work, posits the inevitability of Sexton's deathwish as a consequence of her fatal preference for art over nature. By the time Sexton came to write *The Book of Folly*, the muse which had initially been employed to keep her alive, and which had been effective for thirteen years, was now relegated to "another of the sirens beleaguering the poet and luring her to her death"

(Nucifora 312). Certainly, the world of *Folly* is oppressive, surreal, and disjointed--“an inferno,” to quote Nucifora once again, which is “defiled by blood, excrement, and disconnected body parts” (313); but it is here that Sexton explores the truth, and where her quest for self-realization takes a more ambitious and daring turn.

Diana Hume George, identifying Sexton most convincingly with Oedipus, discerns: “Unlike Jocasta, who is immediately defeated by the revelation of the truth, Sexton grappled with her truth again and again, in a deadly hand-to-hand combat she might be said, on some terms, to have won” (*Oedipus* 6-7). Anne Sexton killed herself, and this act of self-destruction may well be viewed as her surrendering to the cultural mores that demanded female sacrifice: “We must all eat beautiful women” (*BF* 105); yet, she successfully appropriated and fiercely defended an autonomous female subjectivity, even when faced with profoundly fatalistic consequences. Rather than adopting the pathetic and cowardly role of Jocasta, Sexton embarks on a journey of self-discovery, seeking the Oracle and defeating all the Jocastas who persistently beg her “for God’s sake not to inquire further.”

The first “Jocasta” to slander Sexton’s work was John Holmes, whose poetry workshop Sexton had attended and who passionately objected to Sexton’s subversive stance. Holmes loathed her dependence on corporeal and visceral experience as thematic material for her poems, which he perceived as referential to the person whom he deplored. Sexton chose to ignore Holmes’ advice and *did publish*, immortalizing her rebuttal to him in the poem “For John, Who Begg Me Not To Enquire Further” (*CP* 34). In this poem, Sexton publicizes her quest, which retrospectively serves as a useful directive. The goal is not to discover something “beautiful,” but to find “a certain sense of

order.” The speaker acknowledges that “[a]t first it was private. / Then it was more than myself,” because there is nothing to be learned from “rag[ing] in your own bowl.” Sexton’s speaker seeks the “commonplaces of the asylum”-- “your kitchen,” “my kitchen”--such a traditionally feminine locale where bodies are fed and nurtured. “The kitchen was a mother-place,” notes Middlebrook (362), and it reflected the atmosphere of either the order or chaos that permeated the household at any one time. As Linda Gray recalls: “What might have seemed only a messy kitchen seemed to me a symbol for what lurked beneath the surface: a lack of control that could spin without warning into insanity” (89). It was in her kitchen that Sexton sought to connect the fragmented pieces of her self, the “awkward bowl, / with all its cracked stars shining,” because knowing the truth, however disturbing and troubling, can teach “something worth learning” about one’s inner mystery.

What Sexton is also advocating here is the need to break free from the boundaries of traditional female space: the body, the kitchen, the home. It is no longer a restricted area but rather one that reaches out from “my kitchen” to “your kitchen,” from “my face” to “your face.” This female space offers new possibilities--a female version worthy of an enlightened audience. If Sexton’s purpose is too abstruse, her prurient nature offers an alternative solution. At the centre of the poem is the so predictably Sextonian preoccupation with death and particularly suicide: “my own selfish death,” which may finally be considered “an accident of hope.” With this comes the realization that, if the world is not yet ready for the spreading of this new word, a powerfully staged suicide might be the means of engaging the desired cathartic response.

As Sexton’s title suggests, *The Book of Folly* takes its central metaphor from Erasmus’ Renaissance work *Praise of Folly*, which once again highlights

the intellectual search for ultimate truth. As Ann-Marie Seward Barry argues: “[W]hile it is folly *not* to see things as they really are, in the end, ‘the saddest thing’ may very well be ‘not to be deceived,’ because without some degree of protective madness ... the search for an ultimate answer must end in suicide” (46-7). The fact that Sexton chose to take her own life demonstrates that her “protective madness” was an insufficient deterrent. Erasmus’ narrator Folly, however, poses an alternative question: “[W]ho are the people whose death was so often self-sought through weariness of life? Weren’t they closely connected with wisdom?” (47). For Sexton, the pursuit of truth through the medium of poetic art effected the wisdom of guilt, doubt, and confusion. The need to protect herself from this unhappy truth encourages a denial of nature and a more intense focus on salvation through artifice; the realities of life become more tolerable when ensconced within each created poetic stanza. As Sexton herself emphasized: “[T]he real me is nothing. All I am is the trick of words writing themselves” (M 82).

“The Ambition Bird” (BF 3) identifies the basic oppositions with which the speaker is in constant conflict: science and art. The extension of this dichotomy to the more threatening life/death juxtaposition reveals the poet’s unbearable trap. The once healthy and life-sustaining impulse to write has metamorphosed into a hurtling compulsion toward death, and leaves the poet willing to sacrifice all—peace, sleep, rational existence—for the sake of art: “my immortality box, / my lay-away plan, / my coffin” (BF 3). The opening lines find the speaker struggling with insomnia, because the natural drive to create, “the business of words,” keeps her awake. Interspersed with this is “the clock tolling its engine” and the “sundial ... having an electric / seizure at the quarter hour.” The ambition bird yearns to be a participant in a number of scientific

experiments, which are all reminiscent of the Promethean desire to be the benefactor of humankind. The ambition bird wants to understand the workings of the heart through dissection, to steal fire and “immolate himself,” “to be pressed out like a key / so he can unlock the Magi.” Conversely, the ambition bird welcomes the resurrection of Jesus and Icarus, two figures associated with self-sacrifice in the name of truth and beneficence: Jesus “wants to take bread and wine / and bring forth a man happily floating in the Caribbean”; Icarus “wants to die changing his clothes / and bolt for the sun like a diamond.” Untimely death is the fate for both of these men, but the speaker remains resolute: “He wants, I want.” Despite the idle threat to “get ... a new immortality box,” because “[t]here is folly enough inside this one” (*BF* 4), the speaker pursues the relentless search for truth and accepts the possibility that self-sacrifice may, in the end, provide the only answer.

“The Doctor of the Heart” (*BF* 5-6) has a defiance of death as its central theme, but it is a defiance reliant on science rather than faith and the will to live: “wires and electrodes” and the “zigzag machine” keep the heart alive. Science is knowledge and fact, artificial and unnatural, and it lacks the ability to create that may only come from an artist’s “magic fingers.” Science has failed to “take away my mother’s carcinoma,” “my father’s cerebral hemorrhage,” and “my sister’s broken neck.” As the speaker questions: “Is there such a device for my heart?” there is the realization that the “gimmick called magic fingers” is the only means of preservation. Faith and art immortalize Joanie, Sexton’s sister-in-law, who was killed in a car accident while on honeymoon: “her slim neck / snapped like a piece of celery” (“Sweeney *BF* 9-10). The conflict between art and science is once again apparent. The death is caused by mechanical technology, “the unnatural death by car.” The

reliance falls on words and art, while life is renounced because of its cruelty and disappointment: “[H]er death lied” but “the words will continue, for that’s / what’s left that’s true” (*BF* 10).

Science is once again the cause of much pain and suffering in “The Firebombers,” Sexton’s perception of events in Vietnam. American troops went into Vietnam to protect the Republic of South Vietnam, but the counterinsurgency brigades engaged under the Kennedy administration effected, as Noam Chomsky argues, an “atrociousness of chemical warfare,” which resulted in “untold numbers of maimed, widows, and orphans, children being killed to this day by unexploded bombs, [and] deformed fetuses” (25-6). Protests against the Vietnam War attacked the technological, inhuman society that was blamed for the war’s continuation; America, the great Western ruling power, became the “grocer of death,” that dealt with the victims of war by “pack[ing] them in crates like cauliflowers.” Witnessing the devastation of the “death market,” the speaker asks: “America, / where are your credentials?” (*BF* 15). The destruction inflicted upon humanity in the name of saving Vietnam recognizes technology as a negative force that wrenches through lives and societies to establish a controlling hegemony.

One may conclude that it is art not science that will pacify the madness prevalent within the technological world. As Sexton continues her search for the truth, however, there is the realization that, as Seward Barry argues, “The poet is doomed to repeat the mystical cycle of physical death and spiritual rebirth implied by Christian faith, but in reverse” (64). In other words, art leads to faith, faith permits resurrection, and resurrection requires death. Sexton’s project redounds prominently on her desire to employ poetic art not only to uncover the truth through a less threatening medium than, for

instance, autobiography but also to effect her own rebirth while she remained very much alive. The firm commitment to any religious faith, however, remained problematic for Sexton. She thus experimented with the possibility of transferring her struggle over religious questions, as she had with other conflicts, into poetry. This, she believed, was “an operationally productive use of conflicts that she still found irreconcilable in her life” (M 184), and it was a positive move toward examining her mental problems through spiritual rather than psychiatric means. Yet, in a letter to Snodgrass, dated March 25, 1960, Sexton asserts: “I certainly don’t believe in God.” Although she admits “that’s rather sad of me. I wish religion would work” (*Letters* 98), her dedication to the project seems half-hearted and indifferent: “Whoever God is I keep making telephone calls to him. I’m not sure that’s religion. More desperation than faith in such things” (M 355).

Despite Sexton’s doubts and confusions about religious ideology, she does, as Katherine McSpadden affirms in her discussion of Sexton’s religious quest, “find meaning in aspects of reality that institutional Christianity has deemphasized, namely, physical nature and the human dimensions of Jesus’ identity” (403). By transforming her own story into a religious parable, and by investigating the meaning of Jesus as a meeting ground of the divine and the human, Sexton succeeds, most effectively, in creating a parallel between herself and Jesus. Humanizing Jesus is Sexton’s way of making Him more accessible and she posits Jesus as the mortal, sexual, power-crazy protagonist of her poetic drama, “The Jesus Papers.” The spiritual quest continues. “Yes, it is time to think about Christ again,” writes Sexton. “If he is the God/man, I would feel a hell of a lot better” (*Letters* 368-9). Sexton believed that “all spiritual striving is an effort to fill the plate emptied in infancy” (M 460), and

begins her sequence, most predictably, with Jesus' relationship to his mother.

In "Jesus Suckles" (*BF* 93), food metaphors once again dominate as Sexton's speaker considers the possibility of salvation from the female body: "Mary, your great / white apples make me glad." The imagery pertaining to feeding and hunger that evolves within the opening sequence stresses, by association, the almost parasitic dependence Jesus has on His mother:

I cough like a bird on its worm.  
 I'm a jelly-baby and you're my wife.  
 You're a rock and I the fringy algae.  
 You're a lily and I'm the bee that gets inside.  
 I close my eyes and suck you in like a fire.  
 I grow. I grow. I'm fattening out. (*BF* 93)

Alicia Ostriker warns that at the heart of the poem is the idea that, to a boy child--particularly the Son of God--"grateful love and helplessness are 'all lies,' and that reality ... means power, repugnance toward the flesh, and rejection of the mother" (277-8). The baby Jesus acknowledges that while He was born to die, the violation and sacrifice of His mother's body is the means by which he may learn to sacrifice Himself:

I am small  
 and you hold me.  
 You give me milk  
 and we are the same  
 and I am glad.  
 No. No.  
 All lies.

I am a truck. I run everything.

I own you. (*BF* 93)

The reference to the truck recalls a private scenario within the mythic context of "The Jesus Papers." In "Those Times" (*CP* 118), taken from Sexton's third book of poetry *Live or Die*, Sexton's speaker confesses: "I did not know that my life, in the end, / would run over my mother's like a truck." This firmly connects the speaker with Jesus, individuals who perceive their own lives as superior to their mothers' and who effect a sacrifice of the mother for their own end. The conclusion of "Jesus Suckles" finds Jesus asserting His power over Mary, and one is reminded of His retort to her at the Wedding in Cana: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come" (John 2:4). Mary holds importance for Jesus only at the time of His birth and His death. Diana Hume George observes:

We always identify biblical personages through the paternal lineage, forgetting the mother and her fate, which is the fate of the feminine in Christianity. Even God's "only begotten Son" had a mother who, despite centuries of Maryolatry, is relegated to the maternal/sacrificial and is denied by her son."  
(*Oedipus* 19)

Both "Jesus Awake" (*BF* 94) and "Jesus Asleep" (*BF* 95) confront the reader with Jesus' working through the Oedipal conflict. In "Jesus Asleep," "[i]t was the year / of the How To Sex Book" and while the rest of the world propagates, Jesus "ate His celibate life." Feeding and lack of sexual desire posit Jesus in the pre-Oedipal stage. "Jesus Asleep," however, finds Jesus desiring Mary in the subconscious dream state:

Jesus slept as still as a toy  
 and in His dream  
 He desired Mary.  
 His penis sang like a dog,  
 but He turned sharply away from that play  
 like a door slamming. (BF 95)

He wills a division between Himself and Mary, “like a door slamming,” but “[t]hat door broke His heart / for He had a sore need.” Jesus channels His sexual energy and subdues desire by using His penis as a chisel with which He carves the *Pietà*. This sculpture, depicting the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ, identifies the importance of art as a means of securing immortality. This is particularly resonant when one considers Michelangelo’s *Milan Pietà* (c. 1555-64). In this last piece of sculpture, Michelangelo was struggling for new forms, and he finds greater fulfilment in architecture than in shaping human bodies. H. W. Janson, in *The History of Art*, remarks “like the master’s self-portrait, the *Milan Pietà* occupies an intensely private realm. Its plea for redemption is addressed to no human audience, but to God” (458). Similarly, Sexton’s fulfilment through mystical art focuses her project and, as her final book of poetry attests, she is “mooring [her] rowboat / at the dock of the island called God” (CP 473).

Despite the phallic shaping of the *Pietà*, indicating Jesus’ obsession, he resists engaging in a sexual union with Mary during His lifetime. This permits a reunion, in death, with His mother, which becomes a state of ultimate peace and tranquillity:

He swam through the godhead  
 and because He had not known Mary

they were united at his death,  
 the cross to the woman,  
 in a final embrace,  
 poised forever  
 like a centerpiece. (*BF* 95)

Sexton's speaker activates her own fantasy of death as a return to the mother through Jesus who, like herself, has "died over and over again." The emphasis on art as an effective substitute for life recalls, once again, the nature/artifice distinction, and catapults the natural, healthy mother/child bond into the state of the rigid and artificial. For Jesus and Mary this is "the Pietà" and "the centerpiece"; for Sexton and her mother Mary, it is the placing of personal and private vignettes into a familiar, epic framework through the medium of poetic art.

Jesus has proven His own willingness to effect a divide between Himself and Mary. He has condemned her because the hunger her body nourishes is hunger of the flesh. In this respect, the Madonna is synonymous with the harlot, Mary Magdalen. Although the biblical story "Jesus forgives a sinful woman" presents a just and forgiving Jesus (Luke 7: 36-50), Sexton's creation of a squalid and disease ridden setting, dominated by redness, depicts Jesus acting more like a Health Inspector than a Redeemer in "Jesus Raises Up The Harlot" (*BF* 96). The "sweet redheaded harlot," fearful for her life, emerges as a "delicate body clothed in red, / as red as a smashed fist." The blood imagery suggests uncleanness, at the centre of which is a "terrible sickness" in her breasts: "two boils of whoredom." The breast, which has always been viewed as a source of grace, is here seen as the very source of sin and disease: "[Jesus] lanced her twice on each breast, / pushing His thumbs in until the milk

ran out" (*BF* 96).

The relationship that develops between Mary Magdalen and Jesus enters into the sphere of father/daughter:

His raising her up made her feel  
like a little girl again when she had a father  
who brushed the dirt from her eye. (*BF* 97)

The father, as a symbol of redemption as well as a caring figure, is far removed from the seducer/villain of Sexton's earlier poetry. The progression in her perception of the father from stranger to saviour suggests her desire to interpret other major relationships in these terms. As Alicia Ostriker notes: "[B]ehind the "live or die" struggle in Sexton's life was another struggle, which led her first to a re-envisioning of Christian myth, then to a re-imagining of God the Father" (274).

Sexton continues her revisions of Christianity in "Jesus Cooks" (*BF* 98), which finds Sexton juxtaposed, once again, with Jesus through their similar roles as actors on a stage. The miracle of the loaves and the fishes demonstrates Jesus' ability as a healer and a provider of food in the context of a public performance. Sexton, too, perceives herself as a paragon, a celebrity who, through her lively poetry readings, offers mental and spiritual sustenance to the hungry crowd. As Joan Nucifora discerns: "Jesus is pictured as one who, like Sexton ... relies on tricks to impress a crowd that in the end ... views him merely as something of a freak on exhibit" (317). The allusion to food preparation also recalls Sexton's maternal role. She emerges from the realm of domesticity, attempting to provide a nurturing environment for her family. One is reminded, however, as Linda Gray recalls: "My mother had power beyond the home" (96).

“Jesus Cooks” (*BF* 98) brilliantly combines biblical and contemporary language: Jesus asks the Lord to “send down a short-order cook” and “lo, there were many fish.” The Lord, performing conjuring tricks, depicts the miracle in magical terms: “And the Lord said, Abracadabra.” The Lord instructs Jesus to “[w]ork on the sly,” which is reminiscent of the illusion, the big cheat, of Sexton’s performance at her poetry readings. While some autobiographical elements of Sexton’s poetry are impossible to deny, it is equally necessary to recognize the performative nature of the poems that works to disguise and obscure the ostensible truth. Sexton’s and Jesus’ practised performances “ma[de] it look easy,” but it only appeared easy to those who did not truly understand what was going on and who were unable to differentiate need from belief.

Lazarus, the protagonist in “Jesus Summons Forth” (*BF* 99), experiences a similar confusion. Jesus puts the Humpty Dumpty-like Lazarus back together again rather as if He were constructing a model aeroplane or car, closely following the instructions:

First Jesus put on the wrists,  
 then He inserted the hip bone,  
 He tapped in the vertebral column,  
 He fastened the skull down,  
 Lazarus was whole. (*BF* 99)

The poem’s bitter ending finds Lazarus grateful for being brought back to life on earth. Lazarus, “a fool,” had not believed and therefore had not appreciated his heavenly experience: “[I]n heaven it had been no different. / In heaven there had been no change.” It is only those with faith who find grace in the kingdom of heaven: “Because strait *is* the gate, and narrow *is* the way, which

leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14).

"Jesus Dies" (*BF* 101) is narrated by Jesus, speaking from His "crow's nest" cross at Golgotha, but it could as easily be a Sexton poetry reading. The emphasis on performance and the crowd's anticipatory response clearly highlight what Sexton perceives to be similarities between herself and Jesus. Either could offer the gathering crowd the retaliation: "I am not a trapeze artist. I am busy with My dying." Jesus affirms His mortality, in an effort to appease the onlookers: "I will do nothing extraordinary. / I will not divide in two," because:

We are the same men,  
 you and I,  
 the same sort of nostrils,  
 the same sort of feet.  
 My bones are oiled with blood  
 and so are yours. (*BF* 101)

He also demonstrates His frailty and human weakness, His need to have God "put His steaming arms around Me /... Because we are sore creatures." He asks the crowd to leave, to allow Him to die privately. This is a wish Jesus is not granted but a desire for privacy that Sexton, when the time comes, will demand:

Go now,  
 this is personal matter,  
 a private affair and God knows  
 none of your business. (*BF* 102)

One's attention is at once drawn to the peculiar narrative dichotomy that emerges throughout "The Jesus Papers" section. There are only two poems

that employ the privileged first person narrator: “Jesus Suckles” and “Jesus Dies”; the others rely on the omnipresent third eye. In the genre of confession, there are hints of insolence and audacity when the “I” assumes the persona of Jesus, and doubts are thrown on the identity of the audience which the “I” addresses. When Jesus alleges: “We are the same men, / you and I” (*BF* 101), one might be tempted to interpret it as the approval Sexton offers herself before presumptuously identifying herself with the Christ figure.

In “Jesus Dies,” the self-referential pronouns are capitalized, but the subtle syntax--placing pronouns at the beginning of the sentence, and interspersing God’s higher case superiority--distracts the reader’s attention. Appropriate pronouns for Jesus are engaged within the lines of the poem on only four occasions; the two most significant examples are “My dinner plate” and “My dying” (*BF* 101). This is further problematized because the third line throws additional doubt on the authenticity of “I” through its question: “Why do you gather, *my* townsmen?” (emphasis added). The conflated lower case “my,” which must be intentional due to Sexton’s obsession with meticulous editing, assimilates her quite firmly with the Christ figure, and its appearing in “Jesus Dies” confirms her acceptance of the element of danger as a precondition for the reformation of subjectivity, evidenced in the degree to which Sexton’s own approbation falls heavily on Jesus as the sacrificial lamb.

“My dinner plate” and “My dying” are highly charged associations for Sexton, and it is not surprising that the other subjective conflation occurs in “Jesus Suckles.” Throughout the scene between Jesus and his lactating mother, lower case pronouns are used, which emphasize Jesus’ humanness but also set the scene for Sexton’s identification with and appropriation of the Christ figure. One is reminded, by Middlebrook, that “these [latter] poems

confront the reader with a Jesus who ... resembles Anne Sexton, an often very disagreeable person, disgustingly fixated on the female body, neurotically self-absorbed, terrified of the death for which s/he has been singled out" (352).

It is through the construction of this striking similarity between Sexton and Jesus--with an emphasis on mother/child relationships, father/child relationships, and dramatic performance--that Sexton is also at liberty to interrogate Christianity's violation of the feminine. Identifying herself finally with Jesus as the sacrificial victim, she contemplates to what extent the female body is equally a host of spiritual meaning and thus, as Middlebrook illustrates, "intuit[s] the need for a feminist revision of patriarchal monotheism" (350).

The revisionary reading of Christianity that structures "The Jesus Papers" sequence comprises nine poems in which Sexton inventively explores the role of the female through her focus on life in a body and a family. As Seward Barry concludes: "[Sexton's] series of female narrators descend into and flow out of a creative and destructive madness where their femaleness both victimizes them and gives them the sensitivity to perceive truth and to express it through art" (51). The "fixat[ion] on the female body" is a subject that reappears in "Jesus Unborn" (*BF* 103). It is notably not the resurrection that follows "Jesus Dies," but rather a judgment of the Virgin Mary's role in Christianity. The lushly natural imagery that pervades the poem identifies Mary's fertility and earthy sexuality: "The well that she dipped her pitcher into / has made her as instinctive as an animal." Mary is denied sexual experience, however, and the Immaculate Conception comes to signify the beginning of a jail sentence:

She would like to be flattened out like the sea

when it lies down, a field of moles.  
 Instead a strange being leans over her  
 and lifts her chin firmly  
 and gazes at her with executioner's eyes. (*BF* 103)

The fate of womanhood, specifically motherhood, is here identified. The important things are that history will have a Christ, Mary will have milk in her breasts, and “[a]ll this will be remembered.” For Sexton, the principle of the Incarnation is made manifest through a dependence on the female body. As Christ sacrifices His blood at the crucifixion, Mary's sacrifice, like the sacrifice of all mothers, involves her willingness to feed the child from her own body. Mary's role is epitomized in the final lines of the poem:

Now we will have a Christ.  
 He covers her like a heavy door  
 and shuts her lifetime up  
 into this dump-faced day. (*BF* 103-4)

The female body, even the Virgin Mary's, has the potential to be a vile, diseased, and unclean vessel; yet it is also holy. As Diana Hume George contends:

Sexton yoked the clean and unclean, the profane and sacred, *through* the body. She continually and deliberately violated the ritual taboos of our culture in order to break down comfortable and limiting categories. She accomplished this by exploiting the body's potential for sacrificial defilement and holiness. (*Oedipus* 60)

“The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks” (*BF* 105) allows Sexton the authority to identify herself and her need, and it combines many of the issues

and images that recur throughout *The Book of Folly*. First, she refers to “my dream,” which confirms the role of the unconscious through her poetry. The nurturing mother figure is apparent; yet, Sexton acknowledges disappointment when the “moon juice,” “the white mother,” for which she had hoped, becomes spurts of blood, which cover her with “shame.” The blood, suggestive of menstrual blood, identifies the taboo of female pollution. Blood is also a symbol of female sacrifice and the reminder that all life leads ultimately to death. Shame and the fear of language emerge: “If they want to say something bad, / They whisper”; this again defines women’s place in society as one of submission and compliance.

The speaker has progressed from the role of daughter to mother: “I went to the well and drew a baby,” and she offers herself, the “gingerbread lady,” as the fertile and nourishing poet, whose words will be savoured and then devoured. “[W]e must all eat sacrifices,” the speaker affirms, and her words, which metaphorically flow as blood, confirm the analogy between her suffering and that of Christ. Most importantly, Sexton recognizes that, as Christ sacrificed himself to redeem the sins of the world, her own self-sacrifice is the only path open. In an interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton refers to Jesus as: “That ragged Christ, that sufferer, [who] performed the greatest act of confession, and I mean with his body. And I try to do that with words” (26).

During the last six months of her life, Sexton received religious instruction from Pattie Handloss at the Episcopal Divinity School. She decided against being baptized, however, claiming to John Silber on January 30, 1974: “Saint Mattress is just as appropriate a place to find the unknown, doubtful, ever-possible, joyous ‘God’ as any church service” (M 395). Sexton had given up hope of ever developing any firm religious commitment. She was also fast

approaching the end, which she imagined “not as a turning to God but as a return to the arms of what she called a “consecrating mother” (M 395).

The lure of death, always present, and for most of her life a deep compulsion, grew too strong and, on October 4, 1974, Anne Sexton took her own life. There were no frantic phonecalls to friends and family, no cries for help, just a very personal, private act. Dressed in her mother’s fur coat, and with a fresh glass of vodka in her hand, Sexton locked herself in the garage of her Weston home, and turned on the ignition of her car. Wearing the fur coat was a particularly potent gesture; Sexton had once confessed to Dr. Orne: “Every time I put it on I feel like my mother” (Therapy Tape November 28, 1961). Mary Gray was never far from Sexton’s thoughts, and at the moment of the poet’s death, she enveloped herself in the warmth of her mother’s coat. Middlebrook comments: “[D]eath was going to feel something like an embrace, like falling asleep in familiar arms” (397).

Reestablishing the maternal bond is the only peace Sexton may find, and with her mother and great-aunt dead, Sexton yearned for her own death as a means of reconnection: “To the attraction of death as a way of coming home to Mother, finally getting her attention, was added the attraction of death as splitting off the poet once and for all, releasing her into the immortality of her words” (M 201). Oedipus’ “appalling horror” has been identified:

I am empty. I am witless.

Death is here. There is no  
other settlement. (*BF* 7)

Anne Sexton’s “selfish death” was certainly not “beautiful.” One hopes, however, that for her, “in the end, there was / a certain sense of order there” (*CP* 34).

**Jonah made his living  
inside the belly  
Mine comes from the exact same place....**

**This is my death,  
Jonah said out loud,  
and it will profit me to understand it.  
I will make a mental note of each detail.  
Little fish swam by his nose  
and he noted them and touched their slime.  
Plankton came and he held them in his palm  
like God's littlest light bulbs.  
His whole past was there with him  
and he ate that.**

**At this point the whale  
vomited him back out into the sea.  
The shocking blue sky.  
The shocking white boats.  
The sun like a crazed eyeball.  
Then he told the news media  
the strange details of his death  
and they hammered him up in the marketplace  
and sold him and sold him and sold him.  
My death the same.**

**"Making a Living"  
*The Death Notebooks***

### Conclusion

Once upon a time a young person  
died for no reason.

I was the same.

“Killing the Spring”

Anne Sexton wrote touchingly and efficaciously about the torments and bewilderment, the joys and thrills, of life, love, childhood, and maternity. She could dazzle a crowd with her stunning and elegant public persona, her eloquent and oftentimes vitriolic confessions, her humour; and she could evoke empathy and pathos through her intimacy and her belaboured self-deprecation. Almost a quarter of a century after her death, Anne Sexton’s multifaceted personality continues to intrigue critics and readers of her poetry alike. In an attempt to introduce to her audience the kind of woman she was, Sexton offered “Her Kind” as the signature poem with which she would commence her poetry readings:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night...  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite...  
A woman like that is misunderstood...  
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.  
I have been her kind. (CP 15-6)

Sexton speaks of a tripartite subjectivity, constituting the roles of witch, housewife, and adulteress--a subjectivity that is further complicated by her use of the second “I,” which acts concurrently in the metaphorical frame, “like

that," to witness and define her persona. This calls attention, as Middlebrook elucidates, "to the difference between pain and the representation of pain, between the poet on stage in print - flippant, glamorous, crafty - and the woman whose anguish she knew firsthand" (115). "Perhaps I am no one," wrote Sexton,

True, 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.  
That being the case

I would like to call attention to my problem. (*CP* 434)

The problem was clear. Anne Sexton's life was plagued with agonizing uncertainty and a lack of pragmatic and rational stability. The despondent sufferer of a debilitating mental illness, Sexton found her solace in poetry. As Dr. Orne remarks:

The sheer existence of the task of writing poetry, through which she could describe her pain, her confusion, and her observations, provided the basis for a critical sense of self-esteem. (*M* xiv)

Through her employment of poetic art, written in the semi-autobiographical confessional mode, Sexton began to order her experiences in an attempt to discover and accept herself. "With this pen," Sexton asserts, "I take in hand my selves" (*CP* 109).

Ink from this pen flowed ceaselessly from 1956 until it was laid down for

ever in the fall of 1974. The thick black ribbon of ink might have been able to tie together the fragments of a shattered psyche, holding them fast with a neat, clean bow. In the final analysis, however, the ultimate paradox is evidenced. Sexton has peeled away the layers of her self, layers buried deeply under years of guilt and anguish, to such an extent that she has merely succeeded in accentuating the distance between them. Nevertheless, this poetry of madness did, on occasion, transcend the parameters of derangement; as Linda Gray recalls: “[My mother] was rarely crazy when she was writing” (92). Sexton pursued her relentless course, “mucking around looking for truth” (*Letters* 417), in an attempt to find answers. With growing consternation, Sexton realized that the truth for which she was searching was not so easy to access. It was, as the poem dedicated to her mother attests, “the truth the dead know” (*CP* 49).

Sexton concentrated on the personal and the intimate, and articulated notions which circulate around the overtly corporeal, yet subtly provocative perspective of the female body. Questions of motherhood, both personal and as a subject for her poetry, redound; these questions offer yet another observation point from which one might interrogate Sexton’s problematic subjectivity-- particularly in light of the following declaration Sexton made to her mother:

I existed to mean something to you, to matter to you, and then to belong to you. I made up a whole person, a poet, Anne Sexton, who would be worth something to you.[...] All those people who write to me and believe in me. God! I don’t even exist. (M 201)

As evidenced throughout her poetry, letters, and private notes, Anne Sexton’s relationship with her mother was one of obsession, and it held an unrivalled

prominence. She craved love, acceptance, and emotional stability from this titanic figure.

“A woman *is* her mother,” wrote Sexton (*CP* 77); and it is through this acknowledgement of a need, as Jane McCabe notes, “to face herself when she faces her mother and her daughter” (McClatchy 237), that Sexton was doomed to engage in a cyclical repetition of the traumatic behaviours to which she had been subjected during her own childhood--traumas of separation, sexual abuse, and emotional instability. Linda Gray, commenting on the relationship between Sexton and Mary Gray, writes:

[D]espite her difficult relationship with her own mother, there had actually been some love between them, love that it was now painful for her to acknowledge because its loss was even more painful. She knew that I, too, would face such a day. (6)

Motherhood was an overwhelming nightmare for Sexton; it was, as Linda Gray contends, “a dangerous state of being ... that could drive a sensitive woman to a mental hospital” (21).

Ironically, it was Sexton’s refusal to accept the responsibilities of motherhood and adulthood that drove her to the mental hospital. Sexton’s preoccupation with the means by which she might reconstruct the maternal/infantile bond with Mary Gray prompts, in psychoanalytic terms, the development of psychosis. As Lacanian theory has elucidated, a subject’s regression to the Imaginary stage, though physically impossible, necessitates a denial of the Symbolic order and a perception of one’s self, akin to a child’s earliest experience, as a fragmented body.

The construction of Sexton’s self through language is thus highly problematic. On the one hand, she candidly and effectively denounces

patriarchal hierarchy and, through her exploration of defilement, she attempts to deconstruct the Symbolic structure. On the other hand, however, as Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection clarifies, Sexton, by attempting to rid herself of Symbolic language, has in effect made the boundaries of her self permeable. Language has been articulated into visions of hunger, absorption, and excrement; finally, language emerges as Sexton's sacrifice. As Sexton herself said: "I suspect I have no self" (M 62-3); the reasons for that become clear when one considers that she is "passing out bits of [her] heart like hors d'oeuvres" (BF 4). The poetry articulates an ever-increasing pessimism, as Sexton undisputably accepts the necessity for her Christ-like sacrifice. She will offer her self as text. As Diana Hume George elaborates:

Sexton's identifications with the crucified Christ sometimes have the ring of a self-aggrandizing and self-appointed martyrdom. But to whatever extent she may have been martyred, it was at the invitation, if not the insistence, of an exceptionally hungry audience. (*Oedipus* xiii)

Sexton leaves behind mystery and revelation; her poetry overflowing with grief, betrayal, and guilt speaks to an existential terror--a terror that is consuming when "hope ... suddenly overflows the cesspool" (CP 512). "I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away," Sexton told Barbara Kevles, "if there was enough love to put them down" (McClatchy 3). Clearly, despite years of therapy, the nightmares would not go away. "[A] little uncomplicated hymn / is what I wanted to write" (CP 151), Sexton asserts, but "love has none" (CP 152).

In a discussion of Sexton's suicide, Diana Hume George writes:

The suicide distrusts and despises the body. Its voice is that

of the terrible mother beyond the grave, who commands the living woman to die as penance for being born, for depleting the mother's body, for giving her cancer. The deprivation leaves the adult woman hungry - hungry for an affirmative sense of femininity, hungry for absolution, and hungry for death.

*(Oedipus 61)*

Yet, Sexton would surely phrase it differently. She wanted her mother and naively believed that death could offer the means of reconnection. In one of her last poems, written April 1, 1974, Sexton writes:

I wish to enter her like a dream,  
 leaving my roots here on the beach  
 like a pan of knives.  
 And my past to unravel, with its knots and snarls,  
 and walk into the ocean,  
 letting it explode over me  
 and outward, where I would drink the moon  
 and my clothes would slip away,  
 and I would sink into the great mother arms  
 I never had ... *(CP 609-10)*

The search for Mercy Street is finally at an end, because as Sexton, quoting Thoreau, remarks: "Not til we are lost ... do we begin to find ourselves" *(CP 4)*. That final loss is, at once, both a leave-taking and a coming home.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> During the summer of 1955, near the anniversary of Nana's death, Sexton was found sitting in the dark on the back porch, with her sleeping pills in one hand and a picture of Nana in the other. She described her suicide attempts from then on as "a means for getting back to 'the place' where Nana was" (M 33).
- <sup>2</sup> Taken from Sexton's typed notes, 13 January 1962, restricted collection, HRHRC.
- <sup>3</sup> During the early 1970's, Sexton survived on what she called "mother-food"--scrambled eggs, hot chocolate, and thick milk-shakes--because she was unable to keep down solid food (M 360).
- <sup>4</sup> The "little girl" act was one that Sexton played up in her relationship with Mary Gray. Sandy Robart recalls: "Anne always dropped ten years or more in her mother's presence. She was overwhelmed - she was awed. I think it was probably an attempt to please. I can see her standing at the phone in the kitchen, talking to her mother, and feeling that Anne had turned into a little girl" (M 30).
- <sup>5</sup> Dr. Orne's mother, Martha Brunner-Orne, was Sexton's first psychiatrist.
- <sup>6</sup> One is alerted to an important biographical incident because at the time Sexton was writing this sequence she was planning her divorce. The breakdown of the family unit had untold effects on Sexton and, although she was confident that the single life would better suit her lifestyle, loneliness and regret eventually consumed her.
- <sup>7</sup> During the summer of 1940, Anne Sexton suffered from "severe constipation." She recalled this as a "very traumatic period in her life, remembering her mother routinely inspecting her bowel movements and threatening her with a colostomy if she didn't cooperate with efforts to regulate her elimination" (M 14-5).

Brief Chronology of Events in the Life of Anne Sexton

- 1928 November 9: Anne Gray Harvey born in Newton, Massachusetts, to Mary Gray Staples Harvey and Ralph Churchill Harvey.
- 1948 August 16: married to Alfred Muller (Kayo) Sexton II.
- 1949 Took an overdose of sleeping pills.
- 1953 July 21: Linda Gray Sexton born.
- 1954 Hospitalized at Westwood Lodge for emotional disturbance. July 15: Great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley died, age 86.
- 1955 Hospitalized for three weeks. Discharged August 3. August 5: Joyce Ladd Sexton born.
- 1956 March: admitted to mental hospital, her children sent to relatives. November 9: attempted suicide. December: began writing poetry.
- 1957 May 29: attempted suicide.
- 1959 March 10: Mary Gray Staples Harvey died of breast cancer. June 3: Ralph Churchill Harvey died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage.
- 1962: June: hospitalized at Westwood Lodge.
- 1966 July: attempted suicide.
- 1970 August 10: attempted suicide. Hospitalized for psychological problems.
- 1973 March: asked Kayo for divorce and they separated.
- 1973 August: took an overdose of sleeping pills and was hospitalized.
- 1974 October 4: committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning at 3.30 p.m. in the garage of her home.

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