

IMAGE AS RELATED TO THEME
IN THE POETRY OF
ANNE SEXTON

By
PATRICIA ANN WILLIAMS
Bachelor of Science
Northwestern State College
Alva, Oklahoma
1961

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
July, 1968

JAN 30 1969

IMAGE AS RELATED TO THEME
IN THE POETRY OF
ANNE SEXTON

Thesis Approved:

Clinton Keeler

Thesis Adviser

Samuel H. Woods, Jr.

D. D. Durham

Dean of the Graduate College

696503

PREFACE

Quite a number of Twentieth Century American writers use the basic subject matter of guilt, loss, and death in the genres of novel, short story, and poetry. In 1966 Anne Sexton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She is a part of the group of writers who employ startling images to suggest clear if unstated themes in these three areas. It has been my purpose to explore the images in Anne Sexton's poetry and to classify these developments in theme.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the assistance and guidance given me by the following members of my committee: Dr. Clinton C. Keeler, who was always available for counsel and encouragement and whose suggestions and directions were of great value; and Dr. Samuel Woods, who gave so generously of his time.

Finally, I would like to express appreciation to my husband, Keith, and son, Brad, whose understanding, encouragement, and sacrifice were instrumental in the preparation of this dissertation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. IMAGES	3
III. THEMES	60
IV. CONCLUSION	69
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	73

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To find the significance of image as related to theme it was necessary to examine the idea that images could be grouped under certain subject areas such as love, death, and religion. As the groupings were made, it became evident that these areas could be subdivided. The subdivisions of love became sexual and familial, which includes husband and wife, mother and children, and daughter with mother and father. The subdivisions of death were mental and physical; the subdivisions of religion became confession and rejection of religion. Each of these subject matter areas overlapped at times in the same poem, but pervading all aspects of subject matter was guilt. For this reason it was impossible to classify guilt as separate from any of the other areas. As the types of images were classified with subject, it was evident that in each division certain emotions were involved or brought out as a result of specific images. Identification of these emotions in turn suggested questions as to similarities and differences, causes and effects, and other questions. Jung's theories on the subconscious were relevant.

After the classification of each poem (with the exception of very few that seemed not to fit the major divisions) into

subjects, I classified images according to emotions. The themes then became distinctive. In this process of classification a pervading atmosphere of mental distress and agony in many of the poems suggested chaos. In later poems Anne Sexton found a way to organize her life so that order prevailed rather than chaos. Louise Bogan considers Anne Sexton's writing "from the center of human experience, with the direct and open feeling that women, always vulnerable, have been shy of expressing in recent years."¹ This writing exemplifies images as related to themes "from the center of human experience."

There has been no extended treatment of this type on the poetry of Anne Sexton. I read the brief reviews of her books carefully as well as her three volumes of poetry, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, All My Pretty Ones, and Live or Die. Even though her writings have been classified with those of Robert Lowell and W. D. Snodgrass,² almost nothing has been said of her themes or images by major critics. A study of the relationship tends to lend credence to those who believe that Anne Sexton will obtain an even larger place in estimates of quality in modern American poetry.

¹Louise Bogan, "Verse," The New Yorker, XXXIX (1963), p. 175.

Richard Tillinghart, "Five Poets," Sewanee Review, LXXXI (1963), p. 513.

CHAPTER II

IMAGERY

In a study of imagery in the poetry of Anne Sexton, it is evident that the images can be arranged under the subject matter of love--sexual and familial, death--physical and mental, and religion--rejection and acceptance and confession. Pervading nearly all poems are images of guilt, which seem to be the key to the subject matter divisions. Certain emotions such as loneliness and fear are also apparent in all divisions of subject matter.

Two poems incorporate each of these divisions and show through images Anne Sexton's progress from the disorder of mental distress through the ordering of her world and her final acceptance of life instead of death.

The first of the two major poems is "The Double Image." This poem is next to the last poem in Anne Sexton's first volume, To Bedlam and Part Way Back. It shows images of love, death, and religion in the framework of guilt. Other poems in this volume and her two later volumes show the same subject matter. "The Double Image" shows the basic subject matter of love, death, and religion and the startling images which make these concepts sharp and memorable. Images and themes in other poems can be related to those in "The Double Image."

"Live" will be used as a summary poem to show the changes toward a more ordered existence in the realm of love, death, and religion.

"The Double Image" could be entitled "The Triple Image" because it concerns Anne herself, her mother, and her daughter. The first part of the poem brings all the images in focus:

1.

I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I'd thought.
The day life made you well and whole
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out,
putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole
of talking boxes and the electric bed.
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.
Today the yellow leaves
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,
Love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,

why did I let you grow
 in another place. You did not know my voice
 when I came back to call. All the superlatives
 of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
 will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
 The time I did not love
 myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.
 There was new snow after this.¹ (53-4)

The first stanza suggests sadness in picturing the autumn
 when yellow leaves flapping in winter rain are falling flat
 and washed. The comparison of the "medical hypothesis that
 explained my brain" and the "struck leaves letting go" give
 a hopeless feeling that perhaps cure will never be quite as
 complete as the autumn. Fear enters in the second stanza
 where months mowl, fever rattles, pantomimes move, ugly
 angels speak. There is doom. In the third stanza there is
 the dawning of hope when "today believed in itself--or else
 it fell" that is found in the next stanza with holidays, a
 white tree, and new snow. Death is relieved by the renewal
 of life in a child: "love your self's self where it lives."
 Without a doubt, the images of guilt are also present--"And
 I remember mostly the three autumns you did not live here."
 As Anne Sexton establishes later in the poem, these three
 autumns represent the period in which Miss Sexton was recover-
 ing from mental illness. The guilt of not being with the
 child may have added to her mental distress. On the whole,
 however, the other poems indicate the influence of the
 children who tend to lead her back to a world of order. The

¹Anne Sexton, To Bedlam and Part Way Back (Cambridge, 1960).
 All future quotations from this work refer to this edition.

familial love of mother for children and children for mother definitely had a steadying influence.

Anne Sexton has two daughters who are mentioned in her poetry. Whether the narrator is Anne or a persona, as she is fighting her way to sanity, she hints that the love of the daughters may be a saving factor if she can overcome her guilt feelings toward them. From part 5 of "The Double Image":

And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly bean cheeks,
disobedient three, my splendid
stranger. And I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love, how your innocence
would hurt and how I gather
guilt like a young intern
his symptoms, his certain evidence. (58)

Slowly mother and daughter learn to know each other, and in the same tone in "The Double Image":

I remember we named you Joyce
So we could call you Joy.
You came like an awkward guest
that first time, all wrapped and moist
and strange at my heavy breast.
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,
only a girl, already loved, already loud in the house
of herself. We named you Joy.
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not
cure nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (61)

To some extent in the mother's eyes, the daughter is her own self, that part of her own self that she must rediscover.

Joyce appears again in "A Little Uncomplicated Hymn."
The warmth and sweetness of images such as "a song for your

laughter that keeps wiggling a spoon in my sleep"² leave little doubt as to the relation of mother and child. The concrete images at the beginning of the poem (from images concerning toys to caring for a child's bodily needs) indicate the care most mothers give a child as he grows. The child never actually is separated from the mother because of a communication between them that enters even the mother's sleep. In this instance the laugh which is abstract becomes a wiggling spoon which leads back to the concreteness of contact between the mother and child. The little hurts of Joy as a smaller child-- a fever, a fall from a tree, as well as such nice things-- birthdays, new teeth, are recounted. The deep hurt and guilt of the mother who had to relinquish years of her child's life to remain in a mental institution are pathetically related. Still, "A Little Uncomplicated Hymn / for Joy / is what I wanted to write. . . I look for uncomplicated hymns / but love has none."

Linda, the oldest daughter, is addressed as she and her mother attempt a nap together in "The Fortress." Tenderness, love, and wishes for the daughter are contained in the poem.

I cannot promise very much.
I give you the images I know.
Lie still with me and watch.
A pheasant moves
by like a seal, pulled through the mulch
by his thick white collar. He's on show
like a clown. He drags a beige feather that he removed,

²Anne Sexton, Live or Die (Cambridge, 1966). All future page references refer to this book.

one time, from an old lady's hat.

We laugh and we touch.

I promise you love. Time will not take away that. (33)³

The dreams and imaginings of the girl's childhood are, of course, dear to the mother; only a small touch of sadness is apparent.

In "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman" the mother is addressing her young daughter, Linda, as she is approaching twelve years of age. The image of the child at puberty as a garden is quite effective. She assures the daughter of her loveliness and the beauty, strangeness, and excitement of her body as she will "Watch high noon enter-- / noon, that ghost hour." Because of the nature of puberty, sex images abound--"magical transparent belly," "seed," "ripening." The daughter is likened to "a white stone-- / as exceptional as laughter / you will strike fire, that new thing!" Progressively the images tend to suggest a quiet unfolding to the building excitement of the last lines. The love of mother for child permeates the poem.

It is difficult to tell which of the daughters is in "Your Face on the Dog's Neck" or "Pain for a Daughter," but neither poem loses any meaning for this. In the first, the mother again thinks of the girl's younger days as the child sleeps by the dog. The second indicates a mother's agony for her daughter, whose foot has been stepped on by a horse.

³Anne Sexton, All My Pretty Ones (Cambridge, 1961). All future quotations from this work refer to this edition.

The mother is hurt as the daughter in her pain calls out to God rather than to the mother, but the daughter's choice of words show the mother that she is no longer a child dependent upon her mother.

The only other emotions associated with the two children are loneliness and sense of loss as Anne projects the loss of the two daughters by marriage in "Two Sons." Feeling the aloneness, "I grow old on my bitterness," but the poet manages to overcome these bitter feelings to ". . .gather myself in / like cut flowers and ask how you are and where you've been." The image Anne Sexton uses helps the reader identify with a mother who must regain her composure after an experience of cutting all that has been binding in the family ties. She must gather what is left of her life and begin living in a different environment.

Images range from quietness, "Why have your eyes gone into their room?" and "Your eyes lie in wait, / little field mice nestling on their paws" to love as remembered agony, "when you lay bubbling like a caught fish, / sucking on the manufactured oxygen" to "Love twists me, a Spanish flute plays in my blood" and "I will turn like a little dancer." Love pervades all images to "I will crouch down / and put my cheek near you, . . .letting my face rest in an assembled tenderness. These images are so close to basic feeling, to kinesthesia, for example, that they can hardly be paraphrased. The poem "The Fortress" carries the love message from the title to the last line "I promise you love. Time will not take away

that." This seems to be representative of her emotions toward her daughters.

Another part of familial love is love for mother and father. For Anne this love is tinged with all types of bad feelings. Hostility and relief at the death of the parents are suggested. Again "The Double Image" can be used as a primary example. Part 2 shows the feelings of Miss Sexton exemplified in most of her poetry:

2.

They sent me letters with news
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

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

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did her best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait
done instead.

There was a church where I grew up
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,
row by row, like puritans or shipmates
singing together. My father passed the plate.
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.
I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait
done instead. (55)

The narrator is "an angry guest" a "partly mended thing," "an outgrown child." She goes back to childhood images of a

sterile church with "white cupboards" where they were locked up, row by row, singing together. This suggests a similarity to the institution she just left. In the lines "And this is how I came / to catch at her; and this is how I lost her" there is a finality in the loss of the love of one who is supposed to be always loving. There is bitterness in "She had my portrait / done instead." The girl was not forgiven by her mother and father. Perhaps this is a source of guilt.

Miss Sexton carries over the same idea of the double portrait in the poem "Housewife."

Some women marry houses.
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
That's the main thing. (48)

Because "A woman is her mother" the poet can see herself in the double role. This is not necessarily a pleasant emotion because her mother seems to have failed her quite often. "She had my portrait done instead." Still she seems to care for her mother, because she says in part 6 of "The Double Image" "my overthrown / love, my first image." The most noticeable emotion in relation to both mother and father is the overriding guilt she seems unable to get away from. This is associated primarily with death wishes for the parents and will be discussed under the subject matter of death.

Love as an aspect of the woman's relationship with her father and mother is perhaps better described as lack of

reciprocal love. In "Cripples and Other Stories" she gives some insight into her childhood as she tells her doctor of childhood experiences.

Disgusted, mother put me
on the potty. She was good at this.
My father was fat on scotch.
It leaked from every orifice. (80)

My father was a perfect man,
clean and rich and fat.
My mother was a brilliant thing.
She was good at that. (81)

Images earlier in the poem such as "dead rats in the toilet," "enemas of childhood," "outhouses," suggest that Miss Sexton is perhaps trying to pin the reasons for her insanity on childhood events. She is embittered and cynical in describing in opulent images her father as fat, clean, rich and her mother as brilliant, disgusted, but with little warmth. In the same poem the narrator tells of getting her arm caught in the wringer of a washing machine. Her mother took the accident this way:

As for the arm,
unfortunately it grew.
Though mother said a withered arm
would put me in Who's Who.

For years she described it.
She sang it like a hymn.
By then she loved the shrunken thing,
my little withered limb. (81-82)

She considers herself in the image of "child-woman" at this stage. The images of this age are no more reassuring than those of babyhood--"My cheeks blossomed with maggots." Even in blossoming adolescence there is the image of death and decay.

In the same poem are other insights into the relationship between Anne and her parents.

My father's cells clicked each night,
intent on making money.
And as for my cells, they brooded,
little queens, on honey.

On boys too, as a matter of fact,
and cigarettes and cars.
Mother frowned at my wasted life.
My father smoked cigars.

My father didn't know me
but you kiss me in my fever.
My mother knew me twice
and then I had to leave her. (82)

Cell images are used to describe personality. The idea of a mind being reborn as though in the creation is shown in the final image of the poem:

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

The baby image is again used in the context meaning she had not grown mentally or rather has reverted back to childhood. There is an aspect of loss and, of course, the ever present guilt. In "Christmas Eve" Miss Sexton seems to sense the loss of what she has missed in a mother-daughter relationship:

Oh sharp diamond, my mother!
I could not count the cost
of all your faces, your moods--
that present that I lost.
Sweet girl, my deathbed,
my jewel-fingered lady,
your portrait flickered all night
by the bulbs of the tree. (54)

The use of the "sharp diamond" evokes a mother who is hard, inhuman, capable of cutting, yet one who could also be a

sparkling symbol of love. The conflicts surrounding the relationship as shown by this particular image are intense. In the last stanza guilt is again mirrored and the lack of love which leads to death images for the mother and the resulting guiltiness:

You who lead me by the nose,
I saw you as you were.
Then I thought of your body
as one thinks of murder. . .

Then I said Mary--
Mary, Mary, forgive me
and then I touched a present for the child,
the last I bred before your death;
and then I touched my breast
and then I touched the floor
and then my breast again as if,
somehow, it were one of yours. (55)

In "These Times. . ." There is an even greater revelation of reasons for ill feeling between Anne and her parents.

I will speak of the little childhood cruelties,
being a third child,
the last given
and the last taken--
of the nightly humiliations when Mother
undressed me,
of the life of the daytime, locked in my room--
being the unwanted, the mistake
that Mother used to keep Father
from his divorce. (29)

Later in the same poem the guilt is again apparent in relation to her mother:

I did not know that my life, in the end,
would run over my mother's like a truck
and all that would remain
from the year I was six
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
so that I might hear
the unsaid more clearly.

The linking of love with images of a "truck" or a "small hole" indicate the young destroying the old. Could the "unsaid" that Anne heard at six have been the lack of love in the family? The clue to the relationship of Anne and her parents can probably be expressed as lack of love.

Even though the father is mentioned less often, in "And One for My Dame" the father is a traveling salesman. It seems he had little time for a small daughter:

Except when he hid
in his bedroom on a three-day drunk,
he typed out complex itineraries, packed his trunk,
his matched luggage
and pocketed a confirmed reservation,
his heart already pushing over the red routes of the
nation.

I sit at my desk
each night with no place to go,
opening the wrinkled maps of Milwaukee and Buffalo,
the whole U.S.
its cemeteries, its arbitrary time zones,
through routes like small veins, capitals like small
stones.

The loneliness of Anne as a small child is evident in the last two stanzas.

Anne does not use the same death wish images for her father as for her mother, but she seems to feel resentment of his alcoholism, which is mentioned in several poems as "your alcoholic tendency." She also mentions her father's unfaithfulness to her mother.

Meanwhile,
they carried out my mother,
wrapped like somebody's doll, in sheets,
bandaged her jaw and stuffed up her holes.

My father, too. He went out on the rotten blood
 he used up on other women in the Middle West.
 He went out, a cured old alcoholic
 on crooked feet and useless hands.
 He went out calling for his father
 who died all by himself long ago--
 that fat banker who locked up,
 his genes suspended like dollars,
 wrapped up in his secret,
 tied up securely in a straitjacket. (6)

Guilt toward her father is expressed when she is sorting his papers after his death. She says he could have remarried and been happy, but she discouraged his remarriage:

This year, solvent but sick, you meant
 to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush.
 But before you had that second chance, I cried
 on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died. (5)

The images Anne uses in relation to her younger days with her mother and father are stark, bleak, unhappy--"I am a plaster doll," "Oh the enemas of childhood," "I see dead rats in the toilet"--the kind of image each person tries to cover with thoughts of better happenings. The portrayal of the urgent feelings of revulsion develops empathy. The dead rats symbolize a fear associated with mechanical training. The plastic doll conveys a cold distance, an alienation from the warmth of family life. The happy family happenings are missing in Anne's poetry. Perhaps they were missing in her childhood. "Would the cripple inside of me / be a cripple that would show?"

The third kind of love in Anne Sexton's poetry is love between husband and wife. This is not as unhealthy as the emotion between Anne and her father and mother. The beautiful images Anne uses in poems of sexual love are not present either.

Still, there is a development of love between her and her husband through respect and helpfulness.

The images of love between husband and wife in Anne's earlier poems show great intensity. There is a clear difference between the "wife" and the poetess. In "The Farmer's Wife" she has been "his habit" just "ten years now" in that "old pantomime of love / that she wants although it leaves her still alone," living in her own mind, watching him sleeping "While / her young years bungle past" and "she wishes him cripple, or poet, / or even lonely, or sometimes, / better, my lover, dead." The images are ambivalent. They show affection, or at least, companionship in "local life in Illinois," "honey bunch," a "brief bright bridge" but an emptiness that begins to border on hate because she is "still alone" "minds apart from him" "hating the sweat of the house." There is a strapped, desolate feeling that is only partly offset by a feeling of security and need. The wife sees the only solution as death of her husband. It is interesting that in all poems in which the man-woman relationship is marriage, the images are dark and undesirable, whereas in most poems in which the man-woman relationship is a love affair, the images are bright and desirable. In a similar vein "Man and Wife" begins with the quotation, "To speak of wo / that is in marriage . . ." and continues: with a pigeon comparison:

We are not lovers.
We do not even know each other.
We look alike
but we have nothing to say.
We are like pigeons...

...
 Now they are together
 like strangers in a two-seater outhouse,
 eating and squatting together.
 They have teeth and knees
 but they do not speak.
 A soldier is forced to stay with a soldier
 because they share the same dirt
 and the same blows.
 They are exiles
 soiled by the same sweat and the drunkard's dream.
 As it is they can only hang on,
 their red claws wound like bracelets
 around the same limb. (27-8)

but ends in a pathetic, "But they would pierce our heart /
 if they could only fly the distance."

Something is missing in Anne Sexton's early relationship
 with her husband as she says in "Crossing the Atlantic":

Now always leaving me in the West
 is the wake,
 a ragged bridal veil, unexplained,
 seductive, always rushing down the stairs,
 never detained, never enough. (48)

Wake means literally the wake of the ship or a death watch,
 but it evokes the sensation of hypnotism or a dream-like
 trance. The bridal veil being ragged reflects that all was
 not well or at least what was expected in their early marriage.
 There is again the disturbing possibility of need but a need
 that is always rushed. On the same voyage Anne says in "Walk-
 ing in Paris," "I deserted my husband and my children." With
 this, guilt is also indicated. These early poems suggest
 sterility, loneliness, hopelessness and failure. If Anne
 Sexton is speaking of actual marriage in "The Wedding Night,"
 the poem represents a departure from her usual images of mar-
 ried life. The magnolias blossoming are beautiful. Pink,

tight, firm, and polished, the flowers are appealing in color and shape.

The magnolias had sat once, each in a pink dress, looking, of course, at the ceiling. For weeks the buds had been as sure-bodied as the twelve-year-old flower girl I was at Aunt Edna's wedding. Will they bend, I had asked, as I walked under them toward you, bend two to a branch, cheek, forehead, shoulder to the floor? I could see that none were clumsy. I could see that each was tight and firm. Not one of them had trickled blood-- waiting as polished as gull beaks, as closed as all that.

The images of virginity are unmistakable. The blossoms are representative of the wedding night when:

Yet one night in the April night
Someone (someone!) kicked each bud open--
to disprove, to mock, to puncture!
The next day they were all hot-colored,
moist, not flawed in fact.
Then they no longer huddled.
They forgot how to hide.
Tense as they had been,
they were flags, gaudy, chafing in the wind.
There was such abandonment in all that!
Such entertainment
in their flaring up.

....

 someone had, in one night,
passed roughly through,
and before it was time.

The sexual images invoke intense feeling. There is fusion of objects in the literal description of the magnolia blossoms and the implied description of loss of virginity. There is a fusion of actions in the opening of the buds and the rape of a virgin. The images are harsh and brutal "kicked each bud open," "puncture," "hot-colored", as the traumatic experience is related.

As in other poems of actual marriage, however, some guilt is apparent, and there is a loneliness in separation. Perhaps insight into the problem of husband and wife adjustment is mirrored in the last lines of the poem quoted above.

In later poems as more order is restored, love and respect between husband and wife is also to be restored. In "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" Anne Sexton is trying to delve into her past, her guilt feelings, but her husband hesitates to follow this difficult course.

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 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. (51-2)

The invisible veil between Anne and her husband may disappear according to the last lines. An order and an understanding seem to be developing between husband and wife. This love is consummated in part 5 of "The Double Image" and the love seems to be displacing the guilt.

All that summer I learned life
back into my own
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. (58)

In this part of "The Double Image" familial love is reaching a more normal relationship also. Wise Sexton becomes a wife and mother. Order is developing in this family, and the relationship between Anne Sexton and her father and mother is in perspective. Guilt is in the background for the present.

The sexual love images suggest emotions of sadness and many of the poems indicate loneliness brought about by separation. This division of Sexton's poetry contains some of her best. Imagery "completes her range, from the terrible through the beautiful."⁴ "Love Song for K. Owyne" is one of the best love poems. K. Owyne's love seems to protect the speaker from "the army in the sea / move in, again and again, against me." There is a sweet-sadness in this poem particularly brought about by images such as:

Though I was bony you found me fair.
In the bay, the imported swans drank for hours
like pale acrobats or gently drunken flowers. (61)

McDonnell states that "From the Garden" is one of the most beautiful love poems in contemporary American poetry.⁵ Again the imagery is of flowers and again such phrases as

⁴Tillinghart, Sewanee Review, p. 513.

⁵Thomas P. McDonnell, "Light in a Dark Journey," America, CXVI (1967), p. 730.

"watch the lilies open in such a field" give the essence of calm contentment.

"I Remember" is a beautiful poem of beauty, peace, and love in June. The sustaining feeling of the poem is lovely.

I REMEMBER

By the first of August
the invisible beetles began
to snore and the grass was
as tough as hemp and was
no color--no more than
the sand was a color and
we had worn our bare feet
bare since the twentieth
of June and there were times
we forgot to wind up your
alarm clock and some nights
we took our gin warm and neat
from old jelly glasses while
the sun blew out of sight
like a red picture hat and
one day I tied my hair back
with a ribbon and you said
that I looked almost like
a puritan lady and what
I remember best is that
the door to your room was
the door to mine. (11)

Again the sweet-sadness and calm contentment are apparent. The dream-like quality of suspended time is apparent. Less apparent is the return to innocence signified by bare feet, puritan lady, warm gin (warmness and wetness). Death is sleeping at this time as invisible beetles are snoring, and there is a colorlessness of ghostliness. The hint of bareness also suggests putting off worldly things.

A love and death that live in memory are coupled in "Mother and Jack and the Rain." There is a sweet-sad quality of a young love at sixteen in this poem also. Rain adds to

the image of loneliness, sadness, and remembrance, "I think too much. / Fish swim from the eyes of God. Let them pass." The stanza is full of Christian imagery of God's sadness. This recalls the pain of memory to Miss Sexton. Rain sets the scene of the young girl at home with her parents. Rain sets the scene for the storm that kept the young girl and Jack out all night beside a tiny lake. "Now Jack says the Mass / and mother died using her own bones for crutches," and the young girl comes to this same place "to endure, / somehow to endure."

In All My Pretty Ones loneliness is coupled with love and separation in several poems. "'Letter Written On a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound' begins as a wryly melancholy account of the end of a love-affair" but it "becomes a magnificently humorous prayer that the four solemn nuns on the ferry with the speaker may become visibly miraculous."⁶ In the quoted stanza the images may be humorous, but one is still aware of the intense desire to stave off loneliness in the beholder of this image:

Oh, God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,

⁶ M. L. Rosenthal, The New Poets (New York, 1967), p. 138.

flying four abreast
 in the old-fashioned side stroke;
 each mouth open and round,
 breathing together
 as fish do,
 singing without sound.

"Flight" tends to follow the same theme of loss of love resulting in loneliness to the point of despair. "The description of the drive to the airport is full of anticipation and outward-going images:

There was rose and violet on the river
 As I drove through the mist into the city.
 I was full of letters I hadn't sent you,
 A red coat over my shoulders
 and new white gloves in my lap.

At the airport, the turning point of the poem and of the journey, there is a terrible note of finality:

All flights are grounded.
 The planes sat and the gulls sat,
 heavy and rigid in a pool of glue.

The return journey is marked by a sense of almost cosmic desolation and the realization that there is no escape, that flight from the self and world that self creates is illusory:

I drove past the eye and ear infirmaries,
 past the office buildings lined up like dentures,
 and along Storrow Drive the street lights
 sucked in all the insects who
 had nowhere else to go."⁷

This image of the street lights and insects adds to the pervading loneliness. Even the street names are significant. She drives to the airport through "Sumner Tunnel" and away

⁷A. R. Jones, "Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton," Critical Quarterly, VII (1965), pp. 26-27.

from it along "Storrow Drive." Rain and fog accompany the drive, making an even lonelier image.

In "Letter Written During a January Northeaster" the weather brings again an image of loneliness.

The snow has quietness in it; no songs,
no smells, no shouts or traffic.
When I speak
my own voice shocks me. (66)

Love, loneliness, and separation are involved again. The reader learns that the narrator is waiting out a blizzard for a letter from a lover. Every day is the same, "Monday." Loneliness leads to drinking, reliving newspaper articles, reminiscing the grandfather/mailman.

Loneliness is apparent in "Doors, Doors, Doors." The reaction of an Old Man and a Seamstress to a young girl and her lover in an apartment house reveals the characters of each and the inherent loneliness in each. Their reactions are interesting. The Old Man attempts to engage the lovers in conversation as they pass his door, but the Seamstress remembers her own son, who deserted her and her plans for him, to become a priest. She has been made bitter by the loneliness and disappointment. The lovers are fighting the loneliness from "my husband's insane abuse" and "your wild-haired wife" by "Love is the only use. . . Tell them need is an excuse for love. Tell them need prevails." Need in this sense is more than need of physical love. Need incorporates compassion, understanding, and companionship. Need may be the key to Anne Saxton's attitude toward sexual love.

Much of Anne Sexton's love poetry implies a love affair involving the very young. It is easy to identify the loneliness of a young girl in the poem "Wallflower." She in her loneliness calls forth sexual images of:

Upstage the bride falls in satin to the floor.
Beside her the tall hero in a red wool robe
stirs the fire with his ivory cane.
The string quartet plays for itself,
gently, gently, sleeves and waxy bows.
The legs of the dancers leap and catch. (47)

Even though she says of herself, "My thighs press, knotting in their treasure," she will achieve fulfillment only through her imaginative dreams. The images emphasize sterility and self-doubt in reality, "face is red with sorrow," and "Breasts are made of straw," but images in her dreams are opulent, "feverish roses, the islands of olives and radishes." She ends the poem with the sob, "The blissful pastimes of the parlor--I'll never know."

Three other poems, each in a separate volume as if a recurring memory, are of youth and love affairs. In "Love Song" the girl must be just entering womanhood and the love affair must be quite innocent.

I was
the girl of the chain letter,
the girl full of talk of coffins and keyholes,
the one of the telephone bills,
the wrinkled photo and the lost connections,
the one who kept saying--
Listen! Listen!
We must never! We must never!
and all those things . . . (25)

The same girl may be characterized in "The House," a story about a rich young girl's love. This love is also the

the young innocent love of:

Kisses that stick in the mouth
like the vinegar candy she used to pull
with her buttery fingers, pull
until it was white like a dog's bone,
white, thick and impossible to chew. (41-2)

The sensory images of stickiness with a vinegary tingle and thickness combine with the innocence of whiteness, exemplifying the thrill of a love that is very young. Other poems of love show sexual images and loneliness.

This one again,
made vaguely and cruelly,
one eye green and one eye blue,
has the only major walk-on so far,
has walked from her afternoon date
past the flashing back of the Japanese spy,
up the cotton batten stairs,
past the clicking and unclicking of the earphone
turns here at the hall
by the diamonds that she'll never earn
and the bender that she kissed last night
among thick set stars, the floating bed
and the strange white key...
up like a skein of yarn,
up another flight into the penthouse,
to slam the door on all the years
she'll have to live through...
the sailor who she won't with,
the boys who will walk on
from Andover, Exeter and St. Marks,
the boys who will walk off with pale unlined faces,
to slam the door on all the days she'll stay the same
and never ask why and never think who to ask,
to slam the door and rip off her orange blouse.
Father, father, I wish I were dead. (43-4)

This love is more complicated in "The Expatriates." The images are not as concrete. Again a key to Anne's feelings toward this kind of love is expressed, "believing is the act of love.":

My dear, it was a moment
to clutch at for a moment
so that you may believe in it

and believing is the act of love, I think,
even in the telling, wherever it went.

In the false New England forest
where the misplanted Norwegian trees
refused to root, their thick synthetic
roots barging out of the dirt to work the air,
we held hands and walked on our knees.
Actually, there was no one there. (30)

The suggestion of the forest home dwells in memory and the
memory of love becomes almost unbearable.

Guilt may be the reason for an unbearable memory. The
images of guilt in "Old Dwarf Heart" are ugly.

When I lie down to love,
Old dwarf heart shakes her head.
Like an imbecile she was born old.
Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds
of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.
She knows the decay we're made of. (10)

Again guilt, the old dwarf heart, has pervaded even the most
beautiful of ideas, love.

Love as evidenced by "The Double Image" and numerous
other poems is familial--mother and father, husband and wife,
and children. It is healthy when order is maintained. Order
prevails as long as guilt can be forgotten or covered. Hope-
lessness, failing, loneliness contribute to guilt feelings,
but joy in love relationships seems to be overcoming the guilt
feelings.

Images of death are quite varied. Again guilt links
physical and mental death, perhaps more so than any other
aspect of Anne Sexton's poetry. Physical death most prom-
inent is suicide. Fear, loneliness, then peace, and hope are
emotions shown by the images. In "The Double Image" suicide
in the first part which has already been quoted ("I, who chose

two times / to kill myself"). It is mentioned again in part 4:

I wintered in Boston,
childless bride,
nothing sweet to spare
with witches at my side.
I missed your babyhood,
tried a second suicide,
tried the sealed hotel a second year. (37)

Phrases indicating suicide are profuse in many poems. Images of fear link with suicide in "Imitations of Drowning:

Fear
of drowning,
fear of being that alone,
kept me busy making a deal
as if I could buy
my way out of it
and it worked for two years
and all of July. (16)

A stanza like this is followed by a stanza in the form of prose telling of incidents which have happened that seem to be most fearful in Sexton's life. Several childhood incidents which are mentioned in earlier autobiographical poems indicate that the narrator is Miss Sexton. The accidents of almost losing an arm in the washroom wringer and being shut up in the closet have been mentioned in other poems. One incident occurs when she is a small child. Her arm is caught in the washroom wringer, and she follows "fear to its core." She continues to return to the idea of fear as a concrete object as in:

Fear,
a motor,
pumps me around and around
until I fade slowly
and the crowd laughs.

I fade out, an old bicycle rider
whose odds are measured in actuary graphs.

She concludes with the point that "in the end it's fear /
that drowns you." Note the fear in "an ant in a pot of choc-
olate, / it boils / and surrounds you." Phrases such as
these in the proselike stanza recall to the reader most vividly
that fear of drowning:

I swam--but the tide came in like ten thousand orgasms.
I swam--but the waves were higher than horses' necks.
..... The dying
went on and on in water as white and clear
as the gin I drink each day at half-past five.
Going down for the last time, the last breath lying,
I grapple with eels like ropes--it's ether, it's queer
and then, at last, it's done. Now the scavengers arrive,
and hard crawlers who come to clean up the ocean floor.
And death, that old butcher, will bother me no more. (16-7)

Animal images are prominent. Seemingly, they indicate fear.

These animal images recur in another poem "Suicide Note."

Better,
despite the worms talking to
the mare's hoof in the field;
better
despite the season of young girls
dropping their blood;
better somehow
to drop myself quickly
into an old room.

Dear friend,
I will have to sink with hundreds of others
on a dumbwaiter into hell.
I will be a light thing.
I will enter death
like someone's lost optical lens.
Life is half enlarged.
The fish and owls are fierce today.
Life tilts backward and forward.
Even the wasps cannot find my eyes.
Yes,
Eyes that were immediate once.
Eyes that have been truly awake,
eyes that told the whole story--
poor dumb animals. (75-6)

Gnats, moths, fish, a donkey, and bats are mentioned in the same poem. These images give an eery feeling of watchfulness and death. Each has an aspect of the unknown, particularly bats, who inhabit dark, cool places like a tomb. Each creature is repulsive to touch. Fish represent life in the beginning and the owls and eyes indicate watchfulness and knowledge even through darkness. Truth is the present state of wisdom. The moths beat against the light of truth or knowledge only to harm themselves. Gnats never let one rest and thus the quality of watchfulness again.

Suicide by knives and pills as well as drowning is salient. In "The Addict" the images are again stark and realistic:

Don't they know
that I promised to die!
I'm keeping in practice.
I'm merely staying in shape.
The pills are a mother, but better,
every color and as good as sour balls.
I'm on a diet from death.

I like them more than I like me.
Stubborn as hell, they won't let go.
It's kind of marriage.
It's kind of war
where I plant bombs inside
of myself. (85)

Knives are mentioned most often as suicide weapons-- "I carried a knife in my pocketbook" "There are no knives for cutting your throat." The same death wish is seen even in the title of the poem "Wanting to Die." She speaks of the tools of suicide in images of sharpness for knives--"I know well the glass blades you mention;" water for drowning--

"Warmer than air or water, / I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole;" and eating and tongue for pills--"eaten the enemy," "a drug so sweet," and "To thrust all that life under your tongue." Ironically:

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build. (58)

The point for Anne in suicide is not which tool, but: "This time I hunt for death, / the night I lean toward; / the night I want." This longing for death is nowhere more evident than when it is stated in the poem on the death of Sylvia Plath, "how did you crawl into, / crawl down alone/ into the death I wanted so badly and for so long." In the entire poem "Sylvia's Death" Anne Sexton seems to have yearned for this destruction as evidenced by her attempted suicides. In addressing the poem to Miss Plath she talks as if they had a conspiracy for the suicide--death pact. She says, "old suicides / and I know at the news of your death, a terrible taste for it, like salt." She repeats four times in parentheses a summation of anguish. All are similar to this one:

(And me,
me too.
And now, Sylvia,
you again
with death again,
That ride home
with our boy.) (39)

It can be assumed that the repetition in each of these stanzas of "our boy" is a reference to suicide. Anne Sexton has already tried for "our boy" before and failed. The "home" is

death.

Since most of the suicide poems are in Anne Sexton's last volume, it is possible that suicide was a part of the mass of experience so close to her that she was unable to examine or write about the experiences until time had passed and she had more perspective on them. This guilt is mentioned in "The Double Image" in speaking of her mother's attitude:

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside of her. (55)

Anne Sexton's experiences with death are evident, as in "Old"; "Death starts like a dream, / full of objects and my sister's laughter," "Sweet taste--my mouth so full / and sweet running out." but the starkness of the last line "In a dream you are never eighty" leads one to believe dread of age may be a contributing factor to attempted suicide.

It is quite noticeable that attempted suicide may have been encouraged by the everpresent guilt feelings. In succeeding lines:

Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.
I wintered in Boston
with the witches at my side. (53-55)

The reverse is also true. Guilt is caused by suicide attempts; however, in the last of this volume the witches are addressed:

"Sweet witch, you are my worried guide." The witch image seems to be dropped until the last poem "Live" in Sexton's last volume, where witch is mentioned only once and in a way that seems to show in itself her moving toward sanity and order and away from the witch: "The witch comes on / and you paint her pink."

Death is prevalent in the poems in an aspect other than suicide. In "The Double Image" all images have a dark, forboding quality. They also have a double quality of the image of her mother's death and her own living death. Death of Anne Sexton's father and mother is also mentioned. Part 6 is illustrative:

6.

In north light, my smile is held in place,
the shadow marks my bone.
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
of the smile, the young face,
the foxes' snare.

In south light, her smile is held in place,
her cheeks wilting like a dry
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
that stony head of death
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;
we smiled in our canvas home
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.
The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.
I rot on the wall, my own
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time--two ladies sitting in umber chairs.
You kissed your grandmother
and she cried. (60)

Deaths of her brother, an Arabic girl, a friend Betsy, Elizabeth, her mother and father, an old maid aunt, and a fellow New England poet occur in various poems. These deaths are brought about as seen in images of war, burial alive, an airplane crash, cancer, and heart attack.

Perhaps the most horrifying picture of death, the "historic thief," found in Anne Sexton's poetry is that of Johnny Fole, who was the narrator's brother. Miss Sexton's first stanza gets our sympathy for Johnny Fole in describing their childhood games near the sea. This image of the sea is carried out in the description of his horrifying death in a beach assault. She ends this poem with the image of memory that tends to tie with the death image in each of these death poems:

He was tall and twenty that July,
 but there was no balance to help;
 only the shells came straight and even.
 This was the first beach of assault;
 the odor of death hung in the air
 like rotting potatoes; the junkyard
 of landing craft waited open and rusting.
 The bodies were strung out as if they were
 still reaching for each other, where they lay
 to blacken, to burst through their perfect
 skin. And Johnny Fole was one of them.
 He gave in like a small wave, a sudden
 hole in his belly and the years all gone
 where the Pacific noon chipped its light out.
 Like a bean bag, outflung, head loose
 and anonymous, he lay. Did the sea move fire
 for its battle season? Does he lie there
 forever, where his rifle waits, giant
 and straight? . . . I think you die again
 and live again;
 Johnny, each summer that moves inside
 my mind. (32)

Another horrifying death is striking in "The Moss of His

"Skin", although this poem is not a confessional or autobiographical poem as are most of the poems with a death theme. The reader is inside the mind of a young girl who is being buried with her dead father. Insight into the poem is given by a quotation before the poem from "Children of the Desert" by Harold Feldman. It explains the Arabic process of burying alive young girls with their dead fathers as a sacrifice to the goddesses of the tribe.

The death of Elizabeth, whose relationship to Anne is not clear, affected Anne deeply. Anne's images of a casket are breathtaking and real.

You lay in the nest of your real death,
 You lay in the crate of your last death,
 But were not you, not finally you.
 They have stuffed her cheeks, I said;
 This clay hand, this mask of Elizabeth
 Are not true. From within the satin
 And the suede of this inhuman bed,
 Something cried, let me go let me go. (11)

Also quite real is the spell of the ash and bones in part 2: Interestingly, the idea of death seems to have been a release for Elizabeth, as evidenced by the "let me go" phrases. Miss Sexton must have felt of death as a release when she attempted suicide. Anne is again in the process of sorting and reminiscing in this poem.

A narrative of death is perceived in the poem "A Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston." Except for a chance exchange of tickets, Anne herself would have been killed in an airplane crash (ironic since she has tried to commit suicide). Anne gave Betsy her return ticket, Anne

tells Rose as they are flying to Boston, "A reason to worry, / Rose, when you fix on an old death like that / and outliving the impact, to find you've pretended."

Cancer is the cause of Anne's mother's death as told in "The Double Image" and in "The Operation." Anne seems barely to have escaped death by this cause as in "The Operation" she goes through the same process her mother had only recently undergone with fatal results. "The Operation" is considered one of Anne's best poems.⁸ The imagery supports this judgment. One particularly stunning verse takes one right into surgery with her in a drugged stupor:

The great green people stand
over me; I roll on the table
under a terrible sun, following their command
to curl, head touching knee if I am able.
Next, I am hung up like a saddle and they begin.
Pale as an angel I float out over my own skin.

I soar in hostile air
over the pure women in labor,
over the crowning heads of babies being born.
I plunge down the backstair
calling mother at the dying door,
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn.
Its nerves pull like wires
snapping from the leg to the rib.
Strangers, their faces rolling like hoops, require
my arm. I am lifted into my aluminum crib. (14)

Much autobiography can be found in reminiscing through letters and sorting materials after death. Reminiscence is common. It is found in the poem "Funnel" about her New England ancestry. Reminiscence of old letters and the death of an old

⁸Richard Howard, "Five Poets," Poetry, CI (1963), p. 414.

maid aunt is in "Some Foreign Letters"--"When you were mine they wrapped you out of here / with your best hat over your face. I cried / because I was seventeen." In the title poem of All My Pretty Ones Anne Sexton's father has just died, only three months after her mother's death. His death as told in "The Truth the Dead Know" is the result of a heart attack. Anne is sorting his materials after his death and reminiscing. In "Somewhere in Africa" to a fellow New England poet, who also died of cancer, she constructs the image of a primitive African tribal custom of death in the form of a woman placing the man's body in a boat and going down the river "with the ivory, the copra and the gold." The images in this poem show a kind of beauty in death rather than the horror as shown in other poems.

Guilt is important particularly in the death of Miss Sexton's father and mother. In "Lament":

Someone is dead.
Even the trees know it,
Those poor old dancers who come on lewdly,
all pea-green scarfs and spine pole.
I think...
I think I could have stopped it, (7)

In "'The Waiting Head,' about her mother in a rest home, sitting always at the upper front window and 'Watching for anyone from her wooden seat,' and always writing in 'her leather books' that 'no one came'--apparently whether it was true or not,"⁹ Anne says:

⁹Rosenthal, The New Poets, p. 136.

Now she is always dead
 and the leather books are mine. Today I see the head
 move, like some pitted angel, in that high window.
 What is the waiting head doing? It looks the same.
 Will it lean forward as I turn to go?
 I think I hear it call to me below
but no one came no one came. (44)

The imagined loneliness and death of an unborn child in "The Abortion" result in guilt feelings:

Each of these has affected Anne deeply. Yet she seems to be trying to forget these recent successive deaths in "The Truth the Dead Know" from All My Pretty Ones. These "remarkable epitaphs"¹⁰ show a "striding into a sunlight earned through grief. It is a revelating and healing poem and quite different in tone from anything else in the book."¹¹ Even more to the point of forgetting death, she says in "A Curse Against Elegies":

I refuse to remember the dead.
 And the dead are bored with the whole thing.

Animal images, "chicken feathers, worms under the cat's ear, and "scapegoat" abound. Worms are associated with death as are chicken feathers as the remains of a chicken. A scapegoat represents a sacrificial death. In the Hebrew ceremony as the scapegoat was sent into the wilderness as an offering to Azazel, the spirit of evil, he was a symbol that sins had been put away, or forgiven. Thus in a narrower sense, Anne Sexton is the scapegoat taking the blame for something which

¹⁰Ray Swenson, "Poetry of Three Women," Nation, CXCVI (1963), p. 166.

¹¹Ibid.

is the fault of another, perhaps her parents. In "Letter Written During a January Northeaster":

The dead turn over casually,
thinking...

Good! No visitors today.

Anne is again protesting living in the past with the dead. Perhaps she is overcoming her guilt. The death of Anne's mother and father may be the key to release from her guilt. As long as they lived, they constantly reminded her of her childhood, her suicide attempts, and other problems. Peace that comes with death is evident in these images. Another brightness in hope of life coming from death is seen in "Venus and the Ark," a modern story poem of death of life on Venus and the resulting depression. The poem will be discussed more fully later.

What is classified as mental death could be called insanity or madness: "In the mind there is a thin alley called death / and I move through it as / through water." There is no question of the importance of insanity in Anne Sexton's writings. Because she is a confessional poet who is necessarily autobiographical and because she has spent extended periods in a mental institution, almost all her poems refer to this madness. The images used to represent this madness-- "and I am queen of this summer hotel / or the laughing bee on a stalk of death," are most graphic. These images call forth emotions of loneliness and fear added to confusion, fighting, struggling, groping sensations. Guilt pervades all.

In the representative poem "The Double Image" the image of witches, which is used most often to indicate madness, are numerous--"Ugly angels spoke to me: They tattled / like green witches in my head, letting doom leak like a broken faucet." The image of doom is frightening and definite. Other ideas of witches are in part 1 (already quoted) and dispersed through this poem--"I let the witches take away my guilty soul," "Sweet witch, you are my worried guide," "too late, to live with your mother, the witches said," "nothing sweet to spare / with witches at my side." These witches represent the guilt associated with Anne's insanity, but this aspect of the madness will be discussed later.

Pathetic pictures of the insane are everywhere in the poems:

...We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the door and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken
and we move to gravy in our smock
of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates
scratch and whine like chalk

in school. (3)

The other lines of "You, Doctor Martin" the doctor walks "from breakfast to madness" to the "large children" "fexy children" where the "moving dead still talk / of pushing their bones against the thrust of cure." Another picture of the "crazy ladies" of the "mental house" is vividly portrayed with irony in "Ring the Bells." The characters are almost mechanical as they tap their bells as the "bell-lady" points to them, and "although we are no better for it / they tell

you to go. And you do." There is a hopelessness in this early poem.

In "Ring the Bells" the ladies are referred to as "bees caught in the wrong hive." The image of bees reoccurs in poems on insanity. In "Said the Poet to the Analyst":

Words are like labels,
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.
I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;
as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings. (17)

In "Lullaby" the image is changed slightly to "yellow moths."

Fear of death, of insanity continues throughout Miss Sexton's poetry. The images are gruesome, startling, horrifying, but believable. Fear is a type of suppressed hysteria in "Music Swims Back to Me." In this poem it is possible Miss Sexton is criticizing the way "the strong and brutal folk of the world, and all the institutional structures including the governments, handle the innocents, each lost in his own needs, sufferings, and self."¹² The imagery is frightening and, of course, quite effective. The "strapping of stars," "locking in chairs," and actual denial of fear add to the building of uneasiness then end in a small, simple, sad, plaintive word, "Mister?" The night she came she was not afraid but the madness and emotions associated with madness end in fear.

In "Kind Sir," a poem addressed to Thoreau, she is lost in a woods afraid to take--"this inward look that society

¹²Rosenthal, The New Poets, p. 133.

scorns--." She searches to find nothing worse than "myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns," a frightening image of a dying mind. She again seems afraid of what she will find in her subconscious mind, her "night mind" that "saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal."

Perhaps almost as pathetic as the fear are the intertwining emotions of loneliness and boredom. Anne has said that loneliness is the curse of being a writer or an artist or even a human being. This loneliness causes her to seem not a part of the earth.¹³ Through all of Sexton's poems, with the exception of one or two love poems, she seems to be facing insanity, death, and fear alone. Loneliness is coupled with all kinds of events in her life. The sense of aloneness and loneliness is particularly apparent in those poems in which she is trying to "ride out" the mental institution. In "Her Kind" this sort of loneliness is mentioned and pervades the entire poem. Again the witch imagery insures us that insanity is involved:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind. (21)

In "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn" insanity is combined with fear and loneliness. The fear is exemplified primarily by italicized lines of the Twenty-third Psalm breaking through

¹³Patricia Marx, "Interview With Anne Sexton," Hudson Review, XVIII (1965), p. 566.

the poem while loneliness pervades all parts of the poem, particularly in the last two lines. Repeating the Psalm should dispell fear, but she finds no relief because religion is not the "safe place" for her.

The summer sun ray
shifts through a suspicious tree.
though I walk through the valley of the shadow
It sucks the air
and looks around for me.

The grass speaks.
I hear green chanting all day.
I will fear no evil, fear no evil
The blades extend
and reach my way.

The sky breaks.
It sags and breathes upon my face.
in the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies
The world is full of enemies.
There is no safe place. (39)

Images of nature, the sun, the grass, and the sky, seem to give a lonely, mocking atmosphere. Confusion and hopelessness result. Even though she is in the sunlight, her mood is in the shadows, opposite of the day. The sun becomes an enemy because it is looking for her; the grass is reaching for her. She was right to fear because the sky is breaking and suffocating her. The repeating of the Psalm does not work because the world is full of enemies and there is no safe place.

In one of Miss Sexton's best poems "Flee on Your Donkey" she is fleeing insanity. In speaking again of the asylum in the last stanza, there are images of insanity such as "brains that rot like black bananas" that are unforgettable:

Turn, my hungers!
 For once make a deliberate decision.
 There are brains that rot here
 like black bananas.
 Hearts have grown as flat as dinner plates.

Anne, Anne,
 flee on your donkey,
 flee this sad hotel,
 ride out on some hairy beast,
 gallop backward pressing
 your buttocks to his withers,
 sit to his clumsy gait somehow.
 Ride out
 any old way you please!
 In this place everyone talks to his own mouth.
 That's what it means to be crazy.
 Those I loved best died of it--
 the fool's disease. (10-11)

Bees or hornets are used as images of insanity again:

Hornets have been sent.
 They cluster like floral arrangements on the screen.
 Hornets, dragging their thin stingers,
 hover outside, all knowing,
 hissing: the hornet knows.
 I heard it as a child
 but what was it that he meant?
The hornet knows!
 What happened to Jack and Doc and Reggy?
 Who remembers what lurks in the heart of man?
 What did the Green Hornet mean, he knows?
 Or have I got it wrong?
 Is it The Shadow who had seen
 me from my bedside radio? (5)

Confusion and mixed images of madness emphasize these lines.
 In other lines these images of "the fool's disease" bring to
 mind many questions of themes found throughout her poetry.

The guilt Anne Sexton feels associated with madness is
 clear in "The Double Image." She is certain that "The blame,
 / I heard them say, was mine." She has a "guilty soul" from
 her "old debt."

Anne tries to deny the guilt, to move away from fear, confusion, and loneliness as she struggles toward sanity. She tries to find "The Lost Ingredient."

Today is made of yesterday, each time I steal
toward rites I do not know, waiting for the lost
ingredient, as if salt or money or even lust
would keep us calm and prove us whole at last.

Yet, there is always the guilt in the background as Anne struggles on "The Road Back."

There is no word for time.
Today we will
not think to number another summer
or watch its white bird into the ground.
To say, all cars,
all fathers, all mothers, all
children and lovers will
have to forget
about that thing in the sky,
going around
like a persistent rumor
that will get us yet. (43)

The white bird always in the background is "an old albatross." What better symbol for guilt! The albatross is kept from being a cliché because when used at first it is only a symbol for awkwardness. When it is applied to the past the quality of guilt becomes apparent. The albatross has a second symbolic quality in signifying that it is coming into the land from the sea. The albatross then becomes a creative symbol of another summer as he only comes to land to breed.

The third major division of subject matter in Anne Sexton's poetry is religion. Images of Christianity, many that indicate a background of Catholicism, run through the poems of Anne Sexton. That Anne Sexton's "framework of

reference is ultimately religious¹⁴ is probably undeniable. She is not, however, religious in the same sense of the middle class churchgoing American public. She seems to cut to the heart of the matter in each religious reference and in each religious poem. She probably is "religious" in the existential sense.¹⁵ Not in the "ordinary comforts of piety," but involving "one's struggle to survive, to somehow come to terms with the terrible mystery of existence."¹⁶ The idea in itself of her poetry being confessional tends to lead to religion. Images of the crucified Christ recur in many poems. She seems to connect the concepts of suffering and religion. There are Biblical images in poems with several different themes.

A modern story of the ark is told in "Venus and the Ark." Rather than a ship for "riding out" a flood, this ship is a space ship or missile manned by "Two male Ph.D.'s," insects, snakes, fish, rats, and such modern conveniences as "twenty bars of food, ten brief cures, / special locks." It bobbed not on the ocean of rain but "in the mists of Venus." The old and withered Ph.D.'s think "This is the end. / This is the last of a man like me!" but they receive the promise of a new world as

over the mists
of Venus, two fish creatures stop
on spangled legs and crawl

¹⁴Jones, Critical Quarterly, p. 25.

¹⁵McDonnell, America, p. 730.

¹⁶Ibid.

from the belly of the sea.
And from the planet park
they heard the new fruit drop. (20)

The poems on religion follow a trend from one volume to the next; they will, therefore, be treated as groups of religious poems from each volume.

In "The Double Image" Anne Sexton states, "There is no special God to refer to." Part 2 shows resentment of religion by the child:

There was a church where I grew up
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,
row by row, like puritans or shipmates
singing together. My father passed the plate. (55)

"Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn" has been quoted and it will be remembered that lines of a Psalm run through the poem. The only other major reference to religion in To Bedlam and Part Way Back is in the last poem, "The Division of Parts." Anne Sexton's mother has died recently and Anne has just received her division of the mother's money. She says, "It is Good Friday. / Black birds pick at my window sill." Black birds as images of death are used throughout the poem. Other birds images add credence to the idea that as bees denoted madness, birds denote religion. The division of Christian holidays goes through the poem also. The "obstacles of letters, family silver, eyeglasses and shoes" have been sorted and "Like some unseasoned Christmas, its scales / rigged and reset, / I bundled out with gifts I did not choose."

Suffering is linked with most religious images. The last two stanzas of part 1 of "The Division of Parts" tell a

great deal about Anne's Feelings about religion:

now the hours of The Cross
 rewind. In Boston, the devout
 work their cold knees
 toward that sweet martyrdom
 that Christ planned. My timely loss
 is too customary to note; and yet
 I planned to suffer
 and I cannot. It does not please
 my yankee bones to watch
 where the dying is done
 in its ugly hours. Black birds peck
 at my window glass
 and Easter will take its ragged son.

The clutter of worship
 that you taught me, Mary Gray,
 is old. I imitate
 a memory of belief
 that I do not own. I trip
 on your death and Jesus, my stranger
 floats up over
 my Christian home, wearing his straight
 thorn tree. I have cast my lot
 and am one third thief
 of you. Time, that rearranger
 of estates, equips
 me with your garments, but not with grief. (62-3)

Not only does she find no comfort in religion, she may be putting away her guilt in relation to her mother as she plans to suffer but cannot. Even time does not equip her with grief. She only imitates "a memory of belief" that she does not own but Jesus is a stranger to her. Ironically, she has a "Christian home." Continuing in the poem, the Christ image is used. "And Christ still waits...And now, while Christ stays / fastened to his Crucifix / so that love may praise / his sacrifice / and not the grotesque metaphor." There is the command on Good Friday, "Anne! Convert! Convert! but Anne is resigned to the idea that "Lent will keep its hurt for someone else. Christ knows enough / staunch guys have

hitched on him in trouble, / thinking his sticks were badges to wear." Some only turn to religion when they are in trouble, but Anne Sexton is stronger because she will not turn to him because of trouble. Sticks referring to the Cross could exemplify the wearing of stigmata as a symbol of individual suffering which brings the person closer to Christ through suffering as he did. The key to religion for Miss Sexton is:

For all the way I've come
I'll have to go again. Instead, I must convert
to love as reasonable
as Latin, as solid as earthenware:
an equilibrium
I never knew. (65)

All My Pretty Ones finds the Christ image used a great deal more. Suffering is an interwoven image. Part 2 begins with a quotation from Guardini:

I want no pallid humanitarianism
---If Christ be not God, I want
none of him; I will hack my way
through existence alone...(17)

This entire section consisting of six poems has a religious context. Some of the poems such as "The Abortion" deal with a religious question: "Somebody who should have been born / is gone." The repetition of this phrase tends to indicate guilt. "A Curse Against Elegies" strikes at "pious talk" a "thin-lipped preacher" and those who attempt to live with the dead. "Ghosts" "Wailing / for Lucifer" seem to be in the form of women, men, and children.

How ironic is the quotation explaining "With Mercy for the Greedy," since Anne is a confessional poet. The quotation

is: "For my friend, Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment for the Sacrament of Confession." Miss Sexton says, "I detest my sins and I try to believe / in The Cross...True.

There is a beautiful Jesus" but:

He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef.
How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in!
How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!
But I can't. Need is not quite belief. (22)

She again hits the point exactly, "Need is not quite belief."

The lack of warmth that belief supplies is succinctly expressed in the term "frozen". Then:

My friend, my friend, I was born
doing reference work in sin, and born
confessing it. This is what poems are:
with mercy for the greedy,
they are the tongue's wrangle,
the world's pottage, the rat's star. (23)

So she rejects this type of religion for her own confessional religion, poetry. Her birthright, because she was born doing reference work (intellect as contrasted with emotion) in sin and confessing it in poems, is that she does not need confession. The poems are confession transferred from her birthright to something of lesser value. It is lowly--world's pottage and rat's star. The importance is that she has the poetry within her. The poems come out less than what she has to give, "the tongue's wrangle" or a wrestling with words illustrated by rat's which is lowly and star which is high. The wrangle is also indicated in that star is rat's spelled backwards.

The middle two poems, refer specifically to the Christ image in terms of rejection again. "Sleeping in a fever" in

"For God While Sleeping" puts the sleeper at the scene of the crucifixion. Again the Christ image is certainly not beautiful:

hung up like a pig on exhibit,
the delicate wrists,
the beard drooling blood and vinegar;
hooked to your own weight,
jolting toward death under your nameplate. (24)

The "Skinny man" is "somebody's fault" but the sleeper is "not to blame for all this." The skinny man is only a "poor old convict."

"In the Deep Museum" associates suffering with the agony of Christ even more directly than in "For God While Sleeping" and "With Mercy for the Greedy." She believes primarily in "the suffering Christ of the crucifix." It is the "image of tortured suffering" and possibly "a symbol of unselfish love and redemption."¹⁷ A. R. Jones continues this interesting concept:

Thus the cross is at one and the same time an image of intense agony which can be realized personally, and a geometric symbol of the intersection of the timeless eternity of God and the world of man which is changeless and impersonal. Similarly, the man who suffers in a world of suffering and evil can be transcended by the mind that creates in the unchanging, timeless world of art. Through the world of poetic imagination, man can move from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom.¹⁸

Anne definitely rejects the Christian concept of resurrection

¹⁷Jones, Critical Quarterly, p. 29.

¹⁸Ibid.

in "In the Deep Museum". The voice is the voice of Christ himself confessing in the tomb, "I lied. / Yes, I lied. Or else in some damned cowardice / my body would not give me up." One of Anne's most horrifying images is then conjured:

It is panting; it is an odor with a face
like the skin of a donkey. It laps my sores.
It is hurt, I think, as I touch its little head.
It bleeds. I have forgiven murderers and whores
and now I must wait like old Jonah, not dead
nor alive, stroking a clumsy animal. A rat.
His teeth test me; he waits like a good cook,
knowing his own ground. I forgive him that,
as I forgave my Judas the money he took. (25)

As he is consumed, there is again irony:

Unto the bellies and jaws
of rats I commit my prophecy and fear.
Far below The Cross, I correct its flaws.
We have kept the miracle. I will not be here. (26)

This same type of rejection is evident in "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound." Anne continues the image of illusion of the four nuns:

There go my dark girls,
their dresses puff
in the leeward air.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.
See them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news. (57-8)

Puff, air, flying, breath of dolphins, wings and gauzy give the poem an ethereal effect. There is still a juxtaposition

of this ethereal effect with a firmness. Dog is a traditional symbol of the good shepherd or Christ. Dogs are lowly, but flying dogs are positioned between the low and the high of flying. Paradise is considered high and ethereal, but by adding "gauzy edge" paradise is made to seem almost unreachable. There is no tactile beginning to paradise. Miss Sexton has been released from the restrictions of Christian fundamental beliefs and the "good news" is sure to mean happiness for others, in this case the nuns, being also released. Taking the place of these restrictions for Anne Sexton is a religion such as that in "The Starry Night." The introductory quotation for this poem proves her feelings of need for religion:

That does not keep me from having a terrible
 need of--shall I say the word--religion. Then
 I go out at night to paint the stars. (9)
 VINCENT VAN GOGH in a letter to his brother

Her answer would be the same as Van Gogh's except she wrote the following poem:

The town does not exist
 except where one black-haired tree slips
 up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
 The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
 Oh starry starry night! This is how
 I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.
 Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
 to push children, like a god, from its eye.
 The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
 Oh starry starry night! This is how
 I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
 sucked up by that great dragon, to split
 from my life with no flag,
 no belly,
 no cry. (9)

The images lend a dark quality to the poem. The tree is black-haired and must "slip up." A further image of imprisonment is shown in the moon bulging in its orange irons. As the harvest moon comes up, it seems larger on the horizon than at any other point in its path across the sky. As it moves across the sky, the stars in its path are no longer visible. It becomes a serpent swallowing them. These images add to the effect of dying with little effort, or being swallowed up. There will be no suffering and agony for Anne Sexton in her death. Her answer is her poetry and love in "The Black Art."--"Our eyes are full of terrible confessions." Religion is also confession. In "For Eleanor Boylan Talking with God" religion is confession for Eleanor but not for Anne. Anne's religious confession is her poetry. Eleanor's is to God, but Anne denies God as well as Jesus.

In Live or Die Miss Sexton's hunger has been for Jesus.

Once upon a time
my hunger was for Jesus.
O my hunger! My hunger!
Before he grew old
he rode calmly into Jerusalem
in search of death.

This hunger has led a lover of Miss Sexton's in the past to choose a religion she has rejected. In "Mother, Jack and the Rain" Anne Sexton suggests resentment of religion for this reason. "Now Jack says the Mass / and mother died using her own bones for crutches."

In Live or Die concepts of religion and Christ are carried further in "The Legend of the One-Eyed Man." Here is a

deep study of guilt in self as well as in Judas, and here enters the guilt in religion.

Like Oedipus I am losing my sight.
 Like Judas I have done my wrong.
 Their punishment is over;
 the shame and disgrace of it
 are all used up.
 But as for me,
 look into my face
 and you will know that crimes dropped upon me
 as from a high building
 and although I cannot speak of them
 or explain the degrading details
 I have remembered much
 about Judas--
 about Judas, the old and the famous--
 that you overlooked.

The story of his life
 is the story of mine. (22)

The rejection and denial are still evident as she says the
 New Testament

is very small.
 Its mouth opens four times--
 as out-of-date as a prehistoric monster,
 yet somehow man-made,
 held together by pulleys
 like the stone jaw of a back-hoe.
 It gouges out the Judaic ground,
 taking its own backyard
 like a virgin daughter. (22-3)

Anne even blames Christ for not saving Judas from the deed.
 The construction of the Cross and Judas' betrayal are "dis-
 cussed" matter-of-factly, and then the poem ends in under-
 statement which is all the more striking:

Judas had a mother.
 His mother had a dream.
 Because of this dream
 he was altogether managed by fate
 and thus he raped her.
 As a crime we hear little of this.
 Also he sold his God. (24)

In remembering that Anne has said the story of Judas' life is the story of her life, the reader feels the guilt.

"For the Year of the Insane" is a prayer poem to Mary which with other references to Mary establishes a Catholic background for Anne. She has rejected this background also, and there may be some guilt in this rejection. She has tried religion as in this poem and has not found what she needs. The speaker says, "I am in my own mind. / I am locked in the wrong house." She is lying on the floor in an asylum with prayer beads attempting to pray, but images of insanity and suffering thrust themselves into the prayer. There is a failure of communication in the prayer. There is only fear.

"Protestant Easter" tells with irony and satire of an eight-year-old trying to understand Easter and perhaps not so surprisingly getting closer to the significance than most adults. The little girl sits in Church on Easter morning. Stream of consciousness makes the poem realistic. That she tends to confuse and run together time and skip from old concepts to new make the poem human. The child's own images of Easter are priceless and could not be replaced by adult images with any better effect. To have the feeling of the poem one should read it in its entirety, but perhaps one stanza will suffice:

Alleluia they sing.
 They don't know.
 They don't care if he was hiding or flying.
 Well, it doesn't matter how he got there.
 It matters where he was going.

The important thing for me
 is that I'm wearing white gloves.
 I always sit straight.
 I keep on looking at the ceiling.
 And about Jesus,
 they couldn't be sure of it,
 not so sure of it anyhow,
 so they decided to become Protestants.
 Those are the people that sing
 when they aren't quite
 sure. (43)

Even in the mind of one so young Anne places doubt.

The only comfort Anne seems to find in religion is the comfort in her confessional poetry. She accepts her sin as fact; she accepts the Crucifixion as fact, but redemption and transfiguration are rejected in favor of Anne's own existential religion. The universal guilt in religion is present somewhat in Anne's poetry, but her primary guilt seems to be of a more personal nature. She has felt a need; she has examined religion. She has rejected religion to find a partial fulfillment of the need in confessional poetry.

Anne Sexton's poetry moves from descriptions of complete insanity in To Bedlam and Part Way Back through the agony and struggle of adjustment with frequent relapses in All My Pretty Ones to the final avowal of past improvement to the promise of life. In her final poem she seems to have worked to the final acceptance of the life rather than the death in the title of this volume. She has entitled her last poem "Live." She recapitulates some of the horrors of insanity and disorder but says, "I kept right on going on," and this she has done. She intends to keep "on going on"

with the new order she has developed through this suffering and agony in loneliness, fear and confusion because her lines testify to this fact with outstanding imagery.

STRATHMORE PARCHMENT

100% COTTON FIBER USA

CHAPTER III

THEMES

Without a doubt Anne Sexton's imagery is pertinent to subject and more specifically to themes in her poetry. The heightened perception which brings her imagery to focus indicates that sensation is the most reliable aspect of judging themes. These sensations magnify the emotions of fear, loneliness, and particularly guilt. The clarity of the individual images helps to answer some of the questions that can be raised as to concepts or themes. This emotional simplicity moves her themes away from involved meanings such as those of T. S. Eliot. The human suffering, personal, physical, psychic, and spiritual are clearly recognizable in Anne Sexton's autobiographical poetry. Through this suffering she seems to realize the meaning of human life more vividly, more intensely, and more profoundly. She is frighteningly honest, so her themes hide nothing. She sees and feels the nightmares she writes about. She reveals these through self-dramatization. Her themes are appropriate to our time, and the images used will make these themes understandable to other generations.

Anne Sexton is not the only poet whose mental breakdown or personal, private, and painful crises added stature to

poetry. T. S. Eliot wrote The Wasteland in a sanitarium recovering from a breakdown. Wordsworth wrote some of his best poetry after a mental breakdown. At this time:

It is as if Wordsworth stripped man naked in order to realise the human condition at the barest level of subsistence, and at the same time found that the appropriate form and language in which to realise his vision must itself be naked, stark and elemental.¹

Anne Sexton's vision is "naked, stark and elemental." Her themes are uncomplicated. She did not wish to be puzzled over, but to be understood.

In an interview with Anne Sexton the following conversation took place:

MARK: Do you find that you deal very much with the same themes? There do seem to be recurring themes throughout.

SEXTON: Yes, there's the mother-child theme, and death very much, although, I think, maybe less. Any writer, any artist I'm sure, is obsessed with death, a prerequisite for life. I'm afraid they are quite repetitive, but I think that's all right. I don't think you need too many themes. I could defend this, not just because it seems to be what I'm doing, but in other writers that I've loved. I could defend their repetition of a theme.²

Besides the themes of mother-child and death, the poet's themes have here been divided into love and religion. Actually, the mother-child theme is a portion of the love concept. In studying the themes illuminated and given focus by the images Anne Sexton uses, several concepts can be delineated. Anne

¹Jones, Critical Quarterly, p. 13.

²Mark, Hudson Review, p. 569-70.

herself has raised the question of one concept in the quotation above when she says, "death, a prerequisite for life." Quite strangely, but seemingly quite important, there is a great deal of rebirth in her poems on death.

Even more strangely the rebirth seems to incorporate a rebirth somewhere at the beginning of life in the age of fish. Fish imagery abounds in at least a dozen of Anne Sexton's poems, and what striking imagery it is! The rebirth image is the theme of the poem "Venus and the Ark" which has already been quoted. "Two fish creatures" with "spangled legs" crawl from the sea and the "new fruit drop[s]". In "The Exorcists" there is again a climbing from the sea. The imagery of "lightening belling / around our skin" gives a sign of creation. In the poem "Water" the "fish are naked." There is a rising from the water in this poem also. "Love Song for K. Gyne" begins with an italicized verse with the same images that conjure the same theme:

When I lay down for death
my love came down to Craigy's Sea
and fished me from the snakes.
He let me use his breath.
He pushed away the mud and lay with me.
And lay with me in sin. (60)

This creativity theme is portrayed exactly in "The Sun":

I have heard of fish
 coming up for the sun
 who stayed forever,
 shoulder to shoulder,
 avenues of fish that never got back,
 all their proud spots and solitudes
 sucked out of them. (3)

The same idea runs through Miss Sexton's poetry. The giver

of breath / she murmurs, / exhaling her wide lung like an enormous fish," "even though I dressed the body / it was still naked, still killed. / It was caught / in the first place at birth, / like a fish," "I'm all one skin like a fish," "an unrehearsed fish jumps / on the surface of Echo Lake" are only a few quotations exemplifying the beginning or rebirth from the sea.

Spiritual rebirth of the human being is seen in several poems, particularly, "The Operation":

Although the child is in some senses innocence,
There is no doubt that the traditionally religious
idea of being born into a world of evil
and disease is suggested in these images. In
so far as the operation is seen as a re-birth...³

This same idea is specifically stated in "Flee on Your Donkey." There are ideas of the ultimate creation. Again there is fish imagery "scrape the guts out of some dream," "and brought forth young girls / to grunt like fish." There are images of femaleness and the creative process "then I delivered her." There is a wish of death for her mother, but Anne cannot fulfill the wish. There are images of the womb, pregnancy, and again, the sea. There is a search for identity, attempt at suicide, a coming back to physical life but in a psychologically unhealthy state, "black bananas" "everyone talks to his own mouth."

In the subject of love, the images of Anne Sexton's poetry lead to several questions. Is familial love healthy

³Jones, Critical Quarterly, p. 26.

and even redemptive? The answers to this idea have been implied in the chapter on images. To answer this question, familial love must be broken down again into the subject matter of familial love--husband, children, father and mother. Miss Sexton seems to pass through a stage when love in marriage is nonexistent. Marriage images indicate sterility and fragmentation. There is no fulfillment in the marriage. It is quite possible that this part of marriage is a correlative of her broken world. Because of Anne's experiences with mental breakdown, her world was at this time sterile and fragmented. In later poems as she regains her faculties for order, there is a hint of reunion in marriage. Her world is being pieced together and her marriage is being pieced together. In poems where Anne's children are mentioned, she tends to see an order shaping in her world. Her love for the children and their return of her love bring this order with feelings of well being to her life; and, therefore, the imagery suggests unity and order in her poems. If there is an antidote to the isolation and madness she has experienced, it must be in her husband and children. This is, of course, not fully realized at this point, but all implications are there.

On the other hand, she must be able to use her husband and children to cover the guilt she continually feels because of her father and mother. There is evidence that in the early childhood of Anne there was a lack of love between the father and mother and Anne. It is quite possible this lack

of love could have caused the neuroses that led to insanity. The images of the childhood problems are much more vivid in Anne's last volume in such poems as "Self in 1958," "These Times," and "Christmas Eve." At the time this volume was written, her mother and father were both dead and Anne is living with her husband and children. Is it possible that she had to gain perspective of these childhood experiences, and only after the death of her parents was she able to arrange them into any kind of order? It is quite possible that this was another part of her life that could so deeply hurt that it was buried in her subconscious and she was unable to face it. At the death of the poet's parents, she seems to be released from the guilt associated with them. There is a relief at "confessing" by putting these problems into poetry.

Following the same idea, the ties in sexual love were not so deep. She was able to enter these relationships, and she was able to write about them in beautiful images. The hurt associated with her mother and father was much too vivid to be written about until much later.

The suicide in the subject matter of death is not Miss Sexton's alone:

If there is, in fact, one distinctively modern quality in literature, it lies in the centrifugal spin toward suicide of the speaking voice.⁴

⁴Rosenthal, The New Poets, p. 7.

In mental death James Dickey concludes that:

The experiences she recounts are among the most harrowing that human beings can undergo; those of madness and near-madness, of the pathetic, well-meaning, necessarily tentative and perilous attempts at cure, and of the patient's slow coming back into the human associations and responsibilities which the old, previous self still demands. In addition to being on an extremely painful subject, this is perhaps a major one for poetry, with a sickening, frightening appropriateness to our time.⁵

"O my hunger! My hunger!" describes the poet's need for religion. Despite this need she finds little comfort in religious ideas. "But you, my doctor, my enthusiast, / were better than Christ." Religion fails as a comforter. As has been stated before, she finds suffering in religion.

Guilt and chaos are left to be settled. Guilt is ultimately relieved by confession according to Jones:

The intolerable compulsion to confess is irresistibly tied to a free-floating and neurotic guilt, so that the world into which we as readers are drawn is, in the end, phantasmagoric, intensely personal and painfully private, the world of Kafka, of Joseph K. in fact: a nightmare world of guilt, suffering and sudden confrontations.⁶

This is the way Anne Sexton nullifies the guilt--"a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us."⁷ She has set free this frozen sea within herself in her confessional

⁵James Dickey, "Five First Books," Poetry, XCVII (1961), p. 318.

⁶Jones, Critical Quarterly, p. 14.

⁷Franz Kafka to Oskar Pollak quoted in Live or Die.

mode through poetry. She has suffered greatly in her guilt but:

The creative mind--which is largely
released and refined in suffering--
knows freedom and achieves Grace, through
the act of creation itself.⁸

She struggles to release the self and subconscious in her poetry in order to find wholeness and order. Because she has the fortitude to dig into the subconscious, she can begin ordering her life. She can now form an order of reality.

One knows Anne Sexton has chosen and is achieving the world of order and life as opposed to the world of disorder and death by the quotation beginning her last volume:

With one long breath, caught and held in
his chest, he fought his sadness over
his solitary life. Don't cry, you idiot!
Live or die, but don't poison everything...(vii)
from an early draft of Herzog
by Saul Bellow

and by her last poem entitled appropriately "Live." She begins with the quotation of Bellow repeated in part, "Live or die, but don't poison everything..." and she begins the poem:

Well, death's been here
for a long time--
it has a hell of a lot
to do with hell
and suspicion of the eye
and the religious objects
and how I mourned them
when they were made obscene
by my dwarf-heart's doodle.
. . . .

⁸Jones, Critical Quarterly, p. 16.

Even so,
 I kept right on going on,
 a sort of human statement,
 lugging myself as if
 I were a sawed-off body
 in the trunk, the steamer trunk.
 This became a perjury of the soul.
 It became an outright lie
 and even though I dressed the body
 it was still naked, still killed.
 It was caught
 in the first place at birth,
 like a fish.

.

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

.

God! It's a dream,
 lovers sprouting in the yard
 like celery stalks
 and better,
 a husband straight as a redwood,
 two daughters, two sea urchins,
 picking roses off my hackles.

.

So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
 repeating The Black Mass and all of it.
 I say Live, Live because of the sun,
 the dream, the excitable gift. (87-90)

In the poem "Live" Anne Sexton seems to be released from some of the guilt that has permeated her three volumes of poetry. Perhaps the writing of the poetry has done a great deal toward alleviating the guilt associated with love, death, and religion. She has touched many of her important images in this poem and she has summarized all her major themes.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

If Emerson's idea that, "The finest poetry was first experience,"¹ is correct, Anne Sexton is far ahead of many other contemporary writers on the way to success. In her own poetry Anne Sexton states the "impelling impulse behind her poetry,"² and her confessional attitude is established. She writes to "make life mean something as it goes by, to rescue it from chaos--to make 'now' last."³ She establishes herself as a poet in search of order and the eternal "now."

We can classify Anne Sexton with W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath. They are alike in their moving away from involved meanings to emotional simplicity. They express human experiences in a new dealing with the hitherto taboo, with the "very serious, very personal emotional experience."⁴ They are bound together by their air of frankness, violence of language, autobiography in subject

¹Francis X. Conally, Poetry: Its Power and Wisdom (New York, 1960), p. 3.

²Swenson, Nation, p. 165.

³Marx, Hudson Review, p. 563.

⁴Sylvia Plath quoted in Herbert C. Burke, "New Books Appraised--Poetry," Library Journal, September 15, 1966, p. 104.

matter, but primarily the themes exemplifying mental disturbances and guilt, with love, death, and religion.

Anne Sexton has used epigraphs in her first two volumes of poetry that exemplify the motives of poets in the confessional movement. A letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe is quoted at the beginning of To Bedlam and Part Way Back:

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 enquire further. . . .⁵

and a letter from Kafka to Oskar Pollak is quoted at the beginning of All My Pretty Ones:

. . . the books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that makes us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation--a book should serve as that ax for the frozen sea within us.⁶

Anne Sexton does not consider herself a part of any group, but still the themes of her poetry seem to follow the confessionalist themes--guilt, loss, and death in a framework of mental distress. Thomas P. McDonnell, the book editor

⁵Schopenhauer to Goethe, November, 1815, quoted in Anne Sexton, To Bedlam and Part Way Back (Cambridge, 1960), p. vii.

⁶Franz Kafka to Oskar Pollak, quoted in Anne Sexton, All My Pretty Ones (Cambridge, 1961), p. vii.

and staff writer for the Boston Pilot, calls the travel toward order from chaos a dark journey:

The journey is not a calculated one, marked with clear directions along the way (" . . . here are not signs to tell the way"), but a journey in and out of the various dark. The poems are fragments of light that illuminate not so much the general landscape as parts of the immediate terrain--and that only now and then.⁷

As Anne Sexton attempts to create order out of disorder, or construct fragments of light through the dark journey, these basic themes expand with the use of controlled images.

Because she has the gift of strong imagery to enhance her important and universal themes, it is almost certain that Anne Sexton will gain wider recognition as a major poet of the confessionalists. She is even now being published in many new anthologies and has recorded some of her poetry for Folkways Records. With this opportunity for more people to read and hear Anne Sexton's poetry, a greater awareness and appreciation for her images as related to themes will be apparent.

Investigations of Anne Sexton's future poems should prove or disprove the idea of the ordering of her life. The question arises, since most of her poems have a hint of mental disturbance, will it be possible for Anne Sexton to extend her images and themes to cover new areas?

It is impossible to read the poems of Anne Sexton without noticing how the appearance of the line contributes to

⁷McDonnell, America, pp. 729-731.

both image and theme. The jagged lines adding to the knife cutting image serve as an example. In an interview Anne Sexton commented on form in her poetry, "The form is always important...Sometimes a short line is a very sharp thing, and the breaking of a line, the breaking of the rhythm is a very important thing." Thus, "Content dominates, but style is the master."⁸ It is impossible to examine image and theme without noting the importance of the concrete form of the poem and its addition to these areas. The intensity of sensation in the imagery studied here gives both vitality and order to this form. Although the themes are commonplace, they are made to live in the imagination by the virtually instinctive grasp of image by Anne Sexton.

⁸Marx, Hudson Review, p. 569.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bogan, Louise. "Verse." The New Yorker, XXXIX (April 27, 1963), 173-5.
- Burke, Herbert C. "New Books Appraised--Poetry." Library Journal, LXXXVII (October 1, 1962), 68.
- Burke, Herbert C. "New Books Appraised--Poetry." Library Journal, XCI (September 15, 1966), 104.
- Conally, Francis X. Poetry: Its Power and Wisdom. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960.
- Davison, Peter. "New Poetry." Atlantic Monthly, CCXII (December, 1963), 82-5.
- Dickey, James. "Five First Books." Poetry, XCVII (February, 1961), 316-20.
- Dodsworth, Martin. "Puzzlers." Encounter, XXIV (March, 1965), 83-6.
- Howard, Richard. "Five Poets." Poetry, CI (March, 1963), 413-4.
- Jones, A. R. "Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton." Critical Quarterly, VII (1965), 11-30.
- Legler, P. "O Yellow Eye." Poetry, CX (May, 1967), 125-7.
- Marx, Patricia. "Interview With Anne Sexton." Hudson Review, XVIII (Winter, 1965-66), 560-70.
- McDonnell, Thomas P. "Light in a Dark Journey." America, CXVI (May 13, 1967), 729-31.
- Rexroth, Kenneth. "The New American Poets." Harper's Magazine, CCXXX (June, 1965), 65-74.
- Robie, Burton A. "New Books Appraised--Poetry." Library Journal, LXXXV (August, 1960), 67.

- Rosenthal, M. L. The New Poets American and British Poetry Since World War II. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Sexton, Anne. All My Pretty Ones. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1961.
- Sexton, Anne. Live or Die. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1966.
- Sexton, Anne. To Bedlam and Part Way Back. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1960.
- Smith, William Jay. "The New Poetry." Harper's Magazine, CCXXVII (September, 1963), 106+.
- Tillinghart, Richard. "Five Poets." Sewanee Review, LXXXI (July-September, 1963), 506-513.
- Swenson, May. "Poetry of Three Women." Nation, CXCVI (February 23, 1963), 164-6.
- Untermeyer, Louis, ed. Modern American Poetry. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962.

STRATHMORE PARCHMENT

100% COTTON FIBER USA

VITA

Patricia Ann Williams

Candidate for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Thesis: IMAGE AS RELATED TO THEME IN THE POETRY OF ANNE
SEXTON

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Beaver, Oklahoma, February 11,
1939, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Owens

Education: Graduated from Beaver High School, Beaver,
Oklahoma, in May, 1957; attended Oklahoma State
University in 1957 and 1958; attended Northwestern
State College from 1958-1961; received the Bachelor
of Science degree from Northwestern State College
in 1961, with majors in Business and English;
attended Oklahoma State University summers of
1963-1968; completed requirements for the Master
of Arts degree from Oklahoma State University in
July, 1968.

Professional Experience: Teacher of English and/or
speech at the following schools: Arnett High
School, Arnett, Oklahoma, 1962; Shamrock High
School, Shamrock, Texas, 1963; Hennessey High
School, Hennessey, Oklahoma, 1964-1965; Capron
High School, Capron, Oklahoma, 1966; Alva High
School, Alva, Oklahoma, 1967-1968.