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THE SELF IN THE POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON

by

Katherine Frances McSpadden

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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VITA

The author, Katherine Frances McSpadden, is the daughter of the late Mildred (Allen) McSpadden and John Hehir McSpadden. She was born November 13, 1941, in Niagara Falls, New York.

Her elementary and secondary education were completed at St. Mary of the Cataract Grammar and High Schools in Niagara Falls. She received a New York State Regents Scholarship upon graduation from high school in 1959.

In September, 1959, Ms. McSpadden entered Niagara University, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English and Modern Languages in June, 1963. In 1961, while attending Niagara University, she was editor of the student newspaper, the *Index*. In 1962 she was elected to Sigma Alpha Sigma Honor Fraternity.

In September, 1963, Ms. McSpadden entered the Graduate School of Loyola University of Chicago. From 1964 to 1968 she held a teaching assistantship in the English Department. She completed the Master of Arts degree in 1967 and was admitted to Ph.D. Candidacy in 1968. Since September 1968, the author has taught in the Communications Department at Truman College (formerly Mayfair College), one of the City Colleges of Chicago. She holds the rank of Associate Professor of English.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> I come like the blind feeling for shelves,
> feeling for wood as hard as an apple,
> fingering the pen lightly, my blade.
> With this pen I take in hand my selves
> and with these dead disciples I will grapple.
> Though rain curses the window
> let the poem be made.
> (Anne Sexton, "Mother and Jack and the Rain,"
> (<u>Complete Poems</u> 109)

These lines express the central action of Anne Sexton's poetry, the exploration of the multiple selves and roles which she experiences. Sexton's concern with her identity centers around a desire to rid herself of an unsatisfactory, negative identity that has led her to an existence in which she is constricted and limited, alienated from other human beings, from nature and her own body, and from God. Rather than moving confidently out of herself to embrace and explore the wonders of the universe, thereby experiencing the full possibilities which she knows the human self to be capable of, she feels confined within a narrow range of roles and negative selves that constrict her naturally expansive self. Moreover, though she longs for this more vital level of existence, she is "hexed" -- as we all are -- by these unwanted, narrow roles and selves that do not yield easily to her will to rid herself of them. Thus, as suggested by her use of the word "grapple," in the poem heading this chapter, to describe the poetic act, Sexton's poetry is combative. The battle to achieve a more satisfactory identity is waged before our eyes. Sexton's poetry and her self are one and the

same, not in the literal sense of absolute truth to life, but in the sense that her poetry is a means of working out her identity, and that identity, finally, is her poetry. We see the poet sometimes coming to terms with and sometimes defeated by her recalcitrant "dead disciples."

In the process of this struggle for a new self, Sexton reveals intimate details of her own life and the lives of members of her family. Because of this personal dimension of her poetry, she has been considered a "confessional poet," and most critics have focused on her quest as a private and individual one. But the battle lines in her poetry are drawn far wider than these personal and family struggles. Sexton sees her quest for a new self as making her an extension of major quest figures, both real and mythical. Such identification appears in her first public statement of purpose, in which she makes clear the nature of the truth that she seeks about the self. The epigraph to her first volume of poems, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, is taken from a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe:

> 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 enlightment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further. . . .
> (Complete Poems[2])

In suggesting that the quest for the truth of the self which she embarks upon is that of Oedipus, she sets up an identification with this archetypal figure that is reiterated many times in her poetry and prose. The mythical reference takes her poetry beyond the realm of individual confession and places it in a literary tradition of self-understanding

that reaches back to Sophocles. Some negative criticism of Sexton's poetry argues that such naked and direct truth-telling falls into the realm of psychoanalysis rather than poetry. Her own association of her poetry with that of Sophocles tells us that her intentions are primarily literary. That she sees her struggle for truth about the self as principally that of the poet and not the psychoanalyst or patient is also made clear in a prose statement of her truth-seeking motives in a letter to Frederick Morgan, editor of The Hudson Review, dated 6 May 1960 and included in Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters. She also reiterates here the internal combat between the self who would know the truth at all costs and the self who would run from that truth:

> I think that writers. . .must try not to avoid knowing what is happening. Everyone has somewhere the ability to mask the events of pain and sorrow, call it shock. . .But the creative person must not use this mechanism anymore than they have to in order to keep breathing. Other people may. But not you, not us. Writing is "life" in capsule and the writer must feel every bump edge scratch ouch in order to know the real furniture of his capsule. . . . I, myself, alternate between hiding behind my own hands, protecting myself anyway possible, and this other, this seeing ouching other. I guess I mean that creative people must not avoid the pain that they get dealt. I say to myself, sometimes repeatedly "I've got to get the hell out of this hurt". . . But no. Hurt must be examined like a plague. (105)

In acknowledging here that "most of us" must struggle with the Oedipus and Jocasta within us, she declares again that the quest for self in which she is engaged is not just her own struggle, but an archetypal battle which concerns us all. In doing so, she puts forth a view of the human self as essentially disturbing, though only the "philosopher" is likely to be disturbed; in most of us, Jocasta has her way. Thus the "accidents" of her own personal existence are persistent-

ly universalized through archetypal perception of the human condition.

Though Sexton is dogged in her search for truth, she occasionally fears that the truth-evading, Jocasta self has triumphed and that her inability to face the truth has affected her poetry; in "The Hoarder" (*CP* 319-320) she writes,

> I am a hoarder of words
> I hold them in though they are
> dung. . . .

This poem is an anxiety attack, in which she uses the metaphor of digging to describe her frantic efforts to get at the truth inside her:

> There is something there
> I've got to get and I dig
> down and people pop off and
> muskrats float up backward
> and open at my touch like
> cereal flakes and still I've
> got to dig because there is
> something down there. . . .

The entire poem is one unpunctuated sentence, jumping from one unrelated event to another the way an anxious mind would work. What she unearths in her digging are artifacts from her childhood, some of them typically Freudian, such as the connection she makes between her mother's obsessions about feces and toilet training and her own hoarding of words:

> . . . it was the diaper I wore
> and the dirt thereof and my
> mother hating me for it and me
> loving me for it but the hate
> won didn't it yes the distaste
> won the disgust won and because
> of this I am a hoarder of words
> I hold them in though they are
> dung. . . .

This digging into her childhood for the roots of her negative, constricted self is one of the preoccupations of Sexton's quest for a new identity. Her fear that early experiences have inhibited her ability to be truthful in her poetry again indicates that she sees the battle for identity in relation to her poetry. This poem also reflects a second major concern of Sexton's poetry -- and a subject of this dissertation -- the spiritual dimension of the self. In the epigraph to "The Hoarder" and again at the end of the poem, she wonders whether she might be an "idler" like the one condemned in the Old Testament "Book of Ecclesiasticus": "An idler is like a lump of dung: whoever picks it up shakes it off his hand." At the end of the work she exhorts God to reassure her that she is not like this biblical pariah:

> . . . oh God I am a digger
> I am not an idler
> am I?

"The Hoarder" illustrates poetically the nature of Sexton's struggle among her warring selves. The problem for the reader, here as throughout the *oeuvre*, is to see not only how a very wide range of selves can be integrated into one "self," but also how apparently disparate approaches -- literary, Freudian, Jungian, religious, et al. -- are basically one.

In another poem, "The Civil War" (*CP* 418-419), she envisions the kind of whole, transformed self which she desires and again views her multiple selves, both unredeemed and transformed -- and the transformation process as well -- as relating her by extension to other identities. As the image in the title indicates, the task of selfhood is once more

described as an internal battle:

> I am torn in two
> but I will conquer myself.
> I will dig up the pride.
> I will take scissors
> and cut out the beggar.
> I will take a crowbar
> and pry out the broken
> pieces of God in me.
> Just like a jigsaw puzzle,
> I will put Him together again
> with the patience of a chess player.

Here she identifies the warring selves as broken pieces of God and the task of encountering the self as a laborious process of putting these entities together into a harmonious -- if seamed -- interconnected whole, like a puzzle. Her use of items from everyday experience to describe the process of self-building -- scissors and crowbar, jigsaw puzzle and chess -- represents a frequent poetic technique of hers; here these everyday items emphasize that the process of constructing one's self is part of the ordinary, daily experience of all of us.

Just as her disparate, multiple selves, imperfect though they are, are extensions of God, likewise through these marred selves she is able to feel connected with the down-and-outers of the world, the losers, the most vulnerable of human beings:

> How many pieces?
>
> It feels like thousands,
> God dressed up like a whore
> in a slime of green algae.
> God dressed up like an old man
> staggering out of His shoes.
> God dressed up like a child,
> all naked,
> even without skin,
> soft as an avocado when you peel it.
> And others, others, others.

The "new soul" created out of this civil war will make her "a whole nation of God. . . united." Thus the self, like a nation, is made up of many identities, all of which make her an extension of some other person or group, and ultimately of God. This notion of the self as God recurs throughout Sexton's work. In addition to revealing that her journey to selfhood is a religious quest, this vision of the self as an extension of God leads her to turn inward in search of God and also enables her to celebrate the life of this world as equal, perhaps even superior, to the life after death.

Sexton returns to the battle imagery at the end of the poem by asserting that her poem of wholeness will be "an anthem, / a song of myself." Here she clearly identifies her poetry with her self-building and, by the allusion in the last line, sets up another literary identification, likening her poetic task to Walt Whitman's creation of a literary self that represents not only a personal and artistic identity but also a transcendent and universal self that unites the poet with all persons. Like Whitman, Sexton's sense of a whole self is strongly reliant on a celebration of the physical and an acceptance of the body as an aspect of identity. It is largely a feeling of disgust with her body, which she attributes to family attitudes, that gives her the sense of a constricted self that she wishes to escape. The poem uses Whitmanian technique as well in the catalog of the various selves that comprise the poet's identity.

In addition to likening her self-creation to that of Whitman, Sexton also views her search for identity as mirroring Thoreau's. Her poem "Kind Sir: These Woods" (CP 4-5), is addressed to him, and the

theme is announced in a prefatory quotation from Walden:

> For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost. . . .Not til we are lost. . . do we begin to find ourselves.

This passage suggests that by looking to Thoreau she has gained not only incentive for the quest she is embarking upon but also validation of her feelings of being lost. Significantly, this poem is the second in her first published volume, and thus, like the quote concerning Oedipus, serves to announce her intentions. In the poem she describes the confusion about her identity that she seeks to overcome and directly invokes the spirit of Thoreau, addressing her poem to him as a request to someone personally unknown to the speaker but worthy of great respect:

> Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind
> I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed
> and the woods were white and my night mind
> saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.

She looks to Thoreau for reassurance in her dangerous frontal attack on her lost selves because he, like her, is engaged in "this inward look that society scorns," and indeed she finds the reassurance she seeks:

> Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse
> than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

As the imagery of these lines suggests, in likening herself to Thoreau, she looks to nature as a source of self-understanding. In another poem, "The Double Image", in which we have one of her strongest and clearest statements about the self, nature is regarded as superior to acquired

human knowledge in the struggle for identity. Though her poems make clear that she has profound respect for psychoanalysis as a guide to self-discovery, here she regards nature as a superior teacher:

> all the medical hypothesis
> that explained my brain will never be as true as these
> struck leaves letting go. (CP 35)

In another instance of looking to nature for self-understanding, in a late series of poems called "Bestiary U.S.A.," Sexton catalogs various animals with which she feels an identification. That seeing herself as an extension of these creatures gives an insight into her own identity is suggested by the epigraph to the series, in which she analyzes such disparate beasts as a moose and a cockroach:

> I look at the strangeness in them and the naturalness they cannot help, in order to find some virtue in the beast in me. (CP 497)

Sexton's search for a more fulfilling identity, for an identity in which she feels connected with other people, with nonhuman creatures, and with the universe as a whole, is grounded in her experience of being mad. The state of madness in her case involves a sense of confinement and isolation, of separation both from herself and from other human beings. Madness is "to rage in your own [inverted] bowl" ("For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," CP 34); for Sexton it involves both a longing for and a fear of being without an identity, "distant, as plain as a chair, as unmoved, as unnoticeable" ("Dancing the Jig," The Book of Folly 66). A way out of her madness is the subject of Sexton's first volume of verse To Bedlam and Part Way Back, and madness is a theme that she returns to throughout her work. In the first poem in

this volume, "You, Dr. Martin" (CP 3-4) her confinement in a mental institution is both a fact of real life and a metaphor for the confinement and isolation that she experiences at the core of her self. The theme of the poem is that she is cut off from the real world that Dr. Martin, as a sane person, can re-enter easily when he leaves the world of the mental hospital. She is shut up in an "antiseptic tunnel" that is like a dark tomb, except that the dead here are moving. Even contact with nature, in the form of germs, is cut off in this underground tomb. A human self cannot be nourished in this environment in which the patients eat their meals behind "frozen gates" in the dining hall, where individuality and human interchange are nonexistent and the only sound is the discordant grating of metal on metal:

> We chew in rows, our plates
> scratch and whine like chalk
>
> in school.

Nor does such an environment nurture the imagination; her creativity is restricted to the making of pairs of identical moccasins, which will only be dismantled or destroyed by others "tomorrow." She sews in anger at this affront to her natural creative gifts.

In another poem in the same volume, however, she finds that the very search for an identity brings her the sense of relatedness that she seeks:

> It is a small thing
> to rage in your own bowl.
> At first it was private.
> Then it was more than myself;
> it was you, or your house
> or your kitchen.
> ("For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," CP 34)

This pattern, of identifying the negative aspects of her self that keep her isolated and disconnected, and of finding in those same identities a source of union with other selves, recurs throughout the poetry.

This dissertation will explore the selfhood that Sexton reveals and searches for in her poetry in terms of four identities: the child self, the adult woman self, the religious self, and the self as poet. These identities seem to best encompass the totality of the self that she creates in her poems.

In seeking the roots of her mad self, Sexton, like any post-Freudian person, identifies those childhood experiences that have isolated and constricted her, preventing her from coming into a fully expansive adult selfhood. Her poetry about her child self reveals little that is positive in this identity. The child in her is fearful and rigidly compulsive, ashamed of her body and disconnected from it, and therefore physically awkward, self-conscious about her behavior, feeling unloved and unwanted, and unable to reach out to others. On the few occasions when she is able to rid herself of this plaguey child identity, she escapes from it through withdrawal or defiance. In her withdrawn state, she is free to create a new, secret identity that provides a better sense of connectedness with the outside world than does the identity she associates with her family. In one poem, this new self takes the form of an imaginary brother, Christopher, who is able to provide the companionship, acceptance, and sense of being alive that deliver her from her family-identified self:

> For Anne and Christopher were born in my head as I howled at the grave of roses, the ninety-four rose crèches of my bedroom.

. . . .
For I become a *we* and this imaginary *we* became a kind company when the big balloons did not bend over us.
. . . .
For birth was a disease and Christopher and I invented the cure.

For we swallow magic and we deliver Anne.
("O Ye Tongues: Fourth Psalm," *CP* 401-403)

This imaginary brother represents another instance of Sexton's extending her self through identification with another literary figure, here Christopher Smart. The poem in which she creates Christopher is a close imitation, particularly in form, of Smart's *Jubilate Agno*.

In various poems, she speaks of this withdrawal as a means to a more expansive identity. In part, this sense of expansiveness is accomplished because she sees this withdrawal as functioning at an archetypal level and thus connecting her with a fundamental death and rebirth experience of the questing human being. She looks to Jonah's being swallowed by the whale as the archetypal symbol of this act of turning inward to lose an undesirable identity and take on a new, more serviceable one. By seeing herself as an extension of Jonah, she again suggests that the self-creation she undertakes in her poetry is a universal human quest and that it is fundamentally a spiritual endeavor ("Making a Living," *CP* 350-351).

The second of Sexton's identities that this dissertation will explore is her woman self as it relates to her struggle to release a self that is open, loving and creative. Having come of age during the late 1940s and early 1950s her poems are full of the restiveness she felt at the circumscribed lives dictated to women by the narrow precepts of the age of the feminine mystique and family togetherness. She

describes the roles of housewife and mother as depriving women of their individuality and isolating them from reality and from human contact:

> 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.
> (Housewife," _CP_ 77)

Relationships with men are unsatisfactory to such a woman because the marital relationship requires a human connection which violates the false security of this antiseptic existence. Furthermore, men marry to find a mother, not a wife, and so make additional demands on this woman whose whole identity is associated with the cleanliness of her house. When men enter, it is like an invasion:

> Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
> into their fleshy mothers.

Looking to lives of other women as models provides no help because all women are trapped in this narrow, deathlike existence, and a daughter's life is no different from her mother's:

> A woman _is_ her mother.
> That's the main thing.

The lines suggest too that, while men look to women to be their mothers, women are forced to mother themselves, because their own mothers, likewise kept from expressing their humanity, do not provide any comfort or guidance.

When Sexton does feel satisfaction with her identity as a woman, it is when she can feel that her gender connects her with other human beings and with nature. Thus many of her poems celebrate her woman's

body because of its creative powers. "In Celebration of My Uterus" (CP 181-183) is a Whitmanesque celebratory poem in which, following successful "female" surgery, the poet exults in the powers of her body and thereby feels a sense of unity with all other women. Sexton's debt to Whitman in this poem has already been noted by critic Myra Stark. This subject matter reflects a common ploy of Sexton's, one which critics either praise or condemn, namely, her delight in writing on shocking subjects. She wrote openly about certain private experiences of being a woman long before it was fashionable or acceptable to do so. Though she was never active in the feminist movement, her courage in dealing with these hitherto taboo subjects, including masturbation, breasts, gynecological surgery, incest, and lesbianism, has brought her great admiration and a strong following among women seeking a new definition of womanhood in the twentieth century.

In this poem she praises her uterus as a manifestation "of the woman I am / and of the soul of the woman I am / and of the central creature and its delight." The uterus is spoken of in archetypal terms as cup, cover, and container -- all primitive symbols associated with women. This female organ brings her to a new awareness of self-as-body, as well as connecting her with "the soil of the fields" and with roots, making her, like the earth, a source of creative energy and renewal. Furthermore, each individual cell of the uterus becomes a source of identification with other women: "[t]here is enough here to please a nation." In a Whitman-like catalog Sexton lists the particular groups of women with whom she feels a sense of identity. She shares here Whitman's regard for the common person, as she did in her other

Whitmanesque poem, "The Civil War," modeled on his "Song of Myself." The images show women at work, whether at vigorous physical labor, which again acknowledges women's archetypal association with the soil ("[O]one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona, . . ."), or at boring jobs such as often fall to women in our society ("[O]ne is in a shoe factory cursing the machine, . . ."), or the mundane and sometimes messy tasks associated with childcare ("[O]ne is wiping the ass of her child, . . ."). The list also includes primitive women, an artist "straddling a cello in Russia," and a contemporary woman who expresses her sense of connection with the archetypal feminine by "painting her bedroom walls moon color." The poem ends with a litany of rituals she will perform in celebration of her womanhood. The rituals take her into the realms of the archetypal, the intellectual, the primitive, and the natural.

Thirdly, I will deal in this dissertation with Sexton's spiritual self. Her quest for an identity that is expansive and aware of its connections with all of reality is fundamentally a religious quest. Ultimately she understands all her identities as having a spiritual dimension. In a late poem in The Awful Rowing Toward God, her volume of poems mainly devoted to religious themes, she writes in despair and frustration at her inability to rid herself of a destructive identity that remains despite her efforts to eradicate it. She identifies this self "clutching fast to [her] heart" as "a huge crab" and speculates that this crab-self may represent her "ignorance of God." She enumerates failed efforts by psychiatrists and herself to rid her of

this blind, primitive identity and declares here that prayer only makes it worse: ". . . as I pray the crab grips harder / and the pain enlarges" ("The Poet of Ignorance" CP 434). While this poem is grounded in pessimism, the same volume of poems contains "The Civil War," discussed earlier in this chapter, which also views the self in godly terms, but which is full of Whitmanian optimism that she can create a new identity. This identity would be "a whole nation of God," in which the crab-self would accede to a more alive, more self-accepting identity that is able to give and take love. These two polarities express Sexton's spiritual dilemma. On the one hand, she feels that aspects of her identity isolate her from contact with a God-figure who is without and unyielding, and on the other, she experiences God as within and expansive and linking her with all other beings.

Sexton was raised a Protestant, thought it is not clear how actively the family practiced its religion; as an adult she is unable to make her own personal commitment to her inherited faith. Her difficulty in accepting Christianity is due partly to its association with her family background and the unexpansive crab self she has inherited. In a late poem she speculates that she was "born kneeling. . . born expecting the kiss of mercy," that is, with a sense of awe and an assumption that the universe was ultimately merciful, but that her early experiences disillusioned her:

> By two or three I learned not to kneel,
> not to expect, to plant my fires underground
> where none but the dolls, perfect and awful,
> could be whispered to or laid down to die.
> ("Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women,"
> CP 537)

In addition to this association of Christianity with her unhappy childhood, though she admires the strong faith of Christian -- especially Catholic -- friends, she rejects Christianity as content with a narrow version of the truth. While she is very attracted to Jesus as an image of a God who takes on and thereby accepts human weaknesses, she condemns the Christian image of Jesus for its failure to really encompass all of life. Jesus -- and Christianity -- lack vitality because they fail to incorporate the ugly, instinctual and visceral aspects of life. The Christian God-Father, furthermore, seems remote, uncaring and -- especially -- unforgiving. She is constantly confessing her guilty self in her poetry, and yet her open revelations of her plaguey self fail to bring relief or acceptance or a new identity. Her recollections of childhood experiences of religion are repressive: "There was a church where I grew up / with its white cupboards where they locked us up." Such a restrictive form of religion has led to an adult self who is plagued with guilt: "Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said." ("The Double Image," CP 37). The Christian God seems to share in this accusatory conspiracy against her. He in fact seems to epitomize the accusing, uncaring parental figure who is pointing a finger at Sexton and contributing to her madness. The kind of God she could believe in is one who is an extension of the warm, creative, vital, fulfilling spirit that she finds in nature. Instead, her experience seems to have given her a god who is the antithesis of the naturalness and expansiveness which constitute her ideal self. A god who exhibits these qualities, she feels, would not manifest himself in the rigidity and superficiality that she observes in religion and in

other establishments but rather in, for example, the spontaneity and loving qualities of her daughter Joy. Such a god would not have allowed the severing of the mother-daughter bond between Sexton and her daughter to take place, a break which she describes in "The Double Image":

> There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
> why did I let you grow
> in another place. (CP 36)

Through experiences such as giving birth and witnessing the growth of her children, Sexton recovered a reverence for the body and the life of this earth, and she demanded no less of religion and the spiritual life. She finds an immanent presence in the human self that is godlike, and for her this quality forms the basis of her spirituality. This godliness is expressed through the body and is a means to transcendence as well as justification for fully experiencing the here and now. When a person fully accepts her beauty and creativity as reflecting her identity as a part of nature, then she transcends the restrictive limits of human life. Such transcendence is exemplified in a poem such as "Woman with Girdle" (CP 70-71). The body of the woman described in this poem is flabby and unattractive, and she is sexually and maternally inactive. Girdled in her "elastic case," she is undistinguished, out of touch with her deeper self, connected with neither a "new-born" self nor her "old-born," primitive and natural self. By girdling herself, she has distorted her body into something false. As she removes the garment and her "belly, soft as pudding,/slops down into the empty space," she reveals her true bodily self. This revelation extends her

identity by connecting her with her archetypal womanhood, transforming her into a "whole city" of woman:

> Now you rise,
> a city from the sea,
> born long before Alexandria was,
> straightway from God you have come
> into your redeeming skin.

But though Sexton can experience such a satisfactory wholeness in her own being, there is nevertheless a second strain which runs through her work, namely a longing to escape the boundaries and limitations of human existence completely and to experience herself as joined with some more expansive, cosmic being, participating in a higher level of existence. She expresses these longings in visionary poems in which she loses her human and individual self in varying degrees through merger with some powerful, cosmic self, be it God, the "old unseen serpent," nature on a cosmic and archetypal scale, the angels, or Adam and Eve. Sometimes her vision expresses a desire for a complete loss of her own identity, as in "The Starry Night" (<u>CP</u> 53-54), where she wants to be swallowed up in a fiery death by the dragon who keeps the stars. Other times, union with a more powerful identity involves throwing off unsatisfactory aspects of her human self, such as gender, in favor of a self that is, like the angels, completely individual, "not one thing or the other" ("Consorting with Angels," <u>CP</u> 112). Ultimately, transformation of the self can involve joining her own weak, unfulfilling identity with another self that is similar but more powerful, as when in "The Consecrating Mother" she envisions herself becoming one with the ocean imagined as the fulfillment of a powerful woman identity

(CP 554-555). Unlike the promise of transformation held up by Christianity, all these visions are highly physical and sensual and sexual, reaffirming Sexton's belief in transcendence by means of, not in spite of the body.

Finally, this dissertation will explore Sexton's identity as poet. Of all the selves she grapples with in her work, this poet self seems the identity she can most consistently celebrate. In fact, she is clear that it is her poetic self that enables her to bridge the gap between the isolation of her personal quest for a new identity and her need to feel connected with other identities as an extension of them. In relation to her child self, she declares that it is by discovering her creativity that she is able to overcome the negative, constricted child that she accuses her mother of having fostered by her dislike of dirt and imperfection. In "The Black Art" she considers how her poet self is an expansive aspect of her identity as a woman:

> A woman who writes feels too much,
> those trances and portents!
> As if cycles and children and islands
> weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
> and vegetables were never enough.
> She thinks she can warn the stars.
> A writer is essentially a spy.
> Dear love, I am that girl. (CP 88)

Likewise, in "With Mercy for the Greedy" (CP 62-63), she asserts that the kind of confession that she makes in her poetry is far more effective at bringing the mercy she craves than is Christianity.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this introduction, Sexton is clear from the very beginning of her career that her truth-seeking is an archetypal and literary quest. She identifies with literary

questers who have gone before her, such as Jonah and Thoreau, who have set about ridding themselves of superficial identities. Thus, the subject of her poetry is not just the accidents of her own life; her poetry links her with everyone who undertakes to understand the self. Like Thoreau and Jonah, her inward look paradoxically reveals new connections with the outer world.

An additional and seemingly paradoxical aspect of her identity quest is a longing not to turn inward but to expand her identity outward to encompass a multiplicity of selves, to discover her connections with all aspects of reality. In this she has a literary forebear in Walt Whitman, and she emulates him in her celebratory and expansive verse. Furthermore, just as she identifies her inward look with the myth of Jonah's struggle inside the whale, so she calls upon Icarus as an archetype of the kind of risk-taking that is required by the artist in his quest for a more expansive identity.

Sexton finally realizes that her literary self enables her to encompass both of these identities. Through her creative imagination she is able to see beyond the appearances of things to discover their inner selves. Likewise her imagination enables her to transform objects and identities so that she can both explore the multiple identities of things and create new identities for them. In this way, her creative self enables her to bridge the gap between inward, imprisoned identities in a way that none of her other selves can do.

Sexton's sense of self as the need to extend her identity involves two poles. One consists of the various narrow roles which have been laid out for her by dint of birth or sex or cultural pressures:

daughter, woman, mother, wife, Protestant. These roles are limiting in that they fail to unite the "broken pieces of God" which she finds within herself or to bring her a sense of connectedness with the pieces of God in other people. She is attracted as we all are, however, by the security they offer. She even finds madness and death attractive as extreme forms of this desire to lose herself in some other identity that absolves her of responsibility, whether it is the "old unseen serpent" or chairs or napkin rings. But this Jocasta-like urge toward oblivious living is "never enough" because there is Oedipus to contend with as well -- the side of all of us that tells us there is something more, some further truth to be sought.

The opposite pole is characterized by the more dynamic, expanded identities which she feels drawn to as an escape from those circumscribed roles, but which potentially could release her -- and us -- into the more specific roles with dignity and beauty. These extended identities include nature, God, and poetry. While she initially sees these selves as offering more potential for experiencing reality (nature), for providing consolation and redemption (God), and for encouraging creativity (poetry), than she finds in her "given" roles, she soon recognizes that these identities are invariably connected with the more circumscribed roles. A "whole nation of God" can only be constructed from the whores, winos and derelicts of the world. The materials of poetry must necessarily be "the tongue's wrangle" and "the world's pottage." ("With Mercy for the Greedy," _CP_ 62-63). Her poetry becomes a means by which she attempts to integrate the disparate identities, both expansive and restrictive. When the lesser identities triumph, she becomes a

woman "petrified in time" ("The Double Image," CP 41). When she is able to achieve an expansion of identity, a coming together of the God in herself with herself as a part of nature, she finds full satisfaction in this world and needs no other. She can both accept the terms of the quest and celebrate the imperfections of this world as better than any perfect heaven:

> I am rowing, I am rowing
> though the oarlocks stick and are rusty
> . . . .
> but I am rowing, I am rowing,
> though the wind pushes me back
> and I know that that island will not be perfect,
> it will have the flaws of life,
> the absurdities of the dinner table,
> but there will be a door
> and I will open it
> and I will get rid of the rat inside of me,
> the gnawing pestilential rat.
> God will take it with his two hands
> and embrace it. ("Rowing," CP 417-418)

Biographical Sketch

Sexton warns her readers that, while her poetry is confessional, she sometimes alters autobiography to suit her artistic intentions. Consequently, while the facts of her life closely parallel the poetic "facts," it is not always possible to know where the two Sextons diverge. The comments of her daughter made in the course of recounting the events of her mother's life provide some basis for distinguishing where Sexton might have altered fact (Letters 3 passim).

Sexton was born November 9, 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts, to Mary Gray Staples Harvey and Ralph Churchill Harvey. Both sides of her family had emigrated from Britain in the 1600's and had long been

prominent upper middle class New Englanders. Her paternal grandfather had been president of the Wellesley, Massachusetts, National Bank. Her father owned a highly respected Boston woolen firm. On her mother's side, her great uncle, Nelson Dingley, had served as President of the Main House of Representatives and as governor of Maine. Her maternal grandfather, Arthur Gray Staples, had been editor of the Lewiston (Maine) Evening Journal, as well as an established author. A great aunt, Anne Ladd Dingley, a figure who appears frequently in Sexton's poetry, had also been a newspaper editor. Sexton's mother had attended Wellesley College and had aspired to a literary career. Her thwarted ambitions were a continuing source of friction; when Sexton sent her mother a copy of some early poems, her mother accused her of plagiarizing her own works.

Anne was the youngest of three sisters. The family moved from Cambridge to Wellesley and finally to Weston, Massachusetts, where Sexton passed most of her youth. Summers were spent at the family compound on Squirrel Island, off Boothbay Harbor, Maine. The family owned seven five-story houses there, and Sexton refers often and lovingly in poems to the times spent there. No doubt her love of the sea and her frequent use of it as a symbol of life and power derive from these days spent on the Atlantic shore.

Though Sexton's account of her childhood tells of being misunderstood and mistreated as a child, this poetic autobiography reveals only part of the whole truth. Anne was apparently a difficult, rebellious child who was indulged by her wealthy and -- according to Sexton her-

self, in several poems -- materialistic parents. She tormented her sisters and friends and was expelled from several grammar schools. One example of the disparity between reality and poetry is Sexton's relationship with her great aunt, Anna Dingley, who was a loving confidante for Sexton throughout her childhood. Linda Gray Sexton notes that her death, when Anne was an adolescent, was a loss that she felt throughout her life. In most, though not all, of "Nana's" appearances in the poetry, however, she is a negative presence, either terrifying or pathetic. This portrayal seems to reflect Sexton's inner world more than external reality.

Sexton's personality problems continued in her teenage years. Tall and attractive, she was very dependent on boys' attentions; she wore provocative clothing and too bright lipstick, wrote passionate love notes to many admirers, and spent very little time on her studies; she attended Garland Junior College only briefly. She did, however, write poetry during these years, though marriage apparently caused her to leave off writing. In 1948, at the age of twenty, having been engaged to someone else, she eloped with Alfred Sexton II, nicknamed "Kayo." Her own parents evidently accepted the match, but his parents did not approve of her. She enjoyed the domestic aspects of her marriage, meanwhile winning a scholarship to a modeling course, a career which she pursued while her husband was in the service. She also worked at the Hathaway House bookstore for a brief time. With her husband she moved to Baltimore while he was in naval training, and later to San Francisco. They returned to Massachusetts when their first child, Linda, was born July 21, 1953. Sexton's psychological disturbances became severe

enough to warrant frequent hospitalizations during the years surrounding the births of her two daughters; the second, Joyce Ladd Sexton, nicknamed "Joy," was born in 1955. In 1954 and again in 1956, Sexton was confined to a mental institution. The second of these episodes, connected with an attempted suicide, resulted in her children being sent to relatives, and is the source of the autobiographical material in her poem "The Double Image." Linda Sexton, who is the poet's literary executor as well as the editor of a collection of her letters and two posthumously published volumes of poetry, describes life with her mother as like being on a roller coaster, alternating between love and excitement, and suicidal depressions and violence.

During this time Sexton resumed her writing, and the support of her psychiatrist greatly influenced her perseverance. In 1957 she enrolled in an adult education seminar in poetry taught by John Holmes, in which she met poet Maxine Kumin and began an intimate literary and personal friendship that lasted until Sexton's death. She was immediately successful at getting published and, to secure free time for writing, sold cosmetics door to door to pay baby-sitters' fees. During the summer of 1958, she attended on scholarship a workshop at the Antioch Writers' Conference taught by W.D. Snodgrass. The workshop marked the beginning of an intensely emotional correspondence with him, which persisted almost until her death, to a point when her demanding dependency became too much for many of her friends. Sexton admired Snodgrass's work greatly and constantly sought his support and praise. She developed an active correspondence with many other literary figures -- Carolyn Kizer, Robert Lowell, Tillie Olsen among them -- but most

broke off in the years before her death for the same reason. In the fall of 1958 she took a graduate seminar with Robert Lowell at Boston University. There she met Sylvia Plath, and the two, along with Maxine Kumin and George Starbuck, would meet regularly after class to critique each others' poems over martinis.

Sexton's parents died within two months of each other in 1959, her mother from cancer and her father from a sudden stroke just before he was about to remarry. Their deaths along with her mother's illness form the basis of several poems. During this year too she was hospitalized for pneumonia, an appendectomy, and an ovarectomy. The episode appears in the poem "The Operation" (CP 56-59). During the summer of 1959 she received the Robert Frost Fellowship to attend the Breadloaf Writers' Conference. In December she delivered the Morris Gray Poetry Lecture at Harvard. Her first book, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, was published in April, 1960, to warm critical reception. She studied with Philip Rahv and Irving Howe at Brandeis, developed a friendship with James Wright and met Stephen Spender, all of whom encouraged her. She also taught poetry at Radcliffe and Harvard. During this period she began a long correspondence with a young monk and was able to share with him her longing to believe in God. In 1962 she received the Levinson Prize from Poetry magazine. Her second book, All My Pretty Ones, was nominated for a National Book Award in 1963. In the same year she received a fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for three months of travel in Europe. Although she traveled with a friend, she found it necessary to return home a month early because of her disturbed mental state. During the next few years she attempted suicide

several times. She also suffered from various forms of hysteria, trances, and the hearing of voices. Her third book, Live or Die, is a poetic account of this depressed period. In a prefatory note she refers to the poems in this book as "a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy." In 1966 she broke her hip and required surgery to pin it together. This accident made her very aware of her physical vulnerability, a theme which recurs in her poetry.

The critical high point of her career came in 1967 when she received the Pulitzer Prize for Live or Die. The period following this, from 1967-1972, was another high period of Sexton's life. She was encouraged by her success, her mental condition was stabilized because of therapy and medication, and her marriage seemed secure. In 1967 she received the Shelley Award from the Poetry Society of America and also read at the International Poetry Festival in London. Her fourth volume, Love Poems, was published in 1969. Also in that year she began teaching a poetry seminar at Boston University; it was both successful and personally fulfilling. She was soon promoted to the rank of professor. Her play, Mercy Street, was produced off-Broadway in October, 1969. She was very involved with the rehearsals. She completed her fifth volume of poems, Transformations, during this time. Published in 1971, it was somewhat different from her previous volumes of mostly undisguisedly personal poetry. The poems in this volume were her own versions of Grimm's fairy tales, the selections made on the basis of her children's favorites. Conrad Susa adapted Transformations into an opera, first performed in 1973 by the Minnesota Opera Company and

revived in 1981 at the American Spoleto Festival. Her sixth volume of poems, The Book of Folly, in which she returned to her more familiar, directly personal style, was published in 1972.

The last two years of Sexton's life, 1973-1974, were difficult and unstable. She filed for divorce in 1973, though to her later regret. The great volume of love letters she had received throughout her career from admiring fans bore no relation to the realities of developing a dating life at age forty-five. Without the support of her husband, she became increasingly anxious and dependent on her friends. She continued to teach at Boston University, however, and wrote compulsively. Between June 1972 and October 1974 she wrote three books of poems: The Death Notebooks, The Awful Rowing Toward God, and 45 Mercy Street. These volumes reveal that during these last years she no longer did the careful revisions that had characterized most of her career. Her daughter says of her final writings:

> With this vast outpouring, she wrote against death; she seems to have been preparing instinctively for a final silence. Her late poetry, while not as carefully crafted as her early work, is an outstanding document of the evolution of her thought and emotion in these last two years. (Letters 391)

She became increasingly demanding and difficult to live with. Many of her most faithful friends found her demands impossible and withdrew from her. For sustenance she turned increasingly to the support of her fans and to superficial relationships based on hero-worship. She also turned to work.

The Death Notebook was published in 1974, and she worked on the two other volumes. She saw The Awful Rowing Toward God through the

final editing process, though it was published posthumously in 1975. For 45 Mercy Street, however, she made only a tentative arrangement of the poems. The editing process was completed by her daughter Linda, and this work was published in 1976. A final volume of uncollected poems from throughout her career was edited by Linda Sexton and published in 1978 as Words for Dr. Y. A handful of additional uncollected poems is appended to The Complete Poems, published in 1981.

Sexton died by her own hand on October 4, 1974. Her suicide was not unexpected, either by her friends or by her. In the months just before her death, she carefully put her personal and literary lands in order. She meted out favorite possessions to friends, selected a biographer and literary executor, and made arrangements to have her manuscripts archived at Boston University -- they have subsequently been transferred to the University of Texas at Austin -- and made her will. On the day of her death, however, she followed a normal routine and even had lunch with Maxine Kumin.

Sexton had chosen her own epitaph, "Rats Live On No Evil Star," a palindrome she had seen on a barn in Ireland. In a touching letter written to her daughter Linda on April, 1969, to be read after her death, she gives some insight into the relationship between the poetry and her life.

> . . . I've had a good life -- I wrote unhappy -- but I lived to the hilt! . . . I lied, Linda. I did love my mother and she loved me. She never held me but I miss her, so that I have to deny I ever loved her -- or she me! (Letters 424)

Sexton and Her Critics

In discussing Sexton's treatment of the self, critics tend to focus either on the limitations and failure of her attempts to discover a new, united self which would transcend the fragmented, broken, warring identities within her or, more positively, on her successful attempts to break free of these old selves and consequently to break new ground in the poetic treatment of the self, especially the woman self.

There is still no book-length study of Sexton's poetry, so that while the articles which deal with the self in her poetry may refer to areas which I discuss in my study, none takes up the question of Sexton's treatment of the self in depth and breadth. Sexton's spiritual self and her woman self are the two identities that have received the greatest attention from critics. There is a great deal of interest currently in women's spirituality as a continuum extending forward in time from a matriarchal culture which predated the rise of the patriarchy in primitive times. Such spirituality is firmly rooted in the body and intuition and exists outside of -- and has at times between suppressed by -- male cultures which are generally based on the supremacy of the intellect and reason. Sexton's religious poetry predates this current interest but puts forth many of the same notions. If her poems on spirituality seem somewhat disconnected, it is perhaps because she was writing outside the Christian tradition but without a confident, consistent sense of attachment to another tradition. Several critics who treat Sexton's poetry positively focus on her nontraditional

interpretations of the spiritual self.

Most critics, particularly feminist critics, who write on this subject look to Estella Lauter's article on Sexton as the leading contribution thus far to scholarship on Sexton's spirituality. Lauter sees a shift in Sexton's poetry from her volume Transformations on. The shift involves a change from emphasis on a personal to a transpersonal quest and is reflected in her impudent tone, her archetypal images, and her assumption of personae, among them Jesus and Mary, that enable her to understand experience beyond her own. This shift also involves a choice of forms bearing cultural resonances, such as fairy tales, parables and psalms, and a bestiary (78-80). This movement into an archetypal and mythical realm affirms that Sexton's poetry, rather than being only personal confession, represents an act of soul-making, that is, an effort at exploring the imagery arising out of the unconscious as a means to insight into not only her own soul but her connections with "the gods" as represented by archetypal image patterns. Lauter maintains that Sexton's uncensored exploration of these images enabled her to produce "the richest body of god-images to appear in some time." She sees Sexton's dissatisfaction with traditional images of a Father-God and her generation of alternative God-images grounded in feminine creativity as failing to lead to a resolution because Sexton could not "name" these alternative images and especially because she failed to understand them as part of a process of women's re-visioning of unsatisfactory God images in the service of a feminist theology (77-78).

Another highly respected feminist critic includes Sexton in an article and book on women's bodies as a source of grace for themselves and as a means of transforming other souls. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos asserts that Sexton's poetry demonstrates an understanding of woman's body as a means of "primal and permanent" spiritual knowledge. She also expresses the notion that women's spirituality involves "transcending downward," that is, "being surrounded by the ground of being, matter / nature / mother" (431-432) and sees this downward movement as the basis of Sexton's spirituality. As part of her study, Demetrakopoulos focuses on nursing as a source and expression of spirituality, and mother's milk as "a kind of agape that (a woman) materializes to flow through the child and thence into the universe" (435). She cites three of Sexton's poems, "The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos," "Seventh Psalm," and "Ninth Psalm" as works which portray milk as a source of transformative "feminine and cosmic grace" (435-436). She suggests, finally, that Sexton's "vision of a patterned, containing, and loving universe" projected from her understanding of feminine creative and nurturing powers" failed to save her life because she continued to seek primary meaning in masculine images of God (436).

Debora Ashworth includes Sexton in an article on poets exploring the sources of their creativity through religious and mythological images. She cites Sexton's transformations of fairy tales and her exploration of the image of the Madonna as receiving power from both the divine and natural realms (180). Sexton explodes the myth of the virgin in "Snow White" (181), explores the destructiveness within woman's

psyche in "Rapunzel" (182-183), and reinterprets Gretel's act of pushing the witch into the oven as an act of "conquering her own oppression" and transforming the witch into a positive source of creativity (183).

Less concerned with Sexton's religious poetry but still dealing with the way in which her poetry subverts the traditional view of women is an article by Linda Mizejewski concerning Sexton's desire to escape containment and achieve detachment from "earth, solidarity, hearth and security," a theme which I explore in depth in my study. She notes that such poetry runs counter to the ideals laid out for women in Greek and Hebrew literature, which represent the mainstream of Western culture's views of women. In such literature, says Mizejewski, men who escape are honored as heroes and adventurers, whereas women who do are seen as mad and their escape usually leads to tragedy (340-341). It is possible that those critics who regard Sexton's suicide as confirmation of her failure to achieve the wholeness that she sought unconsciously subscribe to this myth of feminine identity. Mizejewski, however, sees Sexton's poetry as following a less established tradition, which she traces back to Sappho, and which can be illustrated by Sexton's poem "The Starry Night." In such poems, though the escape may end in death, the woman speaker is stronger for the escape (342-343).

Two critics focus on Sexton's religious poetry as it does relate to the tradition of Western spirituality. Both William McGill and L. Cunningham laud the depth and character of Sexton's spirituality. McGill sees her religious poetry as in the tradition of revelations of a "dark night of the soul," a point which I discuss in relation to her in-

ward quest for identity. He acknowledges that her poetry is "fundamentally religious," as I also point out, and declares that the intensity of her desire for God equals that of some of the great religious writers. Her fear that the search for God is futile reflects a common theme of religious literature, McGill asserts, likening her quest particularly to that of John Donne's "Parable of the Mountain." In this work, the speaker climbs a mountain to get closer to God, but God meanwhile comes down from heaven to get closer to people. The speaker then can either give in to despair or, if he retraces his steps, will find God looking for him. He suggests that Sexton despaired because the island on which she sought God proved empty.

Cunningham sees Sexton's poetry as a form of exorcism, exemplifying the use of the word as bringing order out of chaos. He quotes Sexton as saying that for her a poem brings her "into order again" and makes the world "a little more sensible and real." His thesis relates to my point that for Sexton poetry is a means of creating the self.

All of these critics have made points in their writings which dovetail with many aspects of my study. None of them, however, has attempted to study all aspects of Sexton's self. Nor has anyone yet developed the notion that Sexton's quest for a whole self involves a war between those identities which she considers constricting and guilt-ridden and those which she considers open and expansive. Likewise, no critic has focused on her paradoxical desire both for transcendence through a full experiencing of her human identity and for an escape through a loss of her identity into a larger, more expansive self. The above are the main considerations of this dissertation.

CHAPTER II

THE CHILD SELF

> The great theme is not Romeo and Juliet. . . .The great theme we all share is that of becoming ourselves, of overcoming our father and mother, of assuming our identities somehow.
> (Letters 28)

As the above quotation suggests, achieving an independent adult self involves separating the individual self from the identity that is an extension of parents and family. In her effort to uncover the hidden inner depths of the self as well as reach out to other, larger identities, Sexton explores her child self mainly as a product of family influences and attitudes. She finds much that is destructive in that identity; in fact, she sees it as basically a non-self. She relates her rigid, anxious, self-hating, angry self to her childhood and portrays this self as a reaction to a compulsive, repressed mother who loathed the body; a materialistic, insensitive father; and a sister who hated her. How real these portrayals of her family are is difficult to ascertain. While more benign images of family members do appear in Sexton's poetry, these negative images predominate. Sexton's sister Blanche's description of Anne as a child reveals the difficulty of knowing how much is true and how much is poetic manipulation of the facts: Blanche remembers Anne as a "much-loved child, over-indulged -- the center of attention" (Letters 3). In an interview concerning her use of autobiographical material in her poetry, Sexton states that her tech-

nique is to simplify the facts of her life for the sake of clarity and dramatic effect. What she seeks, she says, is "the effect of the axe." She continues, "To have that effect you must distort some of these facts to give them their own clarity. . . . [Y]ou don't have to include everything to tell the truth." She cites as an example her poem "The Double Image" (CP 35-42), in which she implies that she was in a mental institution only once and that she was only one child. She says too that poets often lie, both for the effect of the poem and as a cover: "if you say that you lie, you can get away with telling the awful truth." As an example she refers to her poem "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" (CP 24-25), in which the young woman gives up her illegitimate child. "It hadn't happened to me. It wasn't true, and yet it was indeed the truth." Sexton says that what she aims for rather than literal truth is:

> "to try to get to some form of integrity, . . . some whole life lived, to try to present it now, to give the impact. It's the same as with a novelist, only it's in little sections." (Marx 563-564)

In describing her child self, Sexton writes in her poems of a few occasions when she is able to transcend this frightened, neurotic child within her and to become spontaneous, confident, accepting of her self, and loving toward others, including her family. These positive aspects of her identity arise out of turning to inner resources, which she discovers can combat her negative identities -- her awakening sexuality, the exercising of both her physical creativity as a woman and her artistic creativity as a poet, an exploration of her spiritual self. Other poems, in which she evaluates her adult self in relation to

her family identity, show her as still plagued by the "hating eyes" of her mother and father and unable to give birth to the spontaneous, free, loving self she would wish, because she is unable to escape the constricting non-identities ingrained in her by her family. Finally, it is sometimes only in dreams and fantasies that she is able to envision an expansive identity for herself.

Sexton explores the child self and her withdrawal into herself to make contact with a new self most fully and poignantly in "Those Times. . ." (CP 118-121). Critics have noted Sexton's ability to write effective beginnings which create vivid images and draw the reader quickly into the emotional effect she wishes to achieve. The opening of this poem exemplifies this quality:

> At six
> I lived in a graveyard full of dolls,
> avoiding myself,
> my body, the suspect
> in its grotesque house.
> I was locked in my room all day behind a gate,
> a prison cell.
> I was the exile
> who sat all day in a knot.

The source of the conflict between the childhood identity Sexton sees as having been created by her family and the identity she wishes to establish for herself is differing views of the body. For the poet, full acceptance of the body's functions -- even excretion -- is a means of transcendence, a means of experiencing herself as alive, as part of the larger self that is nature. She attributes to her mother, on the other hand, the viewpoint that the body is "the suspect." In "Those Times. . ." the mother would prefer her child to be like one of Anne's

dolls -- perfect, well-behaved, having no messy bodily functions. Sexton images her mother as a sadist who kept her locked in her room or in her closet and conducted awful examinations of her body:

> . . . the bedtime ritual
> where, on the cold bathroom tiles,
> I was spread out daily
> and examined for flaws.

This attitude causes the child to view herself and her body as "grotesque," a feeling that seems to be at the root of the self-loathing which never completely disappears from Sexton's poetry. She is

> . . . the unwanted, the mistake
> that Mother used to keep Father
> from his divorce.

As a result of this negative identity passed on to her by her family, Sexton's child self feels disconnected from her body and from her mother's nurturance. She speaks of refusing her mother's breasts and as later having developed the awkwardness of one whose physical and mental selves are not in harmony. But ironically, it is this state of non-identity which thrusts her out in search of a more pleasurable existence, an identity that can lead to growth instead of imprisonment.

One might expect that a child would seek comfort from her dolls, and in "Those Times. . ." that is exactly where the child-poet turns. As for any child, they provide her with comfort and companionship; additionally for her, they represent an identity which seems preferable to that of the "gate" and "the closet." They have the kind of female beauty which her mother finds lacking in her:

> I think of the dolls,
> so well made,
> so perfectly put together
> as I pressed them against me,
> kissing their little imaginary mouths.
> I remember their smooth skin,
> those newly delivered,
> the pink skin and the serious China-blue eyes.

More importantly, they are both physically and emotionally invulnerable to the kind of pain associated with her real childhood identity:

> They came from a mysterious country
> without the pang of birth,
> born quietly and well.

However, Sexton is both attracted and repulsed by their death-like perfection. She recognizes that such perfection and invulnerability represent another kind of non-identity which is as lifeless and unable to feel -- and thus unable to respond to love -- as the dolls are. In their insulation from pain they represent an identity that Sexton both longs for and fears as an escape from reality. Sexton's very effective image of the dolls as grotesques represents a frequent and successful technique, namely, the reversal of customary attitudes; here she finds horror in something that has universal associations with the benign. Instead of being cuddly extensions of human nurturance, the dolls are death babies, hard, plastic, and manifesting a worse grotesquerie than is present in her real-life identity. (She puts this technique to more extensive use as the basis of her volume of retold fairy tales, _Transformations_, published in 1971, in which she subverts the standard interpretations of the tales.)

In "Those Times. . .," as is not always the case in her other

poems, the experience of non-identity is the genesis of a larger, more satisfactory self. She tries to escape into the death-like world of the dolls through withdrawal, by hiding in her closet. However, she does not escape completely; the clothes in her closet, no doubt chosen by her mother -- her shoes, "the heavy oxfords, the thick execution reds," and her dresses, "empty and sensible" -- represent extensions of the sadistic attitudes of her mother and of the empty, constricting identity she associates with her family. Nevertheless, this withdrawal into herself paradoxically leads outward and upward to a more positive identity:

> I hid in the closet as one hides in a tree.
> I grew into it like a root. . . .
> . . . .
> I knew that if I waited among shoes
> I was sure to outgrow them, . . .

As the tree image suggests, withdrawal from her family self both provides her with a sense of her own identity -- gives her "roots" -- and somehow brings an awareness of her connection with nature that she did not find at her mother's breasts. Moreover, it leads to the awakening of other identities as well:

> . . . I planned such plans of flight,
> believing I would take my body into the sky,
> dragging it with me like a large bed.
> And although I was unskilled
> I was sure to get there or at least
> to move up like an elevator.
> With such dreams,
> storing their energy like a bull,
> I planned my growth and my womanhood
> as one choreographs a dance.

As the tree grows both downward and upward, so Sexton plans an identity

which not only connects her with nature and her inner self but also carries her body into the sky, opening her to the spiritual dimensions of the self. As the last line of the above passage suggests, she sees this act of planning her future self as a childlike proto-artistic creative act, one which prefigures the main task of much of her poetry, the creation and/or discovery of the self. By means of this rehearsal of her adult life she becomes confident -- even though she is unskilled and her body seems an awkward encumbrance -- that she can outgrow the self engendered by her family just as she will outgrow the shoes and clothes that she hides among.

As she grows into this closeted state of non-identity, it leads her in a childlike way to the larger identities which she constantly seeks as alternatives to the narrow identities imposed upon her by her family or by the limitations of other real-life roles. Similar experiences of turning inward and of giving up a narrow identity in order to find a larger one appear in other poems. Sexton sees all of these experiences as making her an extension of others who have experienced a similar rebirth through loss of a less satisfactory self: Jonah inside the belly of the whale ("Making a Living," CP 350-351), Jesus in the tomb ("In the Deep Museum," CP 64-65), and Thoreau in his cabin in the woods ("Kind Sir: These Woods," CP 4-5). Moreover, in certain other poems, such as "The Consecrating Mother" (CP 554-555), Sexton deliberately seeks such a loss of a stagnant, frozen identity in order to experience restoration and rebirth.

"Those Times. . ." ends with Sexton's statement that she has experienced the power of her body to create and to heal itself, and that

these experiences have overcome the hatred of her body conveyed to her by her family, giving her an identity that she can celebrate. She alludes to a broken hip from which she recovered, an incident which has taught her what she "did not know" as a child, that her body is less vulnerable than she had thought:

> . . . my bones,
> those solids, those pieces of sculpture
> would not splinter.

Likewise, the ability to give birth has made her feel alive as her childhood dolls were not:

> I did not know the woman I would be
> nor that blood would bloom in me
> each month like an exotic flower,
> nor that children,
> two monuments,
> would break from between my legs
> two cramped girls breathing carelessly,
> each asleep in her tiny beauty.

Thus, she finds her menstrual cycle a positive feature of her physical identity. The image of the flower suggests that menstruation expands her self concept and enables her to feel a part of the creative force that animates all of nature. The flower as a symbol of menstruation appears both in biblical and Greek myths, and her use of it suggests that she feels a kind of contact with the essence of her womanhood that extends her identity to a oneness with all women. Such identification as coming from experiencing the powers of her woman's body appears in another poem, "In Celebration of My Uterus" (<u>CP</u> 181-183), which I discussed in Chapter One.

"In the end" this larger, more positive physical self has "run

over" her mother's negative image of her "like a truck." All that remains of her six-year-old self, "a small hole in [her] heart, a deaf spot," has paradoxically further expanded her self, giving her what she views as a special power to "hear / the unsaid more clearly." This ability is connected, in ways which the poet does not explore, and perhaps does not understand, with her own role as a poet. In "Those Times. . ." she speaks what the child, who "lay there silently, / hoarding [her] small dignity," left unsaid, and so places that small, silent identity into the context of a larger identity, which includes womanhood, motherhood, nature, and a mysterious access to "the unsaid."

In "Young" (CP 51-52), a much shorter and earlier poem, Sexton's womanhood is just awakening, but it again provides her with a sense of oneness with the creative powers of nature that enables her to escape the negative influence of her family and to transcend her individual identity. In the poem she is preadolescent, on the verge of womanhood, and she is lying on the cool, green lawn on a summer night gazing up at the "wise stars," confident that she can make contact with some kind of elemental, universal wisdom that will accompany her awakening "brand new body, / which was not a woman's yet." The harmony with nature that she experiences here through the awareness of her body leads her also to a very direct awareness of God, who, she is sure, shares her rejection of her parents' lifestyle and her delight in her developing body:

> . . . I, in my brand new body,
> . . . .
> told the stars my questions
> and thought God could really see
> the heat and the painted light,
> elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight.

The "heat and the painted light" refer to her parents' separate windows, which suggest their alienation from each other. She too is alienated from them, and out here on the lawn she is outside the identity represented by "a big house with four / garages" and a wealth that does not keep her from being "a lonely kid." She is also outside the windows of her parents' bedrooms, each window suggesting their lack of connection with the primal natural energy that she is experiencing. Her mother's window is "a funnel / of yellow heat running out," an image which contrasts her own potent pre-womanhood with her mother's ebbing sexuality. Her father's window is half shut, like "an eye where sleepers pass"; he seems soporific and out of touch with the life that she feels throbbing inside her. The identity that Sexton achieves here is a state of primal wholeness. Although as an adult she recognizes the naivete of her childlike belief that "God could really see" her, the fact remains that her state of alienation from her family produces a religious experience, however embryonic and childish. Moreover, in many poems, as I will discuss fully in Chapter Four, the poet achieves a more sophisticated sense of the reality of God, which she does not dismiss as naive.

Though Sexton frequently has to escape the confines of her family-identified self to connect with her own expansiveness, some instances of the awakening of her physical identity are experienced in relation to her father. As opposed to the narrowing effect of her relationship with her mother, she does associate the expansion of her identity -- usually her sexual identity -- with her father. Whereas her identity as an extension of her mother does not provide her with a

satisfactory woman-self, her experience of herself as "the other" in relation to her father does give her such an identity, though that identity is frequently clouded by the threat of incest. Her poem "Oysters," the first in her sequence "The Death of the Fathers," describes an encounter with her father which is more or less innocent (CP 322-323). The experience of eating oysters for the first time represents for her a rite of passage into adulthood, with her father as the initiator:

> I was afraid to eat this father-food
> and Father laughed
> and drank down his martini,
> clear as tears.
> It was a soft medicine
> that came from the sea into my mouth,
> moist and plump.
> I swallowed.

Most children would probably regard raw oysters as "father-food," acquiring a taste for them only in adulthood. Furthermore, oysters are traditionally supposed to have aphrodisiac powers. Thus, eating oysters on this "date" with her father appropriately contributes to the awakening of her womanhood:

> . . . let me take note---
> there was a death,
> the death of childhood
> there at the Union Oyster House
> for I was fifteen
> and eating oysters
> and the child was defeated.
> The woman won.

Here too, then, the poet gives up a familiar identity to take on a new one which promises expansion of the self.

Another sexual awakening in relation to her father is much more

threatening, however, in "How We Danced," the second poem of the sequence (_CP_ 323-324). Here the death of the old self involves a surrender to a larger power, namely, music. The experience takes place as she dances with her father at her cousin's wedding when she is nineteen. The power of the music causes their ego-identified selves to drop away, opening them to vaster, more powerful identities -- celestial, angelic, mythic:

> . . . we danced, Father, we orbited.
> We moved like angels washing themselves.
> We moved like two birds on fire.
> Then we moved like the sea in a jar,
> slower and slower.

The image of birds on fire, while threatening death, also suggests rebirth, since it seems to allude to the mythical phoenix, capable of consuming itself and then recreating itself out of its ashes. Both this image and that of the angels seem to promise renewal and resurrection. But the real reason for the sense of power that Sexton feels is the threat of incest. As she and her father dance to the "Anniversary Waltz," they are "dear/very dear." They, rather than the bride and groom become the focus of Sexton's attention; the occasion in future will be their anniversary more than that of the wedding couple. "Pure oxygen [is] the champagne" they drink to celebrate the occasion. Compared to them, the bride and groom dance as if worn out, "like nineteen-thirty marathon dancers." The most conventional form of male-female relationship thereby becomes a narrowing of identity. Her mother's dancing, on the other hand, seems to rival her own in intensity, but though the former is a "belle" and dances "with twenty men," this rapid fire exchange

of partners has only the excitement, not the power, of the expansiveness experienced by father and daughter at this moment.

Even though promising a resurrection, this awakening of incestuous feelings opens the poet to identities that are threatening. The defiance of conventional mores represented by this quasi-incestuous experience causes elation but makes her an extension of dark powers:

> You danced with me never saying a word.
> Instead the serpent spoke as you held me close.
> The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me
> like a great god and we bent together
> like two lonely swans.

Thus, while the dance brings about transformation upward to the celestial realms, it also connects Sexton with chthonic darkness; the serpent is an archetypal symbol associated with both realms. Sexton normally sees an expansion of the physical self as desirable and as enlarging the spirit as well. But here the physical expansion connects her with a threatening figure representing both the physical and the spiritual. The serpent is the same tempter as that in the garden of Eden, a mocker because, while this relationship with her father appears exciting and enlarging, it also threatens isolation and destruction. As the dance goes on, the father recedes completely -- along with reality -- and is replaced by the serpent. Thus united in a dance with the "great god" of the underworld, Sexton and her partner are completely out of the world of ordinary reality. Whereas the dancers started out as "two birds on fire," they are now "two lonely swans," isolated, aloof and alone. As in another poem "Her Kind," a surrender to the dark side of the self is an exhilarating experience that expands her identity but

also renders her defiantly alone.

This momentary experience of connection with the serpent as a symbol of cosmic power repeats an earlier poem of Sexton's, "The Starry Night" (CP 53-54), in which she longs for permanent union with this lord of both good and evil:

> The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
> . . . 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.

In this poem death is seen as a means of achieving a more expansive and more powerful self in that it leads to union with a powerful cosmic figure representing lower nature. Such a death, as well as the experiencing of dark powers in the dance with her father, is far preferable to Sexton than being alive, if her living self is confined to narrow, self-constricting identities which deny the physical and thereby also restrict the spirit.

Despite her assertions in these poems that she has created or discovered new identities that have obliterated her unloved, rigid childhood self, there are others in which she declares herself unable to make contact with her physical self in such a way as to open her to a full womanly identity and to a creative, expansive self, because the "suspect" self, as defined by her family, still dominates. Furthermore, in poems such as "The Hex" (CP 313-314), seeing herself as an extension of another identity does not draw her out of her self-loathing but

rather intensifies it. In "The Hex," she associates this black identity with her great-aunt's madness and describes herself as full of evil and doomed:

> Every time I get happy
> the Nana-hex comes through.
> Birds turn into plumber's tools,
> a sonnet turns into a dirty joke,
> a wind turns into a tracheotomy,
> a boat turns into a corpse,
> a ribbon turns into a noose,
> all for the Nana-song,
> sour notes calling out in her madness:
> You did it. You are the evil.

The poem is a powerful tale of horror. Sexton presents the image of her great-aunt, as she is being taken to a mental institution, accusing her thirteen-year-old niece of causing her madness:

> Sitting on the stairs at thirteen,
> hands fixed over my ears,
> the Hitler-mouth psychiatrist climbing
> past me like an undertaker,
> and the old woman's shriek of fear:
> You did it. You are the evil.

Since feeling that accusation, any joy Sexton experiences -- such as the pleasure she takes in her physical powers and in her children, as well as any pleasure she takes in writing poetry -- is sabotaged by this echoing voice of her great-aunt. All the identities that she has developed to obliterate her child self -- poet, woman, lover -- are merely "masks" hiding this identity which never changes, making her as good as dead:

> It was the day meant for me.
> Thirteen for your whole life,
> just the masks keep changing.

These familiar sources of pleasure -- nature, poetry, her own body -- are only masks for the horror underlying them. Like her dolls, they are full of death. Not only is the petrified child-self still controlling Sexton's adult self; the aunt too has become a tenacious part of her adult identity. The poet identifies with her accuser because she is her aunt's "awkward namesake," and their eyes are "an identical green." Sexton becomes an extension of the great-aunt, and this incorporation of another identity into her self brings about negative effects. The aunt is her double, representing her mad self; she is that aspect of Sexton's self that accuses her of evil and causes the rigidity and numbness that keep her from fully expressing her adult self.

> the heartbeat,
> the numb hand,
> the eyes going black
> from the outer edges,
> the xylophone in the ears
> and the voice, the voice,
> the Nana-hex.
> My eyes stutter. I am blind.

Here she is kept from developing a new identity by both the world without and the one within. Contrary to "Those Times. . .," withdrawal into herself does not provide an escape into larger identities; it leads only to a death-like state filled with accusing voices. The outer world provides only dirty jokes and death. Ironically, Sexton recognizes all this horror for what it is, something childish and immature -- "doom stamping its little feet," a description which is not at all the way Sophocles would characterize a curse. But though the curse of the aunt-self is petty and vindictive, nevertheless its power seems everlasting:

> She's long gone.
> She went out on the death train.
> But someone is in the shooting gallery
> biding her time.
> The dead take aim.
> I feel great!
> Life is marvelous!
> and yet bull's eye,
> the hex.

She ends the poem ambiguously by acknowledging that she is the criminal but yet blaming her crime on her double:

> Yes! I am still the criminal.
> Yes! Take me to the station house.
> But book my double.

This resolution arises out of Sexton's adult self, however incompletely realized, who acknowledges her own capacity for doing evil, but who rejects the notion that she should be paralyzed by this curse. The identity of the double is likewise ambiguous: it is her thirteen-year-old self who believed in the curse and who still persists, but it is also the aunt-self who must be obliterated if Sexton is to achieve a free adult identity.

The idea of the double appears also in one of Sexton's longest and most important poems, "The Double Image" (CP 35-42). The poem is a reflection on the failure of two mother-daughter relationships, between the poet and her daughter and the poet and her mother. Written in 1958, "The Double Image" describes a suicide attempt by Sexton and a period of recovery spent at her mother's house. In her letters, Sexton details the importance she places on this poem. She recounts that it absorbed her totally during the six months she took to write it. It was inspired partly by her reading of W.D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle,"

which deals with the loss of his child through divorce, and which was a powerful influence on her determination to write openly about intimate matters, despite criticism by others, including her teacher John Holmes. She denies however, that it is a direct imitation:

> It is much more twisted, less objective, more caught up in its own sickness -- and then, it resolves like a story. I can never add nor subtract to it [sic]. (Letters 66)

As late as 1964 she considered it still "her best poem," saying that she had not felt as "turned on again": "I've been hanging on its coat tails ever since, never really writing a poem like that. . ." (Letters 247-248).

The poem is largely narrative and opens with Sexton and her daughter watching the autumn leaves fall:

> 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.

Sexton views herself and the leaves as extensions of the same reality and thus finds in them an explanation of her attempted suicide:

> 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.

Sexton suggests here that a profound understanding of the self begins with an acceptance of one's subjection to the laws of nature, to the natural cycle of birth and death. This contrast between naturalness and artifice forms the unifying motif of the poem. Medical explanations for

such human events as madness and suicide provide the illusion that death can be overcome, that birth can be reduced to a few scientific principles, that success in motherhood can be achieved by adherence to a few simple rules. Such explanations sought in order to gain control over life and death and human relationships are doomed to failure, as there are laws governing all of these that do not submit to human knowledge. All our medical explanations will never alter the fact of death, the miracle of birth, the workings of love, the devastation when love is lacking. The poem is an exploration of the workings of these fundamental realities in the lives of the poet, her daughter, and her mother.

Sexton's joy at the birth of her child is reflected in the child's nickname -- Joy. But when "a fever rattled in [her] throat," Sexton, terrified, can only "move like a pantomime" above the child's head -- another image of paralysis -- and consequently blames herself for the child's illness:

> 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; . . .

These inner voices are reminiscent of the accusations of guilt that Sexton attributes to her great-aunt in "The Hex." Here the poet's guilt feelings cause her to attempt suicide:

> Death was simpler than I'd thought.
> The day life made you well and whole
> I let the witches take away my guilty soul.

The aftermath is hospitalization for depression and treatment with "talking boxes and the electric bed." These devices designed to cure

depression belong to the same world of artifice as medical hypotheses and contrast with a world in which loving oneself renders them unnecessary. Sexton reiterates that her suicide -- she refers to it throughout the poem as an accomplished fact -- can best be explained by a contemplation of the leaves:

> Today the yellow leaves
> go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed
> in itself, or else it fell.

Her message to her daughter is to "love your self's self where it lives." The power of love -- of self and others -- is what keeps one from letting go like the leaves. It is not the love of a "special God" that determines happiness; otherwise, she would not have let her daughter "grow in another place." The most important manifestations of love are found in intercourse between people in the ordinary events of life, and nothing can make up for its lack:

> All the superlatives
> of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
> will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.

Decorated trees and contrived kisses under the mistletoe are also artificial and thus cannot suffice for naturalness and spontaneity. Only such uncontrived acts of love as shown by her daughter when Sexton visits her during her illness are the kind that can keep one from letting go:

> The time I did not love
> myself, I visited your shoveled walks: you held my glove.
> There was new snow after this.

Throughout the poem the child partakes of the natural world of the

leaves; her acts of love and spontaneity run through the poem and are constantly juxtaposed with Sexton's rigidity and numbness.

After her release from the hospital the poet is only "part way back from Bedlam." Able to "tolerate" herself but unable to resume full responsibility for her child, she goes to stay at her mother's home. Though the same voices which accused her of causing her child's illness tell her it is "too late," Sexton sees this return home as an attempt to overcome the failed relationship with her mother that has lasted since childhood. But this attempt ends in failure too: ". . . And this is how I came / to catch at her; and this is how I lost her." Sexton suffers the identity confusion often felt upon visiting one's childhood home. She is "an outgrown child," but as a "guest" she is "angry," still carrying the unresolved grudges of childhood. In Sexton's particular case she is also only "partly mended"; she is like an object, an artificial person, a scarecrow or one of her childhood dolls. Her mother is unable to accept her true identity as an adult daughter who has tried to commit suicide. Although she does "her best," the mother is able to make only superficial gestures of caring, and those gestures, unlike those of the child, are artificial ones which substitute for the love she cannot show; "[s]he took me to Boston and had my hair restyled." More significantly, Sexton's mother has the poet's portrait painted. As chilly as the north light in which it is hung, this "double image" of the poet also belongs to the world of artifice. In it she bears a smile which is artificial and frozen, having been sustained unfeelingingly through many sittings, "till it grew formal." Her real self is messy -- as in "Those Times. . ." -- and subject to

depressions and suicide attempts. The portrait is supposed to provide the poet with an image of her self as sane -- to the poet's mind, artificial -- and thus keep her from future suicide attempts: "matching me to keep me well." For Sexton the portrait represents the alien self that her family has always wished her to be. Sexton sees the portrait image as the doll-like self of "Those Times. . .": withdrawn, unloved and unloving, cut off from her real feelings.

Sexton experiences a double loss of her mother in the poem. Shortly after the painting of the poet's portrait, her mother develops cancer and attributes the illness to Sexton's suicide attempt, another echo of Anna's accusation in "The Hex." Sexton speaks here, as she does throughout the poem, as if her death were an accomplished fact:

> She turned from me, as if death were catching,
> as if death transferred,
> as if my dying had eaten inside of her.
>
> On the first of September she looked at me
> and said I gave her cancer.
> They carved her sweet hills out
> and still I couldn't answer.

Sexton's response to the accusation, as it is to that of her great-aunt, is one of "doubt." Thus, again, as in the case of the poet's daughter's illness, the accusations of guilt are more powerful than the kind of self-love needed to overcome them. Sexton begins then to make the identification between herself and her mother more explicit. Whereas in "Those Times. . ." the relationship between Sexton and her mother is limited to one of influence, in "The Double Image" she becomes an extension of her mother. Her mother too is only "part way back" from her illness:

> Surgery incomplete,
> the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard
> them say.

Sexton's mother has her portrait painted too, and the two portraits, hung on opposite walls, become another "double image," the central symbol of the poem: a "cave of a mirror /. . ./ matching smile, matching contour." The cave image is an allusion to Plato's cave; as Plato's human figures are misled by appearances, Sexton tries in "The Double Image" to get beyond appearances and artifice to the spontaneous, natural reality of the leaves, a reality which she sees as pointing the way to redemption.

Sexton introduces another double image here, and another contrast between spontaneity and contrivance. She reminds her own daughter that she too resembles her mother even though, because of their separation, not really acquainted with her:

> And you resembled me; unacquainted
> with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
> after all.

This outward resemblance, however, is not enough to give Sexton a sense of connectedness with the child's unaffected behavior. The poet identifies much more readily with her mother's lack of spontaneity and with the fixed, unreal images of the portraits. Without feeling a connection to her natural self, Sexton cannot find a grown-up identity to replace that of "an angry guest, a partly mended thing, an outgrown child." Separated from her daughter she is a "childless bride," and having no identity she is still prey to the accusing voices of the witches who remain "at [her] side." She is driven to a second suicide

attempt and a second year in "the sealed hotel." But again there is an expression of love from her daughter which helps to counteract the voices of the witches: "On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this / was good."

Sexton recounts her eventual release from the hospital:

> graduate of the mental cases,
> with my analyst's okay,
> my complete book of rhymes,
> my typewriter and my suitcase.

She returns to her own home and tries to resume an appropriate adult identity:

> 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.

This world into which Sexton tries to fit herself also seems to place an overemphasis on appearances. It is a world of well-manicured lawns, of styled hair, of duties expected of the wife of a successful business-man, of the requisite clothes and tan dictated by Vogue magazine. The child's naturalness does not enter into this world:

> 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.

Sexton uses this brief Whitmanian catalog to describe the child's

naturalness. She adds that her treatment for depression ("all the medical hypothesis / that explained my brain") has failed to explain why her daughter's innocent love, which she sees as an antidote to suicide, has not worked for her. The child's "innocence" continues to "hurt"; the poet "would rather / die" and "gather(s) / guilt like a young intern / his symptoms, his certain evidence." Sexton's middle-class life contrasts with the natural life she observes around her on a drive to see the autumn leaves. Here the colors of the leaves bring up a reminiscence that suggests her own lost spontaneity and the childhood she has failed to recapture by her misguided return to her mother's home:

> That October day we went
> to Gloucester the red hills
> reminded me of the dry red fur fox
> coat I played in as a child; stock-still
> like a bear or a tent,
> like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

The scenes that she passes in the car become increasingly decorous and artificial as the car carries her back to the most artificial, death-like place and image of the entire poem:

> . . . to the house that waits
> still, on the top of the sea,
> and two portraits hang on opposite walls.

Hanging opposite each other, the two portraits are now for her an image of one "double woman":

> In north light, my smile is held in place,
> the shadow marks my bone.
> What could I hve 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.

Thus she associates the qualities of rigidity and death with both her mother and herself. They are different aspects of the same identity. Both smiles are "held in place" without feeling. Only the difference in age distinguishes the two aspects of this one woman. Sexton, younger, is passively waiting for something threatening to happen, a snare. The aging face of the mother mocks Sexton because it shows her how she will look as she ages. The mother is an "overthrown love" because the poet can no longer live with her as her daughter. She is a "first image" because a mother is the closest likeness for a daughter to imitate, as well as a "first image" of approval or disapproval. The mother "eyes" the daughter, suggesting disapproval. Sexton has outgrown this stony head because she has experienced possibilities for an identity larger than what her mother has desired for her. She has learned too what her mother will "never really know," the simple message of self-love learned by contemplating the leaves. The moment captured by the portraits is one in which the two separate identities are most fused into one, when both are closely involved with death, the poet because of her recent suicide attempts, the mother because she is dying of cancer. The portraits represent an identity in which there is no capacity for growth or expansiveness. They stare only at each other and therefore are as if petrified:

> 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.

Thus the portraits, because they will not change, as well as because one shows an aged likeness to the poet, provide her with a "Dorian Gray" image of her future. She does not see herself as capable of the kind of love which her daughter can give. Yet another instance of this love is juxtaposed with this description of the portraits: "You kissed your grandmother / and she cried." All of the positive emotional moments in the poem are initiated by the child's spontaneous and free -- not petrified -- expressions of love. Sexton describes the reunion when her daughter is finally able to return home. The process of learning to love involves opening herself to the daughter's spontaneity, forgetting "how we bumped away from each other like marionettes / on strings" -- another image of the rigidity which results when love is absent. Love also cannot thrive on just weekend visits; there need to be the little everyday events and dependencies to create relationship:

> You scrape your knee. You learn my name,
> wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.
> You call me _mother_, and I remember my mother again,
> somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

Throughout the poem, there is this juxtaposition of the two mother-daughter relationships, both failed. But as the portraits depict a

relationship fixed forever because the mother is dying and the attempt to return home has been a failure, there seems some hope in the younger mother-daughter dyad because of the child's ability to love freely. Sexton, however, sees more doom than hope in the relationship at this point. She remembers the birth of the child and the ways in which the child expanded the life of the family:

> 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, a small milky mouse
> of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house
> of herself. We named you Joy.

But the culmination of the poem is Sexton's confession that her quest for spontaneity has led her to a guilty act:

> I, who was never quite sure
> about being a girl, needed another
> life, another image to remind me.
> And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
> nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

This natural creative act of giving birth to a new identity constitutes her last lurch toward the natural world in this poem. But the act fails because it is calculated. Its purpose is to create another false image of herself, not a free new identity; thus it is the ultimate betrayal of the poem. It has been a misguided attempt to find her own identity by losing it in the identity of someone else. Thus, though in "Those Times. . ." she was able to say that her motherhood had successfully overcome her childhood self, here she confesses that there is an inherent guilt that has kept that new identity from achieving

complete realization in the poet. But though she does not say it, the child, because of her spontaneous acts of love which contrast with Sexton's frozen and artificial identity, represents an extension of the world of nature, an identity which shows promise of overcoming the poet's guilty, adolescent act.

The longing for a relationship with her mother, which fails to come to fruition, and the recognition that it is her own motherhood that has enabled her to overcome the negative body image which has repressed her imagination and her spirit, leads Sexton to envision the possibility of wholeness which arises out of a fully realized maternal identity. The dream visions she expresses are of a maternal presence who fulfills her tremendous human need for nurturance and with whom she can merge, thus transforming her narrow, constricted, fearful child self into a woman-self that is nurturing, sensuous, powerful, creative, and transcendent. While the imagery in the three poems I will discuss is sometimes obscure, the power which Sexton associates with the maternal is clear. Furthermore, in these poems she expands the boundaries of poetic subjects as well as of the mother-daughter relationship itself by expressing her dreams and visions in sexual imagery. While modern readers and moviegoers have become accustomed to artistic explorations of the sexuality in mother-son relationships, an acknowledgement of eroticism between mothers and daughters remains rare.

In "Dreaming the Breasts" (CP 314-315), Sexton celebrates her real mother's breasts as the source of nurturance, and, in referring to her mother as a "goddess," images her as an extension of universal motherhood:

> Mother,
> strange goddess face
> above my milk home,
> that delicate asylum,
> I ate you up.
> All my need took
> you down like a meal.

Memories of her mother's breasts are still very much alive to her, first on an unconscious level because they appear in a dream. Secondly, because her mother's breasts enabled her to live and grow, and because she too is now a woman with breasts, she sees both herself and her mother as extensions of the same universal phenomenon of nature: "The breasts I knew at midnight / beat like the sea in me now." Finally, her mother's breasts were the location of the cancer which caused her mother's death, an event still very vivid in Sexton's memory. She sees her mother's breasts as thus having a life that persists even after her mother's death and herself as able to nurture that life through memory, dream and vision:

> I have put a padlock
> on you, Mother, dear dead human,
> so that your great bells,
> those dear white ponies,
> can go galloping, galloping,
> wherever you are.

In another visionary poem, "The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos" (CP 365-366), reality and dream again merge, this time to create an image of an ideal mother figure whose nurturing is creative and spiritual as well as physical:

> I have a dream-mother
> who sings with her guitar,
> nursing the bedroom
> with moonlight and beautiful olives.

A flute came too,
joining the five strings,
a God finger over the holes.

She merges this vision with the image of a real woman -- unidentified -- and describes this nurturing encounter in explicitly sexual terms:

I knew a beautiful woman once
who sang with her fingertips
. . . .
At the cup of her breasts
I drew wine.
At the mound of her legs
I drew figs.
She sang for my thirst,
mysterious songs of God
that would have laid an army down.
It was as if a morning-glory
had bloomed in her throat
and all that blue
and small pollen
ate into my heart
violent and religious.

This mother is a singer -- like Sexton herself -- whose evocative songs link her in Sexton's vision with both nature and God. Here again, the poet unites the physical, the spiritual and the creative. Furthermore, the woman's songs convey great power, to destroy as well as to create and nurture, suggesting that Sexton includes the dark side of reality in her vision of a full selfhood. All these aspects of the maternal identity -- her physicality, her creativity and power, her ability to bring about spiritual transformation -- are evoked most powerfully in Sexton's rich and complex poem "The Consecrating Mother" (<u>CP</u> 554-555). Its theme is the poet's desire for union with the ocean, to transcendence. The poem perhaps clarifies Sexton's motive for her eventual successful suicide, though her method was not drowning. This

poem is one of the most forceful of her expressions of longing for a Jonah-like loss of an unsatisfactory identity in order to achieve a rebirth into a deeper, more complete selfhood. The poem seems somewhat incoherent, published, as it was, posthumously and written when Sexton no longer revised her work as meticulously as she had earlier in her career. Though the poem has elements of realism, its mode is mainly visionary. It appears to begin realistically: "I stand before the sea. . . ." But her use of the word "before" makes of her a suppliant or worshipper, and leads immediately to the level of spirit and vision:

> . . . it rolls and rolls in its green blood
> saying, "Do not give up one god
> for I have a handful."

What she is most affected by is the ocean's power. The word "blood" suggests the destructive nature of that power. The repetition of "rolls" conveys delight in that destructiveness. Sexton sees the ocean as an extension of the ancient mother goddess figure of Kali, a mother both good and evil, who rejoices in both her creative and destructive powers. She envisions the ocean, representing nature, as more powerful than the gods -- representing the spiritual -- because it can contain many of them -- "a handful." This assertion is justified by myth; Poseidon, Dionysus and Hecate, among other deities, were contained or hidden by the sea. In the violence of the ocean she sees a likeness to the Christian god:

> . . . the ocean made a cross of salt
> and hung up its drowned
> and they cried *Deo Deo*.
> The ocean offered them up in the vein of its might.

The ocean is mysterious, unnameable, replete with hidden selves. It is this promise of identities that attracts Sexton. Again she associates the ocean with suffering and pain, this time on a human level, relating the ocean's movement to women's suffering in childbirth. The ocean's power becomes an image of womanly strength:

> . . . I thought of those who had crossed her,
> in antiquity, in nautical trade, in slavery, in war.
> I wondered how she had borne those bulwarks.

Thus this womanly power is superior to the male creative power represented by its manifestations in exploration, commerce, imperialism and war. From this contemplation of the female qualities of the ocean, the poem shifts abruptly to ecstatic contemplation of how union is to be achieved:

> She should be entered skin to skin,
> and put on like one's first or last cloth,
> entered like kneeling your way into church,
> descending into that ascension,
> though she be slick as olive oil,
> as she climbs each wave like an embezzler of white.

The loss of identity which Sexton seeks here is not a taking-off of her humanity but an entering fully into it, "skin to skin." One's identity as a part of nature must be fully accepted in order to achieve spiritual transformation. This loss of self is both a birth and a death, "like one's first or last cloth." This immersion in the physical involves acceptance of pain as well as pleasure. The experience is a pilgrimage, and throughout the poem Sexton seems to even relish the pain. She images the ocean as a sexually aroused, sexually aggressive woman, in keeping with earlier associations of longing for a mother with

sexual desire. The sea is mounting each wave, taking her pleasure like a theft, as if she were an embezzler. But here Sexton changes pronouns, now referring to the sea as "it." She seems to distinguish between the "big deep" as an aspect of the ocean's identity which follows the laws of nature. She suggests that there is an intelligence governing the ocean, even though its insatiability, "its one hundred lips," seems to operate by destiny. The union between mortal woman and ocean takes place at night, the province of woman. The light of the moon transforms both ocean and woman:

> . . . in moonlight she comes in her nudity,
> flashing breasts made of milk-water,
> flashing buttocks made of unkillable lust,
> and at night when you enter her
> you shine like a neon soprano.

The poem ends with a quieter but determined expression of the poet's intention to accomplish this loss of identity:

> I am that clumsy human
> on the shore
> loving you, coming, coming,
> going,
> and wish to put my thumb on you
> like The Song of Solomon.

Her reference to the book of the Bible which is a love song to the beloved again introduces spiritual imagery and links the spiritual and physical identities. The intensity of the sexual imagery of the poem almost obscures the unconsummated status of this union that Sexton desires. At the end of the poem, however, a transformation has taken place; the poet's determination to achieve such a union has strengthened and she no longer is a frightened, isolated scarecrow on the shore. She

is "coming, coming."

Though it has been convenient to discuss the poems in this chapter in logical rather than chronological order, it is also important to note that, considered chronologically, the poems, with some qualification, generally display a gradual gathering of assurance as Sexton moves toward achievement of a larger identity to overcome the narrow, scarecrow-like self of childhood. "The Double Image," written in 1958, is a very early poem; in it her efforts to achieve the spontaneity exemplified by the leaves and by her daughter only lead to frustration and to an identification of herself with an image diametrically opposed to that of the struck leaves which are able to let go; the portrait, artificial smile fixed forever, hung permanently on a chilly wall. "Young," written in 1960, and "Those Times. . .," written in 1963-64, record childish attempts at achieving a larger identity. The former she disparages because of what she regrets as a naive sense of a personal relationship with God. In "Those Times...." the attempt, though awkward, is proto-artistic, and as such remains acceptable to the adult poet. "The Hex," "Dreaming the Breasts," "Oysters," and "How We Danced" were all written between 1967 and 1972 and were published in the same volume, <u>The Book of Folly</u>. Though in the first of these, as in "The Double Image," she still despairs of ridding herself of a double that prevents her from arriving at a new, expanded identity, the remaining three, together with the other late poems "The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos," written in 1972 and "The Consecrating Mother," written in 1973-1974, all reveal a full entering into the larger identity she seeks. Furthermore, in all of the poems referred

to in this chapter, fullness of identity and transcendence are intimately bound to Sexton's womanhood, the significance of which will be explored more fully in the following chapter. In "Oysters" and "How We Danced" the contact with the larger identity is precipitated by a relationship with a man, namely her father. In "Dreaming the Breasts," "The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos," and "The Consecrating Mother," she is less traditional. The voice is assured and free, and the fullness of selfhood comes about through a full entering into her femaleness on the physical, spiritual and mythical levels.

CHAPTER III

WOMANHOOD AND SELFHOOD IN SEXTON'S POETRY

Sexton seldom explores what constitutes her "self" without considering how her womanhood does or does not lead to the enlargement of identity which she constantly seeks. "Anne Sexton is one of the few women writing poetry in the United States of whom it is possible to say that her womanness is totally at one with her poems" (McDonnell 729-731). Sexton's attitudes toward her womanness are apparent in her poems concerning her childhood. In "Those Times. . ." she celebrates her womanhood, especially her physical creative powers, for having overcome the negative identity she associates with her body in childhood. In "The Double Image," however, she regards her need to give birth to a girl child as a perverted and failed attempt to find her own feminine identity through that of another. In "The Consecrating Mother" she again seeks an enlarged identity, this time by merger with the ocean as an embodiment of feminine power. From these three poems, and in those that will be discussed in this chapter, it is clear that Sexton is most able to relish her womanhood when she sees herself as an extension of nature or as connected with archetypal reality. Such awareness leads her to feel a connection with all women, so that her identity is expanded in a manner reminiscent of Whitman. However, such awareness is not present when, in Sexton's view, certain aspects of woman's socialization--compulsive cleanliness, lack of creativity in the typical demands of the wife or mother role, passivity, emphasis on beauty--cut

women off from their natural selves and so constrict their identities.

Sexton often experiences the sense of connection with the life force in relation to her daughters. "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman" (CP 145-148) is addressed to her daughter as she is about to experience puberty. The poem celebrates the capabilities of the female body, childbirth and menstruation especially, as manifestations of women's connectedness with the life forces. They provide the kind of expanded self that Sexton seeks. This connection with her physical self also leads Sexton to identity with all women, past and present, who have also experienced their identities through the reproductive and sexual functions of the female body. Her exaltation of puberty as the "high noon" of a woman's life is unusual. More often the fullness of selfhood for women is associated with childbirth or marriage. For Sexton, however, in this poem puberty is a "ripening" that expands and transforms the spiritual as well as the physical self. Its onset is the "ghost hour" when one is most open to the larger, supernatural powers. It is a time when all the possible selves that a woman can become are most present. The word "ghost" conveys the notion that these identities might be ominous as well as benign.

Sexton reassures her daughter here that the changes taking place in her "birthday suit" which she has "owned. . .and known. . .for so long" are not "strange," i.e., frightening and unfamiliar, though they are "odd," full of wonder because of the power they manifest. At this age, "eleven (almost twelve)," the daughter's body is paradoxically "full of distance" -- potential -- and "full of its immediate fever," the changes going on. The poem is full of images of bursting ripeness. Her

daughter's body is "like a garden," and the changes merely mean that

> The summer has seized you,
> as when, last month in Amalfi, I saw
> lemons as large as your desk-side globe--
> that miniature map of the world.

Thus her daughter at puberty is a world in miniature, her identities and potential identities as vast as a world but on a smaller scale. Sexton compares her also to a market full of possibilities; "stalls of mushrooms / and garlic buds all engorged" are also images of fullness and roundness, like the pregnant or premenstrual womb. The comparison of her daughter to

> the orchard next door
> where the berries are done
> and the apples are beginning to swell

adds the element of varying degrees of ripeness. Some identities are already fully developed at puberty; others are just beginning to ripen. The most unusual of this series of images is the final one, also the image which gives the poem its title:

> And once, with our first backyard,
> I remember I planted an acre of yellow beans
> we couldn't eat.

This genial image of overabundance, the result of inexperience on the part of the gardener, suggests the difficulty of using all the identities and selves waiting in the inexperienced and pubescent state. These lines are followed by a refrain printed in italics and repeated later in the poem, which amplifies this idea of a surfeit:

> Oh, little girl,
> my stringbean,
> how do you grow?
> You grow this way.
> You are too many to eat.

In "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman," Sexton expresses her pleasure that she is able to pass the wisdom of her own experience on to her daughter so that the child is not frightened by all the "high-jinks" going on in her body. This sharing enables Sexton to feel connected with all other women. She hears, though only dimly, "as in a dream / the conversation of the old wives" -- passing on the myths and lore of "*womanhood*" (italics hers). This feeling of being a part of the whole community of women is so important to her and yet so unreal because she did not experience it at puberty and, not understanding what was happening to her, felt terrified and vulnerable:

> I remember that I heard nothing myself.
> I was alone.
> I waited like a target.

The poet encourages her daughter to welcome this "high noon" of her body, saying that it was the Romans who believed noon was the ghost hour and that the "startling Roman sun" enables her to believe it too. She envisions the young men who will enter her daughter's life as "bare to the waist, young Romans" bearing "ladders and hammers," thus representing a sexuality that is open, vital and physical. Sex will not be quiet and not be done in private and in darkness; the young men will come "at noon where they belong, /. . . while no one sleeps." They will not be terrifying because the mother has already reassured her daughter,using an image reminiscent of Roethke: "*Your bones are lovely*"

(italics hers). The "strange hands" of the young men will seem less invasive because there has been the formative hand of her mother to support her.

The final stanzas of the poem are an exhortation to Linda that if she trusts her body, it will not betray her. It has its own limits, which are gentle ones that will "tie [her] in, / in comfort." This coming into adulthood is, for women, a second birth, according to the poet. She recalls the growth of the child's body while it was inside her own. The form is a Whitmanian catalog, but the language could be only Sexton's:

> If I could have watched you grow
> as a magical mother might,
> if I could have seen through my magical transparent belly,
> there would have been such ripening within:
> your embryo,
> the seed taking on its own,
> life clapping the bedpost,
> bones from the pond,
> thumbs and two mysterious eyes,
> the awfully human head,
> the heart jumping like a puppy,
> the important lungs,
> the becoming--
> while it becomes!
> as it does now,
> a world of its own,
> a delicate place.

The passage is characteristic of Sexton's celebratory verse. The language is highly emotional, yet informal and down-to-earth, perhaps most so at the peaks of intensity. This tone is achieved through the use of everyday language, interspersed with childlike language appropriate in an address to a daughter -- expressions such as "magical mother," "magical transparent belly," "the heart jumping like a puppy," "the

important lungs." She even resorts to nonstandard usage -- "awfully human" -- to give the effect of spontaneity and casualness. The exuberant emotion of the passage is also conveyed by Sexton's personification of the life force, giving it consciousness and making it active: "the seed taking on its own, / life clapping the bedpost." Emotion builds continuously through the passage, which moves from specific images to a summarizing generalization that expresses the central paradox of the poem, that the state of becoming is as expansive and full of life as the completion: "the becoming -- / while it becomes!" The whole passage is set back down gently after this rousing climax by the return to the present and by the reminder that puberty is a "delicate" as well as a mysterious and vital "place."

Though the language is typically Sexton here, nevertheless she is quite Whitmanian in saying "hello" to all kinds of growth -- that of the baby _in utero_, the girl on the verge of adulthood, any enlargement or coming into independence of the self. She sees this growth as full of tremendous activity, both formal, like music, and spontaneous:

> . . . hello
> to such shakes and knockings and high jinks,
> such music, such sprouts,
> such dancing-mad-bears of music,
> such necessary sugar,
> such goings-on!

This emphasis on connection with nature as a means to a larger identity leads Sexton to celebrate the dark side of the feminine because of its association with nature. In "Her Kind" (_CP_ 15-16) she finds strength in identifying herself as a witch and as evil:

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.

In the poem the speaker is taken over by an identity larger than herself and therefore taken out of the limitations of women's real roles. The theme of the poem is related to that of "The Starry Night," in which she longs to be taken over by the "old unseen serpent." In "Her Kind" she finds in her identity as a woman the kind of possession by a larger, cosmic identity which she longs for in "The Starry Night" and which in that poem can only be found in death. This concept of womanhood gives her strength, but it is only by defiance of the everyday limits of her womanhood that she can achieve this expansion of her identity; It does, however, enable her to take on some of the maternal qualities of nature. As an outcast she has found "warm caves in the woods" to which she has brought some of the accoutrements of women's real roles in society -- "skillets, carvings, shelves, closets, silks, innumerable goods" -- and in which she prepares "suppers for the worms and the elves." But ultimately this way of life leads to martyrdom, though one which she accepts proudly and defiantly:

I have ridden in your car, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor

> where your flames still bite my thigh
> and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
> A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
> I have been her kind.

[illegible] leads to death; [illegible] However, the kind of freedom she achieves in this role gives her the courage to face this kind of martyrdom.

Sexton also finds an expansion of self in sexual relationships between women, another defiance of conventional women's roles. One such poem is "The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos" (<u>CP</u> 365-366), part of a sequence of poems called "The Furies" and begun during a stay in the hospital for surgery to remove a steel pin in her hip and to repair her bladder. The poem is a celebration of music as well, especially as connected with women. The experience of listening to a woman sing brings about both a death and a birth. This poem was referred to in the last chapter as one of those in which Sexton envisions an idealized mother as an alternative to her real mother who has failed her. This "dream mother" sings to her with a guitar and makes the poet's bedroom a place of beauty and fertility "filled with moonlight and beautiful olives." Sexton says that she has known a real woman "who sang with her fingertips," perhaps by tender caresses. In addition to the singing, Sexton finds the woman nourishing physically and sexually:

> At the cup of her breasts
> I drew wine.
> At the mound of her legs
> I drew figs.

Her encounter with this woman also enlarges her spiritually. The effect of this relationship is mysterious, powerful and violent, as well as

religious. The poem functions on a mythical level:

> She sang for my thirst,
> mysterious songs of God
> that would have laid an army down.
> It was as if a morning-glory
> had bloomed in her throat
> and all that blue
> and small pollen
> ate into my heart
> violent and religious.

But Sexton does not always see the identity of women as so fraught with possibilities for opening to a larger self. In both of these poems there is a connectedness with nature, with archetypal womanhood and with other women which allows Sexton to celebrate her identity as woman. But this is womanhood in potential or in myth. In other poems she runs up against the reality of women's lives and the barriers which society erects which keep women from feeling these connections which come from a recognition of the powers in the female body.

The woman in "Housewife" (CP 77) is totally disconnected from the true sources of her power because she denies her own body and has taken on an artificial one. Not only does she deny the sensuality of marriage by devoting herself entirely to housecleaning ("Some women marry houses.") but she also denies her own physicality and makes the house her body. It is "another kind of skin," far more restrictive than her own body. Though it may seem alive, as dolls do, and perform functions which are metaphorically humanlike -- "It has a heart / a mouth, a liver and bowel movements" -- its walls, unlike human skin, are not alive and therefore not growing. They are "permanent and pink" -- pink because

the housewife role is as limiting to women as the notion that the color pink can be identified only with women. The woman in the poem submissively lets the house control her life. Sexton pictures her on her knees "faithfully washing herself down." The use of the word "down" suggests a scrubbing as if to prepare a victim for killing or for surgery, as if she's not clean until she's perfectly free of bacteria, as women never feel acceptable as themselves until all their natural earthiness has been scrubbed and perfumed away. When men enter this house, which represents here both itself and a woman's body, they do so "by force," violating this pristine marriage between house and woman. They enter because they are "drawn back like Jonah / into their fleshy mothers." As Jonah was swallowed, i.e., surrendered his identity to a womblike figure, so men seek to escape when they marry. This looking to wives to mother them is so because "a woman _is_ her mother." The meaning is multivalent. The woman has to be her own mother because the husband does not fulfill his duties to her, since he too seeks a mother. More importantly, the line suggests that women fail to establish an independent self because they simply follow the cultural stereotype as did their mothers; they are socialized to see themselves exclusively in the role of housewife and seek no other dimensions of the self. They are thus bound to the past in a reactionary way. Of this identification with mother that keeps women from finding a more expansive identity Sexton says, "That's the main thing" -- the main self-determining factor in their lives. In another poem Sexton envisions the confining, stereotyped aspects of women's identities as red shoes (an image taken from the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale), the

wearing of which compels women to act in ways they cannot control. ("The Red Shoes" CP 315-317). Women are thus destructively dependent on outside sources for their identity. The shoes are "handed down like an heirloom / but hidden like shameful letters." The power of the repetitious roles is so great that it obliterates women's true selves:

> The house and the street where they belong
> are hidden and all the women, too,
> are hidden.

The shoes not only cause the wearers to behave in compulsive ways; they cause women to be divided into many pieces and to behave mechanically, like puppets. Most destructive of all, the women fulfill these roles proudly:

> All those girls
> who wore the red shoes,
> each boarded a train that would not stop.
> Stations flew by like suitors and would not stop.
> They all danced like trout on the hook.
> They were played with.
> They tore off their ears like safety pins.
> Their arms fell off them and became hats.
> Their heads rolled off and sang down the street.
> And their feet--oh God, their feet in the market place--
> their feet, those two beetles, ran for the corner
> and then danced forth as if they were proud.
> Surely, people exclaimed,
> surely they are mechanical. Otherwise. . .

But ultimately the roles are destructive to those who try to live by them:

> The feet could not stop.
> They were wound up like a cobra that sees you.
> They were elastic pulling itself in two.
> They were islands during an earthquake.
> They were ships colliding and going down.
> . . . .
> What they did was the death dance.

Sexton sees this robot-like personality, out of touch with her body and with the wellsprings of her own creativity, as leading to madness. As social roles such as that of housewife create false standards of wholeness which cut women off from their true selves, so madness is an extreme form of this loss of connection with the sources of life and wholeness. In her poem "Ringing the Bells" (CP 28-29) she indicts mental institutions' treatment of patients -- one of whom is herself -- for stifling the creativity which would lead them to a more expansive identity -- and to sanity. The patients in her poem are all women, just as, in reality, mental patients tend to be predominantly women. Here, and also in her poem "To an Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward," the women are powerless against the institution which controls them. Here it takes away their identity; in the case of the young woman giving birth to a child out of wedlock, the institution destroys the bond between mother and child which Sexton clearly views as a sacred bond, judging from her several poems on that subject.

"Ringing the Bells" portrays the women patients of a mental hospital at a weekly music lesson. The patients passively attend the sessions not because they want to but

> because the attendants make you go
> and because we mind by instinct,
> like bees caught in the wrong hive, . . .

Each woman is given a bell which sounds only one note. The rhythm of the poem, recalling the nursery rhyme "This is the House that Jack Built," conveys the women's disconnection from themselves and each other:

> we are the circle of the crazy ladies
> who sit in the lounge of the mental house
> and smile at the smiling woman
> who passes us each a bell,
> who points at my hand
> that holds my bell, E flat, . . .

None of the women has an identity beyond the one note she plays. Even the woman from outside, who teaches the lesson, has no identity. Her smile is as empty as the music she teaches the women to play. The sound of the bells together is "as untroubled and clean / as a workable kitchen," implying that this music therapy merely repeats the uncreative tasks that mark these women's lives out in society. The women's movements are mechanical and come not out of their own musical abilities but are merely unthinking, unfelt responses to someone else's commands:

> and this is always my bell responding
> to my hand that responds to the lady
> who points at me, E flat; . . .

Here, as in "The Red Shoes," spontaneity and creativity associated with music and dance are grotesquely pre-empted by social institutions for the mechanization of human beings.

Sexton also finds in fairy tales expressions of how conformity of women to society's expectations for them renders them either impotent robots or selfish destructive creatures. Several of the fairy tales which Sexton retells in her own style, which she calls "black humor," contain mother-daughter dyads which parallel Sexton's relationships with older women in her own life. She identifies with the young, vulnerable women of the fairy tales, such as Snow White, Briar Rose, or the young woman in "Rapunzel," all of whom are victimized by older women.

In "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (CP 224-229) the poet is critical of the doll-like, dumb, sweet virgin role that she sees Snow White representing. Her version of the tale turns Grimm upside down; the sweet and innocent Snow White becomes a doll-like passive creature whose virginity renders her inhuman. Sexton updates the imagery of medieval love lyrics in the similes by which she describes Snow White's beauty:

> No matter what life you lead
> the virgin is a lovely number:
> cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
> arms and legs made of Limoges,
> lips like Vin Du Rhône,
> rolling her china-blue doll eyes
> open and shut,
> Open to say,
> Good Day Mama,
> and shut for the thrust
> of the unicorn.
> She is unsoiled.
> She is as white as a bonefish.

The wicked stepmother is driven by another limiting role laid out by society for women -- the need to be beautiful. The stepmother's identity, as for many women, depends on her appearance:

> She would ask,
> Looking glass upon the wall,
> who is fairest of us all?
> And the mirror would reply,
> You are fairest of us all.
> Pride pumped in her like poison.

This dependence on her appearance makes growing old a threat and ultimately destroys her utterly; she becomes a jealous, maniacal murderer. The queen is also completely dependent on a source outside herself for her identity. The mirror's pronouncement that Snow White is now more

beautiful because younger brings out her murderous rage:

> . . . now the queen saw brown spots on her hand
> and four whiskers over her lip
> so she condemned Snow White
> to be hacked to death.
> Bring me her heart, she said do the hunter,
> and I will salt it and eat it.
> The hunter, however, let his prisoner go
> and brought a boar's heart back to the castle.
> The queen chewed it up like a cube steak.
> Now I am fairer, she said,
> lapping her slim white fingers.

Snow White becomes a victim of her own sexual fears. Her passivity leads to her abuse by men in general and the dwarfs in particular, as well as by the wicked stepmother. As she wanders alone through the woods, the threats she encounters are the same as those to which women are exposed on the streets. The animal imagery reinforces the idea that this activity in real life is animalistic and subhuman:

> At each turn there were twenty doorways
> and at each stood a hungry wolf,
> his tongue lolling out like a worm.
> The birds called out lewdly,
> talking like pink parrots,
> and the snakes hung down in loops,
> each a noose for her sweet white neck.

The dwarfs too use her. Sexton images them as "little hot dogs" and "small czars," who take Snow White in for their own purposes, because she will bring them good luck. When she tells them her tale of woe, thus making herself dependent on them, they immediately take advantage of her and put her to work keeping house! In relation to the dwarfs, Snow White exemplifies the kind of woman described more pathetically by Sexton in "Housewife." Here, because unmarried, she is all the more totally wedded only to her house and cut off from her sexuality. Even

to the prince Snow White is a doll to be kept under glass:

> The dwarfs took pity upon him
> and gave him the glass Snow White--
> its doll's eyes shut forever--
> to keep in his far-off castle.

In this state of passivity, though awake, she becomes the prince's bride. Thus one can assume her passive, servile role will continue into the happy-ever-after.

Snow White's passivity also makes her a victim of the older jealous woman who wishes to destroy her. The relationship here between younger and older woman parallels the relationship between Sexton and her real mother as she describes it in "Those Times. . ." and "The Double Image." The mother sadistically tries to repress the child's identity because she herself is compulsive about certain aspects of her identity. Snow White, "the dumb bunny," opens the door three times to the queen though warned not to by the dwarfs, and each time she is destroyed. Sexton uses original images here which maintain the tone of detachment. When the queen tightens around Snow White's body the piece of lace she tricks her into buying, the young woman falls like "a plucked daisy." When she revives the second time, she opens her eyes "as wide as Orphan Annie." The third time she dies she is "as still as a gold piece."

For her vanity the wicked queen is forced to put on red-hot iron shoes. The description of her death reflects the horrible thing she has become because of her limited identity:

> First your toes will smoke
> and then your heels will turn black
> and you will fry upward like a frog,

> she was told.
> And so she danced until she was dead,
> a subterranean figure,
> her tongue flicking in and out
> like a gas jet.

As the poem ends Snow White is still passive. The final lines indicate that the pattern of her life and of the queen's is common to women; Snow White and her wicked stepmother are not just isolated phenomena:

> Meanwhile Snow White held court,
> rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
> and sometimes referring to her mirror
> as women do.

This idea that women's identities are very limited and that their lives tend to repeat each other's without change in a destructive fashion is a recurring theme of Sexton's poems about women, most clearly in "The Red Shoes" and "Crossing the Atlantic."

In "Rapunzel"(<u>CP</u> 244-249) the lesbian relationship is destructive to selfhood because the older woman is using the younger one to keep from growing old. This homosexual element is totally lacking in the original fairy tale. This is another poem in which the relationship between the two women parallels the relationship between Sexton and her mother. Like Snow White the poem also shows the destructive nature of women's fears of growing old. In the story the old woman has a locked garden in which she grows rampion. A pregnant woman develops a passion for the rampion, so her husband scales the garden wall each day to get her some. When the wicked witch discovers the theft, she demands and receives their child as her own. She keeps the child locked

in a tower so that "none but I will ever see her or touch her." Sexton sees in this act the reflection of women who fawn over beautiful young women because they regard sex with a man as a "cesspool." The older woman uses the younger woman because:

> A woman
> who loves a woman
> is forever young.
> The mentor
> and the student
> feed off each other.
> Many a girl
> had an old aunt
> who locked her in the study
> to keep the boys away.
> They would play rummy
> or lie on the couch
> and touch and touch.
> Old breast against young breast . . .

Sexton's "Briar Rose" (CP 290-295) follows the story of the pubescent princess who pricks her finger and thus brings a hundred-year sleep to everything in her castle, a sleep which is broken only by the one prince who successfully penetrates the briars which have grown up around the castle and bestows an awakening kiss. But for Sexton the trance represents a regressive state of frozen personality in which the young woman succumbs to states resembling madness. Awake, the girl is victimized by her father's incestuous longings. Sexton's description of these conditions parallels descriptions of her own family background and her experience of madness:

> Consider
> a girl who keeps slipping off,
> arms limp as old carrots,
> into the hypnotist's trance,
> into a spirit world
> speaking with the gift of tongues.
> She is stuck in the time machine,

> suddenly two years old sucking her thumb,
> as inward as a snail,
> learning to talk again.
> She's on a voyage.
> She is swimming further and further back,
> up like a salmon,
> struggling into her mother's pocketbook.
> . . . .

Sexton uses images that normally are associated with an expansion of identity -- the hypnotist's trance, the spirit world, the time machine, the voyage -- but here they represent forms of withdrawal which cut Briar Rose off from other people. In the hypnotist's trance she gives up control to someone else, a form of doctor. The gift of tongues, usually seen as connecting one with some hidden level of the self, some aspect of the larger spiritual reality, here suggests incoherent babbling which cuts her off further from herself as well as from other people. The time machine does not bring her power over time but renders her its victim, returning her to a child state from whence she has to learn how to communicate all over again. She is as remote and passive as a snail. The voyage, which ought to introduce her to new worlds, is taking her backward into a narrow identity. She struggles not to grow but to lose herself by a return to the womb, "her mother's pocketbook." All of these states are symptoms of madness: the incoherent babbling, the snail-like withdrawal, the inability to talk and to make contact with others, the desire to lose herself. In addition to this overdependence on the mother, this Sleeping Beauty is the victim of her Father's incestuous longings:

> Little doll child,
> come here to Papa.
> Sit on my knee.
> I have kisses for the back of your neck.

> . . . .
> Come be my snooky
> and I will give you a root.

The speaker -- Sexton's "middle-aged witch" persona -- calls this relationship "rank as honeysuckle," a curious comparison since honeysuckle is considered one of the most fragrant of plants. The overprotecting king's efforts to keep Briar Rose from experiencing life (pricking her finger) keep her under his incestuous domination, and she becomes taken over by it; when the prince awakens her she cries, "Daddy! Daddy!" Furthermore, Sexton's version of Briar Rose does not end when the princess gets the prince and they live happily ever after:

> Briar Rose
> was an insomniac. . .
> She could not nap
> or lie in sleep
> without the court chemist
> mixing her some knock-out drops
> and never in the prince's presence.
> If it is to come, she said,
> sleep must take me unawares
> while I am laughing or dancing
> so that I do not know that brutal place
> where I lie down with cattle prods,
> the hole in my cheek open.

She cannot sleep because she is afraid of returning to that trance-like state which represents madness. (The "cattle prods" suggest shock therapy.) She also fears dreaming:

> for when I do I see the table set
> and a faltering crone at my place,
> her eyes burnt by cigarettes
> as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat.

What she fears is the thirteenth fairy, the one who had cursed her, who becomes her double, sitting in her place at the table. She is a

"faltering crone," rendered impotent by old age in the same way that Sexton's great-aunt is in "Some Foreign Letters." The cigarette burns may have been self-inflicted, representing a form of suicide, another attempt at loss of self, or they may have been inflicted by others, those to whom she so passively and masochistically submits; she is so used to being betrayed that she relishes it and thrives on it as if it were nourishing food. Like Sexton in "The Hex," Briar Rose is tormented by this inner hate-filled double who represents her fear of old age and who curses her with madness.

The Briar Rose-Sexton figure equates the trance-like sleep she fears with death and with the comatose state preceding death. Sexton has elsewhere expressed her fear of illness, in poems such as "The Operation." Here Briar Rose speaks:

> I must not sleep
> for while asleep I'm ninety
> and think I'm dying.
> Death rattles in my throat
> like a marble.
> I wear tubes like earrings.
> I lie as still as a bar of iron.
> You can stick a needle
> through my kneecap and I won't flinch.
> I'm all shot up with Novocain.

In this state she is both totally vulnerable and totally unable to connect with other living people:

> You could lay her in a grave,
> an awful package,
> and shovel dirt on her face
> and she'd never call back: Hello there!

Her only contact with another person is with her father, making her waking state as destructive to her as sleep:

> But if you kissed her on the mouth
> her eyes would spring open
> and she'd call out: Daddy! Daddy!
> Presto!
> She's out of prison.

The triumph of escaping is of course paradoxical here. In the final stanzas of the poem Sexton makes this idea explicit. Briar Rose's trance represents a loss of connection with her inner sense of who she is:

> There was a theft.
> That much I am told.
> I was abandoned.
> That much I know.

This lack of identity causes her to be a passive victim of those around her:

> . . . forced backward
> . . . forced forward.
> . . . passed hand to hand
> like a bowl of fruit.

The trance reinforces this loss of identity: "Each night I am nailed into place / and I forget who I am." The relationship with her father represents:

> . . . another kind of prison.
> It's not the prince at all,
> but my father
> drunkenly bent over my bed
> circling the abyss like a shark,
> my father thick upon me
> like some sleeping jellyfish.

Thus Sexton's poetry alternates between poems which hold out the promise of transcendence through reaching one's full identity as a woman and those which explore the social and individual strictures which

prevent women's reaching this larger self. In "Little Girl, My String-bean, My Lovely Woman," womanhood has the potential to make one as large as the world. In "Her Kind" identity as a woman can join the individual woman to nature and open her to the archetypal levels of the self. On the other hand, Sexton sees certain social institutions and cultural demands on women as limiting their identity, as in "Housewife"; these negative aspects of womanhood appear even at the deeper levels of the psyche which fairy tales explore.

However, the placement of "The Consecrating Mother" toward the end of her canon brings us back to its optimistic voice for Sexton's final statement on women's identity. Here she continues to seek the expansion of self through her identity as a woman. A full experiencing of womanhood leads ultimately to identification with the cosmos through a complete merger of self with nature as an embodiment of the feminine. The voice in "The Consecrating Mother" is stronger, more assured, less idealistic, more accepting of the pain that such expansion demands, than in any of her other poems about womanhood. The identity that the ocean embodies for Sexton and that she longs to merge with, is a more expanded self than her own mothering role that she finds so satisfying in "Those Times. . ." and a less supportive and nurturing one than her mother in "Dreaming the Breasts" or the dream mother of "Fury of Guitars and Sopranos," even though she expresses sexual desire for this woman. The mother figure in "The Consecrating Mother" is perhaps closest to the self-contained woman of "Her Kind." "The Consecrating Mother" is neither nurturing nor kind. She takes life as well as gives

it, and is more powerful than both the ships whose weight she bears and the human enterprises they represent -- exploration, trade, and taking of slaves, and war. (The ocean, like the leaves in "The Double Image," represents a natural power that surpasses creations of the human mind such as ships and "medical hypotheses," which are initiated largely by men.) Like the ancient goddesses, who represent a more expansive, active concept of womanhood than our culture envisions, this woman inspires religious emotions; "she should be/. . ./entered like kneeling your way into church," and the union with her that Sexton desires will emulate the Song of Solomon. Like them too she is capable of "unkillable lust" and transforms her devotee into a being like herself. Thus the womanly identity that Sexton ultimately seeks is an antidote to the sterility of "Housewife," the timidity of Snow White, the self-absorption of the wicked stepmother, and the angry, partly mended, frozen child-woman which Sexton herself is in "The Double Image." This new woman is a powerful mother, who creates and destroys, deriving her power from nature. Clearly, Sexton imagines a woman that is far different from the images of nurturance and submission that have been at the base of our inherited notions of womanhood. She has indeed heard few voices of "the old wives" to support such an image, which is more reminiscent of the ancient goddesses than of the Virgin Mary or Snow White. For many contemporary women Sexton herself has become one of the "old wives" to whom they look for models of an expanded woman self.

CHAPTER IV

THE SELF IN THE RELIGIOUS QUEST

> I am pretty God Damn religious if you want to look at it.
> (Letters 285)

Whatever else she seeks -- a loving relationship with a supportive mother-figure, a reconciliation with the father, an end to the mental turmoil which plagues her, even death -- Sexton's quest for self-realization has an underlying religious motivation. Her spiritual quest has been belittled by some critics who see it as another manifestation of her dependency, of her need for a protective father or mother. However, her religious poetry reflects the same dogged Oedipus-like spirit of inquiry and the same concern with the nature of the self that characterize her other works. As she is fundamentally concerned with identity and refuses to take refuge in any of her various roles, daughter, mother, wife, poet, as defining the perimeters of the self, likewise she refuses any religious orthodoxy which does not pursue the identity of God and of the human self to its ultimate limits. She condemns superficiality both in the Protestant worship in which she was reared and in the "pallid humanitarianism" of those religions which refuse to grapple with the problematic duality of Christ's identity and settle instead for a system based on ethical values. She insists that "need is not quite belief" and sets out to do exactly what Guardini recommends in the lines with which she introduces a section of All My Pretty Ones -- to "hack

[her] way through existence alone," searching for new spiritual truths in which she can believe (CP 60). She never abandons Christianity completely, but in questing for spiritual values outside orthodoxy she finds meaning in aspects of reality that institutional Christianity has deemphasized, namely, physical nature and the human dimensions of Jesus's identity. Neither does she accept the orthodox view that the trials of earth are a preparation for a fuller life beyond the grave. In her version of the Lazarus story, Lazarus is grateful to be restored to life because "in heaven it had been no different. / In heaven there had been no change" ("Jesus Summons Forth," CP 341-342). Rather, she considers the human experience of multiple roles and selves, though in themselves restrictive and unsatisfying, as together forming "a whole nation of God" ("The Civil War," CP 418-419). Such a view extends the significance of human limitations and enables her to move through these roles toward the expansive identity that she seeks. Furthermore, the existence of all the unfortunate, deceitful, or haunted creatures of the earth -- neurotics, prostitutes, hucksters, nazis, and along with these, "writers digging into their souls / with jackhammers" -- reveals a truth and creative dimension of earthly life that for Sexton is more vital than the perfect life promised by the Christian vision of heaven. Thus she finds potential for transcendence in the here and now, and even in the negative aspects of human identity, a transcendence which can be reached only by a full acceptance of and immersion in physical -- and human -- nature. Likewise, the thousands of ordinary, even trivial details of daily life -- cuts and scratches, frying pans, dolls, sun-

bathing, rowboats, the birth of puppies — are inseparable from the spiritual life, contrary to the more traditional ascetic view that the business of life tends to crowd out spiritual awareness. By finding a spiritual dimension in these limitations of the world, and even more so by exploring and expanding the identity of God and Jesus, Sexton seeks constantly to break down barriers separating restricted identities from larger ones. This chapter will deal first with Sexton's dissatisfaction with Christianity and secondly with her exploration of alternative sources of spiritual growth.

Throughout her poetry and letters, Sexton expresses a strong desire to embrace wholeheartedly the Christian religion in which she was raised and a persistent inability to do so. The Christian message fails to satisfy her, either as a way of coping with and finding value in her limited, misguided identities or as a means to a transcendent, transformed self that connects her with all of reality, including God, other human beings, nature, and the universe. One reason she cannot find satisfaction in Christianity is her inability to separate it from her family background and thus from the plaguey child identity that she would rid herself of but cannot. She explores this connection between her family-identified self and her attitudes toward Christianity in her early poem "The Division of Parts" (CP 42-46). This is a long and important poem which, together with "The Double Image" (discussed in Chapter Two) and "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," which I will discuss fully in Chapter Five, forms the entire second part of her first volume of poems, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, and there is a

continuity of themes. The first poem in the sequence, "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," justifies the kind of probing into intimate personal and family details which she does in the other two lengthy poems. Both "The Double Image" and "The Division of Parts," which follow it, explore Sexton's troubled relationships with her mother, in light of her mother's death, and both cite her family background for its failure to foster spiritual growth. But whereas in "The Double Image" she looks to nature for that spiritual growth and also finds it manifested in her daughter's spontaneity, which she herself cannot achieve, in "The Division of Parts" spirituality and openness are reflected in Christ's self-sacrifice and the Christians' emulation of his suffering. Here again, however, Sexton is unable to share in this extension of the self into the spiritual realm.

"The Division of Parts," like many of Sexton's works, is an occasional piece; it takes place on a Good Friday on which she received a photostat of her mother's will. The irony of her mother's death occurring so close to the observance of the death of Jesus causes her to explore the connection between the failure of her relationships with her mother and her inability to fully embrace the religion in which she was reared. Her role as daughter and her relationships with her mother have not brought her any meaningful extension of identity. As a surviving daughter she is now the incarnated extension of her mother, but she does not see that identity as worth celebrating. The mother-daughter relationships has netted her only unwanted and useless material "gifts [she] did not choose," which represent her share of the "bounty";

coats, too bright jewels, "gaudy fur animals / [she does] not know how to use" and "obstacles" of letters, family silver, eyeglasses and shoes. The memory of a loving relationship does not seem to be a significant part of this legacy. Furthermore, now that her mother is dead, the poet's connection with her has been reduced to a mere mercenary role -- "counting [her] bounty." She sees herself as an extension of the queen in the nursery rhyme left alone in the parlor to eat bread and honey, herself useless and decadent while the life of the world, represented by the king, goes on outside. Now Sexton too is the possessor of decadent and useless wealth.

By contrast with the luxury of her inheritance, the devout of Boston are concurrently performing the ascetic rituals connected with reliving the death of Jesus. The mourning Christians serve as models against which she finds herself lacking. Her attitude toward her personal loss and toward the death of Jesus is the same; while she had "planned to suffer," she finds she cannot. She is attracted to this Christian asceticism because it represents a giving up of oneself to a larger reality and thus suggests that the mourners have found the kind of larger identity that she seeks. She finds herself unable to share in their commitment because, in addition to other reasons, Protestant New Englanders like herself find such public displays of suffering unseemly:

> It does not please
> my yankee bones to watch
> where the dying is done
> in its ugly hours.

Just as the clutter of material possessions she has inherited failed to bring her wholeness, likewise her religion, also part of her legacy, is a useless "clutter of worship" inherited from her childhood:

> The clutter of worship
> that you taught me, Mary Gray,
> is old. I imitate
> a memory of belief
> that I do not own.

As she cannot feel comfortable owning the material possessions that are not her own choice, likewise she does not "own" the religion she has inherited. She imitates her mother by wearing the jewels and furs and using the silver; likewise in religion she merely "imitate[s]/a memory of belief." The event of her mother's death so close to Good Friday has caused her to "trip" and to pay more attention to the rituals of Lent than she might have otherwise. Furthermore, Sexton's mythologizing mind causes her to see both deaths as parts of the same whole and to see the reenactment of Christian mourning as connected with her personal, "timely" loss. And as she feels alienated from her mother, and detached from any feelings of sorrow, so she feels alienated from Jesus and cannot join with his mourners:

> . . . Jesus, <u>my stranger</u> (italics hers)
> floats up over
> my Christian home, wearing his straight
> thorn tree.

Though her home is essentially Christian because she has been brought up in the Christian tradition, she cannot feel the personal connection with Jesus that she finds essential. Rather than being her savior, he is a "stranger," whose image hovers over her life but is disconnected

from it. The ludicrous, child's view image of Christ wearing his cross suggests a rigidity in the speaker arising from her detachment from and failure to identity with his suffering.

Sexton's inheritance has indeed given her a sense of continuity with some larger identity than her own, namely that of her family -- as it is the purpose of inheritance to do -- but that extension of herself is seen as negative and as diminishing her self. As she had previously likened herself counting her inheritance to the nursery rhyme queen alone in her parlor, here she sees herself, because she can mourn neither the death of her mother nor of Jesus, as an extension -- not of Christ or the Christian mourners -- but of the thieves crucified with Christ and of the soldiers who coldly cast lots for Jesus's garments. Addressing her mother, she says:

> 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.

In part two of the poem she rehearses her mother's dying days. While her mother was alive and ill, suffering from the "ugliness" of cancer, Sexton was able to grieve, spending each day for three months caring for her in the hospital:

> I read to you
> from _The New Yorker_, ate suppers
> you wouldn't eat, fussed
> with your flowers,
> joked with your nurses, as if I
> were the balm among lepers,
> as if I could undo
> a life in hours
> if I never said goodbye.

Here again she confronts the failure of the daughter role, with its unreal expectations. She had dutifully nursed her dying mother, with the hope that somehow she could prolong her life, but the role has failed her, and her mother has died despite her herculean efforts. However, even though her mother is dead, the poet still cannot "shed [her] daughterhood." The role has been constricting, and though she recognizes the need to let go of it in order to pursue her other roles, particularly as wife and poet, she cannot. Thus caught, she cannot extend her selfhood through these other roles either. Since her mother's death she has gone through the motions of fulfilling her wifely role, but she is unable to find enrichment in it:

> Since then I have pretended ease,
> loved with the trickeries of need, but not enough
> to shed my daughterhood
> or sweeten him as a man.

Likewise, her writing has proved barren. She can only "poke at this dry page like a rough / goat" and "drink the five o'clock martinis" instead of writing productively.

Her relationship with Jesus parallels that with her mother. Though she does not find Christianity satisfying and cannot enter fully into Jesus's death, still she cannot escape its demands: "And Christ still waits." At this point her mother becomes the vehicle for the merger of two identities -- personal legatee of her mother and also of the collective Christian tradition. It is her connection with her mother which causes her to link the two identities:

> I have tried
> to exorcise the memory of each event
> and remain still, a mixed child,
> heavy with cloths of you.

As she envisions her mother as a "sweet witch" and her "worried guide," she is seized by a desire to embrace her childhood religion:

> Such dangerous angels walk through Lent.
> Their walls creak Anne! Convert! Convert! (italics hers)
> My desk moves. Its cave murmurs Boo
> and I am taken and beguiled.

Thus, by allocating to her mother a religious function and suggesting that the season of Lent and even the desk on which she writes have a spiritual dimension, she offers the possibility that these aspects of life -- her daughter role, her daily life, her poetry -- can lead her to a deeper -- spiritual and transcendent -- dimension.

But she immediately contradicts herself: "Or wrong." She experiences a conflict between this visionary self that feels the possibility of transcending her narrow roles through love, and another identity that finds this eventuality romantic, irrational and futile, perhaps leading to more bouts with madness followed by the difficult road back to sanity. This other, rational self calls her to a more earthbound choice:

> . . .I must convert
> to love as reasonable
> as Latin, as solid as earthenware:

This identity would have the advantage of bringing her "an equilibrium I never knew," a more normal (italics mine), Jocasta-like identity which is not haunted by "dangerous angels" and voices coming from her

desk. This equilibrium would exclude spiritual values and, since it would be reasonable, would save her the anxiety of dealing with the troubling questions raised by the mysteries of Lent: "[a]nd Lent will keep its hurt/for someone else." Such a rational, safe existence, based on realities that are verifiable, would also prevent her from latching onto religion out of weakness and dependency:

> Christ knows enough
> staunch guys have hitched on him in trouble,
> thinking his sticks were badges to wear.

Sexton's inability to trust voluntary death and suffering as a form of love is understandable at this point in her life. She has just witnessed her mother's painful death; despite all her own efforts at providing comfort, she could not prevent the ugliness and suffering of the death from happening, nor could she see any signs of transcendence in her mother's pain. Likewise, she has no guarantee that the Lenten pilgrims have not merely "hitched on him in trouble." Thus, the religious identity of her childhood has failed her. As with most other aspects of her child-self, it has not proved satisfactory in leading her to a sense of wholeness. Just as in other poems exploring her daughter role, she attributes to her bankrupt relationships with her mother her inability to achieve a selfhood that is full of possibilities, here she also connects the failure of her religious self to her mother. Her mother's training in religion has produced a sense of alienation from established Christianity just as her whole childhood resulted in alienation from her family. This sense of estrangement moves her toward a religious quest which will lead to a more satisfactory manifestation

of love in all aspects of her life.

But Sexton's staunch resolve is not long-lived. The deadness evident in nature in early spring brings her back to the two deaths which have been the occasion of the poem:

> Spring rusts on its skinny branch
> and last summer's lawn
> is soggy and brown.
> Yesterday is just a number.
> All of its winters avalanche
> out of sight. What was, is gone.

Sexton continues to be plagued by her divided feelings about her mother, which lead to disturbing dreams. Having slept in her mother's Bonwit Teller nightgown the night before, she has had a "jabbering dream" in which her mother "[d]ivided, . . . climbed into [her] head" to disturb her sleep:

> I heard my own angry cries
> and I cursed you, <u>Dame</u>
> <u>keep out of my slumber</u>.
> <u>My good Dame, you are dead</u>.

Here the association between her mother's death and death in nature causes her to contrast her own mother with Mother Nature. Just as the latter is the personification of nature's power of life and death, so her mother has been able to prevent Sexton from living fully. The sadness of this haunted and helpless character of the mother-daughter relationship is reflected in her dream mother's stony tears: ". . . Mother, three stones / slipped from your glittering eyes." The stony tears hark back to the jewels which are part of the poet's cold, empty inheritance.

But Sexton's divided self also praises her mother and wishes to have her back, as witnessed by the existence of this poem, in which she both "curses" her mother "with [her] rhyming words," which serve, ironically, to "bring [her] flapping back." Sexton praises her mother in a series of epithets which recalls both a religious litany in praise of the Virgin Mary and a Whitmanian catalog of expansive celebration. Because her mother's name was Mary, Sexton has often drawn parallels between her mother and the virgin, another instance of her extending the significance of an event (or person) by (seeing a connection) with myth. Some of her epithets evoke childhood memories of her mother; others seem to celebrate her mother's endearing qualities in language that acknowledges the mythical significance that people important in one's life take on:

> . . . old love,
> old circus knitting, god-in-her-moon,
> all fairest in my lang syne verse,
> the gauzy bride among the children,
> the fancy amid the absurd
> and awkward, that horn for hounds
> that skipper homeward, that museum
> keeper of stiff starfish, that blaze
> within the pilgrim woman,
> a clown mender, a dove's
> cheek among the stones,
> my Lady of my first words,
> this is the division of ways.

Thus the catalog ends with the poet's acknowledgment, in a moment of acceptance, that death has ended her relationship with her mother as well as any possibility of additions to this catalog of memories. By writing of memories of her mother's character and events in her life using mythical language and references, Sexton expands both the

particular events and the myth itself. The particulars of her mother's life are given a more universal significance when Sexton sees them as related to witchcraft -- the negative -- and goddesses -- the positive; conversely, the myth is given added dimension and validity by showing its manifestation in real events. Her mother's death likewise takes on an extended significance because Sexton likens it to the death of Christ. The myth of Christ is also extended by Sexton's attempts to relate it to her mother's death and to understand its particular meaning for her and for the Christian pilgrims. In both cases Sexton sees herself as an inheritor.

In the final stanza Sexton again identifies her mother's death and continued presence in her life with the relationship of Christ to his followers. However, the quality of the relationship is quite different. For Christians, the image of the suffering Christ on the cross makes their commemoration of his death a true act of human love, which it would not be if they honored a bare cross.

> . . . Christ stays
> fastened to his Crucifix
> so that love may praise
> his sacrifice
> and not the grotesque metaphor, . . .

By contrast, the image of her mother is fixed in her mind "without praise / or paradise." She finds her role as her mother's inheritor a much more constricting and ambivalent one than the Christians' role in relation to Christ. While their voluntary suffering is a loving and self-expanding act of identification with another being, the anguish and ambivalence Sexton experiences as her mother's inheritor has led

to no such extension of the self. As she indicates in her other poems about her family, her relationship with them has brought her to the broken state which opposes the "whole nation of God" which would free her to love others as fully as she wishes. Nor has it enabled her to accomplish in her poetry all that she would like. While Christ is a loving, accepting, self-sacrificing person who serves as a model for achieving an extended identity by loving others, her mother, on the other hand, has been demanding as well as loving, selfish as well as giving, and has provided no such model. Sexton is unable to identify with her mother, the accumulator of useless and gaudy possessions, nor is she able to mourn her death and thus separate from her and form a self independent of her influence.

Another poem in which she explores the ways in which Christian worship has failed her, "Protestant Easter" (CP 128-131), reflects her everpresent need to probe ceaselessly for the truth about identity, in this case the identity of Jesus. The worshippers in Sexton's poem make no serious attempt to fathom the troublesome uncertainties of the central Christian question of Christ's dual identity as God and human being. Neither are they awed by the mystery of the possibility of an intersection of human and divine selfhood, nor motivated by the implication that they too might bear the seeds of divinity within themselves. These worshippers, imbued with the Jocasta-like spirit which Sexton abjures, are content with a shallow, unexamined form of religion and are instead preoccupied not with the possibilities for transcendence of human failures but with materialistic competitiveness -- whose Easter bonnet is the prettiest. They seem to represent the brand of Christian

who attends services mainly for social and professional reasons rather than out of a deep commitment.

The speaker of the poem is an eight year old girl attending Easter services. Though she does not seem to be the poet herself, like Sexton she is a determined seeker of the truth about identities and is particularly determined to understand the identity of Jesus: "I just have to get Him straight. / And right now." Also like the poet, who longs to find acceptance of her plaguey selves, the child is drawn to Jesus because of his promise to forgive:

> When he was a little boy
> Jesus was good all the time.
> No wonder that he grew up to be such a big shot
> who could forgive people so much.

The main thrust of the poem, however, is the child's inquiry into the nature of Christ and by implication, her own identity. The child speaker finds in Protestantism no support for her questionings about either Christ's identity or her own:

> Who are we anyhow?
> What do we belong to?
> Are we a <u>we</u>?
> I think that he rose
> but I'm not quite sure
> and they don't really say
> singing their <u>Alleluia</u>
> in the churchy way.
> Jesus was on that Cross.
> After that they pounded nails into his hands.
> After that, well, after that,
> everyone wore hats
> and then there was a big stone rolled away
> and then almost everyone--
> the ones who sit up straight--
> looked at the ceiling.

The congregants' willingness to open themselves to the mysteries of spiritual reality extends only as far as the ceiling of the church. Like Sexton, the child, finding no answers in the religion of her elders, looks to her own experience for an answer to her questions about the identity of Jesus. Just as the poet in her poems about her own childhood, such as "Those Times. . ." and "Young," finds a satisfactory connection with a larger reality by rejecting her parents' attitudes and turning inward to explore her own resources, the child persona, unable to find within the church an adequate explanation for Jesus's disappearance, turns to her own childish experiences of loss or expansion of identity:

> Maybe he was only hiding?
> Maybe he could fly?
> . . . .
> He was smart to go to sleep up there
> even though his mother got so sad
> and let them put him in a cave.
> I sat in a tunnel when I was five.
> That tunnel, my mother said,
> went straight into the big river
> and so I never went again.
> Maybe Jesus knew my tunnel
> and crawled right through to the river
> so he could wash all the blood off.
> Maybe he only meant to get clean
> and then come back again?
> Don't tell me that he went up in smoke
> like Daddy's cigar!
> He didn't blow out like a match!

Each of these conjectures reflects some natural experience with which the child is familiar. Significantly, the image of drowing in the river prefigures "The Consecrating Mother" (CP 554-555), one of Sexton's strongest statements of spiritual transcendence through merger with

nature in the form of the sea. More importantly, however, the child's most mature explanation for the resurrection comes directly from her observation of nature and thus reflects Sexton's belief in the superiority of nature over reason as a source of knowledge. Whereas in "The Double Image," Sexton found the meaning of her suffering by contemplating the falling autumn leaves, the child finds an image of the resurrection in a flower:

> Yesterday I found a purple crocus
> blowing its way out of the snow.
> It was all alone.
> It was getting its work done.
> Maybe Jesus was only getting his work done
> and letting God blow him off the Cross
> and maybe he was afraid for a minute
> so he hid under the big stones.

However, the child has, unfortunately though understandably, in part inherited the congregation's narrow outlook; her profound though childlike understanding of Jesus's identity is tempered by the materialism which surrounds her:

> The important thing for me
> is that I'm wearing white gloves.
> I always sit straight.
> I keep on looking at the ceiling.

But nevertheless she is more concerned about ultimate realities than the congregation, and the poem ends with her cynical observation on the superficiality of the worshippers. While her observation manifests more subtlety and a greater sense of irony than a real child might be capable of, the humor of the lines comes from the childlike language:

> 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.

Though she is never able to abandon Christianity completely, Sexton's inability to enter fully into the worship in which she was reared brings her to look away from organized religion in her quest for meaning. The mystery of Jesus as a god who became human holds her imagination, however; she continues to "plead with it to be true, after all" (Letters 125). Nevertheless, her dissatisfaction with orthodoxy leads her to seek what she desires of religion in other aspects of life and out of these other "multiple selves" to create a religion of her own. Her God must accept her weak and mad and evil selves and be approachable through the physical and natural. Earthly life must be seen as valuable and good, even though it is flawed. The spiritual quest must lead to an extension of the self so that she is not bound by the limitations and faults of her social roles as child, mother, wife. It must also lead to a sense of connection with other beings and with nature.

Sexton's longing for a God who is merciful and who shares in the lives of his creatures fuels her profound interest in Jesus. The puzzle of his proclaimed dual identity illuminates her quest: if Christ is God, his existence posits the kind of extension of self that she seeks.

Her ever-present predilection for the details of Jesus's human identity leads her to find the sketchy biblical accounts of his personal life unsatisfactory, and her interest extends to Mary as well (the

ellipses are Sexton's):

> I think of Mary. . . I wonder what she felt. How could I find out more about her?. . . I'm silly. I wish Mary had kept a diary. . .and put down her thoughts. The birth seems to be told too often in the same words and the early life of Jesus. . . all like a fable that no one quite believes or is sure of. Where can one read about Mary. . .? What was the weather and temp. in Bethlehem that night? What was she wearing? How long was her labor? Things like that. . .it is the poet in me that wants to know. (Letters 153)

No doubt ever suspicious of theologians' speculations, she sets out to provide her own answers to the mysteries of Jesus' and Mary's daily lives. A sequence of such poems is "The Jesus Papers" (CP 337-345). The tone of these poems is signaled by the unidentified epigraph: "And would you mock God?" "God is not mocked except by believers." But besides indulging her delight in shocking her readers, Sexton intends a more serious purpose by this tone of playful impudence, namely, to reintegrate into the identity of Jesus the humanity and continuity with nature which she finds lacking in orthodoxy. By doing so, she breaks down neat, compartmentalized concepts of love, realistically acknowledging Christ's sexuality. Her religion is Dionysian, and she would enlarge Christianity and the identity of the deity to include the instinctual and visceral. As in her other poems in which she imagines a God who prefers earth to heaven, here she adds further dimension to the biblical identity of Jesus to include twentieth century views on the nature of the self. She assumes that a God who has taken on a human body experiences Oedipal and sexual desires along with sexual repression. Thus Sexton's religious values are very much in the spirit of contem-

porary Christianity, in which a prime thrust has been the reintegration of spiritual and physical realities.

The first poem of the sequence, "Jesus Suckles" (CP 337-338), shows the child Jesus exploring his problematic identity as an extension of both a divine father and a human mother. As a god in a child's body, he feels the urge to power; but paradoxically, he is also totally dependent on and erotically -- Oedipally -- responsive to his mother:

> Mary, your great
> white apples make me glad.
> I feel your heart work its
> machine and I doze like a fly.

The sensuous pleasure of nursing at Mary's breast spawns a series of expansive metaphors in which Jesus explores his identity. There is a sexual content in all of the images of self, some childlike -- "I'm a jelly-baby and you're my wife" -- some more erotic and adult:

> You're a rock and I the fringy algae.
> You're a lily and I'm the bee that gets inside.
> I close my eyes and suck you in like a fire.

In all the images Jesus is in a state of celebratory wholeness and expansiveness. He exults in the fact that he is growing, becoming independent: "I grow. I grow. I'm fattening out." As he experiences himself growing and separating from his mother, in the last image in this catalog he apotheosizes her power to nurture him: "I'm a kid in a rowboat and you're the sea, / the salt, you're every fish of importance." As in "The Consecrating Mother," the mother is likened to the sea. She gives and supports life, just as the sea has the power to support the ships which ply her.

In the second stanza Jesus reverses these expansive statements about his identity. The shorter line length here reflects his awareness of himself as an extension of his mother and his gratitude for sharing her humanity:

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

By contradicting himself, Jesus reveals that as he explores his identity, he, like the poet, experiences the human dilemma of the divided self. Here, Jesus is able to exult in all of his selves. In the final stanza, though he might be accused of chauvinism, he asserts a third self, his divinity:

> No. No.
> All lies.
> I am a truck. I run everything.
> I own you.

While most of the poems in this sequence are a friendly and humorous reinvention of biblical tales, similar to her retelling of fairy tales in Transformations, they are motivated also by an underlying criticism of the Christian interpretation of Jesus that is crucial to Sexton's spirituality. She rejects the lack of humanity in the biblical portrayal of Jesus, and in particular the lack of exploration of his physical aspects, including his sexuality and sensuality. Just as in all of her work she stresses a celebration of physicality, one can expect no less from her envisioning of a God who is also fully

human. In the second poem of the sequence, "Jesus Awake," the power requisite for Jesus's spiritual mission is thwarted because he ignores the physical and instinctual sides of his human identity. Thus Sexton indicts Christianity for being content with a restricted, narrow version of Christ's identity, and this view is basic to her dissatisfaction with Christianity.

The opening lines of the poem contrast contemporary images of sexual freedom with the traditional Christian emphasis on asceticsim:

> It was the year
> of the How To Sex Book,
> the Sensuous Man and Woman were frolicking
> but Jesus was fasting.

But Jesus is not merely out of date in Sexton's view; sexual expression is all around him, but he seems oblivious to it. He is denying his identity as an extension of the nature which he has taken on by becoming human:

> The ground shuddered like an ocean,
> a great sexual swell under His feet.
> His scrolls bit each other.
> He was shrouded in gold like nausea.
> Outdoors the kitties hung from their mother's tits
> like sausages in a smokehouse.
> Roosters cried all day, hammering for love.
> Blood flowed from the kitchen pump
> but He was fasting.

The vulgarity of the images that Sexton uses to describe the life force reflects her insistence on the importance of the visceral aspects of the self in developing an identity that is "a whole nation of God." Jesus's denial of his sexual -- human -- self makes him a bunch of separate body parts sewn together as if he were a doll. Because he is

artificial he is also impotent:

> His sex was sewn onto Him like a medal
> and His penis no longer arched with sorrow over Him.
> He was fasting.

His denial of his sexuality renders his divine self ineffectual as well, thwarting the whole purpose for his existence:

> He was like a great house
> with no people,
> no plans.

He is unable to preach his message, which is love, because he denies the connection between love and sexuality which the roosters have no trouble accepting. Furthermore, by failing to experience the sexuality that makes new life possible, he fails to be creative in his mission. Water turns to blood in nature but not in Jesus's ministry.

By denying the life force which is all around him, Jesus cuts himself off from the transcendence in nature and also denies an essential part of his identity. The tremendous "hammering for love" that is going on all around him is a universal cry for an expansion of identity and for merger with another being. By confining himself to a narrower identity, he becomes an artificial person. Though he is "a great house," he is alone and unable to act, because he has given up his connection with the vital sources of life.

What Sexton seeks most from religion is a means of overcoming the guilt-ridden, bone-fragile, death-fearing, unloved child-self that plagues her. While Jesus comes close to representing a God who, having taken on a human identity, shares human suffering, and accepts human

limitations, she cannot quite bring herself to accept him as an image of the "mercy" she longs for. While the Christian message is forgiveness, for which she feels an intense need -- as indicated by the kind of confessional poetry she writes -- she cannot bring herself to trust religious confession to satisfy this need. Her poem, "With Mercy for the Greedy" (CP 62-63), forthrightly recognizes the difference between believing and merely needing to believe. A Catholic friend, Ruth, has sent Sexton a crucifix and urged her to make an appointment for confession. The poet is touched by this gesture, especially because the cross has been worn by her friend and thus represents vividly an extension of her friend's selfhood:

> your own cross,
> your dog-bitten cross,
> no larger than a thumb,
> small and wooden, no thorns, this rose --

Sexton prays to "its shadow," which is "deep, deep." The shadow and the repetition of the word "deep" suggest her wish that the mysteries of Christ's identity could lead her to the kind of enlargement that she seeks. But though she admires Jesus and is able to identify with his physical suffering, this sense of identity does not lead to belief:

> True. There is
> a beautiful Jesus.
> 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.

Thus, though she is able to empathize deeply with Jesus's suffering and to see her own desperate need to believe as akin to his desperate state

of agony and desolation, such identification does not lead to affirmation. She regards her poems as fulfilling her need for confession:

> 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.

Thus, again, she draws a connection between her spiritual quest and her poetry. The above lines constitute the most explicit definition of poetry that Sexton ever gives, and they clearly suggest that she finds more "mercy" forthcoming from her public poetic confessions than she believes institutional religion, with its emphasis on reform, is capable of. I will discuss this passage more fully in Chapter Five, in which I explore the self as poet in Sexton's work.

Sexton imagines a God who is a companion on earth rather than in a remote heaven in "Rowing" (CP 417-418), the first and title poem in her volume of religious poetry, The Awful Rowing Towards God. In this guise God extends to her the kind of mercy and acceptance of self that she longs for. She calls the poem "my tale," thus suggesting that it reveals matters essential to the self. She reiterates the aspects of her negative, restricted self which have prevented her from developing her full identity and an expansive self:

> I was stamped out like a Plymouth fender
> into this world.
> First came the crib
> with its glacial bars.
> Then dolls
> and the devotion to their plastic mouths.
> Then there was school,

> the little straight rows of chairs,
> blotting my name over and over,
> but undersea all the time,
> a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work.
> Then there was life
> with its cruel houses
> and people who seldom touched --
> though touch is all --
> but I grew,
> like a pig in a trenchcoat I grew,
> and then there were many strange apparitions,
> the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison
> and all of that, saws working through my heart, . . .

This summary of her life repeats succinctly the many other autobiographical poems in which she describes her child self as lacking an identity, frozen, unloved, her only love objects plastic dolls which were as dead as she. School only intensified her feelings of a lack of self-identity and reinforced her passivity and sense of being an awkward misfit -- "a pig in a trenchcoat." A lack of community has seemed to characterize her adult life as well, so that she has continued to feel out of place and lacking in wholeness. This lack of selfhood has culminated in madness and self-destruction. Thus far she has been in a state of spiritual deprivation as well: "and God was there like an island I had not rowed to, / still ignorant of Him, . . ."

Now, however, she has arrived at middle age, though still "about nineteen in the head." As in "The Consecrating Mother," the very embarkation on the quest has awakened her from her passive state:

> I am rowing, I am rowing
> though the oarlocks stick and are rusty
> and the sea blinks and rolls
> like a worried eyeball,
> but I am rowing, I am rowing,
> though the wind pushes me back. . . .

Though she is rusty, her quest is invigorating and expansive, overcoming the years of lack of identity and purpose and pitting her against and thus forcing her to come to an understanding of larger realities and forces, represented by the worried and threatening sea and the contrary wind. The poem ends with a description of her goal. Relief from her frozen, pestilential self comes not through a violent merger with the cosmos, as in "The Starry Night" or "The Consecrating Mother," but from a quiet acceptance by a merciful God of her flawed self. No transformation is required:

> . . . I know that that island will not be perfect,
> it will have the flaws of life,
> the absurdities of the dinner table,
> but there will be a door
> and I will open it
> and I will get rid of the rat inside me,
> the gnawing pestilential rat.
> God will take it with his two hands
> and embrace it.

She thus elevates the search for self-understanding and self-acceptance, which is also the journey of psychological analysis, to the level of the spiritual quest. Her God is to be sought through the earth and the body, not outside them.

Sexton longs to share in this divine identity too. In addition to her desire to fully experience her human identity, she hungers to transcend the limitations and constrictions of her human self and to become an extension of some powerful, superhuman being. Always death, usually a violent death, is a means of achieving this identification. Such visionary poems, in which she imagines herself in some sort of transformed state, involve throwing off her human identity to take on

some larger self, or joining her weak and unsatisfactory human self with some more potent being.

The earliest of the three poems I will consider here is "The Starry Night" (CP 53-54), her poetic contemplation of Van Gogh's famous painting of the same title. In this poem, the least Christian of the three, the prime mover of the universe is "the old unseen serpent," a mythological cosmic figure. The poem is an important one because it reflects two elements basic to Sexton's world view, namely, her faith in nature and also in art as avenues of redemption superior to religion. The use of Van Gogh's painting as the organizing metaphor of the poem indicates that she finds in him an artistic forebear for these views. Indeed, this sense that she is an extension of Van Gogh becomes explicit in the epigraph to the poem, a quotation from a letter of Van Gogh to his brother:

> 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.

The power of the painting is effectively transmuted into words in Sexton's poem. She longs for death as a way to become part of this power, which represents for her a violent expansion of self:

> 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.

The town, which can be seen to represent life as the poet experiences it in the here and now, is passive and insignificant compared to the

boiling universe. The only thing in the earthly landscape that is not passive and silent is the tree, which has a female identity and seems to embody the desire for merger with "the hot sky." References in other poems to a desire for -- or fear of -- drowing suggest an identification here between the tree and the poet herself; drowning in Sexton's work seems desirable or threatening, depending on the mood of a particular poem, as a means of a loss of individual identity and an opening to an expanded, cosmic self. In "The Starry Night" nature is ominous, but the speaker wishes to experience and become part of the violence of the universe:

> 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.

In Sexton's starry night, everything in the universe is alive and threatening. The god powering this turbulent cosmos is the serpent, with whom she desires to be united. Here her god is a part of nature, and paradoxically, she finds something godlike in a creature that is generally considered dark, ugly, and evil.

Sexton's god-figures often exhibit paradoxical traits. Just as in "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" (CP 34-35) she was able to find some underlying beauty in madness, here she finds something godlike in the threatening nature painted by Van Gogh and in the

loathsome and lowly serpent. As an archetypal symbol, the serpent has been connected with both the light and dark aspects of the supernatural, with good as well as evil, although most often in modern times it is associated with the underworld and with evil. Here it is the serpent's devouring quality that attracts the poet; she desires to experience the great "rushing" movement of the cosmos. Paradoxically in this portrayal of a turbulent universe, the spiritual quest takes the form of a desire for a complete loss of identity. Not a trace is to remain: no flag to mark the place of her disappearance, no tears of bereavement by those left behind, no "cry" from her, betraying a reluctance to go.

The second poem "Consorting with Angels" (CP 111-112), is more Christian and less drastic. One has the sense in reading "The Starry Night" that the impulse is suicidal, that Sexton longs there to be rid of a personal identity that is destroying her. In "Consorting with Angels," on the other hand, it is her identity as a woman that she wishes to escape as well as those aspects of her identity that are not personal but that represent her commonality with other human beings. Thus it seems here that it is human nature itself that seems limiting, and her discontent with her humanity seems inspired by a resentment of aspects of her identity as a woman which, though at least partly culturally imposed, seem to her to be built in to her gender. By opening herself to a new, genderless identity which has more possibilities than her woman-self, she also enlarges her spiritual self. In throwing off her woman identity she rids herself not only of the house chores associated with her gender but also of her sexuality and physical

attractiveness. While she continues to take delight in these aspects of her selfhood throughout her poetry, she suggests here that there is a deeper selfhood to be achieved by divesting herself of these identities as well. This poem is noteworthy among her works because she seems not to suggest here, as she does almost always, that the way to a deeper selfhood is through the instinctual and the physical.

The poem begins with her declaration that her identity as a woman fails to satisfy her:

> I was tired of being a woman,
> tired of the spoons and the pots,
> tired of my mouth and my breasts,
> tired of the cosmetics and the silks.
> There were still men who sat at my table,
> circled around the bowl I offered up.
> The bowl was filled with purple grapes
> and the flies hovered in for the scent
> and even my father came with his white bone.
> But I was tired of the gender of things.

As an antidote to this malaise, Sexton describes a dream vision of a "city made of chains." The chains suggest commitment and also reflect Sexton's fascination with violence and pain as forms of heightened experience. She longs to become like Joan of Arc, who achieved sanctity by ignoring the social strictures of her sex. Sexton admires the saint because she "was put to death in man's clothes." In other poems, such as "The Consecrating Mother," she longs for a martyr's death as a means to a more expanded identity. She also wishes to become like the angels who, according to the Scholastic definition, are pure form and thus have no gender. In her vision

> . . . the nature of the angels went unexplained,
> no two made in the same species,

> one with a nose, one with an ear in its hand,
> one chewing a star and recording its orbit,
> each one like a poem obeying itself,
> performing God's functions,
> a people apart.

The angels represent a kind of identity which cannot be limited by predetermined roles, sexual or otherwise. Their nature cannot be explained because each is completely individual and distinct from the others. There are no roles; each angelic being creates its own identity by living.

Continuing her vision Sexton enters the city and becomes an extension of her genderless ideals: "I lost my common gender and my final aspect." Now she is freed not only of gender but also of any fixed identity. As a result she becomes like Adam and Eve, who are "thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason" because, as the first of the human race, they have no patterns or roles laid down for them. Paradoxically, the poet's new state makes her more womanly and more desireable than she was in her human woman's body. Using love imagery from the "Song of Solomon," and also repeated in "The Consecrating Mother," she has become the favored one of the king:

> O daughters of Jerusalem,
> the king has brought me into his chamber.
> I am black and I am beautiful.
> I've been opened and undressed.
> I have no arms or legs.
> I'm all one skin like a fish.
> I'm no more a woman
> than Christ was a man.

Unlike the beloved in the song, however, she has left her woman's body and, by escaping from the limiting expectations of her sexual role, become transformed. Like the woman who has shed her girdle, Sexton the

dreamer has given up the superficial and repetitive duties of her human life and by doing so has been able to experience a deeper and fuller level of the self, one in which she perceives herself as part of nature. In order to transcend her human role, she has become both more primitive and more elevated. The final two lines reveal her as godlike and as sharing in the paradoxical identity of Christ. Though she is still a woman, as Christ was a man, she has expanded and transcended her human identity, just as Christ did.

A more potent womanhood is also the solution to Sexton's dissatisfaction with her weak, human self in "The Consecrating Mother" (*CP* 554-555), a poem I discussed in Chapter Three, on her woman self. This poem is one of the most intriguing of all Sexton's works. Coming as it does at the end of her volume *45 Mercy Street*, which is the last volume over which Sexton exercised any editorial control, though she did not oversee its final form, it is tempting to look upon it as her last public statement. The poem brings together several themes that are key in Sexton's work: her longing for a mother, violence and absorption into nature as a way of expanding the spiritual self, and the physical self, particularly her woman self, as redemptive. In this poem she wishes to merge with the sea, which represents female power and creativity and is an archetypal symbol of both. As the title suggests, the expansion of her in this way is redemptive because it is a kind of martyrdom, a relinquishing of a narrow identity in order to take on a more meaningful one. In "The Starry Night" Sexton can imagine the kind of spiritual fulfillment in nature that she seeks because she

sees herself as an extension of Van Gogh and can also identify herself with the tree in his painting. In "The Consecrating Mother" it is her role as woman that enables her to see herself as an extension of the sea in its guise as a symbol of maternal creativity and power. Thus, just as her poet self leads her to experience the transcendence and expansion of self that Van Gogh feels in painting the stars, her own motherhood opens her to the expansiveness of the sea.

The poet views the extension of the self resulting from this drowning in nature, this heightened experiencing of herself as a part of the cosmos, as potentially limitless and as opening her to a multiplicity of selves: ". . . I could not define her, / I could not name her mood, her locked-up faces." The action of this very dramatic visionary poem involves Sexton's progression from the weak, passive, and fearful self who stands naked on the shore "alone like a pink scarecrow," to the self who gathers up the courage to actively seek union with the ocean. A theme appears here which is recurrent in Sexton's poetry: physical death is preferable to the living death of a passive, narrow self who has no purpose. Her attraction to a violent death suggests that only extreme pain can awaken her from the torpor brought on by her constricting selves.

At the end of the poem she is still unredeemed, but she has shaken off her inertia to become

> . . . that clumsy human
> on the shore
> loving you, coming, coming, . . .

She is clumsy because the assertiveness of the quest is new to her,

having settled for a passive self for so long. The consecration that she seeks is erotic as well as religious, as indicated by the language of sexual union. She ends up comparing her poem to the "Song of Solomon," suggesting that she herself would like to create such an erotically religious poem. However, she implies that the intent of such a poem is "to put my thumb on you," that is, to attempt to circumscribe or define the experience in advance, an activity totally contrary to Sexton's typical stance of giving herself over fully to an experience in order to achieve an extension of her identity. Thus, she suggests there is something specious about such poems as the "Song of Solomon" and "The Consecrating Mother." I will not explore this idea further here, but leave it for the next chapter, which deals with Sexton's poetic self.

This urge to escape the limitations of identity is not confined to just the poet and the human level. In her cosmogony, all of creation sustains a desire to burst free of the constrictions of self and experience another level of being. "The Fish that Walked" (<u>CP</u> 428-430) shares this aspiration with Sexton:

> Up from oysters
> and the confused weeds,
> out from the tears of God,
> the wounding tides,
> he came.
> He became a hunter of roots
> and breathed like a man.
> He ruffled through the grasses
> and became known to the sky.
> I stood close and watched it all.
> Beg pardon, he said
> but you have skin divers,
> you have hooks and nets,
> so why shouldn't I

> enter your element for a moment?
> Though it is curious here,
> unusually awkward to walk,
> It is without grace.
> There is no rhythm
> in this country of dirt.

Just as the fish wishes to become human, to enter the element of roots and dirt, so the poet desires to return to the more primitive, more instinctual life of water and the sea:

> . . . I said to him:
> From some country
> that I have misplaced
> I can recall a few things. . .
> but the light of the kitchen
> gets in the way.
> Yet there was a dance
> when I kneaded the bread
> there was a song my mother
> used to sing. . .
> And the salt of God's belly
> where I floated in a cup of darkness.
> I long for your country, fish.

Sexton's desire to become something more than her present self represents more than discontent with her contemporary social roles. Evolutionary theory provides scientific confirmation that the urge within creatures to become more complex, more comprehensive, is universal. Sexton can write of sharing her wish for an extended identity with a fish because the fish is a primitive ancestor of human beings. Likewise, she can see herself as an extension of the stars in Van Gogh's sky because stars have been proven to be composed of the same matter as living creatures. Thus, her desire to escape the confinements of her identity and to sense herself as continuous with other creatures and with the universe expresses something fundamental both to her con-

cept of the self and to the nature of the self as it is generally understood. Furthermore, she indicates in this poem that it is at this more primitive level, in "the salt of God's belly," that divinity is encountered.

Even the universal Self participates in the urge toward an extension of identity. This is another case in Sexton's poetry of "transcending downward," toward earth and physical reality, an urge which she shares with Van Gogh. "The Earth" (CP, 431-432) humorously expands the Christian image of God by showing his wishing to be an extension of his creation. The poem is similar to "The Civil War" (CP, 418-419) in its celebration of an earthly existence which, though it can be threatening and painful, is a more expansive one than the stodgy and pleasureless heaven which Christianity usually presents as the ideal. Her God the Father prefers involvement with his creatures to a remote landlordship in heaven:

> God owns heaven
> but He craves the earth,
> the earth with its little sleepy caves,
> its bird resting at the kitchen window, . . .

This God relishes all aspects of life, even those people who represent destructive, discontent, or fraudulent manifestations of the human self:

> even its murders lined up like broken chairs,
> even its writers digging into their souls
> with jackhammers,
> even its hucksters selling their animals
> for gold,
> even its babies sniffing for their music, . . .

He prefers to his existence in heaven even those creations which hold threats of lovelessness, loneliness and death:

> the farm house, white as a bone,
> sitting in the lap of its corn,
> even the statue holding up its widowed life,
> even the ocean with its cupful of students, . . .

But Sexton's God here is mainly attracted to the human condition for the prospect of escaping his bodiless state: ". . . most of all He envies the bodies / He who has no body." A second Whitmanian catalog in the poem reviews the capabilities of the human body that this God -- and she -- find worth celebrating:

> The eyes, opening and shutting like keyholes
> and never forgetting, recording by thousands,
> the skull with its brains like eels --
> the tablet of the world --
> the bones and their joints
> that build and break for any trick,
> the genitals,
> the ballast of the eternal,
> and the heart, of course,
> that swallows the tides
> and spits them out cleaned.

It is, however, mostly small human pleasures and foibles which God finds lacking in the bodiless state of heaven, where, though He can loaf around and be free of problems, he cannot

> . . . smoke His cigar
> or bite His fingernails
> and so forth.
> . . . .
> He does not envy the soul so much.
> He is all soul
> but He would like to house it in a body
> and come down
> and give it a bath
> now and then.

The genial humor of the poem belies its serious theme, which underlies Sexton's spiritual quest, namely, that such pleasurable sensuous experiences as taking baths, smoking cigars, and loafing provide her with a deeper experience of wholeness and expansion of the self than does the traditional Christian concept of the bodiless perfection of heaven. Even negative ways of making contact with other selves, such as murder, fraud, the relentless self-examination of writers, and the demands of a self-centered baby, seem better evidence of the possibility of a real expansion of identity than does the passive, bodiless state envisioned by theologians. The poem, like others of Sexton, is a celebration of the potential for wholeness and extension of self in all aspects of life.

Sexton views the self as "a whole nation of God," made up of many selves, some limiting and self-destructive, some nurturing and reaching out to larger realities. For her, the spiritual quest involves escaping the confines of those aspects of her various roles and selves which are narrow and constricting and opening herself to deeper and more expansive selves. Like Whitman, she seeks to celebrate the self and to discover its connections with other selves, with animals, with nature and with the transcendent powers of the universe. Being able to relate her multiple roles and selves to "a whole nation of God" gives her smaller roles a significance that satisfies her needs.

Selves such as prostitutes and derelicts, the "outlaws" of modern society, gain her approval because such a way of life reflects an expansiveness and creativity that refuses to rely on social respecta-

bility for its own sake. She likewise rejects Christian orthodoxy when it fails to grapple with the profound truths of the universe and relies instead on the superficialities of appearance and sentimentality and safety. She also rejects its failure to honor and incorporate into worship the visceral and sensuous aspects of the self. She is attracted to and longs to accept Christ as a manifestation of a merciful God, but finds the narrowness of Christianity thwarting her desire to believe.

Once she has left the confines of Christian belief, she has already freed herself of limits on the spiritual quest. In her religious poetry she enlarges the quest to make it a creative act as well as a manifestation of faith. Her creativity involves breaking down distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and material, so that even criminals become representatives of the divine. To experience transcendence one must, like Jonah, go downward, "inside the belly," and sense oneself profoundly as a part of nature. Smoking a cigar is a surer means to spiritual awakening than going to church because it connects one with one's physicality and ultimately with the universe. Everything in the cosmos has a spiritual dimension, and her imagination enables her to connect with this inherent vitality of the universe.

Thus, for Sexton, religion is a celebration of life, both for its pleasure and pain, its narrow roles and its expansive ones. Life is full of magic and mystery, and her religious voice is partly that of a conjurer, calling up the hidden truth of things, expanding identities to reach the cosmic dimension contained in them, making connections

between the spiritual and the profane, the spiritual and the imaginative.

CHAPTER V

THE SELF AS POET

> I cannot promise very much.
> I give you the images I know.
> Lie still with me and watch.
> (The Fortress," _CP_ 67)

> Poetry and poetry alone has saved my life.
> (_Letters_ 81)

Sexton's poetry is a quest for an understanding of herself, a sorting out of the conflicts among the multiple identities which she experiences, both those she has not chosen -- child, woman, Protestant -- and those she has -- wife, mother, poet. All of these selves seem at times to be narrow and constricting, though all have the potential for opening out into a larger identity which can give her a sense of unity with other people and with nature and the larger universe. Some of her identities have this potential more than others. As we have seen, she celebrates the spontaneity of the child self -- usually as manifested in her own children -- but writes of her own child-self as never having been able to experience this freedom and as hampered by a rigidity that she attributes to her family background. She has found her woman self, including her roles as wife and mother as well as more archetypal identities such as witch, wise woman, and earth mother, capable at times of leading to a more extended selfhood. But she finds her womanhood confined to the social expectations and limitations

placed on all women and can escape these chains ultimately only in imagination, by envisioning herself potentially one with nature or as an extension of some archetypal or idealized figure. Sexton's religious self is most vital when she is able to escape the confines of the Christian religion in which she was reared, which she experiences as identifying the human self as sinful and characterizing the trials and temptations of earthly life merely as preludes to a more perfect existence rather than as complete and significant in themselves. She seeks -- and finds -- a transcendent spirit, not through organized religion, but immanent in human and nonhuman nature, and in the experiences and phenomena of this world. The God she desires and envisions -- and who at times seems real -- is a companion at the dinner table, accepting her rat-like self and relishing and approving the pleasures of this life. Nevertheless, she longs to escape completely the limitations and failures of the human self for a more expansive selfhood, one that is as powerful as the sea, as all-consuming as the fiery dragon who keeps the stars, as free of gender as the angels, and as careless of limitations as Icarus.

All of these selves are of course filtered through the medium of poetry and are to some extent created by it. Sexton directly explores this poet self less frequently than her other identities, but when she does it is with a more assured voice than when she writes of her other selves. Poetry seems consistently to offer a more effective escape from the confinement, intolerance of failure, and disconnection from other people and nature that her other selves often lead her to.

Though it does not always serve her in this way, her poetic imagination seems capable of providing her the kind of solid identity in which she can bring together the two predominant and seemingly irreconcilable strains with which she struggles throughout her work. That is, the poetic gift enables her to celebrate the selves and roles of this earthly life as complete and purposeful in themselves and, at the same time, through the power of words and the imagination, to transform them, by seeing in them a transcendent, spiritual dimension, an immanent vitality, which connects her with the world beyond the senses. In such poetry, the dis-ease of the rat-identified self, which perceives itself as unacceptable and longs for self-destruction, is laid to rest and does not need to look for a god who can verify its worth. Furthermore, her poetic imagination obviates the need for death and loss of identity as prerequisite to transcendence. Finally, through her imagination the various selves that she experiences can change and expand to encompass their multiplicity and variety. Her awareness that "nothing is quite what it seems to be" is infused with a new sense of worth, when she recognizes that she, both in her human self and her poet self, can explore -- and even create -- the inner possibilities of all things.

As might be expected of a writer whose poetry mainly concerns her own identity, on the subject of her poetry Sexton has the most to say about her identity as a poet and deals to a lesser extent with the nature of poetry itself or with its effect on the audience. Many of her statements about poetry as such, though they are consistent with her poetry, are found rather in letters and interviews.

From very early in her career Sexton expresses in her poetry an assurance about the nature and direction of her poetic identity and a constancy and optimism of purpose that are often missing in her expression of her other identities. There is much less of the dissatisfaction with this self as being restrictive or cutting her off from other identities than there is expressed toward any of her other identities dealt with in this dissertation. As I have already discussed in Chapter One, her intent from the very beginning of her career is to seek the truth about her own identity, both as it relates to the "facts" of her daily life and also as it is connected with identities beyond herself -- other human beings, nature, archetypal identities, and God. The epigraph to Sexton's first volume of poems makes clear her intention to seek out the truth about her own identity and asserts that her self-exploration connects her with other selves, both archetypal and real. Sexton explores the paradox that a preoccupation with one's inner self can lead to a sense of unity with other people -- and justifies what seems to some of her critics a narrow and self-centered poetic pursuit, in her early and important poems, "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" (_CP_ 34-35). The poem is addressed to John Holmes, the teacher of her first poetry seminar, who felt that her unrelenting self-exposure might prove embarrassing to her friends and family (_Letters_ 58-60). Sexton exhibits in this poem a quiet and reasoned voice that is rare in her exploration of self. The poem begins abruptly and assertively, as if in continuation of a dialogue with her mentor Holmes:

> Not that it was beautiful,
> but that, in the end, there was
> a certain sense of order there;
> something worth learning
> in that narrow diary of my mind,
> in the commonplaces of the asylum
> where the cracked mirror
> or my own selfish death
> outstared me.

The poem is built on the paradox that what is narrow and limiting may also lead to growth and expansion and allow her to feel connected with other selves. Delving into the isolation of her own "mad" mind has revealed to her that, while the painful material she has found there could not be called "beautiful," there is an order in her mad, narrow self that makes her not so different from her "sane" friends, including her critic John Holmes:

> I tapped my own head;
> it was glass, an inverted bowl.
> It is a small thing
> to rage in your own bowl.
> At first it was private.
> Then it was more than myself;
> it was you, or your house
> or your kitchen.

Sexton's insight into the workings of her mind brings her a new intimacy with other people, taking her into their houses, their kitchens, making her feel at home. Her use of this domestic imagery suggests that, by delving into her self, she has gained a greater sense of connectedness with the ordinary events of daily life, both her own and others. The image of the constricted self as an upside-down -- and therefore sealed and isolating -- glass bowl invites comparison with Sylvia Plath's bell jar image and suggests that Sexton's self-probing poetry has established

for her a sense of connectedness with Sylvia Plath, who is similarly preoccupied with identity in her poetry. Though Plath's novel The Bell Jar was first published in 1971, much later than Sexton's poem, written in 1959, both Plath and Sexton were students in the poetry seminar taught by Holmes. Linda Sexton describes their working relationship as one in which they critiqued each other's poetry weekly after class over martinis (Letters 38). In a poem written on the occasion of Plath's suicide, Sexton identifies very strongly with Plath's taking of her life and admonishes her for succeeding at:

> . . . the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
>
> the death we said we both outgrew,
> the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
>
> the one we talked of so often each time
> we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston, . . .
> ("Sylvia's Death," CP 126)

Sexton's use of the image here in this early poem suggests that the bell jar image had been spoken of in these conversations too.

But though Sexton experiences connections with other people through her investigation of her own identity, she senses that some readers, Holmes among them, may reject an identification with the truths revealed in her mad mind, the truths that she reveals in her poetry, mainly because they are painful and not "beautiful." But she refuses to be deterred from writing the kind of self-revelatory poetry she has chosen:

> And if you turn away
> because there is no lesson here
> I will hold my awkward bowl,
> with all its cracked stars shining

like a complicated lie,
and fasten a new skin around it
as if I were dressing an orange
or a strange sun.
Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there.
(CP 34-35)

Her determination to continue to explore in her poetry the "awkward bowl" that is her self reflects the same affirmation and acceptance of her imperfections that she anticipates from her God in her religious poem "Rowing." But here her affirmation of self seems more firmly grounded in reality than in "Rowing." In that poem there is only a vague reference to a spiritual change of heart as the basis of her "rowing" toward acceptance by God:

and God was there like an island I had not rowed to,
still ignorant of Him, . . .
. . . .
and now, in my middle age,
. . . .
I am rowing, I am rowing. . . . (CP 417)

In "For John, . . .," however, we have her explicit testimony that her poetry has enabled her to affirm her imperfect self. This and other poems, as I will point out later in this chapter, suggest that Sexton finds poetry a more congenial arena than religion for exploring and exposing her imperfect self, even though critics such as Holmes may not find worthwhile "lessons" in her work.

Sexton's message to readers who reject her poetry is that she will continue to write about her own "cracked" self but will disguise it with "a new skin." This image of the human self, with its defects and imperfections shining like "cracked stars," reiterates her belief

that even the most imperfect selves can be a source of enlightenment and beauty. Her use of the word "stars" suggests that the knowledge gained from an exploration of the human self, though imperfect, can have cosmic reverberations, can lead to enlightenment concerning the universe and to a sense of unity with it. Her comparison of the cracks in her "bowl" to the meanderings of a "complicated lie" suggests a view of poetry that seems to conflict with her predilection for truth-seeking. Other statements in other sources might serve to explain her use of the word "lie" in connection with her self-revealing poetry. In another poem "The Black Art" (CP 88-89), which appeared in her second volume of poems, All My Pretty Ones, she also speaks of the poet as a deceiver: "With used furniture he makes a tree. / A writer is essentially a crook." When asked to explain how this view of poetry as a lie squares with her repeated assertions that she is "hunting for the truth" in her poetry, she responds:

> I think maybe its an evasion of mine. It's a very easy thing to say, "All poets lie." It depends on what you want to call the truth, you see, and it's also a way of getting out of the literal fact of a poem. You can say there is truth in this, but it might not be the truth of my experience. Then again, if you say that you lie, you can get away with telling the awful truth. That's why it's an evasion. The poem counts for more than your life. (Marx 563-564).

Thus, by her use of the word "lie" she seems to refer to the poet's way of presenting the truth, rather than to the material itself. It is acceptable for the poet to either tell the truth of one's own experience as if it happened to someone else, or to say that one is not telling the truth so as to lessen the impact of "the awful truth."

The image of dressing herself with a new skin also appears in her much later poem "The Civil War" (CP 418-419), discussed in Chapter One in connection with her projections about her new self. Here the image suggests that through her poetry she means to discover a new, more positive, more expanded, more vital self. Thus, the creative act that is poetry results in more than just a work of art. For Sexton it involves the creation of a new self. Likening the creation of a self to the dressing of an orange implies that such an act, though it is awkward and even comical or grotesque at times, will give the self new powers -- a more expanded identity. The act of dressing a strange sun seems even more cosmic and foolhardy, suggesting that creating a self is mysterious and dangerous, an encounter with an entity that is full of energy, fiery and powerful. Clothes, however, will make the sun seem less strange and will begin to bridge the gap between Sexton's humanity and her identity as part of nature. Both images indicate that the poet -- or anyone -- can forge links between human and nonhuman identities based on a commonality in nature, even though one might have to "dress" nature or "lie" about it to make it acceptable.

Sexton makes explicit in this work the lesson to be learned from her poetry -- exploring and affirming the imperfect self in order to create a new self:

> And if I tried
> to give you something else,
> something outside of myself,
> you would not know
> that the worst of anyone
> can be, finally,
> an accident of hope.
> . . . .

> 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, . . .

This assertion that her personal revelations can be a source of hope for the reader at least partly explains Sexton's seeming delight in presenting violent, harrowing, often shocking subjects. As we have seen, her poetry deals in the matter of a disturbed life: the hopelessness of the asylum, suicidal longings, psychotic fears, sadistic and masochistic relationships, subjects which readers often prefer to avoid. Likewise, she seems to relish dealing with taboo subjects -- masturbation, enemas, "female" surgery, incestuous experiences, sexual feelings toward her mother -- which have generally seemed unfit for poetry. Her revisioning of the life of Christ borders on blasphemy; in her religious poetry and elsewhere she uses imagery and rhyme patterns which seem to make light of serious and painful subjects. An elucidation of her use of the word "hope" in connection with these disturbing subjects may be found in her reiteration of this same idea in a quotation from Kafka with which she prefaces her second volume of poems, <u>All My Pretty Ones</u>:

> . . . the books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make 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 the ax for the frozen sea within us. (<u>CP</u> 48)

This view of poetry is expressed again with equal vigor in her interview with Patricia Marx published a few years later, in 1965, in which she

states that her purpose is to shock the reader into becoming "more aware." She says, "I think [poetry] should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt." She suggests in this interview that just as poetry expands the identity of the poet, it can and should also provide a means to a more expansive identity for the reader (Marx 561-562).

Sexton concludes "For John. . ." by suggesting that readers such as Holmes who reject her poetry do so because they fear what they might learn about themselves in this unlovely place that is someone's disturbed self:

> . . . 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.

Such readers are forced to admit, however, no matter how much they evade such probing of the self, that "sometimes in private" they must acknowledge the similarity between their "sanity" and her "madness": "my kitchen, your kitchen, / my face, your face."

Although the poem has been motivated by a reader's misgivings concerning Sexton's truth-telling poetry, she herself speaks firmly and with assurance throughout the poem. She speaks from the Oedipus-identified self, who seems to have no fears regarding the consequences of self-knowledge: the Jocasta self, who shuns self-awareness, seems to have been put firmly -- though perhaps temporarily -- to rest within the poet. She in fact externalizes the Jocasta identity, identifying her with unreceptive readers, in particular her teacher John Holmes. In commenting on other poets in her letters and elsewhere, Sexton makes

clear that for her it is this dauntless Oedipus-like quest into the nature of the self that gives poetry its power to move others. She professes to be moved most by those poets who undertake this same task. Sexton's model for this courageous openness is W.D. Snodgrass, to whom she was first attracted after reading his poem "Heart's Needle":

> I read "Heart's Needle" and I changed. . . . "A poem isn't supposed to do that! It isn't supposed to be that vital!" . . . meaning, of course, . . . how much genius and the fine grip of talent, is in such a poem that reaches down and touches the inmost part of the reader. (Letters 62-63)

This poem encouraged Sexton to continue to write the kind of poetry she wished to write, in spite of negative reactions such as Holmes's. "Heart's Needle," in fact, is the model for one of her most revelatory poems, "The Double Image" (discussed in Chapter Two), also dealing with the loss of a daughter. Snodgrass's poem obviously has fulfilled her requirement that poems "serve as the ax for the frozen sea" within us. By going into himself, Snodgrass has gone out to others, making contact; this poetic gesture is the one Sexton adopts as her own.

Since Sexton characterizes her poetry as arising out of this turning inward to explore her identity and this "inward look" as paradoxically leading her outward again to a greater sense of relationship to all things, she describes the poetic act as a kind of death and rebirth. To evade and understand her false and constricting identities, she is forced to withdraw from them into her self and there discovers her true selves. Out of this look into her own inner core, which would seem narrow in the sense that it is isolated from other selves, she realizes a deeper, truer identity. She makes contact with her identity

as a part of nature and discovers a longing to become one with God or the cosmos. Most significantly, this turning inward relieves her isolation, making her aware that she is an extension of other selves. As indicated in Chapter One, her self-probing repeats an archetypal pattern that is represented by Oedipus. Furthermore, her identification of her poetic self as growing out of an experience of isolation and self-scrutiny enables her to identify with Thoreau; she views her rejection of her superficial roles and selves in search of a more expansive identity as akin to his retreat to the woods to encounter what was essential in himself. She sees herself as "lost," and her need to discover a new identity that will serve her better leads her to identify with Jonah inside the belly of the whale. Her "reinvention" of the Jonah myth ("Making a Living," CP 350-351) makes his tale a paradigm of the dilemma of the self-creating writer:

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

Sexton's account of Jonah's dark night of the soul is true to the myth of the individual's encounter with the self as described by Joseph Campbell in The Hero with a Thousand Faces (49-251 passim). Her description of her striving for self-understanding in relation to this mythical pattern indicates again that she sees her own personal quest as a universal one. According to Campbell, the descent into the belly of the whale symbolizes death and a loss of ego identity. Inside the whale the pilgrim transcends the personal past and is opened to a more expansive self. In Sexton's poem the false identities that define Jonah

as a result of his childhood and his experience in the world are no longer adequate:

> Jonah took out the wallet of his father
> and tried to count the money
> and it was all washed away.
> Jonah took out the picture of his mother
> and tried to kiss the eyes
> and it was all washed away.
> Jonah took off his coat and his trousers,
> his tie, his watch fob, his cuff links
> and gave them up.
> He sat like an old-fashioned bather
> in his undershirt and drawers.

The supports that Jonah has come to expect from his parents no longer serve him in his imprisonment undersea in the dark bowels of a creature representing nature. Jonah's dilemma, which is also that of Sexton and all of us, is that he must engage those aspects of the self from which there is no escape -- the forces of nature and of the unconscious and the isolation resulting from one's identity as a unique being. Neither masculinity, represented by his father's material support, nor femininity, represented by his mother's nurturance, can be of any use to him in his state of aloneness in the face of nature and his own identity. Nor does the adult identity Jonah has put on to deal with the conscious, ego-driven world serve him in this state where ego-identified qualities such as material success, power and even time do not apply.

We have seen repeatedly that Sexton views her own quest for selfhood as motivated by the failure of the identities and roles developed both through her childhood experiences within her family, including her religious identity, and in her adult life as wife and mother. The failure of these "old selves" had brought her to a withdrawal into

madness. As she indicates in "Those Times. . ." and "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," it has been out of a Jonah-like descent into the failed self that she has created a new identity and a poetic self out of which she has "made [her] living." In her account of Jonah, he assumes the detached, attentive stance of the writer to deal with his isolated state. He chooses not to succumb to a futile and narcissistic protest against his fate but to observe it in order to learn from it, just as Sexton suggests in "For John. . ." that one can learn great lessons from the chaos of one's own soul:

> He did not beat on the walls.
> Nor did he suck his thumb.
> He cocked his head attentively
> like a defendant at his own trial.
> . . . .
> This is my death,
> Jonah said out loud,
> and it will profit me to understand it.
> I will make a mental note of each detail.

In order to "understand" his "death," Jonah turns from his roles in the world to a simpler, more elemental self by attempting to comprehend his identity as an extension of nature:

> Little fish swam by his nose
> and he noted them and touched their slime.
> Plankton came and he held them in his palm
> like God's littlest light bulbs.

Like Sexton, Jonah's attempt to understand who he is reveals to him his connections with nonhuman nature, and it is out of this identification that he begins to heal his isolation and to create a new, more meaningful self. But just as in "For John. . . ," when Jonah returns to the world of the ego he is confronted by an audience that does not want to

hear the lessons that he has learned from this confrontation with his elemental self:

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

The tone here is bitter by comparison with "For John. . ." Not only does the audience fail to learn from Jonah's ordeal, but also they view this artist-figure as someone to be put on exhibit. They do not empathize with his sufferings, but wish only to profit materially from them. Published much later than "For John. . .," in 1974, this poem perhaps reflects a longer experience with critics and reviewers; the last line explicitly identifies Sexton with Jonah in regard to audience reaction.

The two poems considered thus far in this chapter express a poetic identity that is based primarily on a turning inward and downward into the self in order to learn the true nature of one's identity and one's relationship with the external universe. Just as in her other selves, Sexton also experiences a skyward attraction as part of her poetic self, an ambitious, courageous self that longs to make some definitive leap out of her self into a larger, more expansive identity. For this longing to transcend the limits of her identity in order to experience a fuller, more daring existence she also finds a mythological

paradigm of the artist in the figure of Icarus. "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" (CP 53) is an English sonnet modeled on a short work by Yeats, "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing" (Perrine 2). Sexton's change of the last word in the title suggests a shift in emphasis from Yeats's poem in which he exalts defeat as a higher thing than triumph. Here, Icarus's triumph is not in achieving his goal but in just having experienced a superhuman identity for an instant:

> Consider Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on,
> testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade,
> and think of that first flawless moment over the lawn
> of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!

Sexton desires the kind of expansiveness exemplified by Icarus's flight to the sun and by the kind of writing she admires in her poet friend. She regards Icarus's fatal attraction to the sun as more expansive than Daedalus's sensible survival instincts which save him from death but keep him from soaring to and beyond his own limits. She suggests in the poem that a true artistic triumph represents the same kind of bursting out of limitations that Icarus achieves; no artist has dared such a creative act before and therefore the achievement is a clear "triumph." It does not matter whether the artist's other works are failures. Even the very attempt to fly in order to escape from the prison of the labyrinth represents the effort to break out of the limitations of the human self that we have seen Sexton drawn to in other works.

Sexton's colloquial language and exclamatory syntax convey the

celebratory mood of the poem. "The difference" that she exclaims about is the moment of flawlessness that Icarus has experienced by taking flight. That moment of creativity, of overcoming his human limits is worth whatever risk might be involved. He has risen above the trees, which seem "as awkward as camels" compared to his swift flight, and suggest a limited, fixed selfhood. The starlings are "shocked" to find that a human being has escaped human limitations. Icarus has in fact superseded most of the powerful forces of earthly nature:

> . . . think of innocent Icarus who is doing quite well:
> larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast
> of the plushy ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!

Sexton suggests here that artistic achievement requires a kind of innocence that ignores limitations and consequences; the practical Daedalus will never "triumph" because he is too concerned with limits and with outcomes. Icarus's innocence causes him to be captivated by the wondrous light and heat of the sun and to wish to be one with it, to experience the kind of creativity that the sun is capable of:

> Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually
> he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling
> into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea?
> See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down
> while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

Thus, by flying into it, Icarus achieves a "flawless" -- though momentary -- oneness with the sun. His "tunneling into its hot eye" is reminiscent of the kind of glorious death that Sexton herself longs for in "The Starry Night," which immediately follows "To a Friend. . ." in her canon. The falling back to earth after such self-extension is insigni-

ficant and inevitable; it is the "triumph" of having achieved a cosmic identity, however short-lived, that has made "the difference." Icarus is thus the paradigm for Sexton of the poet's desire for expansiveness, for creating a work of art in which the form and the words combine to create an expansive moment for both poet and reader.

A more "reality-based" portrayal of the poet's drive for a more extended self still centers on the traditional association of creativity with flight. In "The Ambition Bird" (CP 299-300) Sexton writes of her poetic gift as a compulsion toward immortality which keeps her awake writing night after night and prevents her from leading a more placid, less driven kind of existence:

> I would like a simple life
> yet all night I am laying
> poems away in a long box.
>
> It is my immortality box,
> my lay-away plan,
> my coffin.
>
> All night dark wings
> flopping in my heart.
> Each an ambition bird.

The theme -- the poet's longing for immortality and the durability and greater expansiveness of the work of art as compared with the poet's life -- is again reminiscent of Yeats, and Sexton's bird image suggests that she is aware of the connection. In fact, the tone of the poem, in which the symbol of immortality is more like a nagging crow than a lifeless bird made of gold that sings beautifully, suggests a parody of Yeats's more solemn and dignified musing on the worth of his art after his death in "Byzantium." However, Yeats too downplays the value

of his creative output in his poem, though Sexton in her poem concentrates more on the painful process of setting a poem down on paper.

It is characteristic of Sexton to deprecate her art in such a way. She further disparages her poetry here by suggesting that there is another identity -- non-writing, non-compulsive, content with simple pleasures, and able to accept life on its own terms -- that is more desirable than her poetic self. In a later poem published in 1971 and part of her series of horoscope poems called "Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die" she speaks of her "ideas" as a curse because they "spring from a radical discontent / with the awful order of things." She suggests -- certainly with some degree of irony and understatement -- that this discontented self is somewhat of an aberration within her total identity, that a more contented, more traditionally female self is preferable:

> [U]nless I can shake myself free of my dog, my flag,
> of my desk, my mind, I find life a bit of a drag.
> Not always, mind you. Usually I'm like my frying pan --
> useful, graceful, sturdy and with no caper, no plan.
> ("February 3rd," CP 596)

"The Ambition Bird" lists a catalog of Sexton's artistic ambitions:

> The bird wants to be dropped
> from a high place like Tallahatchie Bridge.
>
> He wants to light a kitchen match
> and immolate himself.
>
> He wants to fly into the hand of Michelangelo
> and come out painted on a ceiling.
>
> He wants to pierce the hornet's nest
> and come out with a long godhead.

> He wants to take bread and wine
> and bring forth a man happily floating in the Caribbean.
>
> He wants to be pressed out like a key
> so he can unlock the Magi.
>
> He wants to take leave among strangers
> passing out bits of his heart like hors d'oeuvres.
>
> He wants to die changing his clothes
> and bolt for the sun like a diamond.

All of these ambitions involve achieving some kind of immortality through transformation by death. Several of the deaths she envisions represent some form of martyrdom, a form of death to which her attraction is clear from other poems, notably "Consorting with Angels" and "The Consecrating Mother." In these and other ways, the catalog of ambitions reflects themes and techniques already seen in many other poems. Several of them reflect her predilection for images taken from popular culture. "The Ballad of Tallahatchie Bridge" was a popular song of the sixties protesting the destructive effects of social restrictions, a common theme of Sexton's. Death by self-immolation was a form of martyrdom also common in the sixties, practiced by Vietnam war protestors. A Caribbean getaway and hors-d'oeuvres suggest that the "ambition bird's" aspirations are solidly middle class! Sexton's ambitions also reflect the close relationship that she sees between religion and poetry, a connection she explores more explicitly in "With Mercy for the Greedy," to be discussed later in this chapter. Many of them reflect a wish for an Icarus-like death leap that will result in a loss of her present identity by becoming part of some other, larger self. The final ambition in particular is a striking image that

is reminiscent of Icarus's attraction to the sun; Sexton would become a diamond which, by reflecting the light of the sun, forges a continuum linking her with it. Such a desire for unity is a constant theme of Sexton's. But the price here, as in other poems, is a kind of death. (See especially "The Starry Night," CP 53-54 and "Making a Living," CP 350-351).

At the end of the poem, Sexton returns, with a note of humor and anticlimax, to her futile wish to be done with this compulsive, artist self that on the one hand fears death and on the other sees the willingness to risk it -- or even the need to experience it -- as necessary for an artist to totally experience her creativity. Again, with humor, she deprecates her art:

> He wants, I want.
> Dear God, wouldn't it be
> good enough to just drink cocoa?
>
> I must get a new bird
> and a new immortality box.
> There is folly enough inside this one.

Her use of the word "folly" refers both to her "ambition," because it is self-destructive, and to her poetry itself, which she here characteristically dismisses as of no value. Presumably this new poet-self would be an identity that could create without being suicidal.

Both "To a Friend. . ." and "The Ambition Bird" reflect Sexton's insight that the longing for immortality carries within it the seeds of the poet's destruction, since the artist must forego her life in order to achieve it. In the latter poem more than in the former she views her compulsion to write as limiting her control over her life.

Another poem, "Said the Poet to the Analyst" (CP 12-13), speaks of this dilemma in another guise, namely, in relation to the power of words to control the artist and render her weak and helpless before them. Here again, the poet speaks out of a self divided between an identity that would prefer a simple, unquestioning life and a self that is more "ambitious," more daring, more concerned with ultimate truth. Thus the Jocasta-Oedipus battle surfaces again. On one level the poem is the poet-speaker's monologue on the difference between the poet's and the analyst's connection with words. It is addressed to the analyst. On another level, however, the poem expresses two aspects of the poet's self. That which she identifies as the poet prefers, like Jocasta, to be blind to the power of words and to the possibility that another self, the analyst, is concerned with the source of the words and the truths they reveal about the poet that she may be unaware of. The poem defines words as "like labels, / or coins, or better, like swarming bees." In all three guises, but mostly so in the last, words are threatening. As labels and coins, words have a Jocasta-like identity of inhibiting truth and expansiveness. Labels represent a finality rather than a fluidity of meaning. As coins, words are merely a medium of exchange for their referents; they have a fixed value. The image of swarming bees, however, gives words a more ominous, uncontrollable quality that is related to Sexton's desire for but dread of the truth--her Oedipus self. Words, like bees, have a life of their own; they are multiple and dangerous and out of anybody's control. In order to write, Sexton says, she must forget that words can expand of their own accord:

> I must always forget how one word is able to pick
> out another, to manner another, until I have got
> something I might have said. . .
> but did not.

The poet goes on to "confess" that words can break her, when she is forced to consider that they have a source of which she is unaware. She would prefer to think of words "like dead bees in the attic, / unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings." In that state they are harmless and can be "counted," that is controlled and understood. The poet's response to this analyst-self, who probes the "sources" of things is to "admit nothing." She prefers to concentrate on the event she is writing about, the story she is telling:

> I work with my best, for instance,
> when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,
> that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot
> came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.

But when the analyst-self probes more deeply, sees behind her words their source in the core of her self, then she is "broken." Words such as "praise," "magic" and "lucky" break down, and she becomes self-conscious and unable to be spontaneous in her writing:

> But if you should say this is something it is not,
> then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny
> and ridiculous and crowded with all
> the believing money.

As suggested in the introduction to this dissertation, for Sexton poetry represents her self, and as a poet she expects to expand her identity in a way that does not happen otherwise. She alludes here to poetry's power to bring about such expansion and indicates that the

growth of the poet's self can take place even in spite of her unwillingness that it should be so.

Sexton explores the power of poetry to bring about this expansion in her poem "With Mercy for the Greedy" (CP 62-63), in which she comes as close as she ever does to formulating a definition of poetry. The poem is again a dialogue of the divided self, in which she asserts the superiority of poetry over religion as a means of redemption.

The poem is addressed to a friend, Ruth, who has written Sexton requesting that she wear a cross enclosed with the letter. Sexton is touched that the cross was once worn by her friend and bears dog's teeth marks. The cross thus seems an extension of her friend. But Sexton cannot find in the cross the same feeling of connectedness with Christ's life and death, though she tries:

> I detest my sins and I try to believe
> in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
> its solid neck, its brown sleep.
>
> True. There is
> a beautiful Jesus.
> 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.

She can feel a sense of connection with his human self but not the divine Christ. To see oneself as an extension of Christ and to be cleansed of evil, religion requires that one take on the suffering represented in the image of the cross. Sexton is unable to make that commitment. In response to her friend's urging to make her first confession, Sexton responds that confession is as natural to her as life

itself and that, in fact, poems are forms of confession:

> 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.

As we have seen in Sexton's poetic exploration of her multiple selves, she tends to define poetry as a noisy and argumentative wrangling among the various identities that make up the personality. Furthermore, rather than rejecting the worldly, comfort-seeking self, as religion in the image of the crucifixion seems to do, poetry takes its subject matter from the imperfect world. It is fashioned from the pottage of the world and is a mixture of all the earthy, common dilemmas of the human soul. It is the rat's star, the realm in which even the rat's quest is noble and can be realized. It is the evil, sinful person's true province, as well as her guide. It is a medium grounded in suffering but providing greater tolerance than religion for failure, for disagreement and uncertainty, for seeking out one's own truth. Poetry is thus more open than religion, permitting so much more of the self to find expansion.

Thus, Sexton's poetic identity is made up of a multiplicity of selves -- starting with the self of the inverted glass bowl, who looks inward because there is an order to be discovered within the self that can lead her back to a connection with the outer world and with other selves. This self is content to hold up her glass bowl, though cracked, for all to see, and thus it is the central focus of Sexton's

poetry. This is also the rat-like self, imperfect and gnawing, for whom she is convinced there is a star, a place of refuge and acceptance. The rat-self connects this self-probing, self-revealing identity with another self, one who is not content with life as an existence "between the grapes and the thorns," but is greedy for life, for transcendence and transformation. It is she for whom the art of poetry involves abundance and excess, who sees poetry as a medium of excess feeling, a magic, black art related to "trances and portents. . .spells and fetiches" [sic] (CP 88). This is a self that wants to sink fully into the sense experiences of the body and the world. But paradoxically, this greed for life also leads her to a need for extension beyond the world, and she seeks a transformed self that would give her a cosmic identity like that of the sun. Such "ambition," however, involves a risk of death that is at once exhilarating and fear-producing.

On at least one occasion, Sexton is able to achieve a poetic synthesis of all these selves. She is able to apply the magical qualities of her art, not to disguise her own identity by dressing it in a new skin, but to reveal the inner identities of objects other than her own self, to give her a sense of extension by connecting her with these objects. She is able to achieve a transformation here, not by a death-leap into the sun but by experiencing fully the spiritual identity inherent in the phenomena of this world. She is thus able to combine her greediness for life with her longing for transcendence. Sexton achieves this synthesis in "The Room of My Life" (CP 422). As she sits writing in her room, she experiences an awareness that her

poetry is her life, that the objects in her poetry and in her life are the same. She further realizes that she has the power to transform these objects into something more than themselves. She can do this partly because of her poetic gift of image-making and because of the power of words to transform things, and partly because objects themselves share her creative power to expand their identities, to assume many selves. The poem is a celebratory catalog of ways in which words and her own imagination enable her to perceive and communicate the inner truth of things:

> Here,
> in the room of my life
> the objects keep changing.
> Ashtrays to cry into,
> the suffering brother of the wood walls,
> the forty-eight keys of the typewriter
> each an eyeball that is never shut,
> the books, each a contestant in a beauty contest,
> the black chair, a dog coffin made of Naugahyde,
> the sockets on the wall
> waiting like a cave of bees,
> the gold rug
> a conversation of heels and toes,
> the fireplace
> a knife waiting for someone to pick it up,
> the sofa, exhausted with the exertion of a whore,
> the phone
> two flowers taking root in its crotch,
> the doors
> opening and closing like sea clams,
> the lights
> poking at me,
> lighting up both the soil and the laugh.
> The windows,
> the starving windows
> that drive the trees like nails into my heart.

Sexton recognizes here the ability of the poet to see and communicate the inner dynamic of all things and their limitless capabilities

for expansion, to become other than what they seem or have been. Such ability enables her to nourish both herself and the world, and this is for her the overriding purpose of poetry:

> Each day I feed the world out there
> although birds explode
> right and left.
> I feed the world in here too,
> offering the desk puppy biscuits.

She is able to experience and express these changing identities because she too is a part of nature and because of the power of words:

> . . . nothing is just what it seems to be.
> My objects dream and wear new costumes,
> compelled to, it seems, by all the words in my hands
> and the sea that bangs in my throat.

By transforming objects into something more than themselves, she nourishes the world, giving it more than she has taken from it. Poetry is thus a form of white, not black magic. The subject matter of her poetry is the "used furniture" of experience. In this furniture she finds an expansive potentiality which enables her to transform it into a tree.

Thus, finally, it is Sexton's own creativity, her imagination as expressed through her poetry, that enables her to experience in this life the extension of self that she seeks, without having to die to achieve it. Her imagination enables her to go beyond her own unaccepted, undesirable identities and to create new ones that are more acceptable. Furthermore, because other writers have explored the same experiences that she grapples with, poetry has enabled her to understand that she is not alone in being confronted with an unsatisfactory, unserviceable

self, and that in her need and desire to explore her identity she has both literary and archetypal guides. Though she also found satisfaction in her physical capacity to create new selves and in other aspects of her identity as a woman, she lamented the lack of guides to enable her to fully explore this self. Finally, poetry promises, not a human existence based on the primacy of pain and self-denial as religion seems to, but an identity which celebrates and continually expands the capacity of all creatures to experience the full capabilities of existence. For all of these reasons, Sexton can affirm her poetic gift with a more assured voice than she can any of her other identities.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The process of becoming herself, that is, separating out what is her own identity from what has been falsely presented to her as an adequate identity by family, society, and church, leads Sexton to turn inward to explore the depths of the self and also to venture outward and upward to discover those larger identities -- nature, God, community, poetry -- in which she participates and which have the power to bring about the enlargement of the individual self. Each of the selves that she explores in coming to an understanding of her own identity -- be it child, wife, mother, madwoman, religious self, poet -- has the potential either to restrict her to a narrow, superficial and deeply dissatisfying identity or to open her to the fullest capabilities of the inner Self. Sexton experiences herself as plagued by negative selves and roles which inhibit her contact with the larger selves which she would experience more fully. These negative selves and superficial roles are largely the result of her family upbringing, which includes her religious training, but are also attributable to social realities, such as the expectations placed on her as a woman, the circumstances of her family's economic status, and the limitations of human nature. All of these forces have combined to create in Sexton an experience of self as mad, confined both literally and psychically, cut off from her creative potential, passively overwhelmed by outside forces and inner voices ("green witches") accusing her of evil and urging her to kill

herself, lost and seeking a key to unlock more affirmative selves, unable to accept the God of her parents and to experience bonds with loved ones, physically alive but emotionally dead. The opposites of these states are the qualities she seeks as indicative of a whole self -- spontaneity and self-confidence, creativity and self-acceptance, the ability to experience connections with other beings both human and non-human, an awareness of her identity as a part of nature, and transcendence of the limitations of the human condition.

The combat between, on the one hand, those outer and inner forces which would confine her to a narrow range of superficial and unnatural identities and on the other, more creative, more expansive, more dangerous identities is the substance of her poetry. Sexton is creating a song of herself, and thus her self-creation and her poetry are one. The open warfare among her identities necessitates intimate revelations about her life and the lives of those around her and occasions poetry on subjects some critics consider inappropriate -- female masturbation, menstruation, enemas, the sexual aspects of the mother-dauther, father-daughter relationship, her sadistic tendencies. While there is no denying her delight in shocking her readers, such subject matter also reflects a more serious purpose, first stated in 1962 in a quotation from Kafka: "a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us" (48), and reiterated often throughout her career: ". . . even trees become trite -- and we need something to shock us, to make us become more aware" ("Interview with Anne Sexton" 32). Furthermore, a basic ploy in Sexton's work is to seek -- and find -- ways in which she is connected with other selves. She sees her struggle as connecting her with all human beings,

including certain literary and archetypal figures, and her intimate revelations give her a sense of relatedness to others involved in the quest for a deeper selfhood: "It was you, or your house/or your kitchen." Thus, her personal struggle for self-understanding has led her to an exploration of the nature of the human self, what restricts and distorts it, what frees it.

This universalization of her quest for a whole self brings Sexton to seek connections with other selves at all levels of her search -- when she feels narrow and constricted, when she has found a way out of this limited identity, and when she has identified the goal of her quest. These other identities can be animate or inanimate beings, people she knows, literary figures, and even mythical quest figures. Thus, one of many paradoxes on which her poetry turns is that an exploration of one's own self -- even when motivated by a sense of isolation -- can intensify one's awareness of commonality with other beings. Though this recognition usually has the effect of expanding and deepening her own identity, sometimes her identification with these other selves can thwart her own growth. When these extended identities seem to control and threaten her, then her identification with them becomes destructive. For instance, she sees herself as harboring within her a senile and accusing old woman -- imaged as her great-aunt -- who persists even from beyond the grave in accusations that Sexton is "the evil one." Again, when she is taken over by passivity and fear, she both longs and fears to become one with chairs or dolls, because they are lifeless and detached. On other occasions, identities that she recognizes in herself and longs to be free of,

nevertheless lead to a sense of expansiveness. These imperfect selves at least connect her with the whores, beggars, and helpless children of the world, in whose identities she recognizes a kind of nakedness, earthiness, and courage that she admires. She can also celebrate her unredeemed identities as "broken pieces of God" or as connecting her with nature. By understanding her suicide attempts in terms of "struck leaves letting go" she extends the self to a participation in the birth and death cycle of nature and also becomes aware that she must love her "self's self where it lives" so as to forge new connections and overcome this inevitable cycle. Even the self that feels guilty and isolated from others takes on extended significance when she can see this experience as an extension of Jonah's living death inside the whale.

In another instance of how these extended identities war against one another, she can be both plagued and freed by the identity that will not let her rest content with the superficial roles and identities which life has meted out to her. When her "radical discontent/with the awful order of things" seems to drive her mercilessly, then her discontented self is ratlike or crablike, and her ideas are "a curse" (595). But yet, when she can acknowledge that her quest for selfhood and truth is like that of Oedipus, it becomes an archetypal quest that makes her a "philosopher" and puts her in league with other questing figures, both literary and mythical, such as Thoreau and Jonah, whose self-understanding comes through a turning away from the world, or Whitman and Icarus and Van Gogh, who seek a new self by rushing to become co-extensive with the universe. And though one suspects that Sexton would never be content with any identity for long, no matter how expansive, she even

at times defines the most desirable identity as one that is sensible and content with limits: "as reasonable as Latin, as solid as earthenware, an equilibrium I never knew" (45). But though even she recognizes that one's superficial, unquestioned identities make up the bulk of one's life -- "Usually I'm like my frying pan -- useful, graceful, sturdy and with no caper, no plan" (596) -- and accepts these selves as adequate for living a satisfactory life, there is another creative and questing self that cannot rest with such ordinariness and must strike out to probe for a deeper reality beneath these appearances. At times she exults in this discontent as the strongest sign of a vital, transcendent being; at other times -- so often in fact that it seems to dominate her poetry and to be the self that most people link with Sexton -- she seems plagued and dogged by this identity and by the difficulties of weaving these deeper selves into a harmonious, transcendent whole.

Sexton's search for a more satisfactory identity is thoroughly rooted in the body and in nature. She clearly links the constricted, superficial and numb identity she wishes to eradicate with the influence of a perfectionist, compulsive mother and an overbearing, insensitive father who have imparted a loathing of bodily imperfections and a distaste for the messiness of bodily functions. Sexton discovers as she grows into adult hood that bodily functions, particularly her physical creativity as a woman, but also her menstrual cycle and even excretion, lead her to a sense of awe at the workings of nature and to a celebration of her participation in it. Like Thoreau, she searches

for images of the self in nature and finds direct contemplation of nature more sufficient as a guide than the study of the accumulated knowledge of science and philosophy. Furthermore, a full immersion in nature, whereby her own small, pink identity as a human being would merge with the ocean or the whirling stars and take on a more powerful, cosmic selfhood, promises the kind of transcendence she desires. With her imagination she revises the Biblical portrayal of Jesus to include an instinctual, visceral, and sexual identity. Her God is one who prefers the pleasures of a physical body to a stodgy and immaterial perfection. Awareness of her woman's body also brings a sense of connection with the archetypal feminine, though she acknowledges that her womanly experiences are "never enough" to overcome the superficialities of familial role models and social stereotypes (134).

Yet giving herself over to a physical identity can be threatening as well, as when forbidden, incestuous sexuality connects her with the dark powers of the serpent, or her attempt to escape her constricted existence evokes a witch-like self who dreams evil, flouts conventions, and risks isolation and a fiery death as punishment. But even such defiance promises a larger self, or a deeper penetration into the mysteries of the human self and never fails to be exhilarating. Even a martyr's death can be a way of achieving a more profound experience of life. Late poems, however, show her still wrestling with the plaguey child self and other negative forces which she seems unable to totally eradicate.

But a more important paradox in Sexton's poetry, in fact the basic

one, is that this "transcending downward" toward her identity in nature also opens her to a spiritual self. Not only does this awakening to her natural, physical, visceral self seem to provide Sexton with a more meaningful spirituality and sense of being alive than does conventional religion, but it also provides her with an awareness of the common identity of all creatures. It enables her to recognize a basic striving in all creatures for an expansion of self by sharing in another level of being. Because she longs to experience her commonality with the sun, with fruit, or with porcupines and June bugs, she can also imagine these creatures' biological and evolutionary development as a natural drive towards an extended, expanded self. Coupled with archetypal associations, this striving can enable her to imagine a moon landing as a sexual violation of the moon or death by drowning as a way of experiencing a larger womahood through taking on the identity of the ocean. This tendency to become more than one's self can also enable her to imagine a God who longs for the pleasures of a physical body and who would accept her rat-like self because He shares it. And it can bring her to extend the identity of Jesus so that He too shares in aspects of physicality and human psychology not usually associated with Him. Moreover, Sexton seems to recognize that it is poetry and the power of the imagination that enables her to share in God's and nature's creative power, so that she can both create new identities and penetrate to the heart of old ones.

Sexton's poetry is an act of "confessing" the truth about her constricted and "guilty" selves as a means of building new, more adequate selves or at least clothing the old selves in a new skin. She

believed that it is incumbent on the poet to be honest in her pursuit of truth about the human self, no matter how much pain is involved or what form its expression might ultimately take. "Hurt must be examined like a plague" (Letters 105). Her imagination enabled her to penetrate to the reality behind appearances, as well as to create new identities for objects and creatures. She was both freed and affirmed by this creative gift as well as compulsively controlled by it, and her poetry is a record of this warfare between a free, transcendent vision of the full possibilities for herself as well as for all human beings, and a tenacious, driving need to push the self to its farthest limits, recognizing that death would destroy the self but would also affirm that she had indeed risked everything in pursuit of a deeper experiencing of self. She regarded her public revelations of her struggle as necessary in order to forge the links between herself and others that would make both them and her more human. Though accused by critics of narcissism and grandiosity, there is a humility in her admission that the self is "not beautiful" and a strong sense of commitment to her craft and to her audience arising from her belief "that the worse of anyone/can be, finally/ an accident of hope" (CP 34). That she chose to take her own life may be more attributable to the chemistry of the human body or to the "green" voices urging her to die than to the failure of her vision or of her delight in living. But she has left a legacy of hope in the determination with which she pursued truth and in the new avenues to spirituality which she pursued, avenues which other women are only now beginning to explore.

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APPROVAL SHEET

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dec 4, 1984
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