

THE JOURNEY THROUGH BEDLAM:
THE LIFE, ARTISTRY AND DEATH
OF ANNE SEXTON

By

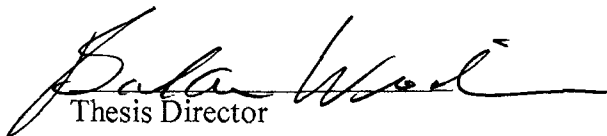
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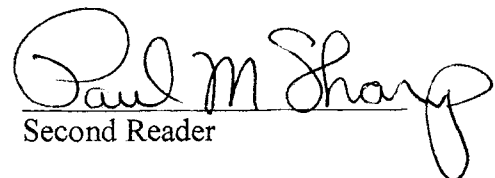
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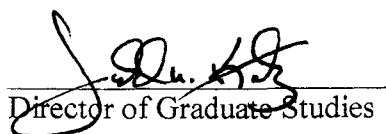

Director of Graduate Studies

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CHAPTER I

THE SEEDS OF MADNESS

The writings of Anne Sexton are often intense, provocative, harsh and replete with startling, vivid imagery. Hailed as an important poetic force, Sexton received several literary honors including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1967. More intriguing, however, is the mass appeal of her poetry. It is embraced not only by those within the exclusive literary community, but the general public as well, who find in her work images and themes with which they can identify. As such, her work has been the subject of much critical analysis with particular attention being given to her complex, often tortured existence and eventual suicide. Indeed, the details of Sexton's life and death are nearly as intriguing as her most engaging poems. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify with certainty the motive for any suicide, Anne Sexton's behavior and eventual demise can be at least partially explained by analyzing pertinent biographical details from a sociological aspect. Additionally, a thorough explication of her poetry provides significant insight into her state of mind over an extended period of time. Her many years of mental illness lead her first to her art and then to her death. For Anne Sexton, her madness was both her muse and her downfall.

Born in 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts, Anne Gray Harvey was the third of three daughters born to Ralph and Mary Gray Staples Harvey. Her eldest sister Jane was five years older and sister Blanche three years older. Though she would often refer to herself in later years as a "girl who was meant to be a boy, the unwanted third daughter," other members of her family recall her being spoiled and cherished as the baby of the family

(L. Sexton 3). Anne sensed rejection from her family at an early age that would lay the groundwork for her future troubles.

Prominent and successful, the Harvey family was heavily patriarchal, controlled by Anne's father, Ralph Churchill Harvey, a well-known executive in the wool business. Although he is described as "a heavy drinker, philanderer and general hellraiser," at home he was meticulous in his demeanor and appearance and demanded the same of his wife, children and surroundings (Seinfelt 327). Mary Gray Staples, Anne's mother, was a woman with whom Anne had a difficult relationship that would prove to be the catalyst for many of her emotional troubles. Mary Gray "also drank and tended to be cold and distant with her daughters" (Seinfelt 328). She herself was raised as a "little princess" and thus treated her daughters in the same manner. Anne and her sisters did not form a close bond during their childhood and remained mostly estranged later in life. Jane, the eldest, was very close to her father and was something of a "Daddy's girl," while Blanche was dubbed the smart one, the bookworm of the family who eventually became the only Harvey child to attend college (Middlebrook 7).

The makeup of the family structure left Anne, the baby of the family, as a needy, clingy child whose desire for attention could not be sated. She was often left for extended periods of time in a spacious playroom in the family house. A vivid memory recounted by Anne many years later finds her

...shut up in her room as a toddler by a folding gate drawn across the doorway. It was a spacious, high ceilinged room in the top story of the house papered with a pattern of red roses. Tall windows looked onto the crowds of trees...The roses became blood clots, and all the leaves rustling beyond the windowpanes are

tongues urging her to die. "I was a nothing, crouching in the closet."

(Middlebrook 8)

This imagery is similar to that which will be found later in her poetry—visions that express her fear and feelings of rejection. This is perhaps the earliest manifestation of the problems that would plague her throughout her life.

Feeling isolated and unloved, Anne's problems were compounded by her role as outsider in the family structure. Ralph Harvey insisted on a dress code at dinner for guests as well as for his own children. Unfortunately, Anne was "chronically messy, fidgety and loud" where her sisters were neat and well behaved (Middlebrook 9). Her appearance and demeanor were described in detail by her sister Blanche: "Anne's hairdo would succumb quickly to her habit of twirling her hair between her fingers into masses of snarls. Her clothes were just as bad: hems trailing, unlikely combinations of scarves and belts donned over mismatched blouses and skirts" (Middlebrook 9). She came to dislike mealtimes and, as a result, often carried food to her room where she would let it stay until it spoiled. As a result, Anne continued to eat her meals in the kitchen until age eleven, long after her sisters had joined the family in the dining room. This behavior set the scene for the first of many disturbing periods of Sexton's life.

At this young age, Sexton's actions begin to develop a pattern that will later coincide with Emile Durkheim's definition of an Egoistic Suicide. Preeminent French sociologist Emile Durkheim published his classic tome, *Suicide*, in France in 1897, and it was subsequently translated into English in 1951. This book introduces and explores four main types, or categories, of suicide. They each relate to the amount of integration and regulation perceived by the individual. For instance, altruistic suicide is caused by too

much integration—the individual feels obligated to sacrifice his life for the particular group to which he belongs. Anomic suicide, however, is the result of excess social regulation—the rich are more likely than the poor to commit suicide under this heading because the rich have been socially regulated to expect more. Therefore, they are more likely to express frustration when they fail to meet their expectations. However, it seems that Durkheim’s egoistic and fatalistic typologies are better suited to Anne Sexton’s behavior and eventual suicide.

With the egoistic suicide, the individual lacks social regulation and is denied social acceptance: the ties to society are loosened and thus suicide becomes an acceptable alternative. Sexton’s behavior at this point effectively removed her from the only society relevant to a child—the sphere of her family. When people are “unable to receive love, affection, or moral support” from their families, they are more likely to fall into the typical category of egoistic suicide (Thio 163). This early manifestation was an indication of the deep-seated psychological problems that would evolve as she grew and culminate in her eventual suicide. Anne’s life was a tragic continuum: her mental illness contributed to her isolation that, in turn, led to her eventual egoistic suicide.

The only apparent nurturing relationship Anne formed with a family member was with Great Aunt Anna Ladd Dingley, Anne’s mother’s aunt who was called “Nana” by the family. They spent much time together at the family’s summer retreat on Squirrel Island in Maine. Nana was childless and her need for affection was well received and a good match for Anne’s own emotional neediness (Middlebrook 12).

Because their first names were similar, sometimes the two referred to each other as “the twins” (Seinfelt 330). Nana would eventually move into the Harvey household

when her age and infirmities made it impossible to live by herself. The relationship that flourished once they were under the same roof is described as “abnormally childlike” (Seinfeld 330). They spent much of their time cuddling, giggling and discussing Anne’s imaginary playmates. Perhaps this is why Nana, and not Anne’s own mother, became a significant maternal figure and model for Anne throughout her own life and later with her own children.

Interestingly, Nana had been a writer by profession, working as a reporter for the *Lewiston Evening Journal* and eventually becoming part owner as well as editor. Perhaps even more significant is the apparent mental breakdown and subsequent therapy Nana underwent. After losing a substantial part of her hearing during a symphony, Nana fell into a deep depression. Unfortunately, this coincided with Anne’s thirteenth birthday and her newfound interest in socializing with children her own age. Feeling rejected and bereft, Nana attacked Anne at one point with a nail file and was swiftly sent to a mental hospital. There she received electroshock therapy. She was then committed to a nursing home where she would remain until her death ten years later. These events are certainly noteworthy as they are perhaps a foreshadowing of Anne’s own tortured existence. First she became a writer, then madwoman, dying alone. In addition, Anne would spend the rest of her life trying to recapture the love and affection she felt when she was with Nana. She would comment, “I never want to go beyond that moment. I want to lie on the couch and be with Nana where I was loved” (Seinfeld 332). Anne would also blame herself in later years for the elder woman’s depression and death.

In junior high school, Anne emerged as a strong willed leader among her peers, a group of public school classmates who were often not as wealthy as the Harveys. Her

sister Blanche maintained that being Anne's friend was difficult, and that "all of her friends were of the slave variety" (L. Sexton 4). Friends and schoolmates from that period of Anne's life remember her as "dramatic" and flirtation and sexual experimentation was common in her circle. It was during this era when Anne's lifelong relationship with the written word began. After a painful breakup with her steady boyfriend, Jack McCarthy, Anne responded by writing poetry that she later dismissed as "bleak, depressed, horrific" (Middlebrook 19). Although she recovered from the breakup, the attraction to poetry was cemented and she continued writing, constructing considerably complex poems. This is the first time Anne engaged in the behavior that would become the hallmark of her existence—turning to writing to alleviate emotional pain.

Anne continued her forays into sexual exploration and compounded that by picking up the habit of smoking. In an attempt to control Anne's increasingly rebellious behavior, her parents enrolled her in Rogers Hall, a boarding school located in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1945. While there, Anne began submitting her poetry to the school's literary magazine, *Splinters*. It has been observed from those earliest works that "the themes were love and loss, loneliness and despair, and even then there was a disquietude over her own death" (L. Sexton 9).

One piece in particular, "Spirit's House," reveals Anne's burgeoning talent as well as the depression and insecurity that were just beginning to make themselves known. The use of the words "agony" and "naked" in the first line speak of a teenage girl's embarrassment with her changing physical appearance and puberty. The repetitive use of the words "I" and "me" perhaps indicate the discomfort felt by an adolescent who fears

that everyone is watching and judging her. The line, “For I have good of all of my pain;” communicates a sense of awareness that she must embrace the pain rather than fight it, for it would be her constant companion throughout her life (8). The last lines, “On roads where I lost sight / of God,” may represent a feeling of isolation and sacrifice on her part (11-12). The rhyme scheme of this poem is a very basic “aabbccdd” for the majority of its lines. This simply may speak of Anne’s amateur poetic ability—following strict rhyme schemes to become familiar with the flow of words. The fact that the poem is simplistic does not negate the creativity within.

Another of her poems from this time period, entitled “On the Dunes,” speaks of Anne’s awareness of her own mortality—a characteristic not often seen in the adolescent years. It is the hubris of the young that leads them to believe firmly in their own immortality. In fact, this poem even reveals her first thought of death as an entity to be embraced—a respite from the pain of life: “I shall straighten like a flame / in the great calm of death, and if you want me / stand on the seaward dunes and call my name” (6-8). Additionally, with “If there is any death when life is over,” this poem also indicates that at that early age Anne was contemplating what might lie on the other side of death—a characteristic that would become prominent in her later poetry and eventually figure into an aspect of her suicide typology (1).

Unfortunately, it seems as if Anne could not write for the sheer joy of writing: at least some part of her motivation stemmed from the need to compete with her mother for the title of family writer. Her husband and other various members of the family often touted Mary Gray as a brilliant writer. The strange aspect of that is that the only writing in which Mary Gray engaged was letter writing: she wrote neither fiction nor poetry.

Anne herself later commented on her mother's writing, "She was not an author herself; she never worked on the family newspaper and her own contribution to literature consisted of scripts for family skits and verses for family birthdays" (Middlebrook 19). Nevertheless, for reasons known best by themselves, both Mary Gray's father and husband celebrated her as a supremely talented writer. When Anne's own writing later began to be published in the *Christian Science Monitor*, her father compared the pieces to letters her mother had written and commented to his daughters that "None of you girls are as brilliant as your mother—you are creative, but she is brilliant" (Middlebrook 20). As one might imagine, this simply reaffirmed Anne's feeling of worthlessness and rejection from her family.

To compound the wounded feelings of jealousy and inadequacy from her mother, Anne was accused of plagiarizing poems she had submitted to her high school yearbook. Indeed, Mary Gray went as far as to send the poems to a friend—an English professor in New York—for his professional opinion. The professor proclaimed the works original and the author talented indeed. This made little difference to Anne, who felt insulted and violated by her mother's actions. She was so wounded by this experience that she would not write a poem again for ten years. Thus, Anne was effectively removed from the only activity that she found herself to be good at and from which she received feelings of pleasure and worthiness. This served to further weaken the bond Anne had with her family—the social sphere in which she had never been accepted.

Anne continued flexing her muscles against authority when she met Alfred Muller Sexton II in 1948 through a mutual friend and engaged in a whirlwind affair. Alfred, nicknamed Kayo after the Moon Mullins comic strip, was from a prosperous Boston

family and was attracted to Anne who had described herself in letters to him as “a woman of mystery” (Middleborook 60). They began dating and quickly became lovers. Upon suspecting that she might be pregnant, her mother, likely fearful of Ralph Harvey’s reaction should he find out, encouraged her to elope. The two heeded her advice and drove to North Carolina where their underage status would not be a problem. A letter written to her parents on the eve of her wedding reveals Anne’s ever present desire for acceptance: “When you get this we will be married—please give us your blessing—please don’t stop loving me—We love you—Soon you will be proud of me of us. We are going to have a happy marriage and lots of beautiful grandchildren for you. You will be proud” (L. Sexton 15). She and Kayo were married on August 16, 1948, in Sunbury, North Carolina, and drove to Virginia Beach, Virginia, for their honeymoon.

Although it turned out that Anne’s suspected pregnancy was nothing more than a false alarm, Anne and Kayo experienced apparent newlywed bliss as evidenced in her further letters home: “This is far more wonderful than I thought anything could be! I am married to the sweetest, kindest, most loving man in the world. I love him very very much—20 times more than I did when I told him I would marry him. I am such a lucky girl—to have the sweetest husband and the sweetest parents in the whole wide world” (L. Sexton 18). This elation was soon tainted, however, by Anne’s disturbing display of increasingly unstable behavior. After they returned home and set up residence with Kayo’s parents, “Her moods shifted at lightning speed—alternating between deep depression and extraordinary excitement within a few minutes” (L. Sexton 22). This behavior is the hallmark of manic depression with mania characterized by, “great elation, exuberance, confidence or excitement” and the subsequent depressive periods

characterized by thoughts that may cause the victim to “feel overwhelming despair, experience the delusion of worthlessness, and think of committing suicide” (Thio 175). One particular incident occurred after her mother-in-law asked her to go buy some milk for dinner: “Anne refused to go. She threw herself on the floor, drumming her heels and fists and raising her voice in rage” (L. Sexton 22).

To compound matters, Anne’s emotional neediness resurfaced at this time in the form of flirtation and sexual experimentation with other men. This is an important facet as it was a trend that would continue throughout the rest of her life: her frequent affairs with poets and writers would have a profound impact on her and would serve to influence her writing. Although Kayo had been taking pre-medicine classes at Colgate University before his marriage, he decided by their first Thanksgiving that pursuing a career in medicine was unrealistic in the face of economic dependence on their families. One of Kayo’s acquaintances from medical school and his wife began to socialize with Kayo and Anne during the time when Kayo was deciding what to do with his future. The acquaintance, a man named Johnny, took particular interest in Anne and they subsequently fell in love. Although Anne insisted that the relationship not become physical, she did consider leaving her marriage to be with him (Middlebrook 26). Mary Gray, upon learning of her daughter’s infatuation with a man other than her husband, demanded that Anne end the affair. Interestingly, when Mary Gray confronted her, she said, “You’re just like me—and I know!” (Middlebrook 27). These enigmatic words would leave Anne wondering for the rest of her life if her mother had succumbed to the same feelings of neediness in her life. Information revealed at a later time indicated that

she may have indeed. This tumultuous experience is significant because it resulted in Anne's first documented psychological break.

Mary Gray sent Anne to Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne, the same doctor who had treated her husband at some point for his alcoholism. Anne's response was to take an overdose of sleeping pills in the home of her mother and father in-law with Johnny present. As Anne commented:

I took the pills in their kitchen ... I made it to my room but before I reached the bed I blacked out. I guess they heard me fall because they came in and kept trying to stand me up. As soon as this happened I was terribly dizzy and started to throw up. Johnny kept making me walk from one side of the room to the other. (Middlebrook 25).

This would be the beginning of Anne's lifelong struggle between life and death. She would forever feel the pull of death as a release from the troubles encountered by the living.

Dr. Brunner-Orne noted that Anne had "difficulty controlling her desire for romance and adventure" (Middlebrook 25). Three months of psychotherapy convinced Anne to stay in her marriage but trouble resurfaced when Kayo joined the Naval Reserve in 1950 at the height of the Korean War. When he was shipped overseas, Anne began dating other men to remedy her boredom. The desire for love and acceptance that began in her childhood carried in to her adulthood: she mistook sexual attraction for both of these elusive notions. Much later, she would tell her therapist that she associated the first separation from Kayo with the development of feelings of "wildness" that were among the symptoms of her illness:

When he's gone, I want to be with someone. I want lights and music and talk... I don't really WANT to have an affair with anyone but I have to: it's the quality of action. I first had this feeling, I suppose, when I was dating, after Kayo went into the service. Pound, pound, pound heart; makes me feel crazy, out of control. (Middlebrook 27)

This, it seems, is the first time that Anne's own expression an interpretation of her manic feelings is properly documented.

On a visit to San Francisco, Anne and Kayo's first child was conceived and Anne returned home to her parent's house to await the birth. On July 21, 1953, at 11:48 pm, Linda Gray Sexton was born in Newton-Wellsley Hospital where Anne herself had been born (L. Sexton 22). Anne found motherhood difficult and feelings of inadequacy and depression resurfaced when her capable mother-in-law provided constant advice and assistance on the care of Linda. The depression proved more tenacious this time and Anne was periodically admitted for observation to the Westwood Lodge psychiatric facility in Westwood, Massachusetts, the summer after Linda's birth.

To compound these problems, Anne gave birth to her second child, Joyce Ladd Sexton, whom Anne would call Joy, on August 4, 1955. Unprepared for the rigorousness of two small children, a husband and a household to manage, Anne began to fall apart—her mental status plummeted into a morass of madness. She began experiencing what she called “terrible spells of depression” (Middlebrook 23). Diagnosed as postpartum depression, the illness progressed until Anne developed severe anxiety attacks and periods of violent rage. She would often take out her anger on her children and would “seize Linda and begin choking or slapping her” (Middlebrook 33). On one particular

occasion, upon finding two- year- old Linda stuffing her own excrement into a toy truck, Anne was overcome by a blinding rage and hurled the child across the room (L. Sexton 22). This event was later recounted in the poem, “Red Roses” (See Appendix).

In this poem, the narrator talks of how she and her son, Tommy, often “dance.” The word “dance” here is a euphemism for abuse, for when “when he’s bad / his mother dances with him” (1-2). Perhaps Anne made the character a boy in order to detach herself from the abuse she was inflicting on her daughters. However, the events that transpire in the poem reflect actual events in Anne’s experiences: “She puts on the record, / ‘Red Roses for a Blue Lady’ / and throws him across the room” (3-5). Next comes the narrator’s method of removing blame from herself. She begins by addressing her reader fervently with the strong, “Mind you,” and continues with her justification, “she never laid a hand on him / only the wall laid a hand on him” (6-8).

The title of the poem reveals itself in the line, “He gets ‘red roses’ in different places”(9). Obviously this refers to the physical evidence of abuse—bruises and abrasions that appear on the child’s skin. It is interesting indeed that the marks should be called “red roses,” traditional symbols of love and devotion. This could symbolize the love that Anne wholly felt for her daughters despite her treatment of them. A more sinister suggestion is that Anne felt that these wounds were actually evidence of her passionate affection for Linda and Joy.

She goes into frightful detail at this time, illustrating the various injuries, “the head, that time he was sleepy as a river, / the back, that time he was a broken scarecrow, / the arm, like a diamond had bitten it, / the leg, twisted like a licorice stick” (10-13). For each of these injuries, one can discern the narrator’s emotional feeling about the events.

First, there is the head injury, obviously serious enough to cause physical symptoms described as acting “sleepy as a river.” The peacefulness of this image is in sharp contrast to the reality of the situation. Perhaps this signifies the calm that envelops the narrator after the original burst of violence: once that anger is dispelled, only peace and calm remain.

“That time he was a broken scarecrow” is a horrible metaphor for the twisted evidence of abuse. The use of the word “scarecrow” perhaps reveals a sense of hysteria—it is a comical image that does not coincide with the actuality of the event. It is a symbol of grotesque foolishness—likely the way in which the narrator reconciles her actions in her mind. “The arm, like a diamond had bitten it” once again utilizes a symbol of splendor and love. This might signify that the injury is viewed as a beautiful, feminine injury—bestowed as it was by the child’s mother. The mother, of course, is the figure in a child’s life that is traditionally the epitome of femininity and nurturing. The line, “The leg, twisted like a licorice stick,” embodies something that fall within the realm of childhood experience—the simple joy of candy. Why, then, would the narrator choose an image that is in stark contrast to a happy child? Perhaps she is dismissing the injury as something fleeting. Or, perhaps she is suggesting that, on some level, the child gains some modicum of joy from the abuse. This seems to be an idea that continuously presents itself throughout this poem.

With the bulk of these images embracing images of peace, beauty and joy, one can sense the internal conflict suffered by the narrator. Is this abuse viewed as appropriately horrible or is she also, perhaps on some subconscious level, suggesting that these injuries are to be cherished as evidence of love? In addition, there is evidence that

the narrator is suggesting that the child himself embraces this activity nearly as much as the mother—a disturbing notion indeed. This idea continues when he is told, “You fell, she said, just remember you fell. / I fell, is all he told the doctors / in the big hospital, a nice lady came and asked him questions, but because / he didn’t want to be sent away, he said, I fell” (16-20). This communicates an awareness the child has of the situation. To the casual observer, it seems as if he simply loves his mother and does not wish to be separated from her. Further reading, however, reveals a more sinister interpretation.

The narrator once again inserts the eerie alternative: “He pretends he is her ball. / He tries to fold up and bounce / but he squashes like fruit. / For he loves Blue Lady and the spots / of ‘red roses’ she gives him” (26-30). There it is—the idea that the child gleans as much pleasure from the abusive relationship as does the mother. One can imagine how this would benefit the narrator—representative of Anne Sexton herself, of course. If the mother feels that the child embraces the situation, then she herself has no need to feel guilt or pain resulting from her actions. This poem communicates Anne’s skewed mental status as she continued to become mired in her depressive, violent rage.

During this time, suicidal tendencies and vicious outbursts became the norm. One night, she resolved to kill herself and sat clutching a bottle of pills until Kayo found her in the morning and contacted her psychiatrist. That seemed to be the beginning of her determination to commit to suicide. She pronounced it as a way of “getting back to the place Nana was” (Middlebrook 33). When her doctor, Dr. Bruner-Orne, went on vacation, she suggested Anne begin seeing her son, Dr. Martin Orne. Anne agreed to do so and would continue to see him for the next eight years. On November 8, 1956, the eve of Anne’s 28th birthday, she took an overdose of the barbituate Nembutal: a prescription

she had originally been given by the doctor to remedy her sleepless nights. She called her mother-in-law before passing out and was rushed to the hospital. She would, from that point forward, refer to Nembutals as her “kill me pills” (Middlebrook 34). Putting the occurrence into her own words, Anne said:

I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I was about 28. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself. (Middlebrook 34)

This statement is rather prophetic as Anne watched helplessly as the crack that appeared in the surface of her psyche expanded as she aged and her depression progressed into the suicide typologies set forth by Durkheim so many years before. Before that occurred, however, Anne entered an important phase of her life—the one in which writing would save her, albeit temporarily, from the darkness that so threatened her.

CHAPTER II

TRANSFORMATIONS

It became increasingly obvious that the cause of Anne's behavior was more than the originally diagnosed postpartum depression. It seemed as if Anne's tentative grip on sanity had been thoroughly shattered by the institution of motherhood itself. Anne seemed to expect her own needs for affection and acceptance to be fulfilled by her infant daughters and was genuinely surprised that Linda and Joy required more attention than they supplied: "...my feeling for my children does not surpass my desire to be free of their demands upon my emotions..." (Middlebrook 38). She articulated this frustration to Dr. Orne, "I want to be a child and not a mother and I feel guilty about this" (Middlebrook 39). She felt stifled by their overwhelming neediness and trapped by her duties and lifestyle which suddenly were that of the typical American housewife. Apparently these feelings were not unheard of at this time due to the societal expectations of women following World War II (Middlebrook 34). It was The Golden Age of the Family in all of its splendor and women were expected to assume the role of primary caretaker with cheerful acceptance. Some resisted these feelings by turning to writing—Anne would embrace her writing skills while continuing to grapple with her madness.

Her relationship with Dr. Orne was significant as he was the first person who suggested that Anne might be a "capable person" by proposing that she put her creativity to use by writing about her experiences with her illness and treatments (Middlebrook 42). This coincided with a need to express herself that Anne first identified when she was a patient at the Westwood Lodge. It was one month after her suicide attempt that she watched "How to Write a Sonnet," a television program aired on Educational Television

(L. Sexton 29). Harvard professor I. A. Richards was speaking about the art of the sonnet and this caught Anne's attention: "I thought, well I could do that. So I went downstairs and wrote one. Interestingly, I called up my mother to read it to her—she suggested a better image, for one thing. I wrote another one that day, and I took them to my doctor. ... He said they were wonderful" (Middlebrook 42). This encouragement inspired Anne to continue writing and she began experiencing feelings of joy and accomplishment for the first time in many years.

Unfortunately, this respite was short lived as she plummeted unexpectedly into a deep depression once more that spring. This may have been to some extent caused by her mother's diagnosis of breast cancer in February 1957. As was common at that time, Mary Gray blamed her illness on stress—specifically Anne's mental difficulties and breakdowns. Anne's already difficult relationship with her mother was strained further by Mary Gray's unreasonable accusation. The guilt stemming from this situation may have driven Anne to attempt suicide once again on May 29, 1957. When Dr. Orme visited her at the hospital, he told her, "You can't kill yourself, you have something to give. Why, if people read your poems ... they would think, 'There's somebody else like me!' They wouldn't feel alone" (Middlebrook 43). And that was Anne's defining moment: "I had found something to *do* with my life" (Middlebrook 43). Dr. Orme later maintained that he encouraged Anne's writing in order to convince her of her own self worth which he found severely lacking: "She felt parasitic, helpless, profoundly angry. My task was to help her develop any resources within her which allowed her to form relationships on a healthier basis than before. That was why, later, I taped our sessions—to help her understand what she was doing" (Middlebrook 43). This introduces an interesting aspect

to Anne's treatment and legacy—her recorded therapy transcripts that would eventually become published and, therefore, publicly revealed. Because these transcripts will be examined in this work, it is important to discuss the controversy surrounding them. The account of Anne's insistence that the tapes be retained by Dr. Orne for use how he saw fit also illustrates Anne's earnest desire to express her feelings and torment in an effort to help others with their various mental disorders.

When, after Anne's death, Diane Wood Middlebrook was commissioned to write Anne's biography, she obtained the recorded sessions from Dr. Orne to include in the work. He handed them over and thus invited a barrage of criticism for his decision to do so. In fact, the publication of these private therapy tapes and their availability to the public caused no small measure of controversy at the time. Dr. Orne was accused of betraying the sacred doctor-client confidentiality when it was learned that he was the one that provided the tapes to Middlebrook for purposes of inclusion in her book. Dr. Willard Gaylin, a Columbia University psychiatry professor and an expert on medical ethics, commented, "Doctors have no official obligation to history and certainly should not act as a research assistant to a biographer." He further described Dr. Orne's actions as a "betrayal of his patient and his profession" (Stanley).

Dr. Orne firmly stood behind his decision and justified his actions by maintaining that Anne would have relished the idea of her experiences being available to others who might benefit from them: "Anne Sexton chose disclosure of her therapy in keeping with what she stood for as a confessional poet ... In the judgment of all who knew her well, Anne definitely would have wanted the tapes released as exactly as was done. What others would see as exposure, she saw as honesty" (Orne). According to Middlebrook,

“His actions caused far more consternation in literary and more particularly psychiatric circles than any other revelation in the book, which chronicles in sometimes harrowing detail Sexton’s madness, alcoholism and sexual abuse of her daughter” (“Anne Sexton”). The revelations contained in these transcripts are valuable indeed as they allow a glimpse into Anne’s torturous struggle with mental illness and perhaps the genesis of it as well.

By Christmas of 1957, Anne had completed enough poems to present them to her mother as a gift. In a letter included with the poetry, Anne reveals a tenuous expression of strength and independence from her mother’s eternal control over her happiness when she writes, “I love you. I don’t write for you, but know that one of the reasons I do write is that you are my mother” (L. Sexton 33). This display of brave but unsteady strength would soon falter and perhaps render Anne even more wounded than she originally was.

Anne made the decision to enroll in a poetry class led by John Holmes, a professor at Tufts University. The classes were held at the Boston Center for Adult Education and Anne was joined in class by fellow poets Maxine Kumin and Ruth Sonner who remember Sexton from that first night dressed in jewelry, makeup, high heels, “all intimidating sophistication in the chalk-and wet overshoes atmosphere of the Boston Center for Adult Education” (Middlebrook 50). Anne remembers that the class was a haven for her, a place where she felt that she “belonged somewhere ... These are my people” (50). One of the first complete poems she produced at this time was entitled “The Traveler’s Wife,” a poem she included in a letter to Kayo who was away on business.

This poem seems to be both an explanation and a plea for understanding—a message to Kayo that attempted to communicate on some basic level what it was that she feared and needed the most. The use of the words “warm side” may have a dual meaning

here. Instead of referring to his actual body warmth in the bed that they shared, she may be contrasting “warm side” with the idea of his “cold side”—the notion of appealing to Kayo’s understanding nature in which she finds shelter and to which she makes her appeal rather than his impatient side which she may feel is tormented and frustrated by her chronic illness (1). The reference to “one safe walled home” speaks of her continuing need for assurance and a haven—someone to receive her thoughts and serve as a receptacle (3). She needs to know that whatever she says or think, Kayo can safely absorb and go on with life. Here, he is functioning as the “safe walled home.”

The mention of a “cup of pain to drink” or an “old pain to think” suggests that she believes herself to be at least partly to blame for her sickness—further evidence of her lingering sense of worthlessness (7-8). In addition, she intimates here that she finds some old, comfortable ease in her madness with “Perhaps old wounds have an easy sorrow, easier than knowing you leave me tomorrow” (9-10). Her sickness is, of course, an entity that provides its own small measure of succor simply because of its familiarity. Also, her dependence on Kayo is evident with her word choice—he isn’t just leaving, but leaving *her* specifically. Thus, this poem, one of her first formal poetic efforts provides the reader with an expressive view of her mental status at this point.

Anne’s first official publication was a poem entitled “Eden Revisited,” which appeared in *The Fiddlehead Review* in April of 1958. Unfortunately, this is the only time this particular poem ever appeared in print. For reasons known only to herself, Anne chose never to reprint her first published work. However, the acceptance of this poem gave her the confidence to continue offering submissions, and she began compiling her best pieces into a manuscript for a book around the first anniversary of her suicide

attempt. She firmly believed that she had assembled a collection of poems that could benefit others with mental illnesses. She surmised that “I suppose I have a book that the average person in treatment would want to read” (Middlebrook 52). She even penned two short stories about patients with symptoms of mental hysteria although they were never published. Her goal, as she explained to Dr. Orne, was to use “a first-person narrator to give the ‘implication of psychosis’ in the tradition of J.D. Salinger, an author she very much admired (Middlebrook 53). This is when one can first detect Anne’s propensity for reveling in her madness.

In conjunction with her continuing therapy and concern with the mental struggles of others, Anne developed an interest in psychology and began reading psychology and psychotherapy texts. She confessed to Dr. Orne that she had obtained them soon after their first session together so that she could “read them to find out what kind of patient to be” (Middlebrook 53). This indicates Anne’s ever present need for acceptance and accomplishment. So desperate was she for praise and a sense of doing something well that she would attempt to mold her own psyche to conform to that which she imagined Dr. Orne desired. In essence, even within the realm of her own illness, Anne felt isolated and removed.

Her primary interest within the world of psychology and psychoanalysis lay in the exploration of Freud’s Oedipus complex. This is interesting indeed considering her relationship with her parents—her mother in particular. Her interest in this subject would serve as inspiration for the epigraph of her forthcoming poetry collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* in which she identified herself with Oedipus for the first and only time in her writing career. Anne seemed to identify with Oedipus on the basis of the similarities

that she perceived between him and herself: “Oedipus is utterly rejected by his biological parents, who wish to murder him that he might not murder his father; his other parents, unknowingly adoptive, are those he flees Corinth to protect...” (George 14). From these details one can easily understand why Anne felt as if it was an appropriate comparison. She had long felt rejected by her own parents and desperately sought acceptance in other venues. Apparently with the identification to Oedipus, Anne knew “she must make reparation for the split inside her that duplicates the split in the psyche of her parents, who both rejected *and* loved her, just as she rejects and loves them” (George 14).

An important development presented itself in the summer of 1957 when Anne began displaying an alternative personality that she said was named Elizabeth. Elizabeth was dramatic and overtly sexual and seemed to serve as narrator of incestuous occurrences between Anne and her father. Anne may have chosen the name “Elizabeth” to represent her alter ego for a variety of reasons. One possibility she suggested is that during one of her frequent trances, she felt that she did not know who she was and therefore “Looked (for some reason) at the back of my watch [inherited from Elizabeth Harvey, her father’s mother] and the initials E.H. were on it. So thought, ‘I must be E.H.’” (Middlebrook 55). Another reason that is perhaps more telling of the psychological disturbances behind the personality split focuses on Anne’s father. Anne recalled an instance when her father was spanking her and called her a “little bitch” (Middlebrook 56). Anne, as a child, interpreted this epithet as “Elizabeth.” This is perhaps the beginning of Anne’s essential exploration into her troubled relationship with her father.

“Elizabeth” would often submit therapy techniques to Dr. Orne that she thought would benefit Anne and allow her to discuss various feelings. When she suggested

hypnosis, Anne would lapse into a trance-like state and speak very freely. During one of her numerous trances that occurred while engaged in a therapy session that was recorded by Dr. Orne, Anne discussed a particular occurrence between her father and herself that may or may not have actually transpired. During the session, Anne began to speak about a memory that finds her father coming into her room and fondling her sexually:

A.S.: Father comes in drunk; wakes me up, saying "I just wanted to see where you were—your sister [Jane] is out letting someone feel her." ... He asks me if anybody ever felt me. I don't know what that means. ... He is holding me. He says to press up against him, sort of wriggles and asks me if I like it. And it feels good. (Middlebrook 56)

Although she was adamant about the legitimacy of the occurrence at the time, she later questioned it by saying, "I couldn't make all this up, or I don't exist at all! Or do I make up a trauma to go with my symptoms?" (Middlebrook 56).

Concerned about the implications of such an inappropriate relationship, Dr. Orne consulted with Mary Gray to determine if Anne's memories were indeed authentic. She confirmed that Ralph often used "nasty language" when he was drunk and once remarked as Anne left the house on a date that she looked as if she were planning to "get laid" (Middlebrook 57). However, verbal abuse is not the same as sexual abuse and it has never been proven with certainty whether she was the victim of sexual abuse or simply the product of an unhappy, isolated childhood. There is some support of her claims of abuse in her psychiatric problems: children who are sexually molested often exhibit signs of "anxiety, depression and isolation" in childhood and, as adults "are more likely than other people to be dissatisfied with sexual relationships and to encounter marital

problems” (Thio 127). The fact that Anne exhibited these problems in addition to others lends credence to allegations of sexual abuse. In any instance, whether real or imagined, these occurrences weighed heavily on Anne’s mind, contributing to her position of outsider within her family structure as both Mary Gray and Anne’s sisters reacted negatively to Anne’s accusations against her father Ralph. “Elizabeth” would remain with Anne for several more therapy sessions, often inserting herself into the discussions as a means of facilitating talk of Anne’s memories from childhood.

As previously discussed, within the typology of the Egoistic Suicide, one suffers from excessive individualism. Sexton did not seem to so much suffer *from* it but revel *in* it. In the fall of 1957, Anne attempted to persuade Dr. Orne to commit her to a mental institution so she could work on her poetry full time without the worry of caring for her husband and children, maintaining that “It’s the only thing I want—enough food to keep alive, go to poetry class—write—rest of world shut off” (Middlebrook 61). Residing in a mental institution would allow her to write freely without experiencing guilt from neglecting her children, which often happened when she entered her writing trances, when she was “thinking about poetry or writing—shuffling between methods of escape—liquor, pills, writing—I don’t have anything else” (Middlebrook 61).

At this time, it becomes appropriate to introduce the second suicide typology defined by Durkheim—the Fatalistic Suicide. This state, according to Durkheim, results from “overregulation” (Durkheim 323). Feeling of overwhelming desperation can lead one to embrace the freeing notion of suicide. Although this term is usually applied to those who live in excessively relegated, tangible situations such as prisoners, hostages or slaves, there are aspects of this typology that can be applied to Sexton’s case. She indeed

felt hopelessly trapped by the stifling mandates of a society determined to force her into some idealistic role of wife and mother. In a written entry in a journal she often kept she professed that she realized

...with guilt, that I am a woman, that it should be the children, or my husband, or my home—not writing. But it is not—I do love my children but am not feminine enough to be all lost in their care. It wears me—I do not have the patience. (How can you really know what I mean—you have never been worn down by a nagging child?) (Middlebrook 63).

These sentiments mark Anne's first documented feelings of anxiety stemming from societal expectations. This pressure would escalate as both Anne's interest in writing and mental illness progressed, eventually culminating in her suicide that would contain characteristics of the Egoistic and Fatalistic suicides.

By the beginning of 1958, Anne had been labeled as “hysterical, psychoneurotic, borderline personality disorder and alcoholic” although she herself preferred the terms “psychotic” and “psychotic break” because she felt that they endowed her with certain poetic abilities and connected her to other “mad poets” (Middlebrook 65). The illustrious group of poets with whom Anne identified included “Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Barrymore, Delmore Schwartz and Sylvia Plath” as well as “T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and, before the age of psychiatry, to Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Coleridge” (Middlebrook 65). She cited Rimbaud who proclaimed that his career included “a lengthy, immense, and systemic derangement of the senses” and in turn, Anne claimed, “I found I belonged to the poets, that I was *real* there, and I had another ‘These are my people’” (Middlebrook 65).

Anne continued to write poetry when she felt free and well enough to do so and willingly tried new antipsychotic drugs as they became available. One in particular, which has not been specified, seemed to work particularly well—freeing her from the worst of her symptoms so that she was able to compose a large number of poems in a relatively short amount of time. Unfortunately though, just as it seemed as if she was going to be able to attain some stability for the first time in her adult life, Anne was beset by worries about her parents' health. Mary Gray, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer in February of 1957, had seemingly recovered only to be told that the disease had metastasized in October of 1958 (L. Sexton 31). Her father, Ralph, on his way to purchase cruise tickets for himself and his despondent wife, suffered a stroke while driving in his car in November of the same year. He was hospitalized while Mary Gray came to stay with Kayo and Anne. The sudden frailty of her parents depressed her greatly and affected her writing and is mentioned several times, albeit flippantly, in her letters to friends with, "Alternately depressed and up. All my personal life stinks as you know. Mother still dying away and Daddy acting nutty" (L. Sexton 62). One imagines that she used flippancy to detract from her overwhelming pain.

Mary Gray Harvey died on March 10, 1959—only a few days before her fifty-eight birthday. Anne was grief-stricken and commented that

I wanted to hold her hand, as one holds a child's hand, to take her across, to say "It's all right. I'm here. Don't be afraid."...And I did. And then she was gone. She was in the nothingness...Without me...Without *herself!* Thus she made the transition from something-ness to nothingness ... and now she is nothing. Except

for me...for me she is a big something...a something I love and hate and still react and talk to. (Middlebrook 102)

In a letter to close friend and colleague W. D. Snodgrass, she wrote, “I am sluggish with tranquilizers today. My mother died last night. I have just returned from the undertaker’s and viewing the body and picking out the gaudiest baroque (but cheapest) casket. ... De, I am going to lose myself” (L. Sexton 66). From both of these exchanges, one can detect perhaps the beginning of patterns that would cling to Anne for the rest of her life. She refers to her mother’s death as the passing from “something-ness into nothingness” (Middlebrook 102). It seems as if Anne’s firsthand experience with death illustrated the attractiveness of it to her. The idea that one could inhabit nothingness—that death was an escape to be embraced—would reappear in her writing many times in the future.

Briefly institutionalized at Westwood Lodge following her father’s stroke and news of her mother’s rapidly progressing illness, Anne composed a poem during that time entitled “The Double Image.” This poem, dedicated to her daughter Joy but encompassing all aspects of the complexities of mother-daughter relationships that extended to Anne herself and Mary Gray, would appear in Sexton’s first collection of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. It is a very expressive, revealing poem complete with complex images of love and devotion, pain and torment.

The first section of the poem seems to be largely autobiographical with details from Joy’s early childhood years. The reference to the narrator’s age and the child’s age are accurate for the time it was written. She speaks of “watching the yellow leaves go queer, /flapping in the winter rain, falling flat and washed” as she remembers the “three autumns you did not live here” (3-6). This is referring to the times when both Joy and her

sister Linda were sent to stay with their grandmother while Anne recovered from various bouts of depression. Anne refers to the “medical hypothesis/ that explained my brain will never be as true as these/ stuck leaves letting go” (8-11). This may indicate something that Joy will “never really know”—Anne’s depression and madness are not caused by any complex medical mystery but the sheer desire to be released, as naturally as the leaves at the end of autumn.

The second stanza begins as the first one with the egocentric “I.” Anne inserts some more actual events into this portion with reference to the time when a “fever rattled/ in your throat and I moved like a pantomime/ above your head” (15-17). Joy had suffered from a bout of croup as an infant that left an already shaky Anne terribly rattled. It is apparent that she thought that the baby’s illness was due to her own madness: “The blame, / I heard them say, was mine. They tattled like green witches in my head, letting doom/leak like a broken faucet;/as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet, /an old debt I must assume” (17-22). An overwhelming feeling of culpability is evident in those lines. The “old debt” mentioned surely must signify the madness and ill behavior for which she felt she was now paying the ultimate price—the health of her innocent daughter. At the beginning of that stanza, the narrator mentions that she “chose two times / to kill myself” (12). The decision to use the phrasing “kill myself” rather than the obvious “attempted to kill myself” perhaps speaks of the feeling that with each attempt, some small part of her never recovered. It is as if she were killing herself in small doses each time.

The third stanza begins with the strong “Death” and mentions that it was “simpler than I’d thought”—a reference to the feeling Anne had that her connection to life and the

living was loosening (22). “The day life made you well and whole/ I let the witches take away my guilty soul” represents her second suicide attempt, making mention once again of “witches” (23-25). The notion of witches and witchcraft are images that are frequently found in Sexton’s poetry. She may have seen herself or, more likely, herself in her madness, as witch-like. “I pretended I was dead / until the white men pumped the poison out” may indicate that her subconscious was aware of her imminent demise and embraced it, relishing in the thought of the release until the doctors literally brought her back to life (26-27).

In the next stanza, Anne implores her daughter to “love your self’s self where it lives” perhaps instructing her in the ways of avoiding the pain and problems with which she herself had been besieged (35). The dangers that result from self-hate are explained in “...why did I let you grow in another place. You did not know my voice / when I came back to call. All the superlatives / of tomorrow’s white tree and mistletoe /will not help you know the holidays you had to miss” (37-41). Here, Anne is speaking of the regret resulting from her abandonment of Joy when she was hospitalized. Although she had to dedicate all of her focus and energy to her own problems and had no genuine control of the situation, it does not justify or ease the feelings of failure that developed as a consequence. Anne does not want the same fate to befall her daughter.

The next section, labeled simply as “2” continues to tell the story of her stay in the mental institution and begins with proof that she remained interested in the well-being of her children. “They sent me letters with news/ of you”— while providing evidence of the inanity of her time spent there making “moccasins that I would never use” (45-46). It is in this section that the representation of Mary Gray makes its appearance: “When I

grew well enough to tolerate/ myself, I lived with my mother. Too late, / too late, to live with your mother, the witches said” (47-49). This indicates that Anne, or her psyche on some level, was aware of the impossibility to acquire as an adult the parental acceptance she desired as a child. “I didn’t leave. I had my portrait / done instead” (50-51). This is Anne’s account of her extended stay with her mother when Mary Gray, recovering from several surgeries related to her breast cancer, commissioned oil paintings of herself and Anne. The painting of the portrait is repeated several times throughout this section of the poem with no adjectives of flowery language surrounding the basic comment. This may signify Anne’s weary acknowledgment that the relationship between her and her mother is very similar to the painting—false and stagnant.

The third section, “3,” begins to speak of the blame Mary Gray placed on Anne for the breast cancer that was spreading and making her progressively weaker. There is a sense of irony here as the attempt of the family members to keep Anne well seems to have allowed death to find Mary Gray instead: “Only my mother grew ill. /She turned from me, as if death were catching, / as if death transferred, / as if my dying had eaten inside of her” (88-91). It may be interpreted that Anne felt some small measure of twisted satisfaction upon considering the power her mother bestowed upon her. Logically, of course, Anne must have realized that she played no part in her mother’s illness. The facet of her psyche that remained wounded and childlike, however, might have appreciated the idea that she was exacting revenge on the mother who had so wronged her in the past. Perhaps this is why she has no reply when “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” (93-96). Is it that she had no reply or that she did not trust what she might say?

In section “4,” Anne remarks, “That winter she came/ part way back/ from her sterile suite/ of doctors, the seasick/ cruise of the X-ray, / the cells’ arithmetic/ gone wild” (97-103). The phrase “part way back” corresponds both to the phrase in section “2” in which she comments that she herself was “Part way back from Bedlam” and the title of the collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. This indicates a connection, perhaps on a subconscious level, detected between Anne and her mother and perhaps her daughter as well. The image of death and despair is evident in this section with “I wintered in Boston” and continues, in a matter-of-fact manner with the fact that she “tried a second suicide, /tried the sealed hotel a second year” (116-122). The notion of the “sealed hotel” is interesting because of its contradictory nature. A hotel, of course, is entered voluntarily. This one, obviously representing the mental hospital, is “sealed.” Why then use that wording rather than simply “hospital”? Perhaps she is encouraged by the thought that she is ultimately in control and that her stay is simply a voluntary choice she has made with her own best interests in mind.

Section “5” begins with Anne leaving the hospital for the “last time” in possession of those things to which she most desperately clings: “my analyst’s okay, /my complete book of rhymes, / my typewriter and my suitcases” (125-130). With this new bravery, Anne set out to rejoin the living. She “visited the swan boats, / the market, answered the phone, /served cocktails as a wife/ should, made love among my petticoats” (133-136). These are the trappings of a life lived as a middle class, suburban housewife. The image is a stilted one: it rings false and lacks the passion with which she discussed her family or even her madness. This persona may be more socially acceptable, but it is simply a mask hiding the true self. Anne herself acknowledges this as she attempts to

forge a relationship with her estranged daughter. She had to learn “why I would rather/ die than love, how your innocence/ would hurt and how I gather/ guilt like a young intern/ his symptoms, his certain evidence” (144-148). Here, she has compared herself to a doctor, a figure who must distance himself from the patient and the illness in order to prescribe an effective treatment. This indicates that she is aware of her illness and that in detaching herself, she is able to reveal more effectively in it.

Coping as well as one might expect, Anne continued to write and compile a large number of poems in the months following her mother’s death. Despite her fears that “The stuff I write is so controversial. NO ONE WILL LIKE IT,” in May of 1959, Houghton Mifflin accepted her manuscript of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* for publication and offered her an advance of \$200.00 (L. Sexton 68). The final edition was due to the printers on August 1 and hours before the deadline, Anne was still trying to decide on the poems she wanted to include. Concerned that there was not a discernable theme in the two sections of the book, she separated them into early and recent work, choosing the poem “Her Kind” as the defining piece of the collection—a poem to set the tone for the rest of her work. This poem and others included in the collection speak of Anne’s noticeable progression toward her eventual demise as well as her identifiable mental status.

In “Her Kind,” the speaker portrays herself as a “witch”—a frequently used image in Sexton’s poetry. The typical associations with witches include notions of pervasive evil and ostracism. She is “braver at night” (2). The word “night” here may very well represent the illness in which she can often feel secure and even empowered. The shift in perspective from “I have gone out” to “a woman like that” shows some form of

disassociation from herself—perhaps distancing herself from the reality of the situation to increase objectivity. (6) “The woods” in this line are also symbolic of the madness—here she finds the warmth, creativity, art and even sustenance that she craves.

Once again, the reader sees a shift in perspective which may be the result of the speaker coming to terms with her own condition. The reference to the “cart” may represent the past—a former mode of transportation that symbolizes her journey from her own painful upbringing. References to her past are particularly evident with “your flames still bite my thigh and my ribs crack where your wheels wind” as these images depict the painful experiences from her childhood that she believes formed her mental makeup (18-19). The subtly sexual image of flames on her thigh may represent her allegations of sexual abuse against her father while the crack of her ribs under the wheels may suggest that her family gained some of their coherence at her expense. That she uses the word “survivor” and sees herself as such may indicate that she is confident within the realm of her madness which is yet another way to see herself as an outsider as she revels in her insanity.

Another poem entitled, “Noon Walks on the Asylum Lawn” is a particularly vivid snapshot of Anne’s lingering anguish and persistent fears. The “summer sun,” typically a symbol of such vibrant joy, is not so here since that which is benign is contrasted with that which is tainted (1). The image of the ubiquitous tree of life is also skewed here with the moniker of “suspicious tree” (2). The most powerful tool Sexton employs here is the interjection of phrases from the Bible. These phrases, in their original context, are meant to serve as messages of strength, security and spiritual fortitude. The sun in this poem, along with other natural symbols traditionally signifying life and salvation, offer not

solace but threatening intentions and insidious evil. When the speaker expresses that “the blades extend and reach my way,” this seems to be evidence of the awareness she has of her own condition (9-10). Blades might literally be a way in which suicide could be committed. She may feel as if she is powerless against the death that she imagines is stalking her as the blades extend her way and she reaches out her wrists in response. The sky, a traditional image of infinity, “breaks” here, perhaps communicating the end of something. Is she referring to time, her own life, or a combination thereof? The conclusion maintains, “The world is full of enemies. There is no safe place,” communicating very directly how the speaker feels hunted—the stalked prey of her madness. She has neither a spiritual connection to others or the solace of a safe haven (14-15).

Another important poem included in this collection is “You, Doctor Martin,” dedicated to the man who kept her safe, however tenuously, from the darkness that threatened to engulf her. The first word “You” directly addresses the doctor bestowing all power upon him. The doctor then walks “from breakfast to madness” (1-3). Here, Anne is acknowledging Dr. Orne’s daily journey from his life of normalcy to the madness of hers—this introduces contrasts as well as serves to demonstrate Anne’s understanding of the sacrifice her savior is required to make on a daily basis. “The moving dead” to which she refers perhaps figuratively signifies the group of mental patients of which she is a member—they are dead of spirit yet technically alive (4). In a literal image, the comparison to the dead could also speak of the drugged states in which the patients reside. She herself is “the queen” or “laughing bee” reveling in the madness that swarms

around here—still on the outside of the group even surrounded as she was by those of her own kind (6-7).

The break between the first and second stanzas is masterful with the second stanza beginning with the powerful “of death.” The reference to the “shibboleth” that “is spoken” at dinner is an interesting word choice by the author (11). The word, Yiddish in origin, is used to distinguish and differentiate between political and social class lines among groups of people. Perhaps Anne is intimating here that even among mental patients, there is a hierarchy in which she is not included. The line “We chew in rows” perhaps represents the conformity of society that is evident in a structured environment—conformity against which she rebels (13).. The third stanza indicates the speaker’s awareness of her own situation—the absence of knives at dinner so there will be no “cutting your throat,” the empty task of making “moccasins all morning” meant to occupy time and frantic hands and minds (16-17).. The speaker seems to appreciate these craft projects as a way of dealing with the lives she damaged during her various bouts of depression and madness with “Now I learn to take/ them back, each angry finger that demands / I mend what another will break / tomorrow” (20-22). The lucidity with which she recognizes her own faults and tendencies is particularly meaningful in this poem

Immediately preceding the wide release of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Anne became increasingly distressed over her father’s health and erratic behavior. At one point, he revealed that he was feeling suicidal and expressed that he finally understood what she had gone through with her bouts of melancholia. Anne was alarmed by these revelations and was particularly upset when Ralph discussed his plans to remarry after having dated an elderly widowed neighbor. Both Anne and her sister Jane, rarely in agreement about

anything, joined forces to ensure that the wedding would not take place although their motivations may have been somewhat different with Anne still feeling distraught over her mother's death months before. Anne began to experience guilt about impeding her father's happiness and was sent back to The Westwood Lodge at the end of May and returned home on June 2. Her father died of a massive stroke the next day and Anne, suffering from tremendous guilt and grief and feeling suicidal once again, retreated back to the Lodge. The timing was especially difficult since it was the fifth anniversary of Nana's death, both of her parents were recently deceased and Dr. Orne, her most important emotional anchor, was away on business. In a letter written to W.D. Snodgrass at this time, Anne expressed that

Some misty god has shoved me up the ladder and I am my own inheritor...I am going to try and NOT write a poem about it. God damn morbid life I've been leading, that's all I can say. How can I write anything positive? My old gods are tumbled over like bowling pins. All is an emotional chaos. Poetry and poetry alone has saved my life. (L. Sexton 81)

This indicates that Anne realized what a tenuous hold she had on her own mental well-being. Feeling bereft of family and connections, she embraced the only thing that gave her life promise and meaning—her writing.

When *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was released on April 22, 1960, it caused a something of an uproar and sparked controversy in the literary world with reactions coming from such divergent sources as Anne's colleagues and friends to other poets. Anne herself was nervous about the reaction and expressed that she lived "in horrors of doubt about it...waiting for the lousy reviews" (L. Sexton 110). An early review by a

New York Times critic said that the poems had “a natural, built-in interest; a mental breakdown, pictured with a pitiless eye and clairvoyant sharpness” (Middlebrook 125). Poet Allan Grossman, writing a review of the book for Brandeis University, expressed that the poems “seem to me incredibly distinguished and compassionate” (Middlebrook 125). Initially, it seemed as if positive reviews would be the order of the day. However, certain circumstances surrounding the book would result in reviews and comments that were less favorable.

Anne’s friend and fellow poet Robert Lowell contributed a blurb to the cover of the book which subsequently caused *Bedlam* to be compared to Lowell’s own published collection of poems, *Life Studies*. Elizabeth Bishop, herself a poet and contemporary of Anne, read *Bedlam* and then wrote to Lowell, “She *is* good in spots—but there is all the difference in the world, I’m afraid, between her kind of simplicity and that of *Life Studies*, her kind of egocentricity that is simply that ... I feel I know too much about her” (Middlebrook 125). Lowell stood by his positive review, however, and defended Anne’s work as a confessional poet.

One of the harshest reviews she received, and therefore the most damaging to her confidence, came from her old mentor John Holmes. Upon reviewing the poems in *Bedlam*, he contacted Anne and communicated his concerns to her, saying:

I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital. ... It bothers me that you use poetry this way. It’s all a release for you, but what it is for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release ... You’ll certainly outgrow

it, and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now. (Middlebrook 98)

Understandably, this greatly upset Anne and seemed to reaffirm her feelings of betrayal and rejection by those whose acceptance she most sought. In conjunction with this unfavorable review came yet another one by poet James Dickey who published his opinion of *Bedlam* in *Poetry* magazine. In this review, Dickey concentrated on the amateurish aspects of the work and commented that the majority of the poems read like they were written by "...an A student in the typical writing class" (Middlebrook 126). However, with *Bedlam* Anne accomplished what she had desired: it brought her to the foreground of modern poetry and gave her some small modicum of respect and authentication as a writer. As a result of the reviews that commented on the lack of refinement and class in her writing and in an effort to receive formal, classical literary training, Anne enrolled in Brandeis University's Institute of Literature to take several courses on modern authors. As always, she was eager to please.

During this time, Anne's marriage to Kayo was faltering. The emotional neediness she had displayed so often as a child resurfaced in adulthood and manifested itself as sexual promiscuity. The deaths of Anne's mother and father in quick succession left her reeling and emotionally needy. Rather than turning to her husband for solace and support, Anne reverted to her old desire for the attention of men. The first man to whom Anne expressed desire and with whom she began her routine of sexual acting out was a man named Jerry, a classmate from her days at the Boston Center for Adult Education.

The first time Anne engaged in a full-fledged affair was during the time when Kayo was traveling frequently for business. When attending classes at the Center, she and

Jerry had shared an intense, instant sexual attraction. Their relationship progressed rapidly from discussing class work over coffee to engaging in sex in the backseat of his car on a regular basis. It is apparent from these transgressions that Anne enjoyed the sensation of power, control, elation and acceptance that she received from the illicit interaction. When she spoke of the affair to Dr. Orne, she expressed that “With Jerry I am different—I don’t know what happens to me. Jerry is vital, gobbles life” and that she enjoyed “making him fall in love with me—when he is finished with sex and I feel I have won” (Middlebrook 60). This sexual power likely provided Anne some modicum of control over a life that she felt was chaotic.

This behavior once again placed Anne outside the realm of acceptable social behavior since it loosened the bond of her marriage and went against the grain of traditional mores as is consistent with the Egoistic Suicide. This affair would continue for more than six months before Anne would suddenly decide that such behavior was beneath her, suggesting that it was actually Elizabeth, her alter ego, that had been conducting the affair in the first place in an attempt to gain attention. Dr. Orne, becoming concerned that this expression of otherness might evolve into a fully developed case of multiple personality disorder, refused to acknowledge Elizabeth as a separate entity any longer. Instead, he merely helped Anne identify the positive aspects of the alternate persona such as “charismatic leadership, her sense of fun, her capacity for pleasure, her self confidence” (Middlebrook 61). Interestingly, shortly thereafter, Elizabeth made a hasty exit and Anne admitted inventing her saying, “I made her up—I think I did ...Any element of truth about her is just a freedom of expression, a lack of (I guess) sexual repression” (Middlebrook 63). One might assume that this awareness would preclude any

further sexual extramarital activity. This would not be the case. The only nod to the departure of the aspect of her personality that had been with her for some time was a poem entitled "Elizabeth Gone" which appeared as a late addition to *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

The summer before her book was published, Anne began a relationship with George Starbuck, a young Boston poet whom Anne had met several times through their small circle of writers with whom they socialized. Arthur Freeman, a friend of both Anne and George, remembered that Anne was enthralled by George and "...couldn't cross the street without getting George's advice" (Middlebrook 118). They engaged in a whirlwind summer romance, taking long, leisurely picnics on the bank of the Charles River with Anne often dancing in the shallow water in a red dress that she associated with "romantic wishes" (Middlebrook 118).

As one might expect of poets, they expressed their love for each other in writing, he dedicating his book *Bone Thoughts* to "The one who said me a lullaby over the phone. To the one who, divining love in this rocky terrain, has made it her own" (118). Anne wrote of her love for him in the poem "Doors, Doors, Doors" which would appear in her next collection of poetry *All My Pretty Ones*. During this passionate affair, Kayo was out of town the majority of the time and his mother, Billie, would often take Linda and Joy to stay with her. Unquestioningly, Anne had more freedom than she had ever previously experienced. Perhaps she engaged in this affair to combat the depression that always seemed to appear during periods of loneliness. This obsession too came to an inevitable end although George and Anne remained close for many years afterward.

The reality of her many affairs culminated in an unintended pregnancy in the spring of 1961. Anne was frightened by the thought that the child might not belong to her husband. Kayo, having no such suspicions, eagerly wanted another baby. His mother, Billie, however, convinced that Anne was not healthy enough to care for another child, arranged for an illegal abortion. Although Anne accepted the appointment with vast relief, the subsequent loss affected her profoundly and resulted in the poem “The Abortion” which would be included in her upcoming collection of poetry, *All My Pretty Ones*, which was to be released in 1962.

“The Abortion” is a heavy-handed dose of guilt and self-loathing directed at a strongly felt weakness of character. She begins with “Somebody who should have been born/ is gone” (1-2). This line serves to put the matter directly out front. It is as if she is attempting to heal a wound by exposing it. Perhaps the pain is the reaction most sought. Perhaps she insists on continually opening and exposing the same wound so it is unable to heal—thereby punishing herself for the evil decision. This line is repeated throughout the poem, written in italics perhaps to represent her conscience’s attempt to ensure remembrance of her transgression.

No sooner did one relationship end, however, than another one would begin. Anne’s relationship with poet James Wright was particularly important to her mental makeup at that time. A fan of his poetry, Anne sent James a letter of admiration in 1960. From that one letter a “great correspondence” began and Anne nicknamed him “Comfort,” an old family nickname for her grandfather that reveals just how much consolation she was seeking—how needy she was for solace (Middlebrook 129). Wright’s book of poetry, *The Green Wall* was the first collection of poetry Anne had ever

purchased and she later told him, “I held it in my hand and it moved, not like the sea below me, but like a small mechanical heart might. I say that, extravagant or not, because the book told me who I was, who I could be. The book was more alive than all the ruined sea” (Middlebrook 128). This indicates a possible reason for Anne’s attachment to Wright: his poetry supplied an identity, for which she was desperately searching. Perhaps she transferred this desire from his poetry to him personally.

By that summer, Anne and James had arranged to meet at a gathering of poets hosted by Hy Sobiloff, a successful financial planner who had a particular interest in poetry and often hosted such events at his home in Montauk on Long Island. Anne found Hy’s refined lifestyle very similar to the one lived by her own father and grandfather and was comforted by the familiarity. This familiarity seemed to signal to Anne that she was justified in pursuing her planned affair. James and Anne, sharing a motel room, tentatively engaged in their much-anticipated love affair. James, who was more nervous than Anne, later recounted his version of the evening, saying that “I was afraid and inhibited; and she made love to me... Her powers of femininity and unqualified kindness, as well as her deeply graceful sexuality, were quite beyond anything I had ever known or even imagined in a woman” (Middlebrook 131). Apparently swept up in the emotion of the moment, James asked Anne to leave Kayo for him. Anne’s reaction was to slip into a fugue state which was accompanied by periods of hallucinations and unconsciousness of which she had no recollection in the morning. James’ affection gradually turned to discomfort, and this affair, too, eventually ended shortly before *All My Pretty Ones* was published in 1962.

Still feeling uncomfortable with the demands of small children and a husband and resenting her mother-in-law's interference in both arenas, Anne began a period of fighting violently with Kayo. On one particular occurrence, Kayo had destroyed all of Anne's writing and thrown her typewriter against the wall in a rage over her "involvement with poets" (Middlebrook 133). This was the first time Kayo spoke of Anne's outside relationships and it is unclear whether he was aware of the extent to which she engaged in extramarital affairs or simply resented the time and effort she dedicated to her writing. Anne and Kayo would drink heavily during the hours before dinner and get into screaming matches that would invariably end with Kayo beating her mercilessly. Anne seemed to not only encourage this behavior but embrace it as proof of Kayo's love for her:

Oh my God, he loves me so after he beats me up, he's so sorry. It's so hard not to fall for this, he loves me so, and all the anger he's had for weeks, that has been coming out in small ways, comes out in a big way. Then, no matter how I hurt, it's gone, and he loves me (Middlebrook 154).

This behavior is seemingly connected to the way in which she also associated love and abuse with her daughters. As with Linda and Joy, Anne felt closest to Kayo and most content in their relationship when the anger and frustration escalated into violence. Anne admitted that she sought the beatings to fulfill a "recurring dream in which she was being "tied up in chains" and "wishing to be punished" (Middlebrook 154). Kayo, upon recognizing that his behavior was out of control, sought counseling from Dr. Herbert Liedermann, overcame his anger issues and finally learned to accept Anne as she was. Kayo began fulfilling a different need in Anne's life—one that provided reassurance and

parental comfort. Anne often asked Kayo to stay by her bed at night, and he would stroke her hair and repeatedly tell her, "Yes, you are my good girl" (Seinfeld 332). After this point, Anne and Kayo reached a peaceful plateau in their marriage that would last for several years.

Anne and her daughters would reach a similar comfort level after years of frustration, resentment, violence and blame. At one point, Anne blamed Linda, then six, for her depressive problems saying, "If I didn't have Linda there to reflect my depression it wouldn't be so bad ... I've loved Joy, never loved Linda...something comes between me and Linda. I hate her" (Middlebrook 73). Coupled with the physical abuse, the pressure of being responsible for the welfare of their mother was a tremendous burden on Linda and Joy. Linda remembered being told by her grandmother that she must be very careful of her mother's feelings and not to do anything that might make her sick and Linda felt "I ALWAYS lived on that brink of fear that she was going to fall apart" (Middlebrook 204). The relationship between mother and daughter would take several disturbing, inappropriate twists throughout the childhood years.

The first of these occurred when Linda was nine and Joy was six. As Anne repeated to Dr. Orne, "Linda got in bed with me Sunday, and we spent about an hour pretending I was nine ... She really wanted me to be thirty-four; and I'd say 'Oh, I want to be nine,' I wouldn't do it" (Middlebrook 204). At this time, Anne would also get into bed with Linda because "I probably relate to Linda as a child would to a mother, crawl up next to her as a child would, and she's receptive" (Middlebrook 204). As was typical, Anne turned to not only her husband but her own children in her search for the parental

affection she felt was withheld from her. It is also likely that she was seeking the same degree of comfort that she had experienced with Nana.

Perhaps the most disturbing interaction between Anne and Linda occurred during the times that Anne was sleeping in Linda's bed on a regular basis. Erotic feelings surfaced and Anne began to not just lie in Linda's bed but to cling to her in a furtive manner. It was many years later that Linda realized that her mother was masturbating as she lay next to her and she recalled, "I would be turned on my side, and I would lie there like a stone, pretending to be asleep, waiting for something to be over. I don't think I wanted to know what it was" (Middlebrook 223). After much consideration and counseling as an adult, Linda surmised that her mother was simply dissociated when these events took place and was attempting to recapture the sexual comfort she had known with Nana.

After these occurrences, the family unit seemed to reach a place of relative calm and happiness. Anne was steadily compiling a new collection of poetry from which she received much pleasure, she and Kayo had reached a level of tentative happiness, and for the first time, Anne was enjoying the presence of her daughters. They performed elaborate Christmas rituals with Kayo dressing up as Santa and the girls measuring the width of the chimney to make sure that Santa could still fit down it. Linda and Joy engaged in normal activities such as dance and music lessons and "Linda marched through the house reciting multiplication tables and Joy tap-danced dents in the kitchen linoleum" (L. Sexton 87). Anne commented that even though she was not "the good mother of convention," she was finally able to bestow affection and pleasure upon her daughters (Middlebrook 135).

Most influential to Anne at this time, apart from the new haven of her family, were her relationships with her colleagues and other people within the writing community. These relationships provided a balm to Anne's complex, wounded psyche. To these people, she could reveal her fears and eccentric thoughts that she had long felt unable to share with her family for fear of rejection. They offered her something her loved ones could not, or would not—acceptance and validation. The foremost of these relationships was with fellow poet Sylvia Plath.

Anne and Sylvia met while attending the writing workshop with Robert Lowell in 1959. Plath was greatly impressed and influenced by Anne, who had turned 31 that fall, and by her poetry which contained “peculiar private and taboo subjects such as mental influence” (Middlebrook 105). Sylvia, then 26, was dedicated to her own writing and had made a stringent pledge not to have children until she had accomplished several writing goals. She was therefore extremely interested in “...the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also of her experiences as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman” (Middlebrook 105). When Sylvia questioned Anne as to the feasibility of having children and a productive writing career, Anne told her that “It can be done, but you'd better think about it really hard,” although what she desired to tell her was “Don't try” (Middlebrook 111).

Lowell realized that both of the writers had qualities that might suit the other and began comparing them in class so that they might “rub off on each other” (Middlebrook 105). The relationship went a bit deeper as Plath, engaged in psychotherapy to resolve issues about her father, began to identify with Anne on a therapeutic level. They engaged in long afternoons of drinking martinis at the Ritz with Anne's lover, George Starbuck.

At this time, Sylvia and Anne discussed, in frank detail, killing themselves not “if or when but how” (Beam 104). Occasionally, another poet of the time, Adrienne Rich, often joined them and the women would discuss why society insisted on equating womanhood and motherhood. Plath, who was attempting to decide whether or not a woman could indeed succeed in motherhood and writing simultaneously, discovered that there were few women who had done it successfully. Why, they wondered, “did the choice of motherhood, if or when it was a choice, disallow writing works of genius” (Middlebrook 112). These timely, in-depth discussions resulted in several poems by each of the women that could be labeled “confessional” (Middlebrook 112). In them, they railed against the establishment, and the patriarchal structure of society and revealed their feelings of repression, anger and despondency.

If Sylvia learned from Anne to voice her feelings through poetry, Anne herself learned something from the younger poet as well. Sylvia revealed that she had once been admitted to McLean Hospital, a mental hospital in suburban Boston. McLean is often described as “the country’s most aristocratic mental institution and definitely the most literary” (Beam 96). The patient list has included such illustrious names as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Adams. In fact, Adams’ wife commented once that McLean “seems to be the goal of every good and conscientious Bostonian” (Beam 96). Indeed, the allure of the prestigious institution continued when Sylvia was admitted as a Smith freshman in the fall of 1953 for suicidal depression. She later recounted her experiences in her novel, *The Bell Jar*, which was published in 1971 and delivered a view of McLean to the angst-ridden teenage girls to whom the novel appealed. After experimenting with Thorazine and insulin treatments, Sylvia’s doctors suggested that she undergo electroshock therapy.

While she was hesitant to engage in such a drastic treatment, she relented and was well enough after the treatment to be released by December of 1953.

Anne, who had long desired to be admitted to McLean, was both envious and fascinated to find that her new friend had been a patient at the illustrious hospital. For Anne, McLean had “always held the odd glamour...as the hospital of choice for the occasionally mad artists of Boston” (Beam 97). Her desire to be admitted began when she learned that both Plath and her mentor, Robert Lowell had been in McLean. Lowell had himself been committed to the mental institution in 1958 due to manic episodes in which he would “swell up with power, anger, and delusion” (Beam 97). Like Sylvia, he also produced writing about his experiences there, completing and publishing a poem called “Walking in the Blue,” which was to become one of his most famous, successful pieces. Lowell was admitted to McLean four times throughout his life and was considered something of a celebrity among the staff and patients.

Now that she knew that her two closest confidantes had experienced life in McLean, Anne’s desire to be admitted was stronger than ever. This seems to stem from both her desire for acceptance—here, quite literal—and her need, once again, to revel in the madness that set her apart from others. She once remarked to her close friend Lois Ames, “If only I could get a scholarship to McLean,” as if it were some honor or prize to be won. Fiercely competitive with Sylvia, Anne seemed to desire the same experiences as the younger poet. It would be several years before Anne saw the inside of McLean and, even then, it would not be in the capacity for which she so desperately yearned. As for her relationship with Sylvia, she and Anne would continue to challenge and inspire each

other until Sylvia's suicide in 1963. This event would affect Anne dramatically and influence her writing in much the same way as their remarkable friendship had done.

By the beginning of 1962, Anne's life was mostly calm, her relationships with her husband and daughters mostly healthy and pleasant. She continued to compile poems for publication in a second collection of work, tentatively entitled *All My Pretty Ones*. Anne decided on that title after reading a line from *MacBeth* when McDuff, upon hearing that his wife and children have been murdered, asks in horror, "All my pretty ones? Did you say all?" This collection of poems was particularly significant as the contents touched upon subjects that Anne had worked diligently to address and resolve in her therapy sessions with Dr. Orne. This book was a tangible expression of Anne's struggles—struggles that would ultimately prove too difficult to be borne.

CHAPTER III

SPIRALING DESCENT

While in the throes of compiling her second collection of poems for publication, Anne suffered a psychological setback and contemplated suicide once again. Kayo was traveling frequently for business, serving as vice president for the R. C. Harvey Company in the years after Anne's father's death. At the time of her psychological break, both Kayo and Dr. Orne were out of town at the same time, leaving Anne feeling deserted and panicked. Nearly hysterical, Anne contacted Dr. Liedermann, Kayo's own therapist and pleaded for him to admit her to the hospital. He was hesitant to do so and informed her that he wished for her to attempt to fight the urge using her own newly found resolve. Left to her own devices, Anne took a large amount of sleeping pills, reasoning that she did not want to kill herself but only stay unconscious until Kayo returned home. She justified her actions by stating that "there's a difference between taking something that will kill you and something that will kill you temporarily" (Middlebrook 164). After this episode, Anne began carrying her "kill me pills" in her purse at all times so that she could actually commit suicide whenever she felt she needed to. Indeed, her mental status seemed to be on a decline after the relatively peaceful years she had spent with her husband and daughters. This is only further proof that the demons were always just below the surface waiting to drag her back under.

This decline is evident from her behavior around the time of the publication of her second collection of poetry. When the book, *All My Pretty Ones*, was accepted for publication by Houghton Mifflin in November 1961, it seemed as if Anne was slowly

losing her will to fight against the tenacious depression, and she reasoned that her motivation for living—writing—had been accomplished. She shared her observation with Dr. Orne, saying, “I’ve made it with the poems now ... that was going to be the reason I lived anyway” (Middlebrook 165). Indeed, her greatest accomplishments may have ironically cemented her demise for once she completed what she felt she had been living to do, it became difficult for her to justify her existence and find reasons to struggle against the allure of suicide.

As she continued careening toward her ultimate demise, she made a comment to Dr. Orne that further illuminates the sociological motivations involved in her suicidal behavior. Shortly before her second book was released, she discussed her suicidal tendencies and lingering depression with Dr. Orne: “You said to me one time, if you kill yourself you won’t live (though it’s one of my ideas that I will be reborn)” (Middlebrook 165). This notion of being “reborn” coincides with one of the theories of the notable sociologist Jack D. Douglas. Douglas, a former professor of sociology at the University of California in San Diego, wished to write a book about suicide that would expand upon the theories of Durkheim. His book, *The Social Meanings of Suicide*, was published in 1970. One of the theories presented by Douglas in this study is classified as “Suicide as a Means of Transforming the Soul from this World to the Other World” (Douglas 284).

With this theory, Douglas suggests that the suicidal individual embraces the notion of death for several possible reasons including the promise of heaven or the desire to be reunited with a loved one. Anne had commented several times on her wish to commit suicide as a way of “getting back to Nana.” This desire Douglas would term a “form of substantial self-escape from this world” (Douglas 300). In addition, Anne’s

actual use of the word “reborn” in reference to her existence after her suicide coincides with Douglas’ suggestion that often suicidal individuals desire to take their own lives so that they can transform themselves “from the realm of the time-bound, space-bound, worldly, everyday meanings to the realm of the timeless, infinite, other-worldly meanings” (Douglas 286). It is clear from Anne’s comments that she viewed death as not only an end to her current suffering but as a method of enjoying peace and happiness as an aware, transformed energy.

A relationship Anne began at this time with a monk named Brother Dennis Farrell provides some insight into her state of mind by early 1962. She became acquainted with him when he sent her a letter praising *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* shortly after its publication. He wrote that her poetry had “liberated in him feelings long suppressed by excessive rationality” and informed her that “Grace is working in you” (Middlebrook 182). Anne immediately wrote back to him, delighted to have someone so attentive and complimentary in her life pleading “I’m in trouble NOW. Write me anything...just words...I need a friend” (Middlebrook 183). Her desperation for acceptance and a connection is evident from her enthusiastic responses. Thus began a friendship based on letter writing in which the two discussed everything from poetry to religion and sin.

When Anne had completed the manuscript for *All My Pretty Ones*, she wrote to Brother Dennis and explained that it was “mostly about the dead...and love...and sin...but mostly the dead” (L. Sexton 137). In turn, these are the topics that she discussed with him. The young monk seemed to delight in having someone to whom he could reveal his feelings of self-exploration while Anne enjoyed flirting with someone from a safe distance commenting on a picture he sent her, “You are awfully handsome to be a

monk...but then...I'm glad you sent your picture because it is a distinct pleasure to behold. You have amazing eyes" (L. Sexton 135). It was in keeping with Anne's flirtatious, promiscuous nature that she made these overtures to a monk.

Their relationship was mutually beneficial for some time and Anne expanded the boundaries of their feelings for one another by writing to him, "I love you, you of your feelings, you of your belief. Your letters have a profound effect on me! You can't imagine!" and "I write to you now because I need you in some way that I can't explain...that, in truth, I do not know" (L. Sexton 140). Even here, within the confines of a relationship that should have been platonic, Anne's clinginess and desire for acceptance and attention overwhelmed her sense of propriety. Brother Farrell would respond in kind, encouraging her to express her feelings as he explored his own thoughts and actions that were evolving with Anne's influence. Eventually, this relationship, as so many others in Anne's life, came to a painful close. In March of 1963, Brother Dennis wrote to Anne and told her that their exchange of letters revealed to him that his evolving ideas were "not commensurate with life in monastery" (Middlebrook 184). As a result, he left the priesthood and never contacted Anne again. She had been abandoned once more.

In early 1963 *All My Pretty Ones* was in wide release in both hard and paperback form and was garnering high praise from critics and fans alike. Poet Richard Howard wrote that Anne "has, in Mr. Lowell's choppy wake, restored to our poetry not only the lyric of self-dramatization that had hidden out in the novel, but an unmistakable notation of events—not witty, but always grim, and without more music than accuracy allows" (Middlebrook 187). The poems in the collection speak of her years of struggle with

mental illness. They are introspective pieces that indicate an awareness of her increasing interest in the peace and respite that await her in death.

The opening poem, “The Truth The Dead Know” speaks of the lure of death and the presence of those on the other side making that state more attractive. This piece is dedicated to her parents—perhaps a method of vocalizing her desire to join them, thus further supporting Douglas’ notion that she desired to die in order to be reunited with loved ones. That notion could be represented by her remark that she is “Tired of being brave” (4). This could include the bravery she displayed in the face of her illness, suicide attempt recoveries and even the loss of her parents. In any case, she has now grown weary of the bravery and no longer wants to fight.

In the poem, “Old,” Anne confronts that which she feels has long been stalking her—the specter of death. She is both “tired” and “afraid” here—“afraid of needles” and “tired of rubber sheets and tubes ... tired of faces I don’t know” (1-3). This, of course, is a comment on a life long lived in and out of hospitals, mental institutions and therapy sessions. Now, she says, “I think death is starting” (4). Perhaps this is what she has identified as the natural progression for someone of her kind. She next comments that “Death starts out like a dream,” indicating that lapsing into unconsciousness is akin to the dream-like state one experiences shortly before sleep—a period full of surreal thoughts, images and “objects and my sister’s laughter” (5-6). She continues discussing the thoughts that swirl around in her mind in her state of semi-consciousness: “We are young and we are walking/ and picking wild blueberries all the way to Damariscotta” (7-9). Someone beckons to her from beyond the cloud that obscures her awareness “Oh Susan, she cried, / you’ve stained your new waist,” which is perhaps symbolizing the mess she

has made of her life (10-11). She pleads to be left alone, to be able to sink further into the miasma of her escape: “What are you doing? Leave me alone! / Can’t you see I’m dreaming? / In a dream you are never eighty”(16-18). This seems to convey the message that when one’s mind wanders unfettered, and able to achieve its fondest wishes, it never lingers on what it may be in old age, because agedness is not a state to be desired. Perhaps Anne is suggesting here that one would be well served to exit at the height of one’s abilities—further evidence that she was finding less reason to deny suicide.

“The Starry Night,” a poem that opens with a quote from Vincent Van Gogh concerning his painting of the same name, is replete with romantic images that are in stark contrast to the continuing theme of death. This may be the result of Anne having romanticized the notion of death as a beautiful entity to be embraced. Likely Anne’s analysis of the actual painting, this poem finds images of death in conjunction with those of peace: “The town does not exist / except where one black-haired tree slips / up like a drowned woman into the hot sky”(1-3). The night, often associated with stillness, “boils with eleven stars” here (4). This indicates the presence of pure energy, perhaps ignited by the possibility of someone achieving his or her ultimate potential. This, the speaker proclaims, “is how / I want to die” (11-12). The final sentence of the first stanza is that plaintive plea for release.

All My Pretty Ones met with critical acclaim and succeeded in making Anne a vibrant new force in the literary world. She had always alternately courted and feared success, once remarking that “I might kill myself tomorrow even if I had the acclaim of Salinger—matter of fact acclaim might be difficult to handle” (Middlebrook 165). Once the book had been thoroughly reviewed, it began to be nominated for several prestigious

awards, including the National Book Award in March of 1963. Shortly thereafter, Anne discovered that she was also being considered for a Ford Foundation grant to work in the theater, a position that had previously been held by both Robert Lowell and Anthony Hecht. The only negative occurrence at this time was a particularly vicious review from James Dickey, who had berated Anne's previous work *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. About *All My Pretty Ones* he wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* in April of 1963:

It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience, as though this made the writing more real, and it would also be difficult to find a more hopelessly mechanical approach to reporting these matters than the one she employs...Her habitual gravitation to the domestic and the "anti-poetic" seem to me as contrived and mannered as any poet's harking after galleons and sunsets and forbidden pleasures. (L. Sexton 166)

This isolated negative review disturbed Anne deeply, not in some small part because she admired and respected Dickey's work. She speculated what had provoked the attack and wondered, "What do you do with a review like this? It certainly was not written for me to read...it was written for the readers of poetry (mostly poets themselves). If I were to listen to James Dickey, I *would* stop writing. God, I don't know" (L.Sexton 167). It is evident from her reaction and comments that her desire for acceptance remained strong into her adulthood—it mattered not that this was just one negative review among many positive ones. Her despair and bewildered sense of hurt was tempered by an extremely flattering offer extended to her in early in 1963.

The American Academy of Arts and Letters offered Anne a traveling fellowship of \$6500 to spend a year abroad—it was the first award of its kind and considered very

prestigious. Anne, although excited and flattered, reacted in a not altogether surprising manner—with fear and trepidation. She felt that she was not well enough to travel to Europe for an entire year without her support system—Kayo would be unable to accompany her because of work responsibilities and he thought it unwise for her to take the children. She decided to ask her friend and neighbor, Sandy Robart, to accompany her as a “keeper” or “chaperone” (L. Sexton 164). The Academy decided to hold an award ceremony in her honor, which promptly caused Anne to become distressed, worrying “I’ll have to go onstage where the citation will be read. Reading a poem, I can sweep onto the stage and before I’m done, I can own them. But just to stand there! And afterward a big cocktail party!” (Middlebrook 194). Her fear of humiliation and rejection from the only group that had ever accepted her was overwhelming—she once again feared the loss of an important connection. Oddly, she decided to forgo a dramatic outfit she desired to wear with a top that “comes down low in the back” for a childlike outfit with flat shoes because, “When I’m that little girl I don’t *have* my body! I can’t explain that, but it’s true” (Middlebrook 194). This seems to indicate that even as an adult, Anne desired acceptance for the child within her that was emotionally starved.

As Anne was struggling to deal with her newfound honor and celebrity, news reached her in February 1963 that her friend and confidante, Sylvia Plath, had died in London of what was reported to be pneumonia. Soon enough, however, it became common knowledge that Plath had died of acute asphyxiation—the result of placing her head in a gas oven. This turn of events seemed particularly tragic as Plath had begun to see success as a poet herself and appeared to be balancing motherhood and writing as had long been her goal. Anne surmised that Sylvia had simply succumbed to her “lust” for

suicide. The news of Sylvia's death caused Anne to remember their discussions of suicide and prompted the writing of the poem "Sylvia's Death" which would be included in her third collection of poems, *To Live or Die*, published in 1966.

In this poem, written just five days after she learned of Sylvia's death, Anne begins to identify with Sylvia and laments that she has been left behind while Sylvia alone claimed the death that they both so desperately desired. The beginning addresses Sylvia directly, indicating that the speaker desires this poem to be deeply personal. The scene is "a dead box of stones and spoons, / with two children, two meteors/ wandering loose in the tiny playroom," which represents Sylvia choosing the oven the—"dead box"—as her method of suicide while her children play with no suspicion in the other room (2-4). She wonders what happened to disturb the happy domesticity of Sylvia's letters that spoke of "raising potatoes/ and keeping bees" (11-12). She asks "what did you stand by, / just how did you lie down into?" seeking to understand what provoked her demise (13-14).

The tone in the next paragraph changes abruptly from a melancholy search for answers to accusatory and angry with "Thief! --/ how did you crawl into, /crawl down alone/ into the death I wanted so badly and for so long, the death we said we both outgrew" (15-19). The desperate envy is obvious here—the speaker feels abandoned and rejected on a most basic level. She speaks of their past relationships—the meetings in which they would discuss their suicidal intentions over "three dry martinis in Boston, / the death that talked of analysts and cures, / the death that talked like brides with plots, / the death we drank to, / the motives and then the quiet deed?" (22-26). The repetitive use

of the word “death” in this section indicates that the speaker relates her relationship with Sylvia with the desire for and appeal of suicide.

Sylvia’s death came at a time when Anne was vulnerable and primed for another psychological setback amidst the honors and awards she was receiving. The stress and pressure of society’s expectations of her caused her to retreat into herself, her memories of times spent with Sylvia and thoughts of the pain Sylvia must have been experiencing at the time of her suicide. Asked by the minister performing the funeral service to assist in selecting the poetry to be read, Anne was dismayed to learn that Sylvia’s actual suicide would not be mentioned during the service. Anne felt that it should be discussed because the suicide was Sylvia’s way of ultimately “returning home” and Anne maintained that “this shouldn’t be left out of her funeral—I think this is an important way to die” (Middlebrook 199). Sylvia’s death reaffirmed what Anne had long suspected—death was attainable and could provide the release for which she was looking. As she explained to Dr. Orne, “Suicide is addicting ... Sylvia had the suicide inside her. As I do. As many of us do...Sylvia Plath’s death disturbs me, makes me want it too. She took something that was mine, *that* death was mine!” (Middlebrook 200). As Sylvia’s death began to create ripples in the literary world with the wide release of her book, *The Bell Jar*, Anne began to consider what she herself would like to leave behind as her posthumous work. In May of 1963, Anne told Dr. Orne that “I’ve been thinking I’ll write a book and leave it, so when I die it can be published posthumously” (Middlebrook 201). This seemed to signify that she the decision to end her life had been cemented.

Her impending trip to Europe temporarily took her mind off her suicidal impulses as she worried about functioning while away from home for such an extended period of

time. Her stress level increased until, shortly before she was scheduled to leave, Anne suffered a setback and passed out in the bathroom of Dr. Orne's office, cradled the air conditioning unit after regaining consciousness and collapsed on the floor again in a trance, calling Dr. Orne "Nana" over and over (Middlebrook 201). Despite the drama of this session, Dr. Orne recommended that she continue with her plans to take the trip, assuring her that he would be available through letters and supplying her with enough medication to keep her worst symptoms at bay. Ironically, what seemed to bother Anne the most about the trip was leaving her children—she had grown to love and enjoy them as they grew older. On August 22, 1963, Anne and her companion, Sandy Robart, set sail for Europe amidst a sea of tears and worries.

The letters Anne wrote home early in her travels reveal that she was relatively stable and determined to embrace the adventure at hand writing such things as "The ship, on stern at night is glorious tho very windy and cold. Last night stood and watched the wake, booming barrels of foam trailing out...ever, ever" (L. Sexton 174). She coped relatively well until her and Sandy's luggage containing all of their belongings, including a collection of Nana's letters, was stolen in Belgium, causing her to feel panicked and lost. Writing in a letter home, she laments "We are some homesick...we are lost little babies...the 'adventure' turned sour" (L. Sexton 185). From that point on, Anne began experiencing symptoms of her illness—depression, anxiety and manic behavior. In Venice, she wrote letters to Kayo speaking of her intense love for him. When she reached Rome, however, she met a Yugoslavian barber named Louis and immediately began a passionate affair with him, thus surrendering to the mania. They crashed the car during a drunken rampage, she made a \$180 hysterical phone call to Dr. Orne and sent a desperate

telegraph to Kayo stating "Arriving Boston Sunday October 27" (Middlebrook 209). By the time she arrived home, she was in an acute state of suicidal depression. The first person she chose to see was Dr. Orne. She showed up at his office with a large purse that contained Nana's picture, her "kill me pills" and a razor. Four days before her thirty-fifth birthday, she was admitted to the Westwood Lodge once more.

Her mental status was obviously in a state of decline as she pulled herself back from the precipice once again. Kayo, not understanding why the woman who returned from Europe was not the relatively well adjusted, pleasant woman who had left but the depressed, insane woman she had been, screamed at her during this period "You've been in a swamp for so many years, I'm tired of you!" (Middlebrook 211). At this time, Kayo offered to do whatever was within his power to make Anne happy. She remembered that he told her that "I could have anything in the world, McLean, Austen Riggs Center, or any doctor or any thing, divorce or anything to make me happy" and she herself wanted "to get well and for him to want me to get well" (Middlebrook 211). She decided, once again, to commit herself to Kayo and attempt to salvage their marriage. This tenuous connection came at a time when Anne would need Kayo's support more than ever. Several months after Anne returned from Europe, Dr. Orne revealed that he had accepted a research and teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. Anne would be deserted once again.

Reeling from the combination of Sylvia's death, the manic episode in Europe, the fight with Kayo and Dr. Orne's impending departure, Anne's resolve to commit suicide was stronger than ever. We once again see evidence of Durkheim's theory of Egoistic

Suicide in letters written by Anne at this time. In a letter written to her close friend Anne Clark, Anne wrote that :

I don't want to live... I am like a stone that lives...locked outside all that's real...I wish, or think I wish, that I were dying, and yet, and yet to be behind a wall, watching everyone fit in where I can't, to talk behind a gray foggy wall, to live but to not reach or to reach wrong...I want to belong. I'm like a Jew who ends up in the wrong country, I'm not a part. I'm not a member. I'm frozen"
(George 123).

It is evident from these plaintive words that Anne was suffering from the isolation and lack of connection that is the hallmark of the Egoistic Suicide. As such, she began contemplating exactly how she would like to carry out the actual suicide, deciding on a combination of alcohol and pills which she termed "the woman's way out" (Middlebrook 216). She began to speak of the perfect death as one that rendered the victim a "Sleeping Beauty" rather than the method chosen by Ernest Hemingway which, according to Anne, "is the greatest act of courage I can think of" (Middlebrook 216). She supposed she herself could not use a gun because "I worry about the minutes before you die, that fear of death. I don't have it with the pills, but with the gun there'd be a minute when you'd know, a terrible fear. I'd do anything to escape that fear; death would be a friend, then" (Middlebrook 216).

As a result of the constant thoughts about and longing for death, Anne began writing poetry on the subject to be included in her third collection *To Live or Die*. Dr. Orne, concerned that Anne receive the best possible care after his departure, helped her interview new therapists at this time. They settled on Dr. Ollie Zweizung and Anne began

seeing him in conjunction with her regular appointments with Dr. Orne. The poems she produced at this time period were almost exclusively related to her longtime friend and mentor's imminent departure including one entitled "KE 6—8018," the telephone number to Dr. Orne's office. Written January 3, 1964, it is full of surreal images and thinly veiled messages of desperation.

The speaker begins by addressing the "Black lady" with "two eyes, / low as tobacco," here representing the madness that stalks Anne (1-3). She asks "who inked you in?" making reference to the scheduled appointments she had kept with Dr. Orne. She then mentions several people that hold creative positions in life, "The shoemaker could not do it,/ nor the sculptor nor the cubist" (4-5) Interestingly, each of these professions are ones in which forms are molded or created—representing Dr. Orne's singular talent to help mold and shape her psyche. As she addresses the "Black lady," she identifies her as a "sweetener, a drawer of blood—that's all,/ a hot voice, an imminence and then a death"(7-8). This seems to be a description of the progression of her disease as she sees it.

In the next stanza, the speaker begins by addressing "My love," asking "when you leave in which crevice will you hide?" This very probably is Anne's reaction to those people in her life vehemently insisting that she is getting better and that she will survive without Dr. Orne's assistance. She is facetiously agreeing that the madness will leave and now is wondering where it will go. She reveals that she suspects otherwise with "You will rest/ Like a drowned bat upon my shoulder" (15-16). The illness may be temporarily subdued but remains ultimately sinister and deadly. She acknowledges that she will have to take some responsibility for her own well-being stating that "In one hand I will have to

hold that silence” because “there will be no track anymore./ There will only be that peculiar waiting./ There will be nothing to pick up./ There will be nothing” (17-21). It seems as if she is less strong in her conviction to fight than she is simply resigned.

The next stanza mentions “a house--/ a house that I knew, / the center of it, / a tiny heart, / synthetic though it was/ making that thin buzz-buzz/ like a sly beetle” (22-28). This seems to represent the Dr. Orne’s office, with the “tiny heart” in its center an apt description of Dr. Orne and the lifeline he offered her on so many occasions. One might assume that the “buzz-buzz” is the method by which his secretary alerted the doctor that patients had arrived. Continuing into the next stanza, the speaker once again addresses the “Black Lady” asking “what will I do/ without your two flowers,” commenting that “I have inhabited you, number by number. / I have pushed you in and out like a needle” (29-33). This may be evidence that Anne alternately hopes and fears that her illness will leave her. On the one hand, she very much doubts that it will; however, the merest possibility that it could leave results in her feeling oddly abandoned.

The end of the poem switches perspective from the other to the repetitive “I” followed by the determined “will.” This might be evidence of Anne’s attempt at bravado in the face of fear as she maintains “I will struggle like a surgeon. / I will call quickly for the glare of the moon. / I will even dial milk. / I will hold the thread that was fished through the ceiling/ that leads to the roof, the pole, the grass, / that ends in the sea” (42-47). The images represented here seem related to defiance, her daughters and the tenuous filament that connects her to the world, to the universe, to life. Ultimately, however, “there will be nothing, / black lady, nothing,” and she will “wait, / unleashed and

unheard” (55-58). Her pain will be able to run rampantly over her while her cries go unheard because she will have no one to help her reign in her madness.

Anne’s mental stability began to decline as Dr. Orne’s departure date rapidly approached. She began to suffer from a “constant rhyming inside my head” and was hospitalized in the psychiatric unit of Massachusetts General Hospital rather than the usual Westwood Lodge so that she could be started on a course of the new psychoactive drug Thorazine (Middlebrook 225). Although widely prescribed after its introduction into the world of psychotherapy, the drug caused severe side effects including tremors and “facial distortions, which strongly emphasized the asymmetry of her features; involuntary movements of the mouth, lips and tongue” (Middlebrook 226). Most disturbing to Anne however, was the effect the medication had on her writing ability—because it was a heavy sedative, it diminished her creativity. She no longer experienced the creative outbursts her mania produced and lamented that “I think language is beautiful. I even think insanity is beautiful (surely the root of language), except that it’s painful” (Middlebrook 226). She stayed on the drug, however, and would ultimately endure its side effects for the next eight years.

By September of 1966, Anne’s longtime publishing company, Houghton Mifflin, was preparing her third collection of poems, *Live or Die*, for publication. This collection represented the choice she had long struggled to make—would she live or would she die? During this time, Anne, ever desirous of physical attention, started a passionate love affair with her new therapist, Dr. Zweizung whom Anne had nicknamed her “doctor-daddy” (Middlebrook 258). She revealed this shocking turn of events to several of her closest friends who pleaded with her to terminate treatment with him immediately and

report the doctor for unethical behavior. Anne, however, reveled in this unorthodox relationship and despaired in “giving up the solace of cuddling” (Middlebrook 260). In desperation, she took an overdose of sleeping pills and was subsequently hospitalized for 48 hours although she later downplayed the occurrence saying that “it wasn’t a serious attempt or I would have succeeded” (Middlebrook 260). It was at this time that Kayo admitted that he was aware of her extramarital affairs and felt “constrained by her illness from confronting her with they pain they gave them” and commented that “I thought if she ever got well, we could put that kind of thing behind us” (Middlebrook 261). This is the only known instance in which Kayo would intimate that he was fully aware of the extent of Anne’s infidelities.

To compound Anne’s feelings of stress and pressure, she was notified in the spring of 1976 that she was to receive both the Shelley Memorial Prize, awarded annually by the Poetry Society of America, and, most amazingly, the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Literature. She had long coveted the Pulitzer Prize and once remarked to Dr. Orne that her goal was to write a book that would win the award and that “I want it just as much for when I’m dead as when I’m alive” (Middlebrook 271). In the following years, it seemed as if winning the award was perhaps a sign that she had completed what she had been put on Earth to do and now was free to finally take her own life for her darkest days were yet to come.

Several of the poems that were included in *Live or Die* speak of Anne’s desire for death—proof that the lure of suicide was becoming too difficult to resist. The first of such poems is entitled plainly enough “Wanting to Die” and speaks of what she sees as her simple wish for escape. The beginning is a rather weary response to a question someone

has asked her: "Since you ask, I cannot remember. / I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage" (1-2). Perhaps someone has inquired about the genesis of her illness, the first time she identified that she was destined to die. She speaks of the return of the "unnameable lust" which is her desire for death. Interestingly, this is the same term she had previously used to describe Sylvia Plath's desire shortly after her suicide. She attempts to explain that her suicidal tendencies are not evidence of any particular hatred against the living world, maintaining that "I have nothing against life." When she comments that "I know well the grass blades you mention, / the furniture you have placed under the sun," this seems to be a response to those that try to convince her of the beauty of life, the worthiness of it (5-6). She acknowledges these aspects, but is trying to communicate that it is beyond her—her suicidal tendencies are just part of her makeup. She suggests that she has no control over her situation as "suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*. / They never ask *why build*" (7-9). She seems to be implying that she is destined to do this—suicide is simply her fate.

She next speaks of her past suicide attempts explaining that "Twice I have simply declared myself, / have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy, / have taken on his craft and magic"(10-12). The contrast between the "enemy" and its "magic" here indicates that Anne is aware of her incongruous behavior. She cannot explain it—her madness is both evil and inviting. She maintains that "suicides have already betrayed the body," suggesting that she and others like her live beyond the realm of pain and reality once they have sampled the treasured release, the "drug so sweet/ that even children would look on and smile" (20-21). She addresses the common belief that "Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say," and counters that "yet she waits for me, year after year, / to so delicately

undo an old wound, / to empty my breath from its bad prison”—that prison, of course, the living body that so tortures her (24-27).

After many years of tumultuousness and twenty-three years of marriage, Anne decided that she needed to be free of Kayo and asked for a divorce early in 1971. She offered no explanation other than a letter to a friend in which she commented that:

I can only say that I could not stay married to him any longer and stay alive, and it is very hard for me still to be without him, and harder on him even more perhaps. I do not wish to go into gruesome details, and I know they say ‘till death do us part,’ but there are many kinds of death, and our marriage had multiple ones (L. Sexton 395).

She impulsively left the family home and stayed with a succession of friends and acquaintances, apparently engaged in a period of elated mania that allowed her to interact with people and continue her writing. Kayo was left feeling hurt and bewildered as were Anne’s daughters Joy and Linda, then ages thirteen and eighteen. Kayo remarked that “I didn’t know what the hell was going on. I have wondered, was it brought about by her meteoric rise, by having too much money, too much sense of power?...But I honestly don’t know, never have known, what her real, driving motive was in the divorce” (Middlebrook 372). When their divorce became final, Anne lost yet another connection to life and had one less reason to deny suicide.

During this time of upheaval, Anne began work on a collection of poems that was different than her usual pieces. Describing the process by which she produced these poems, Anne explained “I take the fairy tale and transform it into a poem of my own, following the story line and adding my own pzazz, They are wry and cruel and sadistic

and funny” (Middlebrook 336) Thus, she titled the collection *Transformations*. In these pieces, Anne included images from “Rapunzel,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and most notably “Snow White.” In her retelling of that classic tale, Anne likens the poison apple in “Snow White” to society’s pressures on her to lead a “conventional life in the suburbs of Boston, caring for her two daughters and helping her husband advance in his career in the wool business” (Middlebrook 3). These sentiments coincide with the previously mentioned Fatalistic Suicide typology set forth by Durkheim. Anne felt hopelessly trapped by the stifling mandates of a society determined to force her into some idealistic role of wife and mother.

The years of torturous mental illness and achievements and setbacks had taken their toll on Anne by July of 1974. She had earlier that year appointed her eldest daughter Linda, then age 21, as her literary executor in case anything should happen to her. She maintained that she did so because “I know you know the value, the potential of what I’ve tried in my small way to write, not only in financial potential for your future income, but maybe, just maybe—the spirit of the poems will go on past both of us...” (L. Sexton 417). In addition, Anne drew up a will that contained very specific instructions for her funeral arrangements, began to give her valued possessions away to friends and told friends and family members that she wanted the words “RATS LIVE ONE NO EVIL STAR” inscribed upon her tombstone (L. Sexton 422). That particular palindrome had long amused her—the idea that the negative word “rats” could be interpreted as the positive word “star” pleased her.

On Friday, October 4, 1974, Anne went to lunch with her friend Maxine Kumin, about which Kumin noted that “we had a gay and silly lunch together, and I remember

thinking how much better she seemed” (Middlebrook 396). After returning home, Anne poured herself a glass of vodka, dressed in her mother’s fur coat and went into the garage, closing the door behind her. There, she climbed into the driver’s seat of her 1967 red Cougar, started the car and turned on the radio. Anne Harvey Sexton died of carbon monoxide asphyxiation at the age of 45, finally free of the torment that had plagued her for so long. The family reunited for her funeral service and in 1976, when Anne’s ashes were finally interred, Kayo, Linda and Joy met at the Forest Hills Cemetery to return her to the earth. No doubt they were thinking of their complicated relationship with the women that had so loved them and needed them but was unable to defeat her demons, even for those she treasured most.

The literary world was understandably not shocked by Anne’s death, but they were extremely saddened by it. Poet Denise Levertov maintained in the obituary she penned for a Boston newspaper, “Anne Sexton’s tragedy will not be without influence in the tragedies of other lives...We who are alive must make clear, as she could not, the distinction between creativity and self-destruction. The tendency to confuse the two has claimed too many victims” (Middlebrook 397). One can imagine that Anne would have been pleased that her painful battle with mental illness would be used as an educational tool to help others avoid her tragic fate.

Appendix A

"Red Roses"

By Anne Sexton

Tommy is three and when he's bad
his mother dances with him.
She puts on the record,
"Red Roses for a Blue Lady"
and throws him across the room.
Mind you,
she never laid a hand on him,
only the wall laid a hand on him.
He gets "red roses" in different places,
the head, that time he was sleepy as a river,
the back, that time he was a broken scarecrow,
the arm, like a diamond had bitten it,
the leg, twisted like a licorice stick,
all the dance they did together,
Blue Lady and Tommy.
You fell, she said, just remember you fell.
I fell, is all he told the doctors
in the big hospital, a nice lady came
and asked him questions, but because
he didn't want to be sent away, he said, I fell.
He never said anything else although he could talk
fine.
He never told about the music
or how she'd sing and shout
holding him up and throwing him.
He pretends he is her ball.
He tries to fold up and bounce
but he squashes like fruit.
For he loves Blue Lady and the spots
of "red roses" she gives him.

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