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"A TERROR AND A DREAM" : DOMESTIC IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON

by

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B.A. May 1982, Christopher Newport College

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

ENGLISH

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Approved by:

Philip D. Raisor (Director)

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ABSTRACT

"A TERROR AND A DREAM" : DOMESTIC IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON

Frances S. Waters
Old Dominion University, 1984
Director: Philip D. Raisor

Women writers often experience a conflict between traditional feminine roles and the less traditional role of the female writer. And for those writers, like Anne Sexton, who choose not to choose between roles, the result is conflict. This conflict, recognized by previous critics and evident in Sexton's biography and poetry, results in a domestic imagery expressing this vacillation. In this study, submitted in partial fulfillment for the M. A. degree in English, I provide an in-depth study of Sexton's domestic imagery. I concern myself with two imagery patterns: one, in which the symbolic image's meaning changes randomly with no controlling network: two, in which the symbolic image's meaning is controlled by the kitchen or general domestic environment. I examine this previously underdeveloped imagery pattern and relate it to Sexton's biography--providing new criticism on both the artist and her work.

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I

"Poems are like dreams; in them you put what you don't know you know," writes Adrienne Rich (40). This statement is particularly true of the works of Anne Sexton. In Sexton's own words, poetry "milks" the unconscious (Kelves 5). It revealed to her what she refused to see as the truth about herself, her family, and her work. Principally, her poetry reveals that she was torn between the woman who thought of herself as a writer and the woman who thought of herself as a housewife. Throughout her life Sexton struggled with this conflict and ironically it became the well-spring of her poetry and her source of refuge from the family. On one hand, Sexton was committed to her work as a professional writer; on the other hand, she was equally committed to her life as a wife and mother. The conflict intensified and in her poetry was expressed in the imagery of the house and family which I will term domestic imagery. Publically, she appeared to love the suburban home life, but her letters and poetry produce a different picture. The more confident she becomes in her poetic ability and success the more sarcastic and bitter the domestic imagery becomes. Houses are no longer happy places for people to gather; they become rooms filled with knives that cut, people that bleed. The purpose of this thesis

will be to trace the dramatic tension as it exists in the domestic imagery of Sexton's poems.

In the existing scholarship on Sexton's poetry critical opinion is varied.[1] Comments run from unbounded praise for her glaring honesty, her choice of subject matter, and her unadorned plain language to outright condemnation of her work for precisely the same reasons. These critics argue that her subject matter is not a fit topic for poems, that her work is too close to reality, and too personal to raise the work to the universal level of awareness. Furthermore, they argue that her work is uneven; this is the most frequent comment on Sexton's work. Some of her verse, these critics say, seems finely tuned, well edited and focused. Other poems seem almost dashed out, and are not developed or lack control.

Some critics comment on Sexton's use of domestic imagery.[2] Geoffrey Thurley notes the use of the imagery, but does not discuss it in full; his brief discussion, however, is one of the most complete on the subject. He observes:

> The verse is clotted with Ace bandages and Bab-O and Coca-Cola and Duz and Chuck Wagon dog food. We find Al Jolson. . . Dior, and the Boston Symphony--the whole gamut of mid-century America--gaining a light flip tone to the sardonic sense otherwise adopted (89).

Thurley's notions are correct. The picture painted of the Suburban Good Life, with its emphasis on materialism, is apparent throughout Sexton's verse. It seems to be a

Sexton trait to blend this seriousness of topic and a "La-de-dah" attitude. She alternates humor and seriousness of purpose, thus producing often a deeply sarcastic tone to her work. The evidences of the sardonic are sprinkled throughout her work. The sing-song rhyme of "The Abortion" is a fine example as is the entire volume of Transformations.

Her wide swinging metaphors and far-fetched comparisons have been the subject of some of the scholarship.[3] These techniques often stretch the imagination, sometime seem out of balance, and sometime the metaphors seem almost mixed. Sexton is praised and condemned for this usage. For instance, girls "languish everywhere like bedsheets," (Sexton Collected Poems 134); breasts "blow out like two / pincushions," (73); her "heart is a kitten of butter" (423). The domestic quality of the imagery can be seen in the following comparisons: "She was as full of life as soda pop," (227) "The Queen chewed it up like a cube steak," (225) and "as real as a cast-iron pot," (188). Some critics enjoy the daring use of comparison and marvel at the vigor and strength of the image; others find the comparisons to be too disconnected and provide little sense of image.

A few scholars argue that these comparisons are evidence of Sexton's lack of control. Her later books, Transformations and The Awful Rowing Toward God, are examples of books full of the offending comparisons. These critics contend that such usage was accidental, not purposeful. Yet, such usage does appear to be intentional. The fact

that the comparisons get bolder can be attributed to Sexton's growing confidence in her poetic ability and her self-assurance with her own success.

Brief discussion of Sexton's domestic imagery is occasionally found in those critics who discuss Sexton's family life and identity conflict. Commentators recognize that Sexton's problem with her mother are explored in "The Division of Parts," while other poems such as "All My Pretty Ones" explore her relationship with her father. She calls her mother "a velvet lady who cannot smile," (50) and refers to her father as "a commodore / in a mailman suit," (50). The mother is called "god-in-her moon," (46) and the father stands "like a duke among groups of men" (51). Often both parents are addressed in the same poem as in "The Truth the Dead Know" (49). In these poems the metaphors and comparisons are often far-fetched and discussed as such, but the conflict between Sexton and her parents takes priority in the discussion. The domestic quality of the image is not discussed as a topic of its own.

Some discussion of the domestic imagery is present in commentaries on religious sensibilities.[4] Sexton's conflict with God is a popular topic for critics. A good deal of her poetry is religious in nature and her images are remarkably Christian in origin. The Crucifixion and Easter often appear. Again they merge with her natural tendency toward the domestic. "With Mercy for the Greedy"

is a fine example of the poet's inability to reconcile herself with the Christ figure. These critiques note that Sexton seems to be able to deal with the universal concept of God, but cannot accept the fact that Christ died for her sins. Sexton prefers to save herself. Very often, the imagery is domestic. A few critics have noted this.[5] Jesus "is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef" (62). In the grave a rat who comes to consume the body of the speaker "waits like a good cook" (64). When God leaves the poet "the sun" becomes a "latrine" (441). Rowing to God, the speaker feels "salt" stick to her body like "grains of tapioca" (473). Although Sexton's faith in God wavered, it is often expressed with domestic imagery. Yet the conflict is discussed but the imagery is not. No critic, for example, notes that "For Eleanor Boylan Talking With God," occurs in the kitchen. Often instances of faith and hope in God are set in and around domestic settings like swimming pools in the backyards, kitchens, or bedrooms.

Naturally all writers write from their own personal experience and utilize what they have learned in their lives. There is no doubt that Sexton was a housewife and mother. However, if we take the time to explore Sexton's use of domestic imagery we see that it changes from volume to volume, from poem to poem. Indeed the consistency and significance of the kitchen images alone should no longer go undiscussed, nor should the craft behind this imagery. It reveals something new about the poet which affords a

better understanding of her and her work. This thesis will document the use of the domestic imagery and chronicle its change from work to work.

II

That there is a divided self in the artist is a generally accepted fact. Carl Jung writes, "Every creative person is a duality or a synthesis of contradictory aptitudes. On one side, he is a human being with a personal life, while on the other side he is an impersonal, creative process" (168). To understand the artist we must examine the creative side of the individual. "We must analyze the living and creative human being as a unique personality," contends Jung (152). However, if we wish to understand the human being, we must examine the personal life as distinct from the creation. Jung insists that it would be an error to attempt to understand the human being solely from the creative art as it would be an equal error to try to grasp the meaning behind the creative work solely based on the artist's personal experience. "The human psyche is," Jung insists, "the womb of all the arts and sciences" (152). He writes:

> What is essential in the work of an artist is that it should rise far above the realm of the personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as a man to the spirit and heart of mankind. The personal aspect is a limitation--even a sin--in the realm of art. (168)

Mary Esther Harding, the author of The Way of All Women, a psychological study based on the theories of Carl Jung, contends some roots of the conflict between the creative

side and the personal side stem from the fact that the artist, sometimes, is a woman. Harding writes that Jung identifies three psychological developmental states for a woman: naive, sophisticated, and conscious (Harding 6). In the first state the woman is seen as innocent and totally unselfconscious. In the second state, "the individual is in a primitive union with nature, a state only broken by the emergence of the ego" (6). The second stage is viewed as a definite step toward the goal of consciousness. The third stage is an important consideration with regard to the work of Anne Sexton, for I contend that she came to this stage in her later life and career and it is reflected in her poetry and her use of the domestic imagery. The ego becomes a powerful concern in the final stage. "personal aggrandizement and the satisfaction of the ego arise and form a new life motive. . . ," argues Harding (6). One of the most important considerations when writing about Sexton is the remarkable change that occurs in her letters and career in her later life. Her writing raised her to a new awareness and her goals in her career began to take precedence over her home life and the previously held values of home and family. When the replacement is reached the third stage of consciousness is obtained. According to Harding it is possible that the woman will at this point learn to manipulate others through this new sense of power; she learns to assert herself when it is advantageous for her to do so. This occasional use of power and the conflict

between roles became "a terror and a dream," as Adrienne Rich once termed it.

Although most critics would agree with Jung's theories, there are some like Cleanth Brooks who have reservations. Brooks argues, "No one would deny that every literary work is the product of language, of history, of a particular culture" and the work itself "is more than a mere extensionality of its author's mind and personality," (46). However, Brooks disagreement seems to be a matter of degree. Only up to a point does the author's personal history guide his creation. What the author wishes to express and how he states it is guided by the mind. Brooks contends that the work itself can possess a literary identity of its own apart from the author's intentions or his psychological make-up. "It is fair to call the poem autonomous. The naval string connecting it to its creator has been severed, and now it lives a life of its own" (46). In his conclusion Brooks quotes D.H. Lawrence who said, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale," for "intention is always subject to the corroboration of the poem itself" (45).

The psychological aspect of the personality of the artist may then be partly responsible for the art, but there is a separation, a detachment, that occurs after the initial thrust of the work has been completed. The work of art, to be successful and to reach beyond mere diary account, must be viewed with more craft conscious eyes. This new vision

sees the art as separate from the self. The poet, for example, can alter line length, experiment with rhythmn and the sound of the verse, sharpen images, make the verb choice more vigorous. Generally, the work of art is finely tuned. It becomes polished, as is said of Sir Philip Sidney's work. The essayist, on the other hand, can re-arrange paragraphs, alter sentence structure, add transitional devices, and make sure all the necessary terms are defined and developed. All the connecting points can be made clearer. The majority of this work must be accomplished after the initial creating stage is over. It would seem detrimental to the creative process to add judgments when first sketching out an idea for a poem or essay. The first goal is to commit the idea to paper, not to hinder it with personal judgments. To do so would block the creative flow, disturb the creating stage as most writers would agree. The personal life of the artist, according to Jung, should not mix with the creative side, but this seems like an impossible task. Each side appears to be at war with the other. Each side wants to be dominant. But such a clear division of personal and creative sides is not always visible, especially with Anne Sexton. Her work shows little detachment of creative force from actual events--for Sexton is of that unique breed known as the Confessional poet.

What is a Confessional poet? The scholar and critic, Robert Phillips writes that "Since 1959,. . .there have been a number of poets determined not to lie in verse" (1). This

simple but accurate description of Confessionalism also applies appropriately to the work of Sexton. She was noted for her honesty in verse.

Another common characteristic of Confessionalism is that the poets themselves become the major subject in their poems, while the family and those surrounding them are secondary. This is perfectly true in the work of Sexton. Sexton is the subject of her poems. Often Confessional poems ask questions rather than provide answers. This characteristic can also be well documented in Sexton's work. In addition, there are few restrictions on subject matter. Previously untouched and unacceptable topics were now frequent. Family crisis, abortion, masturbation, divorce, and breakdown are just a few of the topics Confessional writers chose for their work. Still another characteristic of Confessionalism and of Sexton's work is the everyday pattern of speech. Not only must the experience be rendered with truth, it must be rendered in the language of the people. No high level of diction removed and distanced the reader from the poem. This was one of the most important contributions of Confessionalism. Because of this openness of language, the Confessional poet also employed an openness of form; free verse became a major tenet.

Charles Molesworth defined Confessionalism in this manner: it is "a committment to recording as directly as possible the shape of a private pain and intimate sickness, without regard to artifice or aesthetic transcendence" (73).

He argues, furthermore, that the reader's response grows from the "admiration" directed at the poet because he is able to write, and to write well, about an experience that would numb and silence the ordinary (66). The key according to Molesworth is the poet's ability to use language effectively--to transmit the experience. Such a distinction is vital to his argument as he contends that such a split and the resulting reader response "produces the ironic texture that we have come to associate with Confessional poetry, a texture we can feel" (66). This "return to the feel of reality," as Molesworth calls it, "stood out as a major Confessional goal" (66).

An important contribution explored and developed by Paul Lacey, to the study of Confessionalism, is Sexton's use of the epigram. Lacey notes Sexton's control and craft as expressed in epigrams: "Each of the books is shaped by ruling themes, carefully chosen epigrams, or a chronological or developmental pattern."

Lacey writes:

> The title To Bedlam and Part Way Back precisely indicates the arc which the book describes, and which each poem is designed to advance: from sickness to health; from possession by ghosts and demons toward exorcism; from disownment toward inheritance. The book's epigrams describe the method by which the way back can be won; making a clean break of it in the face of every question pushing the inquiry further, even in the face of appalling horror. (12)

Sexton was clearly a Confessional poet, so we need to ask: how do we examine the life and the poems? How do we find Jung's separation? Cleanth Brooks says, "It is

legitimate to move from the work to the author, but not from the author to the work"(Brooks 45). Many others would disagree. Leon Edel, a noted biographer of Henry James, has said that "the writing of a literary life would be nothing but a kind of indecent curiosity, an invasion of privacy, were it not that it seeks always to illuminate the mysterious and magical process of creation," (Finey 16). It seems appropriate to discuss the works and the life of this particular poet in this light. The poetry of Sexton is highly personal. She wrote of her hospital stays, her friends, her suburban life style. According to Suzzanne Juhasz, a noted feminist scholar/critic and author of many articles on Sexton, "Sexton is either the overt or implicit subject of her poem" (Seeking 262).[6] Robert Phillips cautions, however, "One must be very careful in reading Anne Sexton to separate the truth from the fiction" (74). For instance, Sexton wrote about having an abortion but never had one; likewise she wrote about having a brother, but never had one of those either. But Sexton was, as Lacey noted, too craft conscious to be limited by actuality. Thus to use Emily Dickensons' phrase, Sexton told the "truth" but told it "slant," and by examining the relation between her life and her work, we can learn more about her creative process.

III

Anne Sexton came to writing by way of her mental breakdowns and the resulting analysis, but all in all she was a very traditional woman brought up in the times of the late 40's and 50's; she was not a modern woman as we now perceive such a creature. Sexton was raised to value home, husband, and children. Women of her time married at an early age and had children; they fulfilled the expected roles. Housewife and mother were careers in and of themselves. Sexton was the proper daughter and later proper wife of a Boston businessman. She went to the proper schools, but she admits that she only learned to flirt with boys there. This appears to have been her main goal in academic life. At the Garland School, a finishing school for young ladies, she said she learned two things; how to flirt with boys and how to make a perfect white sauce. In August of 1948, she eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton II ("Kayo") to Sunbury, North Carolina. Later they honeymooned in Virginia Beach but returned home quickly as Sexton herself had a dental appointment. They settled down and set up housekeeping. By 1955 the couple had two daughters and Sexton's mental trouble surfaced rapidly. "Anne was unprepared for the responsibility of. . .a household, and a husband: at 27, she felt she was drowning," (Letters 22).

Often in interviews Sexton was asked if she felt a conflict between the roles of wife and mother and poet. She replied that she had no difficulty managing the roles. When asked by Patricia Marx, (1965) "Do you feel there is a difficulty in being a woman and a creative artist?" Sexton replied:

> I think they are closely allied. I don't think it's difficult at all. It's within a woman to create, to make order, to be an emotional full human being, I think, perhaps, men are better because they are denied this in their lives. Therefore, they put more of it into a poem, and maybe if you are born with an extra amount, as a woman, it works out alright. You have enough for life itself, you have enough for a family, and then you have some left over. (36)

In an interview with Barbara Kelves, (1968) she was asked:

> Kelves: Do the responsibilities of wife and mother interfere with your writing?
> Sexton: Well, when the children were younger, they interfered all the time. It was just my stubbornness that let me get through with it all, because here were these children saying, 'Mama, Mama' and I was getting images, structuring poems. (20)

This answer is characteristically Sexton. It partially answers the question. Yes the children interfered, but what was done about it, and more importantly, how did Sexton feel about the disturbance? Did she lose poems because of it? Did she stop writing and tend to the childrens' demands, or did she go on with her work? In a later interview the response is clearer:

> I started writing when my children were awfully young. I simply wrote when they went to sleep until three in the morning, then got up at six. I don't know how I did it then, because now I

> need all my sleep. As they got older and were running around more, playing, I'd turn on a symphony, just to cut down on their noise. They would come right in and break into a poem. You get used to that; you adjust to it. 'She hit me, she pinched me'. . .You've got to be aware. Its difficult, but not impossible. (FitzGerald 81)

Despite Sexton's complaints about her children and her seeming ability to manage it all, the house, the children, the husband, the illnesses, she often had opportunities to escape from the responsibilities. When awarded a Radcliffe Institute Grant for Independent Study, (1961) her editors comment: "The grant also provided her with some office space--a long awaited haven from the children, which, once gained, she seldom used" (Letters 124).

However, in another interview, Sexton commented that the poem must come before home and family: "They burst forth and you must put everything else aside. It really doesn't matter what it is,. . .You don't tear yourself away from the typewriter unless you must sleep" (Kelves 19). The result is a contradictory picture. Which comment are we to believe and accept? There is no clear answer, unless we look at the poems which, as Sexton claimed, told her what she did not know.

When asked how Kayo felt about her writing, Sexton would reply that his opinion was very important to her. But the replies are also somewhat evasive. She would be "put off" an idea if Kayo did not agree (7). But in her letters, she contended that Kayo understood little about her work. "My

husband loathes poetry and does not care too much for (at all) his wife being this poet-person," she wrote to Brother Dennis (Letters 142). A conflict arose when Sexton had to deal with this man who she professed to love, but who did not understand what her work was all about. Moreover, Sexton allowed Kayo, as she did the children, to interfere with her work. This hostility in Sexton grew and grew and found full expression in the domestic imagery. When she was writing a long poem called "18 Days Without You," she was stopped by Kayo's insistence:

> My husband said to me, I can't stand this anymore, you haven't been with me for days. The poem was originally 21 days without you and it became 18 days without you because he had cut into the inspiration; he demanded my presence back again, into his life, and I couldn't take that much from him. (Kelves 20)

Sexton's diction is revealing as always. Kayo had "cut into" her "inspiration." He "demanded" Sexton abandon her work and come "into his life" as if his was more important. Sexton also exhibits no sense of regret or hostility toward her husband; on the other hand, she seems willing to make this sacrifice for him. Later Sexton would write how much she depended on her husband. She once said she couldn't manage without him and "needed him to tell her who she" was. But following this comment, she insisted that it was just "terrible" to be so dependent on a man; she felt she should be able to manage without Kayo, and learn to be a "modern woman" (Letters 213). Thus the basic pattern of vacillation seems to be established. Sexton would say one thing on one

day; the next day the answer would be totally different.

In May, 1963, The American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded Sexton a grant for travel. The grant had several options; travel for three months plus a cash award, or travel for a full year with no cash award. The full year excited and tempted Sexton, but she was hesitant to be away from the safety of the family for so long. She depended too heavily on her friends and family, note the editors of Sexton's letters (157). Also, Kayo did not feel that he could leave his business for so long and he requested that Anne not take the children. Sexton wished at first to take the shorter trip but was persuaded by her husband to take the longer trip. After assuring her that the children would be all right, Kayo managed to convince Sexton that the longer stay was in her best interest. Therefore, under the insistence of her husband, Sexton asked a neighbor (Sands Robart) to go with her and the two of them sailed from New York on August 22, 1963. It was during this trip that she began a long re-evaluation of her relationship with her husband.

"I love you and know it is entirely different than ever before. . .Is that why I came?. . .To find out. . .," she wrote (197). In letters such as these, Sexton was loving and sure about her relationship with Kayo. "I'm trying to become a person over here. . .with your blessing," she wrote (213). But an intense period of reassessment had set in. The distance and the time away coupled with the growing poetic

success stimulated a painful period. The vacillation and the conflict increased. On one hand Sexton could write:

> It is not a dream of roses growing in the garden, of just a hi-fi playing low, of just a darling baby in the crib, or the rosy wonderful house with the darling kitchen. All those things are dreams. No. Love for you is no dream. . . (53-54),

Sexton wrote from Italy. But in the same letter she also wrote, "Being your Princess Anne delights me. . .but worries me" (212). Worshipped by her husband, Sexton partially enjoyed the attention, but at the same time felt smothered by it. She knew it couldn't last and that Kayo's attention would not be enough for her. She was aware that she took too much from him and was a demanding emotional person. This can be seen in her relationship with her friends and in her correspondence as well. Sexton drained her friends and family and was the constant center of attention. But this same dependence on Kayo caused her to be unsure of herself. "If I could become unchained. . .become me without him. . .without always leaning on him," she wrote in an earlier letter (114). Thus Sexton was aware of the problem and the full year's separation from her family merely intensified it. Sexton was trying to become a "person" but couldn't decide what type of person to be without the support of her husband.

Sexton, therefore, fluctuated between wanting to be the Princess Kayo desired and the poet person he didn't like, but Sexton realized that being a poet was becoming more and

more important to her. Thus, she felt that she was a failure in both roles. "Whoever she is. . .hasn't made the grade yet," she despaired from Europe (53-55).

In an ironic sense, Kayo came to represent for Sexton the traditional role from which she was seeking exit. Alfred Muller Sexton was as traditional as was Sexton herself. He was raised in the same environment and experienced the same generation's values. Most importantly, he kept Sexton stable. In a letter to W.D. Snodgrass, Sexton confided that "she needed Kayo around," (154). Later, she wrote to Brother Dennis:

> My husband is so stable that he fulfills that need. He is so stable that he is a complete conformist, a middle-class lawn grower, good father, good golder, nice all around guy. He doesn't ask questions. (155)

Kayo might not have asked questions concerning his expected role in society and within the marriage, but he did demand something which Sexton was unable to give. Concerning her first illness, Sexton writes, "I do remember Kayo visiting me,. . .and saying, 'Anne, I just want you back the way you were'" (104). From Europe, Sexton wrote, "Kayo something has got to give. Your sense of need of perfection. . .and mine too. . .they are getting in the way" (219).

Thus, the conflict within Sexton began to take definite shape. "Wife Princess, Button," she would refer to herself during her frequent letters from Europe (59). Sexton refused to see herself as a poet. In early days, she was far more comfortable seeing herself as a housewife (219). "I do not live a poet's life. I look and act just like a

housewife," she wrote in 1963 (270). Or in 1965 "I'm not really a poet you know, just a button who loves you" (277); or still further, "Go ahead and say it Anne. The poet in you" (277). Although the conflict is apparent from these letters and poems, Sexton would still publicly deny that it existed.

Remarkable are some letters in which Sexton questioned the nature of her relationship with her husband (January-October 1963). These letters exhibit a change of style and shift in tone. Sexton's letters were usually long, rambling, fragmentary and informal. Her usual closing was "Hugs and Kisses," followed by a series of "X's" and "O's." Often she would call herself "Annie." But in this particular series of letters the tone was serious and foreboding. There were no casual sign-offs, no hugs, no kisses; instead there were unadorned signatures, or closings such as "Your wife, Anne." The shift from a tourist telling tales of lost luggage and rented cars became a serious inquiry as to why she was there and what Kayo and the children actually meant to her. Indeed, to use Sexton's own words, "This was no happy trip" (164).

Commenting upon her domestic life and public life Anne Sexton expressed the same vacillation. "I live the wrong kind of life for the person I am," she once said. Often she saw the roles in extreme conflict:

> But still my desk is a mess of letters to
> be answered and poems that want to tear

> their way out of my soul and on to the typewriter keys. At that point, I am a lousy cook, a lousy mother, because I am too busy wrestling with the poem to remember that I am a normal American housewife. (270)

Sexton would often describe the problem as one of her identity: "I fear I am not myself here in my Suburban housewife role," she wrote to Brother Dennis (143). As much as Sexton wanted to fulfil both roles, they seem inexorably crossed. Sexton often said that she "found" herself through her writing; moreover, friends like Maxine Kumin, said the writing kept Sexton alive. "When I'm writing," Sexton wrote, "I know I'm doing the thing I was born to do." Or "Only as I write do I realize myself" (382); Again, "The thing that seems to be saving me is the poetry" (51). Once, early in her career, Sexton said, "The poems are my life," (272). Whatever the source, letters, biography, interviews, poems, the problem and conflict still find their way into words or expression. The conflict circled about Sexton's dilemma of which person to be: poet or housewife. Later in her life, the strain would become more visible and begin to actively take its toll.

After 24 years of marriage, in February 1973, Sexton asked her husband for a divorce. Against the advice of good friends and her therapist,she pursued legal action against Kayo who resisted strongly. The divorce was granted despite Kayo's objections in November 1973. Sexton obtained custody of the children and regained possession (which she had tem-

porarily lost) of the house at 14 Black Oak Road; she became, however, as time went on increasingly more despondent. What she expected to happen to her life and what she wished to accomplish with her new found freedom did not materialize. Also her friends, who had been pulled apart by the bitter fight between Kayo and Anne, and whose friendships had been strained by a neurotic, almost desperate Sexton, began to withdraw. Sexton interpreted this as the last acts of desertion by her loved ones. This gradual dissolution is mirrored in her correspondence. Faithful letter writers no longer responded; replies became shorter and more seldom. Sexton turned to God, a belief that was always shaky with her as it is seen in her religious poetry, to seek comfort. Finally, she turned to her work. Still depressed and making many late night long distance phone calls to the remaining friends, she confided in Linda, her eldest daughter, that the divorce was a mistake; it had done nothing but make her aware of what she had lost. During this low point in her life, Sexton was convinced that she would not live long. She even suggested that The Death Notebooks (1974) would be posthumously published.

Before this gradual depression and intense period, there were earlier bouts with depression and the conflict that Sexton felt concerning being a poet and housewife. In a very early interview (1968) Sexton almost paraphrased the Jungian states of consciousness through which she would pass:

> Until I was 28 I had the kind of buried self

> who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was the victim of the American dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was to have a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. (Kelves 3)

This most famous quotation from an interview with Barbara Kelves requires some analysis. Sexton did not ask much from life; she speaks in an almost apologetic tone. Sexton desired the security, safety, and comfort that her role as wife and mother seemed to bring her. Also worth noting is the fact that she saw herself as a victim--a sufferer--someone who is not responsible for what has happened to her. The American Dream had control over her; it caused her to expect too much and to be disappointed when that expectation was not fulfilled. She speaks little of wanting anything for herself and seems to take her identity from her husband and children. When asked about important events in her life, Sexton would use the births of her children as reference points. This seemingly minor point is not very minor nor is it without significance. Her career was secondary to the birth of her children. She would recall the birth of the children as the principal experience while the date of her first publication was attached to this more important memory. It is far more than just a simple device for remembering dates and events. The children were a stabilizing force in her life for a long time and took precedence over her work.

Also from this remark, we can see that Sexton knew she

was unhappy and had something, another type of "self," within her that needed expressing. This "buried self" had "creative depths." The conscious self, as Jung would have called it, was capable of far more than white sauce and diapering babies. To find contentment within a self that could only perform such skills was not for Sexton. It did not provide the career fulfillment that Sexton sought, nor is it asking much from life. Her "buried self" came to light through breakdowns and therapy. It was one of her first therapists, Dr. Martin, who suggested that she take up writing and encouraged her efforts. He cultivated her writing by saying it might provide the meaning she was searching for and felt she was lacking; her work might "mean something to someone some day" as Sexton often quoted him as saying. At this point in her evolution to consciousness, it would have been difficult to prove to Sexton that her needs were valid and required meeting. After all, she was married and had two lovely daughters and a successful husband. What more could she have wanted? She had all that was supposed to make a woman happy. This is not to say, however, that therapy was the goal of Sexton's writing throughout her life; as she grew in confidence and became more assured of her identity, her goals in writing altered. Although therapy was no longer the sustaining goal, it was the goal that first brought Sexton to writing and should be recognized as a primary thrust in her career.

Later in her work she became more and more interested in

herself as a writer and her sense of identity and independence grew with each poem, each book, each accolade. Her confidence in her personal worth as a poet grew until, one day in the middle of her career, (1972) she would write and demand as much money for teaching a class as John Barth. "If a man gets it," she wrote to her friend George Starbuck, "why doesn't a woman" "If I'm important, I want to be paid importantly" (385). Later still she wrote to Thomas Alexander of Cape Cod Community College to request 1500 dollars for a reading. When Alexander proposed less, Sexton fired back that if they paid 775 dollars plus for James Dickey she wanted the same. "I think if you could raise it for Dickey, you could raise it for Sexton" (353). This is not the same woman who spoke in the Kelves interview and wanted so little from life and spoke apologetically about her needs and wants. The earlier Sexton would never have replied with such assurance and assertiveness; she would have been happy to have been asked. Moreover, Sexton would not have launched a personal campaign to be appointed a regular professor at Boston University. "A professor at Colgate shouldn't have to be a lecturer at B.U.," she complained to George Starbuck in 1971. After sending her resume and list of honoraries and publications, Sexton wrote to Morton Berman, English Department Chair at Boston, requesting not only a permanent position (she was part-time faculty at the time) but insisting on tenure as well (376). Surely this behavior stands in marked contrast to the woman of the

Kelves interview. This female was confident and felt she knew what she was worth. She began to think of herself first and no longer put the family first; she recognized her own needs and their validity.

But for Sexton to come to such a shift in attitude was no easy process; it was a long, tedious road. The decision was not easily reached nor did it come without ramifications. A woman who asserts herself in such a manner is often called authoritative, dogmatic, and selfish. "The woman who wants to be a poet, therefore, needs to be a poet, needs to exhibit certain aspects of herself that the society will label as masculine," argues Juhasz (Double 2). It is in her later writing career that Sexton exhibited this assertive "masculine" attitude. She became more and more aware of her power, a position expected for the woman who has recently come to consciousness. The series of letters with regard to her teaching and reading fees illustrates this point. Also it must be noted that this attitude is closely aligned with Sexton's success in her work. In general, these letters are more coherent. The earlier letters are full of apologies, misspellings, and grammar errors. As her own self confidence grew she became less dependent on her friends through letters, but the letters were a major portion of her life and place of her thoughts.

Thus the conflict that Sexton experienced between being

a writer and a housewife/mother can be seen through the biography. It is in the poems that the conflict takes its most violent and aggressive form, for we must recall Sexton's initial dedication to the truth and her uncanny ability to be honest in her work. The vacillation is present in the entire cannon of her work and gradually builds then declines in the later volumes, following the divorce from Kayo in 1973.

IV

"The stuff of Anne's life mercilessly dissected is here in the poems," writes Anne's faithful friend, Maxine Kumin, in the introduction to The Collected Poems (xxxiv). So it is: dissected by the poet herself.

To Bedlam and Part Way Back, (1960) is Sexton's first volume of poems. She was previously published in small literary journals and had studied with John Holmes and Robert Lowell, taking classes with George Starbuck, W.D. Snodgrass, and Sylvia Plath. The confessional aspect of her work disturbed some of her teachers; consequently, they expressed doubt about the true nature of the artistic merit of such personal revelations. John Holmes, in particular, warned her "against exposing herself and her family" (58). It should be remembered, however, that the Confessional genre was not fully accepted as a legitimate style. The critical opinion was still changing.

As a whole the imagery of this first volume and the others that follow falls into a pattern. The first pattern contains individual minor images, such as spoons, daisies, wallpaper, and certain items of clothing, that randomly change in their meaning. In one particular poem spoons might symbolize freedom; in another poem spoons might symbolize confinement. Daisies can be bright and cheerful or

be symbols of the death of Sexton's marriage. There is no major controlling force that governs the meaning of these individual symbols.

The second pattern of imagery, however, does contain a controlling force or image. This pattern is a major symbolic network that takes two directions. The first direction is into the kitchen while the second is into a more general domestic setting. The individual items in these particular environments take their meaning or are controlled by the kitchen or general domestic setting. For instance, in "For Eleanor Boylan Talking with God," the picture of the kitchen is pleasant overall. Washing dishes is a beautiful experience for the speaker. But in another poem such as "The Fury of Cooks," the kitchen is a forbidden place off limits to the speaker; consequently, all the minor symbols contained in this forbidden kitchen are negative. At one point, the kitchen is the center of the happy home. Later it changes into a death chamber.

The same overall controlling pattern is true of the poems that are directed by a general domestic setting. These poems--dealing with love, friendship, marriage, and Sexton's belief in God--are often set in the backyard, other rooms in the house, or by the swimming pool. Again the major setting controls the minor images within each poem. The poems of _Transformations_ fit into this category. These poems are not set in the kitchen, but they are in a general domestic setting and this environment controls the

minor symbolic images. Snow White, for example, does not spend her time in the kitchen, but the setting is a cottage in the woods. "Red Riding Hood" comments on Surburban life. "Cinderella" comments on the fantasy of living happily ever after. The center of each of these poems is domestic and Sexton's attitude toward the setting controls the way in which the minor images change.

The first use of extended domestic imagery is found in a short poem of three rhyming stanzas called "Her Kind." This poem is an example of the first pattern of imagery. The smaller domestic images of the "skillets, carvings, shelves" are not controlled by the setting of the woods. The "witch," who is the speaker, tries to explain why she is different from other women. She separates herself from the mainstream by claiming she is "possessed." This woman, who "is not a woman quite," has done "her hitch" in the normal domestic world of "plain houses." The word choice seems to reflect Sexton's discontent with the housewife role. "Hitch" conjures up images of forced enlistment while the houses are unadorned. The symbolic image of the woods (the setting) does not control the way in which the smaller domestic images are used in this poem. The major thematic concern in this poem is the isolation of the speaker. Although the speaker brings into the woods all the items necessary to make a home--pots to cook with, fabric to decorate with, closets to put items in--she is still not complete. Then the speaker brings someone to

provide for in the home: she "fixed supper for the worms and the elves." Even with the complete home environment, the speaker is still "misunderstood." She is still isolated--"a lonely / thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind," writes the poet. In the last stanza the speaker adopts a more defiant attitude. She "waves her nude arms at the villagers." Suddenly she is prepared to deal with the "misunderstanding" and the isolation. She will cope with the "flames" which "bite the thigh" and the "ribs that crack." In the final stanza the images of defiance and bravery become more intense. The speaker is "not ashamed to die" for her actions or her life no matter what it may be; she is ready to accept the consequences of being different, of being a "witch" or being "misunderstood." Critic Jane McCabe writes:

> The thrill, even the strange contradiction--the witch who keeps house for worms and elves, the survivor who is not ashamed to die--come from a kind of declaration of separation from that careful, diminishing surburban world; it is an insistence on being a "woman who writes." (246)

The image of the spoons, a minor changing domestic image, appears in a short poem called, "The Exorcist." The speaker in this poem is ridding herself of the memories of freedom before her marriage. The spoons can remove the speaker from the normal domestic world of her "room" and her "swollen dress." The speaker is haunted by the memories of the freedom she once possessed. She remembers a time

when she was "brown with August." She remembers a time when the happy couple "swam" in the face of a coming storm. Now, however, the speaker tries to deny that this time ever existed. It becomes too painful to remember in the time of the closed rooms and "the swollen dress." The "spoons" and the "bric-a-brac" remind the speaker of the happy time that she prefers to forget. The denial of the freedom of an earlier time reaches its height in the final lines of the poem: "I swear, / I most solemnly swear, on all the bric-a-brac / of summer loves, I know / you not."

The first developed example of the second pattern of images within the general domestic environment is seen in "The Farmer's Wife," a long single stanza poem. The voice is a precursor to the more strident voice of Transformations. This poem chronicles the boredom and tediousness that can befall a marriage. The love that the couple once shared is now termed "country lust"; the wife has become a mere "habit" while sexual intercourse is called a "pantomime." Finally the woman takes refuge in "separate dreams," as Sexton herself did in her poems and illnesses. The speaker "hates the sweat of the house." This imagery does not conjure up images of darling houses, cute babies, or loving marriages. The speaker in the poem, however, still desires the "love" that comes with such a dream version of marriage. What she receives in its place "leaves her still alone," as Sexton's letters to Kayo often suggest. The woman refuses to discuss her fears with her husband; she buries her

growing anger and begins "living her own self in her own words." Now desiring freedom from the marriage, the speaker's dream explodes into violence. She wishes her husband to be a "cripple," or a "poet" perhaps just "lonely" like her, or "sometimes, better, my lover, dead." She first wishes for a transformation of the husband, but prefers the idea of his death. This appears to be the best solution to the speaker's disenchantment with the marriage and the husband.

In "For John Who Begs Me Not To Inquire Further," a poem addressed to Sexton's writing teacher John Holmes, the poet again deals with the speaker's desire for freedom from the domestic setting. The image here is unpleasant:

> I tapped my own head;
> it was glass, an inverted bowl.
> It is a small thing
> to rage in your own bowl.
> At first it was private.
> Then it was more than myself;
> it was you, or your house
> or your kitchen.
> And if you turn away
> because there is no lesson here
> I will hold my awkward bowl,
> with all its cracked stars shining
> like a complicated lie,
> and fasten a new skin around it
> as if I were dressing an orange
> or a strange sun.
> Not that it was beautiful,
> but that I found some order there.
> ....
> my kitchen, your kitchen,
> my face, your face.

Sexton speaks of her conflict in a more positive light in the above verse. She writes about domestic objects,

bowls, oranges, kitchens, objects that concern her. The speaker "rages" until the raging gets too big to be contained. It bursts out of the "bowl" and into the "kitchen" and then out into the world. Despite the disapproval, or perhaps the "misunderstanding" of "Her Kind," the speaker does not seem to care. She will again be defiant and "hold her awkward bowl." The shame and the fear are gone and the speaker is willing to accept the consequences of her actions. The acceptance of this new self takes on a ritualistic image; the speaker dresses the new self--she fastens a "new skin around it." This new birth is equated with the rising of a "strange sun." Although this new self is not perfect, it is valued because it represents hope. It is "hope" for a "lovelier place" that provides "a certain sense of order" with "something worth learning" despite the price the speaker must pay. The final two lines speak of the kitchen. The "face" of the poet and the "face" of the person in the poem are addressed ("my face, your face") and are likened to the "kitchen" of the poet and the "kitchen" ("my kitchen, your kitchen") of this other person, presumably John Holmes.

All My Pretty Ones (1962) is Sexton's second volume of work and it includes poems of considerable range and depth. This volume contains some of Sexton's finest work: there are poems about her parents ("The Truth the Dead Know," and "All My Pretty Ones"); there are poems about feminist concerns ("The Abortion," and "The Operation"); there are

poems about religion ("With Mercy for the Greedy," and "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound.") The voice is angrier than before. It is more sarcastic and bitter. The pattern of increasing hostility toward the domestic scene continues to increase. In Sexton's life, this is the period right before her European trip with Sandy Robart.

According to Alicia Ostriker, "'Housewife' is a ten-line poem with four hair pin turns and a final two lines that are as important as the first two of 'The Red Wheel Barrow'" (63). The picture of domestic life is scathing:

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

This poem is brutal in its view of what Suzanne Juhasz called "the secret domestic world and its pain" (Seeking 263). The house takes on a life of its own; it becomes what is important in the marriage. It becomes a living thing with a "heart, a mouth" and a "liver." Again in an almost ritualistic fastion, the woman washes herself down "all day." She is on "her knees." The "walls are barriers; they are "permanent and pink." The color suggests that they are erected by the woman herself. At this point

in the poem, the picture is of a supplicant trapped in a house of her own making. The male then enters "by force." The sexual implications of these lines are very clear. After performing the ritual washing, the woman submits to the man and is overpowered by him as Jonah was by the whale. This picture of domestic life controls the images of the symbolic network. The minor images in the poem take their definition from the poet's use of the general domestic setting.

The comments of Ostriker concerning the poem's final lines are accurate. These lines are very important for they uphold a popular theory about women's behavior patterns. Nancy Friday pointed out in My Mother, My Self, that it is natural for a female to take her identity from her mother. Moreover, to do so is almost instinctive. It is very hard for females--whether they like their mothers or not--to overcome this ingrown behavior pattern. Such a pattern becomes "the main thing" that guides all other action of the female.

Another poem in which the kitchen is the overriding control is "For Eleanor Boylan Talking with God." In addition, this poem is one of Sexton's first poems where a religious event happens in the kitchen. Here the speaker wants salvation--she wants to talk with God, but she feels unworthy. Eleanor, the other person in the poem, is speaking with God. She is seen in a very favorable light. The poet likens Eleanor to her mother saying Eleanor is

"more beautiful." The speaker is removed from the action, while Eleanor is placed in the kitchen. The "I" is "breathing in cigarettes like poison" while Eleanor "stands in her lemon-colored sun dress / motioning to God with her wet hands / glossy from the washing of egg plates." Not only does this poem take place in the kitchen, but also the simple domestic act of washing dishes (a minor domestic image) is glorified. The image is controlled by the overall view of the kitchen. In this poem the kitchen and the salvation it represents are accessible to Sexton.

"The Black Art" is one of Sexton's strongest comments on her professional conflict. The images are of domestic environments and they are controlled by the poet's view of the environment. According to Louise Brenikow, "a woman poet constantly pits herself between cultural expectations of 'womanhood' and 'woman's writing,'" and this poem surely proves the point (8). The poem reads:

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

This confrontation compacted into a three stanza poem is potent. The woman writer is seen as far more isolated and out of sorts than the speaker of "For John. . ." or "Her Kind." The woman here has "trances and portents." She feels all the "bumps" of life (as Sexton called them)

that enable a writer to write well and sensitively. According to Sexton, a good writer had to be willing to expose herself to all aspects of life--all the good and bad experiences. It was through the total life experience that the writer's craft and skill grew. Logically, then a limited life experience of "cycles and children" would not be "enough." Nor would "vegetables" or "gossips" be "enough." The writer, according to Sexton in this poem, needs to be a "spy" who "can warn the stars." Again the language here is revealing. The writer "thinks" she can "warn the stars," but in reality it is impossible. To wish to accomplish such a goal is to wish to do the impossible and to set oneself up for failure. Critic Jane McCabe asserts that this poem is "a rather facile explanation of why women write poetry," but it seems far more complex than facile (245). The female writer who wishes to do the impossible designs self-failure, rather than self-fulfillment, as the male writer does. The writer winds up alone with "too much food and no one left over / to eat up all the weird abundance."

Thus we can see that the imagery in this second volume takes on a new level of importance. Not only does the voice become more bitter and the domestic images more strident, but also the images are more concentrated and sustained. They, therefore, become more central to the actual meaning of the poem. The imagery now, however, begins to change.

The patterns already established begin to alter more rapidly and with greater variation.

The domestic images of Live or Die (1966) are scattered throughout this volume but are connected to the opening. As Robert Phillips noted, the epigram of this volume is particularly helpful when looking for a central theme for the volume. The conflict in Sexton between her writing and her marriage was beginning to take its toll. She was increasingly depressed and this depression finds expression in this epigram and volume. All in all it was not a very good year for Sexton. She began work on a novel she never completed; she attempted suicide in July; she fell and broke her hip on her thirty-eighth birthday. Following all these disasters, Sexton seems to have resolved to try to live a more peaceful life. The epigram reads: "Don't cry, you idiot! Live or die, but don't poison everything. . ." (Poems 94). The full quotation is taken from an early draft of Saul Bellow's Hertzog. Sexton admired Bellow's work and was very pleased with his new novel. She took its message to heart and decided to "live." But the majority of the poems in this volume were written before Sexton's resolution; therefore, they read "like a bad case of melancholy," as Sexton once termed it. The range of emotion is quite varied because of Sexton's "melancholy." Some poems, like "Self in 1958," speak of a lack of emotion, while "Live" expresses the family conflict with great hostility. Although there is a level of violence and anger

in _Live or Die_, the overall theme is sadness and exhaustion.

In "Consorting With Angels," the tiredness of the soul is fully expressed. The poem fits into the first pattern of random domestic images with no major controlling force. The image of the spoons appears once again and so does the image of the pots and cloth. Sexton writes:

> I was tired of being a woman,
> tired of the spoons and the pots
> tired of my mouth and my breasts,
> tired of the cosmetics and the silks.
> ....
> I was tired of the gender of things.

The symbolic meaning of the domestic images in this poem are not controlled by the kitchen or some other domestic environment. These appear to be a simple listing of "things" the poet wishes to reject. Defeated by sex and the conflict it can cause, the speaker searches for that sexless place between both roles. Thus, she becomes "not one thing or the other." The poem's closing lines are reminiscent of the tight logical couplet which closes Shakespeare's Sonnet 118. In his sonnet he claims that what he just said is true or else he "never write." Of course, Shakespeare wrote and the existence of the sonnet proves that. Sexton uses the same tight logic to close her poem: "I am no more a woman / than Christ was a man." Naturally Sexton was a woman, and Christ was a man.

"Love Song," is another poem which fits into the same pattern. The domestic images are not controlled by the environment. In this poem Sexton identifies herself with

her youth--particularly her teenage years. Yet this is not the voice that speaks in the poem; it is the voice of the traditional lady that speaks in "Love Song." "Listen! Listen! / We must never! We must never!" says the speaker who refuses to expose family secrets. The speaker is the girl "that hummed like a tuning fork" the girl who argued and did not wish to discuss her family life in the poems; the girl who tried to take comfort in her husband and children, but found out it was not enough to save her. This girl needs and values the fantasies of marriage, but still fears their loss; however, she is powerless to do anything about their loss. Despite this fear, the writer still goes on "with an old red hook in her mouth, / the mouth that kept bleeding / into the terrible fields of her soul." The girl of the "letter" would not agree with what "bleeds" from the writer's mouth. This voice claims that such talk is fit for closed rooms, not public poems. Thus the conflict between housewife and writer still exits in Sexton.

"Man and Wife" is a poem of the symbolic network controlled by the general domestic setting--a home in Boston. This poem bears remarkable similarities to "The Farmer's Wife." The circumstances of the marriage are the same in both poems--boredom. "We are lovers. We do not even know each other. / We look alike / but we have nothing to say," writes Sexton. Out in the suburbs of Boston, the couple in the poem have become more than bored with each other;

they have lost touch with each other--they are a "mis-take," the speaker claims. "Like strangers in a two-seater outhouse, / eating and squatting together. / They have teeth and knees / but do not speak," says the persona. Forced into a mutual silence, they chose not to communicate though the opportunity exists. They "share the same dirt / the same blows"; they do still have something in common--pain and frustration. But the sharing of this pain--this "dirt"--is not to be shared. This couple are totally isolated from each other. "Drunk on the drunkard's dream" they are dis-illusioned and find only the "wo that is in marriage," the speaker proclaims.

"Self in 1958" is another portrait of unhappiness in general domestic setting. This poem, however, concentrates on the female's unhappiness. The self in this poem is not real--it is devoid of all feeling and numbed by the domestic experience. The "I" becomes a "plaster doll" with no emo-tions; she assumes a "pose." The images of mundane domestic world are underscored by Sexton's diction. She likens her life to a doll: "I live in a doll's house / with four chairs / a counterfeit table, a flat roof / and a big front door," she writes. The home environment in this poem is more than confining; it is more than "permanent and pink." This house has shrunk and is devoid of all sense of reality; it is false--"counterfeit."

Furthermore, the diction which describes the marriage bed in this poem is damning in its picture of coldness and

loss of feeling. "There is an iron bed," Sexton writes. The male enters--not by force as before--but he puts the woman on the "straight bed." He "plays" with the woman, yet he is not even aware of the change that has taken place in the woman; he thinks the speaker is "me," Sexton writes. The man then does not understand the change that has taken place in the woman, nor does he wish to understand it. He "plays" with her as someone would play with a toy. He "puts" her on the bed as somewould place an object. Again there is no emotion in this situation.

Next, the domestic imagery then shifts and focuses on the family in general. "They pry my mouth for their cups of gin / and their stale bread," says the speaker. The family seems to just take from the female in the poem and gives little in return. Now the female is exhausted; even the memory of emotion has left her: "I would cry," she says, but cannot "remember how." Moreover, she does not possess the "tears." The picture of this domestic life is scathing. The result is that the woman is left without any feelings and emotion--she is drained by them all.

Most critics comment that this poem reflects Sexton's attitude toward modern suburban life. Robert Boyers writes, "Sexton loathed the way in which we have agreed to be dominated by the synthetic comforts we crave," (212). He elevates her complaint to a universal level; he writes:

> Her house is a doll's house, with neat little carefully measured cubicles thinly separated from one another, with the 'all-electric kitchen, a card-board floor, . . . a

> counterfeit table,' suggesting total
> alienation from the modern world tech-
> nology has wrought. (212)

While such an analysis is possible, the most elemental level of Sexton's work is the literal level--its personal association with the poet's life. Sexton might comment on modern technology, but only as it affected her. The "all-electric kitchen" and "card-board" floors may reflect the dehumanization of the marriage in the face of the modern domestic world. The last stanza of this poem supports this view. The "I" knows what is expected of her; she should "smile" and "shift gears" to "spring the doors open in wholesome disorder," but such is not possible. This domestic environment serves to trap the woman in an atmosphere that is far more dangerous for someone trying to "become" another person. The violence of the "Farmer's Wife" seem preferable to this lack of emotion. Now there is nothing; not even the memory of a response.

"Live" is one of this volume's longer sequential poems. It is a full six stanzas of free verse. The line lengths vary quite a bit: some lines have as many as ten or twelve words, while others have only two words.

The dream of the happy marriage framed by the general domestic network is seen as impossible. Sexton writes:

> It's a dream,
> lovers sprouting in the yard
> like celery stalks
> and better,
> a husband straight as redwood,
> two daughters, two sea urchins,

> picking off my hackles.
> If I'm on fire they dance around it
> and cook marshmallows.
> And if I'm ice
> they simply skate on me
> in little ballet costumes.

This family uses the female even more than the picture of the family in "Self in 1958." The images used here by Sexton are horrifying. The speaker's hope of the happy family is called a "dream." It is as unreal as finding "lovers sprouting in the yard," or a husband as long lasting as "redwood." "If" the mother, or female in the domestic setting, is in trouble or in pain--as Sexton clearly was in 1966--the family does not simply ignore that pain, they use it. The speaker says she is on "fire" and the family's response is to "cook marshmallows." If the speaker is frozen--"ice"--then the family's response is to "skate" on her. The children are characterized as "sea urchins" who live off the female. Again they take from the female and give nothing in return. Frozen by her fears, or on fire with pain, the family uses the female for its pleasure. Moreover, they seem to enjoy it; they dress in "costume" for the occasion.

Love Poems (1969) contains poems of varying depth and range. The domestic images are scattered throughout poems that touch such subjects as might address a lover's interests. There is "The Touch," "The Kiss," and "The Breast." One of the most famous of Sexton's domestic images occurs in "For My Lover Returning to His Wife." The long sequen-

tial poem, "Eighteen Days Without You," is a poem directly recalling days with Kayo. It reflects Kayo's insistence for Sexton to come back into his life that caused her to shorten the poem. Also, the kitchen and spoon imagery make appearances in this volume. A more level state of mind appears to have come over Sexton at this time and such a peace is suggested in the telling epigraph from Yeats: "I have lived many lives. I have been a slave and a prince. . .Everything that has been shall be again" (Poems 172). This state of mind is reflected in the biography as well. Sexton, in the years preceeding Love Poems'publication, was reaching poetic success and receiving public praise for her work. In 1967, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, received the Shelley Award from the Poetry Society of America, toured in England, taught creative writing classes, and was awarded an honorary Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard. In particular, she was working on her play "45 Mercy Street" (1969) which opened on Broadway in October. This particular project was near to Sexton's heart and she was most pleased with all the attention she received and the power which she was gaining. Thus, this happier state of mind is reflected in this volume of work.

The kitchen reference appears in "The Touch." It refers to the separation of mind and action as the speaker claims the problems in her life are not real. They seem to be in the "head." "The trouble was not / in the kitchen

or the tulips / but only in my head," says the speaker. Thus, the kitchen is seen as a trouble free environment only cluttered because of the speaker's problems. The problems are not in the happy family center or the lovely outside garden; they are within the speaker.

In "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts," a long sequential poem, Sexton's persona comments that domestic life is a dream. It is the "Hollywood" vision of the dream called "Marriage."

> I had joined her the way a man joins
> a woman and yet there was no place
> for festivities or formalities
> and these things matter to a woman
> and, you see, we live in a cold climate
> and are not permitted to kiss on the street
> so I made up a song that wasn't true.
> I made up a song called Marriage.

In this "Marriage," the speaker claims a woman needs "festivities" and "formalities"; she needs some semblance of order as "these things matter to a woman." Stifled by the lack of order and forbidden to "kiss on the street" the woman falls into a dream like state, a state of untruth. She makes "up a song called Marriage" in hopes that this song will fulfill her needs. This poem, in addition, contains elements of scattered domestic imagery. The "mother's apron," "fork," and "skirtful of hell" are but a few of the images used. The images that suggest the dream like state of the happy domestic wife are most prevalent. However, "and built a life that was over hour / and built a castle where no one lives," suggests that the happy times are too

shortlived and that no one can live in the "castle." Therefore, "in the end, a song / to go with the ceremony," is constructed by the speaker. This poem, although level and consistent in its overall tone, nonetheless, is poignant and sad.

One of the most famous lines of domestic imagery occurs in "For My Lover Returning to His Wife." The domestic imagery is not very important in this poem, but it provides a background description of the wife. The wife is "as real as a cast-iron pot," says the speaker. This image is concrete, solid, and sturdy. It reminds one of everlasting objects, those almost impossible to destroy like the lover's relationship with the wife. It has gone on for too long and holds too many shared memories to be replaced by the "momentary. . .bright red sloop. . ." or the ". . .Littleneck clams out of season." The images of domesticity continue: the wife is the one who "sees to oars and oarlocks." She places "wildflowers at the window at breakfast," a partial kitchen reference from which the speaker is removed. The early image of the "cast-iron pot" contrasts strongly with the speaker's description of herself in the strong two final lines: "I am a watercolor. I wash off."

"Song for a Lady" contains the spoon image once again. This time the spoons represent the position of the lovers lying on a bed.

> On the day of breasts and small hips
> the window pocked with bad rain
> rain coming on like a minister,

> we coupled, so sane and insane.
> We lay like spoons while the sinister
> rain dropped like flies on our lips
> and our glad eyes and our small hips.

In a long sequential poem, "Eighteen Days Without You," each of the sections begins with a date, the first one dated "December 1st" and the last one dated December 18th." The individual stanzas seem to reflect a short story of Sexton's and Kayo's marriage. In "December 1st" Sexton describes her own upbringing in a house where she was "forbidden to climb over the garden wall," suggesting the confinement of the proper Boston family which is further supplemented by the image of her dolls "waiting in neat rows." The contrast between her rearing and Kayo's is heightened in the final stanza when the speaker describes the type of life that they have made together. This picture is happy and very traditional in its scope, but is ironically undercut by the lines which preceed each of these three stanza sequences, "Once upon a time." Naturally, these lines suggest that the speaker knows that what she is about to describe is not real; it is a fairy tale. The last stanza reads:

> You said, 'Now that the cabin is ours, I'm going
> to run the power in.' And we had a power party.
> I made gingham curtains. We nailed up your
> Doctoral degree / . . .
> we made our own electricity while we play house.

The man takes up the accepted traditional role of handyman tending to the power lines, perhaps symbolizing the importance of his contribution--the power--the energy

flow in the marriage or relationship. The woman is seen in domestic terms as well; she is making homemade curtains, and they are gingham. The image painted is one of the quaint little love nest for the newly married. Perhaps it is reminiscent of the little apartment Sexton and Kayo shared following their elopement. Granted, Kayo did not have a "Doctoral degree," but such a line only stands to prove that Sexton was not limited by the actuality of her life; she used what information was best for the poem, the homey situation and the lovers, and added the information about the degree. The degree also symbolizes the man's upper standing in the relationship, as he is not only bringing the energy to the marriage, but also he is in a superior position to the woman. Such a concept fits well with Sexton's idealized vision of marriage and the emphasis on the "dream" of marriage is underscored when she writes that such efforts were mere "play." The couple did not really live this way nor were they capable of sustaining the dream. It was just playing "house."

In no other volume is there such an abundance of domestic imagery as there is in Transformations (1971). The images here are not only frequent, but also they are characterized by violence, bitterness, hostility, and biting sarcasm. The kitchen imagery is associated with blood and fire and is graphically violent. Critic Arthur Oberg writes, "Although Sexton has been intensely aware of herself as a

woman and a poet, there is a new militancy here" (151-152). Indeed there is, for in Sexton's hands the tales of the Brothers Grimm become bloody, vicious tales about domestic life and its pitfalls. The Hollywood dream is characterized as just that by the fairy tale setting given all the marriages and courtships. There is a consistency of image on this level not used before. Shoes burn; tongues flick in and out like gas jets; toes curl or are cut off; everything seems to bleed and gush blood. The violence associated with the fairy tale of marriage is fiercely dissected in this very strong volume of work. In addition, the voice makes one more shift; it is consistently sarcastic in _Transformations_. The biting sarcasm and bitter voice of Sexton coupled with the graphic images of blood and violence make this work the high point of the domestic conflict Sexton had been dealing with for years now. The conflict in the domestic setting takes full flower in _Transformations_. By distancing herself more than usual from her subject matter, Sexton allowed herself greater power and strength. She was freely able to express what had been partially contained in the earlier work. This is the only volume of poems where Sexton is not the direct subject, nor is she concerned with the actual experience of her family. The separation and the fairy tale setting provided the poet with new ground to stimulate her thoughts, thus giving new expression to the domestic setting.

"The Gold Key" opens the volume. A "middle-aged witch" is the speaker (Sexton?). She presents a "boy" within each of us that desires something--he "wants some answers." And the Brothers Grimm provide the framework for these answers to the boys' requests, however painful.

The image of the virgin housekeeper, Snow White, is a bitter and damning picture of what domestic life and the fairy tale vision can do to a woman. The poem opens with the unreal doll-like image of Snow White. Her "cheeks are as fragil / as cigarette paper" while "her / china-blue doll eyes / roll." After the Queen has ordered Snow White to be taken to the woods by the hunter and killed, the Queen eats what she thinks is Snow White's heart: "The Queen chewed it up like a cube steak." This image is particularly gruesome when one visualizes it and with Sexton's unadorned language, the picture is not hard to conceive. Snow White, of course, is taken in by the Seven Dwarfs, "those little hot dogs," after wandering around lost in the woods for seven weeks. The picture already sketched in of Snow White is that she is slightly stupid. After arriving at the cottage and agreeing "to keep house" Snow White is warned by the dwarfs not to open the door and to beware of the "killer-queen."

The disguised Queen goes to the cottage and Snow White opens the door. She buys some lace from her which the Queen "wraps as tight as an Ace bandage," thus making Snow White "swoon." "She lay on the floor, a plucked daisy," the

speaker says. The dwarfs return and save her and "She was as full of life as soda / pop." Snow White is warned again and told to beware. The Queen returns and sells Snow White a "poison comb" which causes her to "swoon" again. This time "she opened her eyes wide as Orphan Annie," once again suggesting that Snow White is not too bright. Still wide-eyed and virginal she knows little of what to expect from life except the fairy tale.

The Queen returns this time with the famous poison apple:

> Snow White, the dumb bunny,
> opened the door
> and she bit into the poison apple
> and fell down for the final time.

This time the dwarfs cannot revive her, so they make a "glass coffin" to look at her beauty always. The Prince comes by and falls in love with Snow White and the dwarfs feel such pity for him they offer to let him take the coffined Snow White back to his castle. In the move there, quite by accident, the apple falls from Snow White's mouth and she wakes. Thus the Prince does not even wake her up with the famous kiss. Her revial is mere accident.

At the wedding the Queen was "invited to the wedding feast" despite the fact that she has tried to kill Snow White four times. Snow White is surely a "dumb bunny." But as the Queen arrives the imagery gets vicious. "Red-hot iron shoes" are "clamped upon her feet" like "roller skates." She is told:

> First your toes will smoke
> and then your heels will burn black
> and you will fry upward like a frog,
> ....
> And so she danced until she was dead,
> a subterranean figure,
> her tongue flicking in and out
> like a gas jet.

This image then shifts to Snow White who reflects the Queen's love for beauty and promises to replace her:

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

Of this particular poem Suzanne Juhasz writes: "Young girls, heroines and princesses begin in a state of mindless natural beauty, in an innocence and purity" (Excitable 129). The female in this poem does begin in a state of purity; she is innocent. But such innocence and purity do not mean that she must also be unintelligent. It is possible for a female to be both pure and intelligent. Snow White, however, may be pure but she is not smart. (Sexton does term her a "dumb bunny.") Snow White does wander lost in the forest for some seven weeks; she opens the door repeatedly when she knows the Queen is trying to kill her; she ignores the warnings of the dwarfs who have saved her again and again. Snow White does seem to be a mindless female with "doll eyes." The resemblance of this mindless female to the surburban housewife cannot be overlooked.

Juhasz's comment on "mindless natural beauty" may also be applied to the Prince in this poem. Usually the Prince

rides up on a beautiful white horse and wakes Snow White from her death sleep by her love's first kiss. But what happens in Sexton's tale? The Prince does not wake Snow White. In transporting her coffin, the apple just falls from her mouth and she wakes. The Prince has little to do with saving Snow White in the end. He too is maligned in this fairy tale.

Perhaps the most bitter poem in this volume is "Cinderella." Although images of meat loaf, lambchops, eggs, milkman, dolls, iron pots and flour sacks are abundant, the theme is the poets' own reflection of the conflict between the dream and the reality of marriage. Almost all the critics who comment on this poem see it as a fairy tale within a fairy tale. Thus it becomes a double fiction. The possibility of the "happy ending" is immediately dispensed with in the opening stanza. A series of unlikely events begin the poem:

> You always read about it;
> the plumber with twelve children
> who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.
> From toilets to riches.
> That story.
> ....
> ....
> Or a milkman...................
> ....
> goes into real estate
> and makes a pile.
> ....
> ....
> Or the charwoman...............
> who is on the bus when it cracks up
> and collects enough from the insurance.
> From mops to Bonwit Teller.
> That story.

Alicia Ostriker has written concerning "Cinderella":

> "The fairy tale ending of marriage,
> supposed to represent romantic and
> financial security ever after, be-
> comes, ironically, 'That story'--
> incredible in the first place, and,
> were it credible, pathetically dull...
> half of Sexton's tales end in marriage,
> and most of the marriages are seen
> as some form of either selfishness
> or captivity." (66)

The violence begun in the tale of Snow White is also present in "Cinderella." When the oldest step-daughter tries on Cinderella's shoe and it does not fit, "her big toe got in the way / so she simply / sliced it off," says the speaker. Her sister does not get away with the trick as "amputations. . .don't heal up like a wish." At the wedding another horrid event is contrasted to the ceremony; the sisters, again invited, are attacked by the white dove which the Prince has kept with him while looking for Cinderella: "the white dove pecked their eyes out. / Two hollow spots were left / like soup spoons," says the speaker. The imagery of the spoons reappears coupled with violence--no longer mere description. The tale ends on the same note of impossibility:

> Cinderella and the prince
> lived, they say, happily ever after,
> like two dolls in a museum case
> never bothered by diapers of dust,
> never arguing over the timing of an egg,
> never telling the same story twice,
> never getting a middleaged spread,
> their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
> Regular Bobbsey Twins.
> That story.

These final lines do more than explicate a fairy tale.

They do more than exhibit the impossibility of a happy marriage. They stand in testimony to the boredom and tediousness of a modern marriage. Such tedium is underscored by the details Sexton masterfully selects to make her point; the couple fight over trivial matters like egg timing. Their smiles are "pasted on"; they are not real smiles of happiness; they are the expected smiles of the expected happy marriage. Robert Phillips writes of the "double whammy" of this poem's ending arguing that it is "totally unreal and unlikely" (90-91). He is very right, for no couple could live like this and no couple does which is exactly Sexton's point. She is attempting to fully expose the "Hollywood" dream of marriage in this volume and does it with great skill and strength.

The introduction to "Red Riding Hood" catalogs the suburban life that Sexton lived. This was the life that made her feel more a housewife than a poet. First there is the "matron" buying her "Chuck Wagon Dog Food and Duz." The life of Suburbia is described in street names and places: "Apple Crest Road," "Congregational Church parking lot," where the suburban wives go to meet their lovers.

Sexton's conflict with this life and her poetic career are well expressed:

> And I. I too.
> Quite collected at cocktail parties,
> meanwhile in my head
> I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.
> The heart, poor fellow,
> pounding on his little tin drum
> with a faint death beat.

> The heart, that eyeless beetle,
> enormous Kafka beetle,
> running panicked through his maze,
> never stopping one foot after the other
> one hour after the other
> until he gags on an apple
> and it's all over.

The conflict apparent in these lines bears direct resemblence to Sexton's life. She did describe herself as a housewife, and said that she lived the wrong kind of life for the person she was. The sterile image and numbness of the earlier poems centering on the domestic conflict have now been replaced with another yet more horrifying image. The memory of the feeling is gone, and it has been replaced with an animal-like existence. The poet likens herself to a "Kafka beetle" who is trapped by the conflict. She is unable to do anything about the fact that she is trapped, just as Kafka's beetle could not free himself and return to a human state. Existence just happens and the beetle was forced to deal with it in much the same way that Sexton was forced to deal with her own domesticity. It is clear, however, that she did not enjoy this life as Kafka's beetle did not enjoy his. Trapped by her existence and forced to endure it, the speaker in the poem "undergoes open-heart surgery" and runs "panicked through" a "maze." The total lack of control is underscored by Sexton's skillful diction. The beetle is described as an "eyeless beetle" who "never" stops "one foot in front of another." "His life, as the life of the poet and all those trapped in this

sterile domestic environment, continues in the endless maze and only ends in death. The sarcasm of the insect's death cannot go unnoticed: he "gags on an apple and it's all over," writes Sexton. The beetle has no control over his death as he has no control over his life. The domestic scene picture changes one more time and this time the picture is bleak.

The Book of Folly (1972) is a volume of poems that centers on the domestic imagery of conflict, not of the marriage but of writing. Also these poems focus on the two symbolic network patterns of the general domestic environment. The images contained in these poems are controlled by the domestic setting that Sexton creates.

The fact that the majority of the poems center on Sexton's professional career can be related directly to her biography. During this year and the year that preceded it, Sexton received a few more honorary degrees and was teaching at Boston and Colgate Universities. Her life with Kayo seemed to settle a bit. They were both actively engaged in a new business, "The Needleworker," in which Anne was writing the advertising copy for Kayo's new catalog venture. Even her letters of this time reflect a professional concern and a new confidence. This was the time when Sexton mailed a resume (with all her honoraries included) to George Starbuck; she wrote requesting a more permanent position at Boston, and she demanded the salary of John Barth. Her letters were full of business correspondence

to editors, or fellow poets--including Stanley Kunitz and Anthony Hecht. She was concerned with some expected publication about her friend, Sylvia Plath, and there are letters to Ted Hughes (Plath's husband) as well. Sexton's book, Transformations, was converted into an opera and Sexton went out West to hear the performance. She was thrilled by it and recorded it so she could listen to it at home. Thus it is clear that Sexton's mind was directed toward her writing and toward her career which is reflected in this volume of poems. As further evidence of Sexton's growing concern with the professional side of her life is the dedication in Folly which reads: "For Joy, when she comes to this business of words," (Poems 298).

Sexton's professional concerns are expressed in "The Ambition Bird." The opening poem in Section I, "Thirty Poems," is a series of sixteen short stanzas. Some of the stanzas are no longer than two lines or one complete sentence. Sexton's persona calls her quest for success--her desire for this "business of words"--a bother. She personifies the feeling as a "bird" which keeps her "awake" (298). It is "insomnia at 3:15 A.M.," she writes. The persona tries to rid herself of the "bird" by "drinking cocoa, / that warm brown mama," but her attempts are unsuccessful. She seeks a "simple life / yet all night I am laying / poems away in a long box." The box, a hiding place for the poems and the ambition that generates them,

brings "immortality" as well as death: the persona later calls the box her "coffin." The poems then are the speaker's way of attaining "immortality" in her "business of words," but the ambition that drives the poet is capable of killing her too. "All night dark wings / flopping in my heart. / Each an ambition bird." The bird had many desires, but they all seem to be destructive ones. The bird wants to "immolate itself" or to "be dropped / from a high place" or yet still "to pierce the hornet's nest." Finally, the speaker lists the "wants" of the bird:

> He wants to die changing his clothes
> and bolt for the sun like a diamond.
>
> He wants, I want.
> Dear God, wouldn't it be
> good enough to just drink cocoa?
>
> I must get a new bird
> and a new immortality box.
> There is enough folly inside this one.

The bird and the poet then both desire something--success, immortality--which will bring destruction. The bird "wants" with no end in sight. Much like the voice inside Eugene Henderson, of Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King, that "wants," these wants are unanswerable. The bird has desires (like Henderson's) but they are not stated. He just "wants" and never really says what will make him stop wanting. Drinking cocoa is not "enough" just as the "gossips" and the "vegetables" of "The Black Art" were not "enough." Whatever is fed to the bird is never "enough" to satisify it. The conflict between am-

bition and the price one must pay for success is very clear and this poem stands as one of Sexton's strongest statements on the writer's life as opposed to the housewife's life.

"The Other" is a poem with a controlling general domestic environment. The fear and foreboding of the domestic setting control the use of smaller domestic images in this poem. The opening lines paint the picture of a creature just waiting to pounce on the persona. The persona does not have a firm name or vision of this creature: it has several forms, "Mr. Doppleganger. My brother. My spouse / My enemy. My lover." Much like a creature in a horror movie, this monster changes forms but still has power over the persona.

The conflict between the "other" and the speaker of the poem is clear in the following lines: "When the child is soothed and resting on the breast / it is my other who swallows Lysol," writes Sexton. Thus the speaker can be happy with comforting a child, but the other destroys the happiness. It does violent, hostile acts to ruin the lovely domestic setting. The other also destroys the speaker's general domestic life: "It cries and cries and cries / when I go out in a cocktail dress." So the other destroys all aspects of the domestic vision for the speaker.

Finally the persona realizes that she is helpless and has no control over the other. Therefore she submits to it and realizes that the other will win in the end. The

only reasonable alternative for the persona seems to be:

> I can sign over everything,
> the house, the dog, the ladders, the jewels,
> the soul, the family tree, the mailbox.
> Then I can sleep.
> Maybe.

It is important to note in this list of domestic objects there is one serious image--the "soul," skillfully slipped in by Sexton. These images are controlled in their domestic setting by the symbolic network in this poem. The view of the other is bleak, pessimistic and horrid. Thus this view becomes the force by which all the smaller domestic images are guided. The fact that Sexton slipped the "soul" into her list is a credit to her craft as a poet. The other "wants" the life of the poet as well as wanting "everything" else that goes along with it.

In addition, the poem ends on a note of hope. Even if the persona gives this other "everything," even her life, there is no assurance of sleep. The poet qualifies the hope expressed by one single word: "Maybe." There appears not to be any security or safe haven for the persona who is haunted and hunted by this other.

The year 1973, the one preceding the publication of The Death Notebooks, was painful for Sexton. It was the year that she separated from Kayo and moved (temporarily) from her beloved house. She was in the hospital three times in 1973 and wrote that she was sure Notebooks would be published after her death. Her preoccupation in this volume

seems to be with her illness and her sense of her own approaching death. As always, a look at the epigraph reveals this overall concern. Taken from a Hemingway novel the epigraph reads: "Look, you con man, make a living out of your death" (348). At this point in her life, Sexton was drinking heavily and was addicted to her medication. Her erratic late night phone calls drove away the best of friends. She felt deserted and abandoned. The poems in this volume recall this painful period in her life. Some of the work in this book is a nostalgic longing for the family. Some of the poems are centered in the kitchen. Some of the poems are in the general domestic setting. Thus the overall pattern of the symbolic network shifts once again. The kitchen, for example, becomes a forbidden or a frozen room. The violence and blood of Transformations has been replaced by a sense of loss. Determined "to make a living" out of her personal pain, Sexton uses her emotions as a reason to go on with life.

The general domestic setting of the house is a place to "catch" God in the volume's opening poem. The persona, "Ms Sexton," has been searching for God all over the land but she cannot seem to find him. She finds "No One" each time. "Then she journeyed back to her own house / and the gods of the world were shut in the lavatory." Happy to have found them at last, she "locked the door." The end of the poem is rather ambiguous. There is no complaint,

but no rejoicing either. The gods are found in the bathroom, not the usual place for gods. It can be argued that after the long search the persona is happy to have found the gods, but the placement of the gods in the lavatory undercuts the final image. Perhaps it may be a comment on Sexton's dismay at not having found anything in her search for so long. The decision is left up to the reader.

"The Death Baby" is a long sequential poem of six sections in which the controlling force of the kitchen shapes the smaller domestic images found in the kitchen. In the first section, the persona has a dream in which she recalls the contents of her refrigerator--naturally found in the kitchen:

> I remember the stink of the liverwurst.
> How I was put on a platter and laid
> between the mayonnaise and the bacon.
> The rhythmn of the refrigerator
> has been disturbed.
> The milk bottle hissed like a snake.
> The tomatoes vomited up their stomachs.
> The caviar turned to lava.
> The pimentos kissed like cupids.
> I moved like a lobster,
> slower and slower.
> The air was tiny.
> The air would not do now.

The domestic images here are almost violent. The visual images of the life given to the food in the refrigerator are hostile. Bottles hiss; the caviar bubbles and moves; tomatoes explode. The persona has been "laid" out like a lifeless thing, and the objects around her take on

life--perhaps her life as it drains from her. The domestic images here are compelling and vivid, and they are controlled by the overall dream vision which takes place in the kitchen. The kitchen image, therefore, becomes a dark and forboding one. In this poem, the kitchen stands for the death of the speaker as the objects around her take on life and this interesting pattern is repeated in later poems such as those of 45 Mercy Street as we shall see.

In "The Fury of Cooks," another long sequential poem centering on the kitchen, the kitchen is off limits to the persona. It becomes a forbidden place. The persona pleads to be "let in" but is denied access to the kitchen. The food (alive again) will not permit the speaker to come in: "Souffles, salads, / Parker House rolls, / let me in!," she cries. The persona is desperate to get back to the kitchen, but now the chief cook, "Helen," bars the way. "This is my country," Helen claims. If we assume the kitchen symbolizes Sexton's happy former domestic life, then we can assume that she is desirous of that life again. The persona now wants the security of the happy kitchen once again, and what she wants is tended by another.

In an interesting palindrome, one of Sexton's favorite word plays, the persona claims that the forbidden kitchen is Helen's "dog,"--in Sexton's word game, her God. Thus, not only is the happy domestic life of the persona forbidden, but so is the God that dwells there. The god is

accessible to another--Helen. Just as God was once accessible to Eleanor Boylan, but not the speaker. Once again the knowledge of God, or salvation, is seen in the domestic setting of the kitchen; but it is forbidden and out of the speaker's grasp.

A second section of the "Fury" poems is called "The Fury of Sundays." This expresses also a nostalgic desire to return to the happy domestic scene, which according to Sexton existed only in her mind. Nevertheless, the persona dreams of such a wonderful day when all "was right with the world" and she was happy in the domestic world. The sun is "baking the roof like a pie." It reminds the speaker of "red algebra marks." The family, "I and thou and she," are out in the yard on a hot afternoon by the pond. The images of domesticity continue: the "she" is a small child who wants "to take a bath in jello," while the husband is doing the manly things that Sexton often associated with her husband Kayo. He is "fixing the machines," and the couple is "sipping vodka and soda." This memory seems to center on a time when the family was "young" and happy and they did not look for something other than what they had: they "did not look / into the abyss, / that God spot," writes Sexton. It would seem that these happy but ignorant times are longed for. It was a time before the "business of words," before "the ambition bird" which disturbed the happy family life. At the very least the poem seems to be a call for the times

when each one in the family had an expected and accepted role. There were no conflicts then or, at least, they had not yet risen to the surface:

> I and thou and she
> swim like minnows
> losing all our queens and kings,
> losing our heels and our tongues,
> cool, cool, all day that Sunday in July. . .

The family was together and all equal. They were contented and did not mind the heat.

A six stanza poem called "Clothes" also focuses on the kitchen and the guiding force of the kitchen controls the listing of domestic objects. The persona in this poem is selecting what she will wear and what she will bring to God. For this meeting the speaker wants to be "clean." "Nothing with drool please, / no egg spots, no blood, / no sweat, no sperm," she writes. She decides to take the "hat" she was married in--another nostalgic symbol of the persona's sense of loss and reminder of the happier time of marriage. Additionally, she takes her "painting shirt." The shirt is associated with kitchens:

> And I'll take
> my painting shirt
> washed over and over of course
> spotted with every yellow kitchen I've painted.
> God, you don't mind if I bring all my kitchens?
> They hold the family laughter and the soup.

The memories of the happy kitchen in this poem are strong; consequently, they control the selection of the smaller domestic images like the shirt and the hat. This poem is a very clear statement of what kitchens meant to

Sexton, thus shedding light on the overall importance of this network of imagery. Not only does the speaker wish to take a tangible reminder of the kitchens when she dies, the shirt, but she also wishes to take the kitchens themselves. Here the kitchen represents family happiness and a sense of togetherness. It is the gathering place for food and laughter. All a "yellow" bright, sunny kitchen can mean is compacted into this stanza: the kitchen is the center of the home and family life for Sexton. The "laughter" is the food for the mind and the soul of the family.

The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975) is markedly religious in tone as might well be expected. This volume is Sexton's only work which contains almost all religious work. The domestic environment, however, controls the religious concepts. Thus these poems are another example of the symbolic network which controls the minor domestic symbols. In addition, these poems are relatively calm and the pattern of violence and bloodshed continues to decline. The domestic images are more child-like as well. The volume's opening poem, "Rowing," is taken from a child's story and the kitchen poems are beautiful and controlled. The kitchen returns to a state of calm not seen since "For Eleanor Boylan."

Also of interest is the revealing epigram. There are a series of epigrams which open this volume dedicated to Brother Dennis. The first reads in part: "There are

two ways to victory,--to strive bravely, or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned," (416). A comment by Kierkegaard follows: "Above all do not make yourself important by doubting," (416). The last reads:

> The days, like great black oxen tread the world:
> God the heardsman goads them from behind
> And I am broken by their passing feet. (416).

The intent of the volume is clear: these are Sexton's last comments on her religion, her career, and her preparation for death. The poems center on her life as a writer following her divorce from Kayo. Now the writing and its demands consume the poet. She talks of how much writing drains her; how much it takes from her; how hard it is for her to find peace with the pressures of success.

"Rowing" is a long, controlled poem whose framework is taken from an award winning children's tale. This tale, <u>A Story A Story</u>,and Sexton's poem both express peace and acceptance. The poem underscores the contentment and theme of self-surrender already established by the dedication and epigraph. Sexton begins with a description of her life:

> Then there was life
> with its cruel houses
> and people who seldom touched--
> though touch is all--

In spite of the lace of "touch," or personal feeling in life, the persona in the poem "grew." The houses and their inhabitants were "cruel"' they did not offer much emotional support for growth. But the speaker has managed

to flower in this atmosphere of desolation.

Sexton now begins to use the symbolic network to describe God in the general domestic setting. The persona in "Rowing" is trying to reach God; but when "the island of God" is reached the speaker's problems will still exist: "The absurdities of the dinner table," will still exist on God's island. But these problems will be accepted by God and the persona will not be judged according to her problems. "The gnawing pestilential rat" that lives inside the speaker will be accepted by God: "He will take it in his two hands / and embrace it," she writes. Thus the personal conflict that has absorbed so much of Sexton's time and energy will be resolved in the "hands" of God. Interestingly, Sexton still views the two selves as separate and requiring reconcilation at this point so very late in her life. Here, however, both sides are equal; neither is dominant; neither wins. The persona concludes much in the same fashion as the tale was begun: with acceptance. The tale has been a tale--nothing more, nothing less. Its outcome is not for judgment. Its outcome does reflect a level of hope as the speaker is still searching:

> This is my tale which I have told,
> if it be sweet, if it not be sweet,
> take somewhere else and let some return to me.
> This story ends with me still rowing.

So the search goes on, but at least there is a level of acceptance and peace that the poet now feels is within her grasp. Sexton comes as close to resolution in this poem

as she ever does.

"The Children," in the poem of the same name, are "writing down their life." Because of this compulsion to tell, they are "crying in their pens," and their efforts to achieve immortality in verse are useless; they write "on the wings of an elf / who then dissolves." The "bomb of an alien God" destroys their efforts: seeking life "in this business of words" is no longer valid. The only thing that remains says the speaker, is "the real McCoy" of the "bulldog courage." Finally, the speaker says that this knowledge comes quickly and instantly if it is allowed to: "I could melt the darkness / as suddenly as that time when an awful headache goes away." Lines like this support the fact that such peace is attainable. It can be put "in the private holiness / of my hands."

"The Room of My Life," has a similar theme. Seeking the way from the "maze" of life, the speaker finds herself in a room where "the objects keep changing." The objects take on life: "The forty-eight keys of the typewriter / each an eyeball that is never shut," haunt the persona; it becomes her enemy. Its constant watching keeps the speaker in fear and from doing other tasks. There is little left of the persona and still the typewriter demands more and more. The speaker offers only "puppy biscuits," in hope of appeasing the machine. "Nothing is just what it seems," complains the poet. Thus it is clear how the writing conflict takes on new importance for Sexton later

in her career. This pattern of imagery changes once again. What was originally desired--the freedom to write and the success that comes with fame--is not what it appeared to be. It too then becomes part of the "Hollywood dream," as unreal as "lovers sprouting in the yard," or "a husband straight as redwood." Once again the writer has been deceived. The objects of her dream have changed "costume." Only the names and places seem to change in this drama; the conflict remains. Still the writer is "compelled by all the world" and "the sea that bangs" in her "throat."

The image of the kitchen serves two functions in "The Fish That Walked," and "The Wall." In the former, the persona is talking with God. The second stanza contains the reply of the persona; it is expressed with domestic symbols:

> I can recall a few things. . .
> but the light of the kitchen
> gets in the way.
> Yet there was a dance
> when I kneaded bread
> there was a song my mother
> used to sing. . .

The persona longs to be with God but is kept from such an occurrence by "the light of the kitchen." The kitchen memories and happiness, as well as the unhappiness they represent, are obstacles keeping the poet from God, or salvation. The memories of childhood do likewise. The controlling network of the kitchen guides the meaning

of the symbol. The "song" of the mother, the "dance," the "kneaded bread," all become obstacles to be overcome. Thus the memories of the "Hollywood dream" keep the poet from attaining one goal still. The "fish" or God replies to this comment:

> You must be a poet,
> a lady of evil luck
> desiring to be what you are not,
> longing to be
> what you can only visit.

Denied access to God, the poet still desires something impossible. She is called "a lady of evil luck." Not only does the speaker desire to be what she is not, but also she is not content with what she is. It seems that Sexton always wanted to be a housewife when she was a poet and a poet when she was a housewife. The roles are still in conflict for Sexton; she cannot be a housewife who is also a poet; she must be one or the other. Consequently, she dooms herself to failure and destruction as she did long ago in "The Black Art." Suzanne Juhasz writes: "The woman and the poet were different selves and in conflict with each other, she (Sexton) was well aware," (Seeking 267). The wholeness of self that Sexton wrote of in "Rowing," and desired for many years was not to be hers; it was a place where she could only visit.

Juhasz also contends that Sexton not only saw and witnessed this conflict between selves, but also that she preferred one self over the other: "She (Sexton) did not

like the woman; she liked the poet" (267). This matter is debatable. There are times, albeit, when Sexton appears to like the poet, but there are times when she appears to like the woman as well. It seems to depend on her state of mind at the time, and when reading her work, it depends on which volume is read. Often both the woman and the poet seem to be disliked as in "Consorting With Angels." Therefore, it is hard to agree with a blanket statement that Sexton liked one person or the other. Perhaps it was her "need of perfection," as she once called it, that kept her from seeing the selves as one--equal, but different sides of her personality.

In "The Wall" the kitchen becomes a place of fruitful creation. It is called "the sea which is the kitchen of God." This poem stands as a Gloria to the Creation of God and nature. Nature, called "all change," is created in the "kitchen." Thus God creates as the poet creates in the happy-home kitchen.

"Welcome Morning" is a joyous, heartfelt poem that has a peaceful, religious atmosphere centered in the kitchen. The symbolism of the kitchen creates another pleasant image. The domestic images are wholesome and spiritual: "There is joy / in all," the persona proclaims. Then the speaker details everyday events that bring such joy, reminiscent of Brother Lawrence's Practice of the Presence of God, in which Brother Lawrence saw all he did--even the most menial tasks--as acts of devotion

and service to God. He saw all his actions in this light and this attitude is clearly reflected in Sexton's poem. "In the chapel of eggs I cook / each morning," writes Sexton. The kitchen is now elevated to a church where communion with God is possible:

> Each morning,
> in the spoon and the chair
> that cry, 'Hello there, Anne'
> each morning
> in the godhead of the table
> that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
> each morning.
> ....
> All this is God.

This poem expresses a wholeness of spirit not seen before. In the second stanza, the holy atmosphere is underscored; the table becomes an altar where the poet offers "a prayer of rejoicing,"; "holy birds at the kitchen window / peck into their marriage seeds." Now the persona has elevated herself to the level of priest; she takes part in the communion service with the birds. In addition, this prayer is not one that the speaker wishes to covet for herself. "The joy that isn't shared, I've heard / dies young," writes Sexton. She attempts to preserve some of this happiness for herself by sharing it with others. In a characteristically Confessional moment, Sexton writes of the small, personal experience clearly and simply and raises it to a universal height.

The only critic who sees the domestic imagery in Rowing is Ben Howard; he calls the pattern "a bizarre blend of the Gothic and domestic" (182). In addition, he notes

the highs and lows of the imagery of this volume: "By turns her imagery is sentimental, sexual, violent, freakish, surreal, material, religious, and scatalogical" (182).

Later in the same essay, Howard connects the kitchen with violence:

> Her most characteristic kind of metaphor fuses imagery of violence and death with imagery of the kitchen suggesting a close, even inevitable relationship between them. (182)

While it is true that Sexton does often associate the kitchen with violence, she also associates it with happiness and salvation. What can be said about the kitchen poems is that the pattern changes and such change is connected to the poet's life. When she is expressing a domestic conflict the kitchen is not a happy place, but at other times the kitchen is a holy church. The images of blood and violence are most closely aligned with Transformations, but as it has been seen, the pattern of the images changes. The kitchen is never one thing or the other for Sexton; it is capable of encompassing both the good and the bad and therein lies its power.

In this last volume written under Sexton's complete control, we can see how the conflict has altered as well as the image pattern. The domestic conflict with Kayo has been resolved, so the main conflict becomes professional. The drive for success and the problems associated with acceptance of this success "bang in the throat" of the poet.

Also there is a shift in voice and tone. Gone are the images of blood and frozen kitchens. The voice is level--detached. At this point in her life, Sexton was working very hard and fast despite the deepening depression. Although she was still struggling for independence without Kayo, she managed to keep herself working. She was writing as if she knew she did not have much time left. Slowly she began to withdraw from life giving fewer and fewer readings. Conversely, the writing flourished. An early draft of Rowing states that the work was written between January 10 and January 30. Sexton commented that these poems were written "in a frenzy of despair and hope. To get the meaning out was the primary thing--" (Letters 391). Also, Sexton saw less and less of her friends; she did keep up with her letter writing. After a new doctor and a return to the hospital, Sexton was finally cured of her drug addiction; however, it was only replaced by alcohol abuse. Only the "costumes" of her life appeared to change.

According to the editors of her letters, Sexton's death was not unexpected (423). The day before her death she gave a reading. On the Friday before her death, she lunched with Maxine Kumin. Sexton's life was well-ordered. Her papers were all arranged; her funeral plans set; her biographer selected; her literary executor appointed. Sexton had completed the writing of the manuscript 45 Mercy Street, but its internal organization had not yet been

finished. A look at this volume, published in 1976, shows another change in the pattern of domestic images. The images are of loss and nostalgia. Naturally, this trend can be traced to her biography.

"45 Mercy Street" is a dream-like poem which opens the volume. The speaker is wandering about Boston looking for a particular house and street. But she is unable to find this old house of dreams with its "parquet floors," "stained-glass window," "cupboard of Spode," and "big mahogany table." This world is not within the speaker's grasp; it is "not there, not there." Since the reality that the speaker remembers is lost, she wanders about in the dark, her way lighted by a match. She has "lost my green Ford, / my house in the suburbs, two little kids. . . a husband." The voice here is desperate and the speaker searches like a child. Finally, she realizes "this is no dream / just my oily life." The dream of loss is now the speaker's reality. The parallels with Sexton's own life at this time are very clear. She was recently divorced and had, in actuality, lost some of her possessions as well as her husband. Her life was no dream, and for better or worse, it was her life--"oily" or not. The mood and the despondent tone reflect Sexton's attitude in the months before she died.

In "Landscape Winter," the domestic imagery makes a short return to a hostility and resentment, not usually seen in this period of her work. A harsh side is once

exposed:

> And within the house
> ashes are stuffed into my marriage,
> fury is lapping at the walls,
> dishes crack on the shelves,
> a strangler needs my throat,
> the daughter has ceased to eat anything
> the wife speaks of this
> but only the ice cubes listen.

With the death of the marriage comes despair and depression. "Fury" beats at the walls, while "dishes crack" and shatter, like the dream of the happy marriage. A "strangler needs" the poet's "throat." Although death and violent images abound once again, the tone is a bit different; these images are not expressed in anger. On the contrary, they seem to be pathetic. And the over-riding concern seems to be expressed in the two final lines. The wife is now alone and left with no one to talk to: only the frozen image of the ice cubes remains.

"Walking Alone," a single stanza poem further expresses Sexton's personal sense of loss following the divorce. She "lusts" after her husband's "smile." "What can I do with this memory?" she questions. Then she catalogs the way in which she loves her husband: "the way the oboe plays," and "the way a ripe artichoke tastes." The lost love grows in power since its loss. Love "enters" her "blood like an I.V.," Sexton writes. The list of memories continues: "Then in comes you, ordering wine, / fixing my beach umbrella, mowing grass, / making my kitchen happy with charcoal steak." These images are all very familar.

Kayo is seen as the person in control of the relationship. He is the one who "orders" the "wine,"; he fixes the "umbrella" making the poet more content; he takes care of the necessary details of life; he cuts the grass, and finally, he comes to the kitchen to make it "happy" with a charcoal steak. The Traditional role of the husband still is alive in the mind of the poet and in the verse. Thus proving once again that Kayo's presence is needed to make the "kitchen" and the poet happy. Despite his physical absence, the poet's dependence upon her husband is still very strong.

The kitchen makes another appearance in a long poem, "The Break Away." Characteristically, Sexton selected the kitchen as the environment to describe her feelings on the day of her divorce. Such a selection underscores the importance of the kitchen to her both professionally and personally. On this day, the husband sends the speaker daisies and their brightness is contrasted with the speaker's despondent mood. In a short memory sequence, Sexton likens the courtroom to a "cement box," then to a "gas chamber," which critic Nancy Hoffman terms "a prolepsis of her death by gas in the garage of her home only a few months after the divorce was final," (212). The daisies are put in the kitchen:

> The daisies confer
> in the old married kitchen
> papered with blue and green chefs
> who call out pies, cookies, yummy,

at the charcoal and cigarette smoke
they wear a yellow salve.
The daisies absorb it all-

The image here is a copy of the preceding poem: The memories of the husband and marriage are kitchen centered. This time, however, there is no happy husband to "fix" the "umbrella" or mow "the grass"; there are only the chefs on the wallpaper who call out, mockingly, as a reminder of times gone by. Again, the image is of isolation and desperation. This time only the "daisies" remain to "absorb" it all.

The images of isolation and desperation begun in earlier poems come to full flower in "The Lost Lie"--a suggestive title. The emptiness of the kitchen has now spread out to other rooms of the house:

Today I roam a dead house,
a frozen kitchen, a bedroom
like a gas chamber.
The bed itself is an operating table
where my dreams slice me into pieces.

The frozen image, begun in earlier poems, is reconstructed as is the gas chamber image (another prolepsis perhaps?). On the bed, the "dreams" of the speaker are more than painful; they "slice" the poet "into pieces." The image here is horrifying. The bed becomes not a place of happiness with the husband, but a haunting reminder of the vision of the happy marriage gone haywire. The contrast between what the speaker dreamed would take place in the bed, and what actually takes place there now is

heightened by Sexton's unadorned diction. The "dreams" that once just caused conflict in the speaker, and in Sexton, now bear the potential for death.

In "February 11th", one of a long series of horoscope poems, the image of the house becomes a child-like general domestic environment:

> Still I yearn
> a first home.
> A place to take a first baby to.
> Railroad tracks
> outside the kitchen window
> and the good morning choo-choo.
> ....
> Tricycles......................
> hall, ktichen, dining room and back
> ....
> I always said
> I was happy there.

The dreams of the happy home haunt the speaker as they did Sexton. In this child-like vision, the speaker longs for the dream and the happy honeymoon cottage--"the vine-covered cottage." Despite all the messages that Sexton has sent to the contrary, she still professes that she was "happy" there. Again, the one thing that can be said about Sexton's domestic imagery is that it alters and changes. Sexton never professed to be "always". . ."happy" anywhere--let alone in the marriage. She did say, "I can't say that marriage and children were the answer for me" (FitzGerald 85).

Nancy Hoffman calls this last volume of Sexton's work, "a litany of loss" (80). The sense of desolation and isolation hinted at in earlier poems reaches a crescendo

in this volume, but such is almost to be expected following the divorce. The overall sense of foreboding and doom is present in the speaker and is symbolized in the images of the kitchen and the house. Hoffman writes:

> There is no place to go. The husband and the home life of tradition that Sexton alternately hates and longs for is now gone, beyond her reach. Emptied of feeling words, of the voracious appetite. . .She writes her own epitaph, that epitaph that says 'enough' (212-214).

V

A relationship between life and art seems to be an accepted fact by scholars, critics and psychologists alike. No work, however small, is created in a vacuum. With the case of the Confessional writer, the relationship is even more intimate than with the average writer. Thus this relationship can provide a better understanding of both the work and the life.

Moving from work to life has illustrated Sexton's use of domestic imagery. The various conflicts within her--the marriage conflict, the writing/housewife conflict, and the religious conflict--change shapes like some type of medieval beast. A pattern of imagery, however, is noticeable. Not only is such a pattern visible, it is clear that this pattern changes and alters according to Sexton's life.

The domestic imagery of the first pattern is the least complex. Minor domestic images, such as spoons, daisies, items of clothing, and fabric, change meaning; however, this change is random. There is no controlling symbol that governs which of these images will alter in meaning and when it will alter in meaning. The changes vary.

The domestic imagery of the second pattern is far

more complex and far more significant. It forms a major symbolic network that takes two different directions--one into the kitchen and one into a more general domestic setting. The kitchen or the general domestic setting controls how the individual images are used. The objects in the kitchen, for example, take their meaning from the overall view of the kitchen at that point. Some kitchen poems are happy; the images in such poems are likewise happy. Some general domestic settings are violent; the images in these settings are likewise violent. Thus the images of this pattern are more controlled than the images of the first pattern and are more frequent.

Both of the patterns, the symbolic first pattern and the more complex second pattern, have a correlation to Sexton's life. When the poet's concern is her profession--either her writing or her teaching--the poems reflect such. When the poet's concern is with her husband or her family, the poems reflect that as well. Therefore, the pattern's expression is noticeable in the early work, peaks in mid-career, and falls off in intensity following the divorce from Kayo. In the early poems, Sexton was undergoing a transformation of personality. She went into the hospital following a nervous breakdown; she entered the hospital as a housewife and came out as a poet. Yet this role change was not firmly set in her mind. The imagery that results at this time reflects the vacillation. Sexton

saw herself as two different people: a housewife and a poet. She was trying by way of analysis to become one person or the other, but she did not know which person she wanted to become. This perception of self solidified in her later work and as her skill as a poet grew, so did her ability to express herself through the domestic imagery. The seeds of the various conflicts and imagery networks are all in the first volume of poems. They merely grow and intensify with each passing year until Transformations.

The voice that expresses the patterns and networks of imagery also undergoes a change. The voice is (at first) a minor complaint. The voice is angry, but not yet bitter. The later poems, however, exhibit a marked change. The voice becomes violent and hostile. The images, told in this voice, become bloody and graphic. Finally in Sexton's last poems (45 Mercy Street), the voice shifts again. Here she is nostalgic. She longs for her husband and the security of the marriage. She also speaks of her approaching death. The imagery also reflects this voice shift. The kitchen, for example, becomes frozen. Sexton's marriage bed becomes an operating room. The voice then shifts throughout all of Sexton's poetic career and each shift can be traced to her biography.

In To Bedlam and Part Way Back the poet expresses her conflicts with her family members--her mother, her father, her husband, her children. The isolation and

separation that Sexton felt following her return home from the hospital is also present in this volume. The conflict between her life as a writer and her life as a housewife can be found in "Her Kind." The poem, "The Farmer's Wife," fits into the second network pattern; it is set in a general domestic environment. All of these poems reflect the vacillation and isolation of self that Sexton felt at the time.

In the poems of Sexton's mid-career, the patterns become clearer and stronger. Poems like "Consorting With Angels" express a tiredness of life. The girl of the "chain letter" talks of Sexton's career. The woes of marriage are written of in the mid-career poems as well. "Self in 1958" is a damning picture of the general domestic setting. This speaker is not even human; she is removed from life and cannot even recall the emotions that once made her happy. The picture of the family in "Live" is negative; the family in this poem takes its pleasure from the pain of the mother. The relationship with the biography at this time in Sexton's life is very apparent. This was a difficult period for her as she was in and out of the hospital; her confidence was at a low point and this mood is reflected in her work.

The poems of _Transformations_ move well past simple anger and hostility. They are militant, violent, and bloody tales of domestic horrors. The seeds of the early

frustration and anger take full power in this volume. All the poems of Transformations deal with the general domestic setting and the poet's view of that setting at this time is not at all happy. The "Hollywood Dream" of marriage falls flat in these poems. The myth of "happily-ever-after" is dissected in the hands of a very craft conscious Sexton.

The militant voice of Transformations gives way to a voice that speaks of the writing conflict in The Book of Folly. Poems like "The Ambition Bird" and "The Other" address this subject clearly. This mood as well can be traced to the biography. Sexton was feeling more like a professional poet at this time. She was winning awards; she was obtaining honorary degrees; she was writing advertising copy with Kayo. Thus the domestic crisis was temporarily shelved in favor of this other crisis.

The Death Notebooks reflects Sexton's preoccupation with her illnesses and her sense of death. She was despondent and depressed and this mood is clearly reflected in the work. Naturally, this sorrow can be traced to Sexton's divorce from Kayo which was granted in 1973. The nostalgic longing becomes an important part of the general domestic setting in the kitchen poems. In "Gods," the poet cannot find peace; in "The Death Baby" the kitchen becomes a forbidden place where the poet slowly dies; in "The Fury of Cooks," the poet is kept out of the kitchen which symbolizes a haven for the gods as well as the happy home environment.

The changes in this volume are wide ranging because of Sexton's mood at the time.

In The Awful Rowing Toward God Sexton expresses a levelness and calmness of mind not seen before. The revealing epigrams support a new faith in God. The biography supports this turn to religion as well. Following the divorce from Kayo, Sexton felt alone and deserted by her friends. She turned to religion to seek comfort. This new preoccupation finds its way into the poems of this volume. "Welcome Morning" is a short poem of faith and beauty that fits into the symbolic network of kitchen poems. "The Fish That Walked," expresses the writing conflict in the network of general domestic setting. Thus Rowing is a volume that exhibits a change in the poet's attitude and the resulting change in the overall symbolic network.

45 Mercy Street is a work that reeks of depression, loneliness and isolation. This mood can be related to Sexton's deepening depression following the divorce from Kayo. The reality of the divorce suddenly set in for Sexton. She realizes that it was no dream, just her "oily" life as she terms it. The poems of longing for Kayo and the security that he represents reach a high point in this volume. The dream of the happy husband in the happy kitchen haunt the poet. She "lusts" for his "smile." The symbolic network in this volume takes another remarkable shift. The kitchen becomes empty, lifeless and frozen. In "Landscape Winter." the poet is all alone with no one but ice

cubes to listen to her. "The Break Away" describes the kitchen atmosphere on the day the divorce was made final. The daisies (in this poem) "know they are about to die." In addition, the poet calls herself "a woman of excess, of zeal and greed." She sees herself as a "drunken rat" in another line. These lines can again be related to Sexton's mood at the time and they were her last statements before she ended her life.

The conflicts that are expressed in Sexton's work are clearly connected to her life. The patterns of imagery change as the life changes. Sexton once said that honesty was the most important element in her work; she strove for accuracy. This dedication to accuracy and honesty make tracing the elements of her life in her poems a valid approach to criticizing her poems.

Still, Sexton's problems were many. She was a very complex woman with an equally complex set of problems. She wanted to be a wife, a mother, and a poet. Yet she saw all those identities as separate. She never realized that she was all of them or that there was nothing wrong with being all of them. It was this diverse background and foundation of interests that made her the poet that she was. It was this longing to be more than the ordinary that set her apart from other writers. It was this reaching for the prize, as Henry James once called it, that led Sexton into the unchartered territory of the "secret

domestic world and its pain" (Juhasz Seeking 263).
It was this longing for accuracy and truth that allowed Sexton to write of her life--to expose herself and her private agony to the world.

Anne Sexton was a gifted poet, a wife and a mother. Her inconsistencies and vacillations are part of her work. They are what Susan Van Dyne called "part of her total-truth telling gesture," which "is not a failure of craft, but a conscious choice" (478). Such is really the case, for the changes in the patterns of imagery provide further ground for criticism of Sexton's work. They relate directly to the poet's life and her art. They, therefore, help us in our fundamental understanding of this "woman of excess, of zeal and greed. . ." who thought she "could warn the stars."

END NOTES

[1] See Maxine Kumin, A. R. Jones, Beverly Fields, Ralph Mills, and Rise B. Axelrod for criticism in support of Sexton's writing. See Robert Tillinghast, James Dickey, William White, and Jeffery Lant for criticism in opposition to Sexton's writing.

[2] See Geoffery Thurley, Ben Howard, Arthur Obert, and Robert Boyers for criticism that comments on Sexton's use of domestic imagery.

[3] See Brian Gallagher, Kathleen Nichols, and Robert Boyers for criticism that comments on Sexton's use of comparison.

[4] See Kathleen Nichols, Thomas P. McDonnell, Ralph J. Mills, Robert Mazzocco and Joyce Carol Oates for criticism that comments on Sexton's religious sensibilities.

[5] See Thomas P. McDonnell and Kathleen Nichols for criticism that comments on Sexton's view of salvation. Of particular interest is Suzanne Juhasz's "Seeking the Exit on the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the Career of Anne Sexton."

[6] See Muriel Rukeyser, Thomas P. McDonnell, Louise Bogan, Patricia M. Spacks, Segnitz and Rainy, Tillie Olsen, Rise B. Axelrod, and Brown and Olsen for feminist criticism.

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