FINDING MERCY STREET: A CASE STUDY OF ANNE SEXTON AND THE THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS OF WRITING POETRY

by

Theresa L. Thompson

An Abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English and Philosophy University of Central Missouri

April 2014
ABSTRACT

by

Theresa L. Thompson

Approximately 58 million people suffer from mental disorders in the United States, with roughly 800,000 people taking their lives annually. In this thesis, I explore how writing poetry can be a therapeutic intervention in the treatment of mental illness. The purpose of writing this thesis is to convey my belief that, using Anne Sexton as a case study, by tapping into the collective unconscious, writing poetry can help the mind heal from emotional trauma. The research design employed is a case-study of Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Anne Sexton. Based on anecdotal evidence, the results of this case-study suggest that writing poetry prolonged Sexton’s life for 28 years.
FINDING MERCY STREET: A CASE STUDY OF ANNE SEXTON AND THE THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS OF WRITING POETRY

by

Theresa L. Thompson

A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English and Philosophy University of Central Missouri

April 2014
FINDING MERCY STREET: A CASE STUDY OF ANNE SEXTON AND THE THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS OF WRITING POETRY

by

Theresa L. Thompson

April 2014

APPROVED:
Thesis Chair: Dr. Russell Greinke
Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Joshua Taft
Thesis Committee Member: Dr. William Vaughn

ACCEPTED:
Chair, Department of English and Philosophy: Dr. Daniel Schierenbeck

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI
WARRENSBURG, MISSOURI
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Joshua Taft and Dr. William Vaughn for their helpful guidance as members of my Thesis Committee. I would also like to thank Dr. Kathleen Leicht for her initial contributions. A special recognition goes to Dr. Russell Greinke, my Thesis Director, for taking a single kernel of an idea and growing it into a tangible research project. I would also like to acknowledge the singer Peter Gabriel, whose song “Mercy Street,” was the inspiration for the Anne Sexton case-study. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of poet Anne Sexton; may her “awkward bowl” of confessions continually pour over readers living streams of insight.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .............................................................................................. 7

CHAPTER 3: METHODS TO Sexton’S CASE ..................................................................................... 17

CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY OF METHODS ............................................................................................. 30

CHAPTER 5: SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ................................................................. 33

REFERENCES ..................................................................................................................................... 35
Chapter 1  Introduction

Creative self-expression is paramount in maintaining a healthy mind, body, and soul. Whether through the medium of visual art, dance, music, or writing, creative self-expression is one channel through which the mind can heal itself from trauma. Poetry is one such form of self-expression. According to writer Gillian Bolton, “Poetry can create order out of mental turmoil or strife; poets have explained this as a reason for choosing such tight poetic forms as sonnet, villanelle or haiku” (121). The purpose of writing this thesis is to convey my belief that by tapping into the collective unconscious, writing poetry can help the mind heal from emotional trauma. The works of Carl Jung, combined with the poetry of Anne Sexton, will be the focal point of this paper.

Poetry has always helped me to process many traumatic events throughout my life’s journey. For example, part of the healing process from my divorce in 1995 was writing a poem entitled “Elephant Bones,” a work that later won first place in the Warrensburg Trails Regional Library Poetry Contest. Several years later I wrote a poem that helped me to process my grief from an unexpected miscarriage. I became even more interested in poetry as a healing agent after learning about the National Association for Poetry Therapy. This organization is committed to using the written word as a medium for emotional redress, and according to their website, “The National Association for Poetry Therapy is an energetic, world-wide community of poets, writers, journal keepers, helping professionals, health care professionals, educators, and lovers of words who recognize and appreciate the healing power of language” (1).

Poetry and other literary genres have been used, both formally and informally, to heal the mentally ill in the United States since the early nineteenth-century, when
according to Nicholas Mazza, “psychiatric patients were writing poems for the Pennsylvania Hospital newspaper *The Illuminator*” (4). The term “poetry therapy” is defined as the use of language, symbol, and story in therapeutic capacities and encompasses bibliotherapy (the interactive use of literature) and journal therapy (the use of life-based reflective writing), as well as therapeutic storytelling, film therapy, and other language-based healing modalities. Poetry therapists are individuals who work in a variety of areas, including mental health, medical, geriatric, therapeutic, community, and educational settings. Severely mentally ill adults oftentimes benefit from poetry groups, where they can read, write, and share their poetry within a supportive group setting.

I intend to explore writings in the field of Jungian psychology in order to understand how poetry can be healing. I will also explore how poetry can be used as an effective therapeutic tool by examining the pivotal, personal journey of Anne Sexton, specifically how Sexton was encouraged to write poetry by her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne. According to biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook, Dr. Orne advised Sexton: “You can’t kill yourself, you have something to give. Why if people read your poems (they were all about how sick I was) they would think, ‘there’s somebody else like me!’ They wouldn’t feel alone” (42).

Inspired by her therapist’s advice, Sexton found a purpose for living by writing poetry. Tireless in pursuit of perfecting her verse, she oftentimes revised a work twenty or more times. According to authors Daniel Lester and Ralph Terry (as quoted in Bolton), “As she perfected her poems she was, perhaps, able to achieve an intellectual distancing from and control over the emotions that initially stimulated the content of the poems” (120). Writer Gillie Bolton observes that “reworking can bring insight and consolidation.
The redrafting of poetry is a powerful, deeply thoughtful process of attempting to capture the experience, emotion, or memory as accurately as possible, in apt poetic words and images” (120). Indeed, a finished poem is the author’s mark left on a sandy beach: through the act of reading, the audience later journeys along the same verbal path, filling in cognitive footprints left by the poet who has walked before them.

Often described as a confessional poet, Sexton wrote about the taboo subject of incest, with, as Bolton points out, her words conveying the “raw cries of pain, anger, distress and joy” (122). Consider the confessional tone in the closing lines of “Briar Rose”:

Each night I am nailed into place
and forget who I am.
Daddy?
That's another kind of prison.
It’s not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkeningly bends over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish.
What voyage is this, little girl?
This coming out of prison?
God help -
this life after death? (131-143)
Many critics have observed that Sexton’s “personal problems” interfered with the aesthetic quality of her poetry. As Lester and Terry point out (as quoted in Bolton), in the past twenty-five years, “literary critics have offered their own responses to ‘Briar Rose’ and to the incestuous image that directly precedes her question” (122). For example, in a critical essay of Sexton’s *Transformations*, Louis Martz believes that, “The poems become vehicles for extended associations, until the last one, ‘Briar Rose,’ almost disappears into an enfolding commentary that concludes the volume with these words” (48). Martz implies that the plot of the Sleeping Beauty tale disappears into Sexton’s poem, and as Dawn Skorczewski points out, “Martz’s comments are part of a culture in which the prevalence of sexual violence against children has repeatedly been voiced and then buried since the late 1800s” (123).

Another particularly stinging indictment is from critic Helen Vendler, who writes that “Sexton’s poems read better as a diary than as poems” (443). Vendler takes issue with Sexton exploring such taboo subjects as abortion and incest, and one of her more biting observations was that lyric poetry “has never demanded that the occasion for the poem be named in the poem. . . . No poem is improved for having a shattered taboo in it, or an abortion in it either. . . . Every poet is in the end only one sort of poet—a poet of the native language” (438). It is not so much what Vendler says as what she does not say here that, according to Skorczewski, “closes down the world of poetry to poets like Anne Sexton. She disparages poets who actually name taboo subjects such as masturbation and abortion, as if there is a poetically acceptable way of discussing such things without actually naming them” (333). Rather than celebrating Sexton’s ability to give voice to a
difficult subject, Vendler treats her poetry as vulgar sensationalism. As Skorczewski points out:

Critics of confessional poetry oscillate between celebrating representations of private pain as long-needed and redemptive for society and denigrating or chastising poets who suffered (or cause their readers to suffer) too much. Their judgments raise important questions about whether poetic representations of personal suffering or bodily pleasure constitute art, or if they do so only sometimes. (322)

Whatever that judgment is, literary critics seem divided as to how much is too much. Because Sexton is writing as a survivor, according to Skorczewski, the question at the end of the poem might be asking, “How can I speak openly about what happened to me and preserve an identity in this culture?” (310). In this dark imagistic brew that concludes “Briar Rose,” Sexton –ironically enough– offers healing, both to writer and reader, by illuminating repressed emotions in verse.

**Soul Food**

Carl Gustav Jung, the founding father of analytical psychology, defined the human soul in terms of gender. He coined the phrase “Anima” as the female soul image for the male, and “Animus” as the male soul image for the female. Our soul responds well to positive experiences, but when it is wounded through a traumatic event such as sexual abuse, the soul, in response to a fractured psyche, begs for healing. In response to this inner wounding, the body may dance, sing, play music, and write poetry in response to the soul’s yearning for wholeness. According to archetypal psychologist and Jungian analyst James Hillman, the “soul is vulnerable and suffers; it is passive and remembers. It
is water to the spirit’s fire, like a mermaid who beckons the heroic spirit into the depths of passions to extinguish its certainty” (122). Indeed, the soul is porous as paper, absorbing the prints of its handlers. Some fortunate souls go through life with only a few smudges, while others, at the mercy of an abusive family member, shatter like glass into a thousand jagged pieces beyond repair.

Fortunately, the creative process of writing poetry helps the human soul to heal from this inner wounding. Jungian analyst Lawrence Staples maintains that creative work “serves as an inner parent that compensates for the flawed parenting we may have had as children. Creative work mirrors us in a way we were often not mirrored by our parents” (10); additionally, with poetry acting as a mirror, it helps “restore the wounded self” (11). With the very act of committing verse to page, we give our spirit an outlet through which to process the traumatic event and slowly begin to heal. Moreover, when we recover our souls, Hillman speculates, we heal “the inner man, and as the inner sister or spouse, [we heal] the place or voice of God within, as a cosmic force in all humans” (20).

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight how poetry attends to the soul, as well as how Sexton wrote poetry as a form of self-therapy. In order for readers to garner a sense of why I consider poetry as a therapeutic agent, this thesis will explore work from professionals in the fields of psychology, Jungian analytical psychology, poetry, and poetry therapy. I hope to contribute to the growing literature on the usefulness of poetry in the realm of psychotherapy, as well as endeavor to relate how poetry is one method for healing emotional trauma. I will explore the history of poetry as a form of therapy, as well as poetry’s capacity to heal in Chapter II. I will explain my research methodology in
Chapter III, discuss significant findings in Chapter IV, and explore research limitations and areas for future study in Chapter V.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Poetry as Ancient Healer

Since ancient times, preliterate cultures have combined poetry with their specific healing rituals. According to psychiatrist Jack Leedy, “The Stone Age shaman was the first to incorporate poetry into his healing rituals through the use of spells, exhortations, and rites of exorcism” (xix). In the ancient Roman, Arabic, and Babylonian societies, poetry played a key role in the medical programs, and “anthropological evidence bears witness to the surviving place of poetry in medical practice in disparate areas across the globe – in Siberia and the Orient, in Polynesia, Australia, Africa, and among the American Indians and Eskimos” (xix). In the Hebrew culture, the biblical Old Testament chronicles how King David wrote poetry, known as Psalms, as a way to quell his fear of being chased around the countryside by Saul, as well as lamenting his guilt over committing adultery with Bathsheba, in Psalm fifty one.

According to English professor and scholar Abraham Blinderman, primitive cultures believed in the potency of words and their power to heal: “The Iranian branch of the Aryans, the Venidad, distinguishes three ways to overcome disease: surgery, medicine, and the spell, but their practitioners believe that the pure man healed by the ‘word’ is more effectively cured than the man treated either by surgery or medicine, a view that is held most universally by primitive healers” (43).

For the Greeks, poetry and healing were intimately cojoined. In The Poetics, Aristotle attempts to describe the origin and purpose of poetic verse, and he concludes that “poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in
our nature” (Part IV). The Greeks highly regarded the arts; in fact, the god Apollo was considered a dual god of both medicine and poetry. Jungian analyst Russell Lockhart wrote in 1983 that “the image of therapy as a song of healing speech was an extraordinary achievement of the early Greek mind. . . . For centuries, the Greek imagination attempted to find the secrets of rhetoric and poetry that would move the soul, the magic in words that would heal the soul” (86).

Writing held a very cathartic power to the Greeks; thus the library, as well as the Greek tragic theater, were deemed as highly valuable community institutions. The stories of the gods were the earliest forms of Greek Mythology, which deeply permeated the culture. Such stories include Helen of Troy, who was married to a Greek King, but the goddess of love, Aphrodite, promised her to Paris, a Trojan Prince. Then there is the enduring journey of Odysseus, who returns home twenty years after leaving for Troy. He arrives on the rocky island kingdom of Ithaca disguised as a beggar, only to discover his faithful wife, Queen Penelope, being wooed by numerous suitors. These myths contain important literary DNA, and are a “genetic blueprint” from which later prose and poetry are derived; for example, the first canto of Ezra Pound’s “The Cantos” (1922) is both a translation and a retelling of Odysseus’ journey to the underworld.

Jung states that it is “therefore to be expected of the poet that he will resort to mythology in order to give his experience its most fitting expression” (164). Jung contends that poetry needs mythological imagery to give it form. Moreover, the poet must “resort to an imagery that is difficult to handle and full of contradictions in order to express the very weird paradoxicality of his vision” (164). Once again referencing “Briar Rose,” the certainly weird vision of Sexton’s father “thick upon me like some sleeping
jelly fish” (lines 39-40) illustrates Jung’s belief that a poet’s imagery should be difficult and “full of contradictions.” After all, there is no greater human paradox than when a parent, whose primordial charge is to nurture and protect her child until maturity, violates this sacred trust with the unspeakable crime of rape.

Advancing to the seventeenth century, English poet John Milton (1608-1674) used poetry as a way to address melancholy. In his work “L’Allegro,” he begins the opening stanza by rejecting a depressed mental state in the first ten lines, then, in line 11, he entreats Euphrosyne (Goddess of Joy) to go forth with him into the clarion fields. Likewise, eighteenth century Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) used verse as a prescription for coping with sadness; for example, in the relatively short “Ode to Melancholy,” Keats advises his reader not to go to Lethe, the Greek river of sadness, to forget his melancholy, nor should he drink the “the ruby grape of Proserpine” (line 4) in order to end his life. Rather, Keats’ sunny prescription for melancholy is to spend time with nature, to seize a moment and enjoy it. In contrast to fellow Romantic poet John Keats, Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834) wrote verse, most notably “Dejection: An Ode,” as perhaps a way of dealing with the mental anguish of his 16-year opium addiction.

Poetry as Modern Healer

In his book, The Poetry Cure: A Pocket Medicine Chest of Verse (1925), Robert Haven Schauffler, a pioneer in poetry therapy, introduced the United States to the therapeutic properties of verse, which he saw as a potential remedy for symptoms such as “fear, fatigue, swollen ego, ingrowing ugliness, the blues, pettiness, insomnia, torpid imagination, sorrow, hardening of the heart, sluggish blood, myopic vision of the eye,
and other ailments” (xvii). Like his Greek predecessors, Schauffler viewed poetry as medicine, and, in fact, the book was published on the heels of his popular essay “The Musical Pharmacy.”

In the chapter entitled “Ten Minute Cures,” Schauffler prescribes different poems for readers with different ailments. For example, if one suffers from fatigue, the author proclaims that Oliver Herford’s “The Chimpanzee” will bring “uplift to your vitality, and to the corners of your mouth” (xxxii). For hardening of the heart, Schauffler prescribes a strong dose of sympathy, which one finds in verses of Robert Frost’s “The Tuft of Flowers,” and Robert Burn’s “Auld Lang Syne.” Finally, if readers suffer from insomnia, Schauffler suggests perusing the following before bedtime: William Wordsworth’s “To Sleep,” Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lotus Eaters,” Ellen Gate’s “Sleep Sweet,” and Arlo Bates’ “The Pool of Sleep.”

After studying the positive effects of poetry on patients in a New York clinic, Schauffler concludes that poetry is a healthy way for his patients to expunge themselves of negative, toxic emotions. Moreover, he saw the healing potential not only for the writer of poetry, but for the reader as well:

For the best thing about this sort of therapeutics is: that every poem which a poet has created for himself as a means of escape or defense or compensation, can often provide these same luxuries for uncreative folk, who are not so lucky as to be able to cure themselves with a few strokes of a pencil. All they need is a little imagination and a pocket medicine chest of verse. (xxiv)

During the 1960s psychiatrist Dr. Jack Leedy facilitated a poetry group for emotionally troubled patients at Creedmoor State Hospital in New York; as a result of his group work, he was inspired to compile and edit Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in
the Treatment of Emotional Disorders. In chapter two of this ground-breaking book, Leedy demonstrates the effectiveness of poetry therapy with chronic schizophrenic patients at Dixmont State Hospital in Pittsburgh. Leedy conducted an experiment in which seven patients were selected for poetry therapy, while another five patients were the control group. Leedy writes that, “The seven patients sat at a large round table with two therapists in a room designated for poetry therapy. Poems were chosen according to Leedy’s isoprinciple – i.e. poems that symbolically represented feelings that the patients were unable to deal with successfully – and were used as levers to involve the patients in discussing their feelings” (29). Leedy reports that the average patient was “31 years old, single, and a high-school graduate, with hospital residence of just over six years” (30).

At the conclusion of the eight-month poetry therapy experiment, the hospital staff noted a positive change: “Of the original group of seven, three had been discharged and four were making visits home. Of the control group, one had been discharged, the four others were not permitted home visits, nor were their attitudes more enthusiastic toward [the] hospital routine” (30).

At the experiment’s conclusion Leedy formulated three hypotheses: First, poetry “can help to create a mood in which emotions can be shared and responded to by the group, and so stimulate interpersonal relationships” (31). Secondly, “with its apparent objectivity, [poetry] can be dissected and used for acquisition of insight more readily than personal symptoms or behavior” (31). In other words, as patients shared their poetry, they were more spontaneous and less repressed than usual. Leedy observed that “several patients who had previously both avoided and denied their own problems, and certainly could not verbalize them, were able to react to poems by such comments as ‘That’s just
how I feel’” (31). Lastly, psychiatric patients can interpret the poems in a safe and nurturing environment, which allows a poem to “put a wedge into the pathology and defenses of the psychotic and provide for relatively unthreatening interpersonal relationships, a structured therapy setting with rigidity, and a means of understanding without pressure” (31).

Another startling revelation from the experiences at Dixmont State Hospital is how important it is to memorize poetry. For example, a patient, identified only as “H,” “suffered from auditory hallucinations; particularly when working in the laundry, voices would admonish her, saying she was a bad girl and should have led a better life” (34). A therapist suggested to H “that she memorize the last stanza of Ernest Henley’s ‘Invictus’ whenever she felt the voices begin. While the memorization did not entirely banish the hallucinations, H reported that she was better able to control them and felt less powerless when they did occur” (34).

In a 1972 Time magazine article entitled “Poetry Therapy,” it was reported that “about 3500 mental patients, prison inmates, troubled students and nursing home residents were reading and writing poetry under the guidance of some 400 psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and specifically trained English teachers” (45). In the same article, Yale psychiatrist Albert Rothenberg theorized that patients might can valuable insights by either reading poetry or writing original poems. The following year on the west coast, Arthur Lerner founded the Poetry Therapy Institute in 1973, and in 1978 he edited and compiled Poetry in The Therapeutic Experience. In this book, doctors and psychotherapists alike describe different approaches for using poetry in a therapeutic setting. In 1985 Leedy compiled and edited a book entitled Poetry as Healer. Within the
past decade, more evidence emerges to support the belief that writing poetry can be an
effective therapeutic tool. In a 2003 article entitled “Finding Our Voice Through Poetry
and Psychotherapy,” Noah Kempler suggests that writing verse can help clients to find
their personal voice. Next, he gives a first-person account of how poetry helped him as a
psychotherapy client: “Writing poems, in any form, during therapy helped me to access
the deep-seated and often symbolic expressions of my own pains of living” (219).
For Kempler, writing poetry helped him to re-discover language “in a form that was so
much more than words and phrases [He] had learned as a child. . . . [He] was able to find
[his] own words, and [his] own way of putting them together” (219).

**Links to the Unconscious**

According to Carl Jung, our unconscious mind is a vast, impenetrable sea of
tastes, smells, visions, and sounds; in effect, all perceptions of experience not readily
accessed by the conscious mind are housed in the unconscious. In *Symbols and the
Interpretation of Dreams*, Jung writes “all contents of consciousness have been or can
become subliminal, thus forming part of the psychic sphere which we call the
unconscious” (223). Before the invention of pre-sifted flour, baking flour went through a
metal device called a sifter, which separated out lumps and other unwanted elements; this
process helped to aerate the flour. Like the old-fashioned sifter of yester-year, the
unconscious aids the conscious mind in sifting through and interpreting our experiences.

The unconscious also manifests itself through dreams, and while we sleep our
consciousness is transformed into a different state of being. Archetypal psychologist
James Hillman writes, “Dreaming is a nightly dip, a skinny dip, into the pools of images
and feelings. . . . Dreams solve problems because all dreams are wet; they dissolve the
mental constraints of the day world in the flow of imagination” (139). The connection between dreams and poetry is they both are links to the unconscious; moreover, while dreams communicate with symbols, poetry communicates with metaphor and imagery. Jungian analyst Robert Johnson likened dreaming and the imagination as two conduits “that run from the unconscious to the conscious mind. . . . Dreaming and imagination have one special quality in common: their power to convert invisible forms of the unconscious into images that are perceptible to the conscious mind” (23).

Likewise, through the power of verse, the poet seeks to untangle an intractable mass of images stored in the unconscious, giving them recognizable shape and meaning through the language of metaphor and simile. In fact, Jung credits the poet for his or her ability to “divine the darkly moving, mysterious currents, and to express them according to the limits of their capacity in more or less speaking symbols. They make known, like true prophets, the deep motions of the collective unconscious, ‘the will of God’… which, is in the course of time, must inevitably come to the surface as a general phenomenon” (54). I maintain the images that bubble up from the unconscious, in the form of dreams, are one way the psyche seeks to heal itself from trauma, and through her artistic endeavors, in the poem “Briar Rose,” Sexton seeks to make sense of these reflections.

**Review of Criticism**

In 2004 Jill Gill wrote, of all the confessional poets after the Second World War, “it is Anne Sexton, more than any of her peers, who has been pronounced guilty of narcissism” (61). As acclaimed novelist Joyce Carol Oates explains (as quoted in Gill): “Sexton has been criticized for the intensity of her preoccupations: always the self, the victimized, bullying, narcissistic self” (61). As quoted in Gill, Patricia Meyer Spacks
condemns her “shrill narcissism” and “insistent mirroring” (61), and Helen Vendler pointedly gives thanks for a rare volume in which the poet “turn[s] away from the morass of narcissism” (441). As Alicia Ostriker bitingly concludes (as quoted in Gill), “Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist” (63).

Gill makes a very strong case that, rather than being an undesirable trait, narcissism is important to Sexton’s poetics in several respects because “it offers a framework within which to develop themes of self-love and desire, it offers fruitful metaphors such as those of the mirror and the cave, and it lends the structural and linguistic potential of the echo” (64). Through Sexton’s exploration of the psychoanalytic roots of narcissism, Gill believes “it is possible to recuperate the adjective narcissistic and demonstrate its importance in apparently divergent poetic traditions” (61). Interestingly, Gill recasts narcissism in a more positive light, viewing it not merely as “a limiting and inadvertent error peculiar to confessional poetry (and acute in the work of Anne Sexton), but as “a sophisticated and productive strategy employed by confessional and avant-garde poetries alike in their negotiation of such shared preoccupations as language, subjectivity, representation, and referentiality” (61). What appears to be authorial self-absorption in Sexton’s work may, in fact, be a sophisticated textual narcissism of the kind delineated by Linda Hutcheon (61).

In Hutcheon’s analysis, it is “the narrative text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissistic” (1). Gill points out that Sexton concentrates on a writing that is textually rather than biographically “self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational” (62). Instead of condemning Sexton’s poetry, Gill
contends that her confessional approach to verse foreshadows “the markedly self-reflexive tendencies of more recent American poetry” (62). Indeed, the history of American poetry has been on a four-hundred year unbosoming, beginning “from an impersonal, modernist aesthetic to a personal, lyrical, confessional narcissism and on to a cool, self-reflexive, linguistically sophisticated postmodernism” (83). In every way Sexton’s poems represent self-reflexivity and language play that characterize avant-garde and postmodernist poetic forms.
Chapter 3 Methods to Sexton’s Case

Biography

Anne Gray Harvey, later known to the world as Anne Sexton, was born on November 9, 1928, in Newtown, Massachusetts, to parents who could have been characters lifted from the pages of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. Ralph Staples Harvey was a tall, handsome, affluent man who owned his own wool business, R.C. Harvey Company; Sexton’s mother, Mary Gray Staples Harvey, was equally attractive, and her family held prominent social positions as staunch Republicans in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine. The true embodiment of the Roaring Twenties, the couple threw glittering, self-indulgent parties in their prosperous Chelsea, Massachusetts’s home. These parties fueled Ralph Harvey’s heavy drinking, and unfortunately for the Harvey daughters, Mary Harvey was not one to refuse a cocktail, either. The preeminent Sexton biographer, Diane Middlebrook, states that Sexton told her long-time therapist, Dr. Orne, “my mother could drink anytime she wanted. My mother drank two drinks every noon and three drinks every night come hell or high water”(13). Though the poet, along with older sisters Jane and Blanche, grew up with every material advantage in this rarified New-England sphere, theirs was a spiritual poverty nurtured by a cold, competitive mother, and an often absent, alcoholic father.

Sexton was the baby of the family, and a family snapshot of the four-year old attests to the fact that she loved to be cuddled. If affection was the one aspect of parenting she deeply craved, it was also the one insidiously withheld. Middlebrook recounts that Sexton was a very lonely child: “One of her most haunting images was of being shut up in her room as a toddler, by a folding gate drawn across the doorway. . . . Anne’s
imagination endowed this room with terrors in her late poetry: the roses become blood clots, and all the leaves rustling beyond the windowpanes are tongues urging her to die” (8). It would appear the seeds of her self destruction were sown at an early age.

Indeed, Sexton grew up in a virtual “house of horrors” in which her mother threatened her with a colostomy if “she didn’t cooperate with efforts to regulate her elimination” (15), and her father routinely raged at her for being “messy, fidgety, and loud” (9). A punctilious dresser who always wore a jacket and tie to dinner—and in fact ironed his own underwear—Ralph Harvey was appalled by Sexton’s trailing hems and her “unlikely combinations of scarves and belts donned over mismatched blouses and skirts” (9). When Sexton’s father had been drinking heavily, he singled her out at the dinner table, complaining that her “acne disgusted him and that he could not eat at the same table with her” (14). If Ralph Harvey’s onslaughts had stopped at the dinner table, one conjectures that Sexton’s depression might have been less severe; unfortunately, his exploitation took a more horrifying path, straight to the child’s bedroom. Sexton once recounted to Dr. Orne that her father would come drunkenly into her room, begin fondling her, then depart with a final kiss on the lips, leaving his whiskey bottle on her bedside table.

Whether Sexton’s report of incest was a memory or a fantasy is open to debate, but as Middlebrook points out:

The evidence for its actuality lies chiefly in the vividness and frequency of her descriptions during trance states. Moreover, Sexton’s symptoms and behaviors—in particular, the dissociative states that were so prominent a feature in her case, her tendency to sexualize significant relationships, and
the fluidity of the boundaries she experienced between herself and other people—fit the clinical picture of a woman who has undergone sexual trauma. (57)

Middlebrook’s probable diagnosis was that Ralph Harvey’s drinking “permanently destroyed her trust in his love” (14).

Fortunately for Sexton, one luminous star emerged in an otherwise dark constellation of dysfunctional family members, and this star had a name: Anna Ladd Dingley. Known affectionately as “Nana,” Sexton’s spinster aunt came to live with the Harveys when Anne was eleven, and it was this snowy-haired woman, arriving like the cavalry, who gave Sexton the unconditional love she so vehemently craved. Middlebrook writes that “Anne remembered spending all her time with Nana, playing cards in her room, doing her homework there, eating lunch with her, and going to the movies with her after school” (15). Oftentimes Sexton and her aunt would lie together under a blue-bordered quilt, as Nana recounted stories about the old days; indeed, theirs proved a poignant union of Nana’s loneliness wedded to Anne’s neediness (15).

Motherhood

According to a special women’s issue of Life magazine from 1957, women were to find complete fulfillment in marriage and motherhood in a neat succession (as quoted in Middlebrook): “from the first prom, to the first kiss, to the first baby” (40). Sadly, this was not the glowing, Norman-Rockwell reality for Sexton, who struggled with the demands of motherhood shortly after marrying Kato Sexton at age 19. As Middlebrook observes, “These babies were supposed to provide Sexton’s fulfillment as a woman, but instead they made demands on her emotions; rather than feeding her hunger for
acceptance, they required her to respond to their separateness” (39). As she plainly told Dr. Orne, as quoted in Middlebrook, “I want to be a child and not a mother, and I feel guilty about this” (39). Sexton’s morbid fear of being alone with her two young daughters preceded two suicide attempts. In November of 1956, the future Pulitzer-prize winning poet was rushed to Newton-Wellesley Hospital after taking an overdose of Nembutal, or “kill me” pills, as Sexton called them (34). After she was stabilized, Sexton’s psychiatrist transferred her to Glenside, which Middlebrook describes as a grim institution for mental patients, where she stayed for two or three weeks.

The Dr. Orne Years: Crawling Out from Under

Dr. Orne’s initial diagnosis of Sexton’s condition revealed a vague cornucopia of mental ailments including post-partum depression, severe amnesia, and hysteria. Middlebrook points out that “an overview of her case would distinguish at least three different possible sources [for her mental illness]: biological, psychological, and sociological” (37). However, there was evidence to support the argument that “on both sides of Sexton’s family, there was a genetic predisposition to biologically based illness” (37). Although electroshock therapy was the preferred form of treatment at Westwood Lodge mental hospital, Dr. Orne, favoring psychotherapy instead, saw Sexton five times a week for individual counseling. As Middlebrook reports, “Sexton and her doctor sat face to face, not separated by a desk. Each could observe the other’s countenance; [this] awareness of their interplay had an important role in therapy” (44). Over the course of eight years Sexton and Orne developed an iron-clad bond, and in her poem, “You, Doctor Martin,” she confesses, “Of course, I love you; / you lean above the plastic sky, / god of our block, prince of all the foxes” (lines 21-23). Sexton credits him with having an
“oracular eye in our nest” (31). Even though Sexton rails against being back in the hospital in this poem, she recognizes that it is the place “where the moving dead still talk / of pushing their bones against the thrust of cure” (3-5); moreover, in keeping with the common belief that “idle hands are the devil’s playground,” she is kept busy making moccasins.

Still, Sexton’s initial meeting with Dr. Orne got off to an inauspicious start. In an attempt to get Sexton to list her positive traits, he pressed hard to get her thinking of something she could do, to which Sexton replied (as quoted in Middlebrook), “I could be a good prostitute and help men feel sexually powerful” (xiii). Later her psychiatrist recommended she try writing about her experiences in treatment. Inspired by his suggestion, in January of 1957 Sexton brought her doctor “a large batch of formally ambitious poems, neatly typed and dated” (42); thus, a poet was born. In an anguished, mental struggle in which Sexton see-saws back and forth between choosing to live or die for the next seventeen years, at this point in time she concludes, “Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem.”

Although Sexton’s corpus of work is strewn with poems about her own self-destruction, a number of poems also celebrate womanhood, motherhood, and – most importantly – her desire to live. It was in a poetry workshop, taught at the Boston Center for Adult Education by John Holms, that Sexton found a vocational use for her therapy experiences. For example, the poet’s desire to escape mental illness is evident in her repeated use of prison metaphors in the poem “Flee on Your Donkey.” Upon her return to the Westwood Lodge Mental Hospital, Sexton wrote in “Flee on Your Donkey,” “I have come back / recommitted, / fastened to the wall like a bathroom plunger, / held like a
prisoner / who was so poor / he fell in love with jail” (198-203). In “Anne Sexton’s *Live or Die*: The Poem as the Opposite of Suicide,” Jenny Goodman points out that “the poet’s identification of her condition as a prison leads her to search for a way out” (74). Recognizing that she is in an institution with a “girl curled like a snail” (47), and an unnamed patient who “tries to eat a shoe” (48), Sexton’s later image of flight in this poem has a desperate, yet sensual, quality to it:

Anne, Anne,
Flee on your donkey,
Flee this sad hotel,
Ride out on some hairy beast,
Gallop backward pressing
Your buttocks to his withers
Sit to his clumsy gait somehow. (226-232)

According to Goodman, in these stanzas the poet addresses herself as a friend, and “presumably the mind, or the spirit, is addressing the body, and there is the sense they are working together” (75). Although her mind and body may be working in unison here, Sexton, the poet, is still grappling with Sexton, the mental patient, to “flee this sad hotel” (228). During her time spent in therapy with Dr. Orne, Goodman points out that “Sexton uses analysis and dreams to probe her past and speaks of her ‘eyes circling into [her] childhood / eyes newly cut’”(75). Thus endowed with a new vision gained from psychoanalysis, this fledgling insight allows “her present self to connect with the past, but the process is painful and does not promise sure results” (75). Ironically, the fact that
Sexton summons the strength to battle her illness at all indicates she has enough energy to fight madness, to want to live.

What appears to be one of Sexton’s most therapeutic works, a poem entitled “Live,” is among a collection (Live or Die) that won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1967. Although the poem starts out with death imagery, later Sexton asserts “Even so, / I kept right on going on, / a sort of human statement” (19-21). Gathering even more steam, by line 76 Sexton boldly declares that “I’m an empress. / I wear an apron. / My typewriter writes.” In describing her ever-changing pendulum swing towards life, the poet writes:

    Today life opened inside me like an egg
    And there inside
    After considerable digging
    I found the answer.
    What a bargain
    There was the sun,
    Her yolk moving feverishly,
    Tumbling her prize –
    And you realize that she does this daily.  (45-53)

As Goodman points out to readers, “the sun is associated with birth through the metaphor of the egg, and birth is associated with the daily cycle of the sun” (78). Goodman goes on to claim this stanza is the most positive statement of the whole book because “[the poem] ‘Live’ suggests a rebirth at the beginning of each day” (78). A few lines later the poet extols the virtues of her family by proclaiming Kato, her husband, is “straight as a redwood,” and her two daughters are “two sea urchins, / picking roses off my hackles”
In “Live” Sexton also seems more accepting of motherhood, as she allows herself to be the fire on which her girls cook marshmallows. The poem concludes on a very upbeat note in which the poet exhorts her readers to “Live, live because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable gift” (114-115). In fact, because these lines not only end the poem, but also the book as well, Goodman observes that “one cannot help but think that writing is, for the poet, an act affirming life” (78).

**Archetypal Anne**

From her eight years of therapy working with Dr. Orne, Sexton learned to draw from the nebulous, Jungian well of her unconscious as the source for her poetry. In describing this phenomenon, Sexton scholar Brenda Ameter notes that the poet told Barbara Kelves in a 1968 interview:

> Sometimes, my doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven’t integrated into my life. In fact, I may be concealing it from myself, while I was revealing it to the readers. The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious. The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of. (85)

Sexton often deferred to her unconscious as to whether to let an image remain in a poem. “May it do me no ill” was her verdict given to Kelves. According to Ameter, “This explanation illustrates the beneficial qualities of the unconscious insisted upon by Jung and acceptable to both Sexton and feminist scholars” (87). In her first book of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), Sexton asks hard questions and is not afraid to “flinch at the pain that they bring” (84). As Ameter points out, “The questions, set forth
in the common images of everyday life, analyze archetypal relationships” (84). Sexton explores various relational configurations including mother-daughter, father-daughter, mother-son, woman-lover, and woman-woman friendship. Furthermore, Ameter argues that “Sexton evokes archetypal images written on the psyche of people across cultures, countries, languages, and commonly shared experiences from which myths come” (85). Within the perimeter of her lush imagination, Sexton has become an Illinois farmer’s wife (“The Farmer’s Wife”), a father with a mentally-handicapped child (“The Hangman”), and even Christ hanging on the cross (“In the Deep Museum”) in order to capture her character’s interior feelings. Moreover, the subjects of Sexton’s poetry are both powerful and universal, often involving marginalized characters struggling for rights all people seek and deserve.

One example of Sexton’s archetypal poetry is “The Double Image,” also from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. In this poem, Sexton alternates between the past and present, as she explores her feelings of loss at her own mother’s death, while mourning the current absence from her infant daughter, Joyce, at Glenside Hospital for another suicide attempt; interestingly, Sexton uses the trope of portraits to describe the relationship between all three generations of women. The poem’s seven sections are near-perfect in terms of action symmetry. In the first three sections, the daughter and then the speaker leave home, followed by the fourth section, which Gill describes as denoting “a liminal moment of uncertainty” (71). For example, when Sexton’s mother comes back from the hospital she describes her mother’s surgery as “incomplete, / the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard / them say” (95-96). The final three sections complete the cycle, with first
the speaker and then the daughter returning home (71). The closing six lines address the poet’s ambiguity she feels towards her daughter:

We named you Joy.
I, who was never quite sure
About being a girl, needed another
Life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
Nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (199-204)

In the above passage, Sexton speaks to the universal desire that most, though not all, parents have to biologically replicate themselves (“Life, another image to remind me”), while also addressing the foible of living out—often unfilled—lives through their children. When Sexton’s infant daughter understandably fails to meet these unattainable expectations, parental guilt ensues: “And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure / nor soothe it” (203). Moreover, when the speaker tells Joy, “I made you to find me” (204), she echoes the sentiments of a generation of “lost” women who relied on their children to – like mirrors – reflect back their purpose, to become diminutive beacons of guiding light revealing their identity.

In fact, “The Double Image” could be read in terms of Jacques Lacan’s understanding of narcissism, which, as Gill describes it, is “an examination of the way in which we achieve subjectivity by perceiving and identifying ourselves in relation to others” (71). For example, Sexton’s mother commissions dual portraits of both herself and her daughter, which “hang on opposite walls” (40). How the poet interprets Mary Gray’s action illustrates a generational connectedness, in that Sexton states that “my
smile” is also her mother’s smile “held in place” (59). Like toddlers beguiled by their own reflections, in this work Sexton recalls the past, looking to the double image of her mother, with “cheeks wilting like a dry orchid” (159), for her sense of identity.

Another example of Sexton’s early archetypal poems is “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further.” She opens by admitting that this poem is not beautiful, but there is a sense of order, “something worth learning / in that narrow diary of my mind” (4-5). As she continues further, the stanza becomes more than just about herself:

I tapped my own head
It was glass, an inverted 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. (17-28)

Sexton begins this passage with the image of tapping on her head, much as a doctor would tap a patient during a physical examination. Whatever personal rage is contained within “your own bowl” starts out as a private matter, but it quickly expands to include the collective unconscious of a wider audience when she uses the second-person pronoun. For example, when Sexton writes “it was you, or your house / or your kitchen” (22-23) the poem becomes an archetype. As Ameter points out in her essay, “The
language evokes comparisons with the Biblical ‘But as for me and my house’ (Joshua 24:14), but it stops short of ending ‘we shall serve the Lord’ just as Anne Sexton never reconciles her beliefs with traditional piety” (84). The above passage concludes with a caveat that “if you turn away / because there is no lesson here / I will hold my awkward bowl, / with all its cracked stars shining.” In other words, if we, the readers, do not dip from the universal bowl of Sexton’s pain, the poem’s lesson is missed, and “our” bowl once again reverts back to Sexton’s “awkward bowl,” with all her insights lost upon us, lost to her cracked, shining stars.

The poems in this chapter clearly illustrate the curative effects of writing for Sexton. Undoubtedly, the eight years of therapy with Dr. Martin in which she used dreams to probe her past, combined with the poetry workshop taught by John Holms, miraculously redirected Sexton’s energies away from self-destruction, towards a more positive path in helping others with mental illness.
Chapter 4 Summary of Methods

Living to Write, Writing to Live

Friday, October 4th, 1974 dawnd brightly in Weston, Massachusetts, with leaves the color of “sour-ball candy” as Sexton described them falling from the trees. On that chilly Friday autumn afternoon, the poet ominously took off her rings and placed them in her purse; next she put on her mother’s old fur coat, its worn satin lining warming her flesh. According to Middlebrook, with a fresh glass of vodka in hand, Sexton “let herself into the garage and closed the doors behind her. She climbed into the driver’s seat of her old red Cougar, bought in 1967, the year she started teaching. She turned on the ignition and turned on the radio”(397). Her final suicide attempt was well-thought out, unannounced, and clean, unlike previous tries. As the music blared and the garage filled with lethal fumes, Sexton journeyed into her death as one might walk into the sea: “I wish to enter her like a dream, […] sink into the great mother arms / I never had” (excerpt taken from “In Excelsis”).

While it is an undeniable fact that Anne Gray Sexton succumbed to an untimely death at the age of 45, I maintain that writing poetry helped prolong her life. As fellow poet Maxine Kumin points out in her Introduction to The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton, “I am convinced that poetry kept Anne alive for the eighteen years of her creative endeavors . . . . Without this rich, rescuing obsession I feel certain she would have succeeded in committing suicide in response to one of the dozen impulses that beset her during the period between 1957 and 1974” (xxiv). As evidenced in chapter three, writing poetry was the healing agent that kept Sexton going. For example, in 1957 her initial psychotherapy work with Dr. Orne, combined with John Holm’s poetry workshop,
proved the catalysts needed to check Sexton’s depression and to give her life a purpose. During her time working with Dr. Orne, she used analysis and dreams to probe her past, and eventually share with the entire world those insights, however painful, in verse. Although Sexton’s work teems with death and self-destruction, poems such as “Flee on Your Donkey” and “Live” remind readers that no matter how despairing the poet became, for eighteen more years she still doggedly fought her mental illness: “I kept right on going on / a sort of human statement” (excerpt from “Live”).

In the year 1973, after her marriage to Kato failed, Sexton went to a priest asking to be “made” a Catholic. The sympathetic, older man explained he could not convert her, but according to Kumin, the priest “said the magic and simple words that kept her alive at least a year beyond her time and made The Awful Rowing Toward God a possibility. ‘God is in your typewriter,’ he told her” (xxiii). And so it was that the words, phrases, and images pouring forth from her typewriter at the end of her life proved the same powerful anecdote they were in 1958, when she confessed in a letter to fellow poet W.D. Snodgrass, “Poetry has saved my life and I respect it beyond both or any of us” (42).

When I was a senior English major eagerly anticipating graduation, one of my last English classes the spring I was to graduate from Berea College was a course in poetry. As Dr. Sears rolled out his dusty lecture on the rhyme scheme of John Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” I restlessly squirmed in my seat, drawing a flower around the ring in my note-book paper. I concluded that poetry had to be about love, it had to rhyme, it had to be written by someone dead for at least two-hundred years, and, above all, poetry had no personal relevance. In writing this thesis, all my youthful notions of poetry have been dispelled, one by one. While taking this journey alongside
Sexton these past eight months, I learned that when her marriage failed, when her
daughters left for school and she was utterly alone, words were *all* she had, and with such
lexical bricks and mortar she built poems that provided her with a sense of identity, a
source of strength, a purpose for her life, and a means through which to help others with
mental illness. Indeed, the magic of Sexton is that while she bared the messy, tragic
details of her personal history, she maintained careful control of the rhymes and meter,
and in the process turned confessions into art. By being confessional, Sexton tapped what
Jung called the collective unconscious, and in so doing explored many universal truths
ardently imparted to her readership.
Chapter 5 Suggestions for Future Research

Limitations

As compelling as Sexton’s story is, case studies historically are the weakest mode of research. Ideally, I wanted to perform a qualitative study in which I could have documented the results of actual patients writing poetry in a mental hospital setting; however, due to time constraints and IRB concerns I did not pursue this avenue of research. Either through personal interviews or filling out a questionnaire, I would have asked patients if writing poetry helped to alleviate their symptoms of mental illness. As a trained social-worker, this is a study I would like to do at some point in my future profession.

Future Research

Because the field of poetry therapy has only been around since 1970, more research needs to be undertaken to evaluate its effectiveness. To my knowledge there are few qualitative studies, and no quantitative studies—which are considered the gold standard in research methods—that investigates the use of poetry as a form of psychotherapy. It would also be intriguing to read studies of how effective writing poetry is for children with psychiatric disorders.

Nevertheless, for forty-five years we had funny, scary, witty, outrageous, controversial, glamorous, exhibitionist Anne, who in plumbing the depths of her madness wrote poem after poem as a stay against her own demise. Indeed, Sexton left in her wake a remarkable legacy: to the mental patients who were referred to her work, she was the balm of Gilead; to the next generation of women poets, she broke new ground, shattered taboos, and according to Kumin, “endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of
the flamboyance of her subject matter” (xxxiv). I conclude my thesis hoping that this case study of Anne Sexton will lay the ground work for future studies on the efficacy of writing poetry as a form of treatment for mental illness.
Works Cited


