

## Kaufman's "Sylvia Plath Effect" in Sexton's Poetic Search for identity

**Lect. Amal Ali Al-Rowisan**

With the advent of the Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, society started to emphasize reason as important for humanity. This led to the division of society into two separate cultures, the scientific and the artistic, forming a gap between them. C. P. Snow urges in his book *The Two Cultures* to the necessity of a closure of this gap. However, the Romantic Movement hastens towards the closure of this division between sciences and arts by its emphasis on spontaneity, imagination, and the spiritual. This closure is highlighted in the understanding of human illnesses where it is difficult to have a complete picture of human beings without studying arts and humanities. T. S. Eliot observes that “we read many books because we cannot know enough people” (*Notes Towards* 86). Reading literature gives opportunities for scholars and people in general to explore the lives and inner worlds of a wide range of individuals especially literary accounts of illness and madness.

Poetry as a form of literature expresses humans' emotions and passions which makes it important in the context of psychiatric studies of human illnesses. One of the illnesses recurrently discussed in psychiatric studies is manic-depressive illness as a condition of creative people's genius. Madness has preoccupied many different disciplines and has “caused them to converge, thus subverting their boundaries” (Felman, 12). To relate this scientific notion to art is to speak of the similarity between madness and literature. Both madness and literature are ruled by the feelings that are repressed in them which necessitates a psychoanalytic examination in order to read them.

This article adopts Kaufman's psychopathological term "Sylvia Plath Effect" which relates science to literature in the study of mental illness of literary figures, and which emphasizes the mad genius association. It attempts to construct a psychopathological reading of the symptoms of manic-depressive illness and the experiences led to it in the analysis of the confessional poetry of a 20th century poet, Anne Sexton. The analysis of these symptoms extends to include a parallel analysis of the stages of her female quest which is embedded in each symptom. By this application, the study tries to contribute to the closure of the gap between science and art. It attempts as well to introduce to the studies of poetry and psychopathology an example of the application of a newly dubbed term on a modern manic-depressive poet. It attempts to urge social and academic institutions to appreciate and support the poets' attempts for expressive writing of mental illness. Having stated the objectives, the following part discusses the theory adopted.

In the context of modern critical literary theories, a series of critical theories came into the foreground, each was associated with a specific decade. One of the critical theories is

Psychoanalytic criticism which started in the 1930s. Psychoanalytic literary criticism refers to literary criticism or literary theory which, in method, concept, or form, is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis begun by Sigmund Freud (1856-1936) and the various thinkers who have been influenced by his works. It discusses the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature. Psychoanalysis is defined as a,

Medical technique, a method of therapy for the treatment of mentally ill or distressed patients that helps them understand the source of their symptoms. For its emphasis on discovery of the source of symptoms, psychoanalysis is first and foremost a method of interpretation. (Booker, 27)

Many critics and philosophers since Aristotle had examined the psychological aspects of literature ranging from the author's motivation and intentions to the effect of a work on an audience. However, the application of psychoanalytic principles is a recent phenomenon initiated primarily by Freud and Carl Jung. Freud also wrote a paper entitled "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1907), in which he views literary works as the representation of the author's repressed wishes showing that the job of the psychoanalyst is to piece together the aspects of a writer's life and his works and to form from them the artist's mental psyche.

Mental illness which is the core of this study is one of the subjects related in the discussion of psychopathology which refers to: 1. the study of mental disorders, distress, and abnormal behavior; 2. the study of signs and symptoms of mental illness. This discipline was founded by the German psychotherapist Karl Jaspers in 1913 who studied mentally-ill patients using a biographical method. Many studies on the mad genius notion have linked mental disorders, particularly bipolar disorders, with creative artists. There is a prolific body of ancient and scientific theories that identifies strong links between creativity and mood disorders as: manic-depressive disorder and depressive disorder. This study utilizes a contemporary psychopathological term, "Sylvia Plath Effect", dubbed after James C. Kaufman's study "The Sylvia Plath Effect: Mental Illness in Eminent Creative Writers" in 2001. This term emphasizes the association between genius and mental illness in artistic fields, particularly in poetic field.

In his study, Kaufman explores in two related parts the stereotypical relationship between creative writing and mental illness. In the first part, using the historiometric approach, he analyzes the historical data of the lives of eminent 1,629 writers from *A Reader's Guide to Twentieth-century Writers* and from *Webster's Dictionary of American Authors* using scientific methodology and statistics. Four different types of writers were included in the book: fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers. Several different variables were entered, including gender, type of writer, and a number of "setback" measures including signs of mental illness, lingering physical illness, and experiencing a significant personal tragedy in one's life (e.g., losing a child). Key phrases and events were specifically noted such as hospitalization for psychological issues, nervous breakdowns, or suicide attempts. The study demonstrates that poets are prone to suffer from mental illness more than any type of other creative writers, and

female poets are found to be significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness than female fiction writers or male writers of any type.

In the second part, Kaufman selected *Webster's Dictionary of American Women* (1996) and studied 520 eminent women (poets, fiction writers, non-fiction writers, visual artists, politicians, and actresses). The previous "setback" measures were analyzed. He again found out that many of female poets are mentally ill and more likely to experience mental illness than any other type of eminent woman. This early finding of notable mental illness in female poets has been dubbed as "the Sylvia Plath Effect," after the American poet Sylvia Plath to whom Kaufman refers as "one of the most gifted and troubled poets in the sample" which evokes her tragic suicide ("The Sylvia Plath" 46). Sylvia Plath had encountered episodes of psychotic depression and ended her life by suicide. By applying this concept, this study aims at analyzing the manic-depressive illness in the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton exploring its symptoms and her quest for identification from writing about the experience of madness to her suicide. It employs some of the variables set by Kaufman for measuring writers' illness in the thematic analysis of Sexton's poetry. As the confessional poetry promotes a personal presentation of the poet's life, the study uses a biographical method in the thematic analysis of the symptoms of Sexton's manic-depressive illness.

Having stated the objectives and the theory adopted, it is crucial to start with defining two significant key words for Kaufman's "Sylvia Plath Effect"; creativity and manic-depressive disorder. Creativity is a complex notion. It is a term that explains human mental capacity that seems to transcend all other human capacities. The search for the knowledge about creativity has often been linked with magic, the demonic, and the divine. Many of the earliest ideas about creativity were mystical and relied on divine inspiration. Yet, modern creativity researchers attempt to use these "mystical" kinds of words such as "genius", "lunatics", and "madness" in their article titles (Kaufman, *Creativity* 101 3). The modern concept of genius, "as the manifestation of the highest form of innate original ability in individuals" became popular during the eighteenth century (Becker, 21).

In addition to the concept of creativity, manic-depressive illness is the other important part of Kaufman's theory. Manic-depressive illness, also known as Bipolar disorder, is "a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks" (National Institute of Mental Health, 1). People with this illness experience intense emotional states that occur during the periods called "mood episodes", a person may experience either a manic episode or a depressive episode, and sometimes a mixed state including both the symptoms of mania and depression (1). An "overly joyful or overexcited state" occurs during the manic episode while an "extremely sad or hopeless state" occurs during the depressive episode (1). These mixed states in which both depressive and manic symptoms coexist are transitional phenomena that occur when a person is going into or out of a depressive or manic state. Such states always coexist with the damaging sides of manic-depressive illness as alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide.

Manic-depressive illness has powerful effects on relationships with its "extraordinary and confusing fluctuations" in mood, personality, thinking, and behavior (Jamison, 25). It is traced in the characters of many gifted writers. "The aftermath of mania is usually depression," asserted Jamison (32). People experience depressive symptoms as apathy, lethargy, hopelessness, sleep disturbance, slowed physical movements, slowed thinking, impaired memory and concentration, and a loss of pleasure in normally pleasurable events. Other diagnostic criteria include suicidal thinking, self-blame, inappropriate guilt, recurrent thoughts of death, a minimum duration of the depressive symptoms (two to four weeks). Some of these symptoms are utilized in the thematic analysis of Sexton's poetry.

In the context of the discussion of mental illness and artistic circle, many studies found that poets are more prone to have manic depression since it is believed that poetry may attract people with "a predisposition toward illness" as exemplified by Kaufman's " Sylvia Plath Effect" (Kaufman & Baer, 271). To answer the question why poets in particular are more prone to illness, it is important to explain several domain-specific aspects that have an effect as examined by Kaufman and Baer. First, the nature and style of poetry is more expressive than other forms of writings as poets use a more ruminative thinking style. The tendency toward being expressive would make an individual more prone to illness. This relation is further emphasized by the link between rumination and depression. Rumination is "engaging in behaviors and thoughts that passively focus attention on one's symptoms of distress and on all the possible causes and consequences of these symptoms" (Nolen-Hoeksema, "Mediators of the Gender" 37). People who engage in more ruminative responses when they are sad, blue, or depressed by thinking repetitively and passively about their negative emotions have higher levels of depressive symptoms. Depressed people tend to ruminate in an attempt to remedy the negative situation. However, this act results in prolonging and enhancing negative thinking associated with depressed mood, causing bad problem solving, clashes with family and friends.

Second, poetry does not alleviate mental illness. Studies showed that expressive writing about a traumatic experience "may be deleterious to one's health if adequate support and therapy are not in place" (Kaufman & Baer, 275). Thus, if the work is expressive of the negative experiences, the poet would have an increase in negative mood. So if writing poetry would worsen the mood, what is the role of writing therapy? The theory of self-efficacy would answer this complex notion. People with high self-efficacy will tend to focus more on possibilities than inadequacies. When people feel that they have internal locus of control, "they will tend to give themselves more credit for their successes. An internal locus of control is also associated with having an optimistic explanatory style, which is often associated with a variety of good outcomes, such as better health" (Kaufman & Baer, 275). Yet, because of the mystical nature of the creation of art, writers may credit "divine inspiration" for their productions. If poets credit a "muse" for their creative writing, this act produces what Kaufman and Baer refer to as "a perceived external locus of control" which will lessen their self-efficacy making them more prone to depression and emotional disturbances (275-276). This in turn explains why women may be affected more by this phenomenon as they are more likely to have an external locus of control.

Thirdly, the implicit expectation of a certain field may result in the illness of poets. If the “gatekeepers” of the domain of poetry have certain preconceptions, then these beliefs may influence other components such as poets’ productions. Many of the studies that revealed a connection between mental illness and poetry had examined eminent writers, and some had showed that the publishing field unconsciously rewards poetry produced by mental illness. One frequent stereotype is that male poets write less expressive poetry than female poets. This view, regardless of its validity, can be seen as the reason behind Kaufman’s dubbing his theory as “Sylvia Plath Effect”. Thus, female poets suffering from mental illness and writing expressive poetry would be more praised than other fiction female writers with such illness. Fourth, poets usually peak at a younger age when there is great possibility for mental illness to strike. This earlier productivity justifies their prolific work and their earlier death. Many forms of mental illnesses are common at younger ages especially bipolar depression. This fact strengthens the connection between mental illness and poetry.

Another significant point that is raised in the discussion of manic-depressive illness is the role of gender differences in depression. Nolen-Hoeksema conducted a study in 2001 with Benita Jackson entitled, “Mediators of the Gender Difference in rumination”. They found that women tend to engage in ruminative acts more than men when they are sad or depressed. Gender differences in rumination lead the observed gender differences in depression leading women to a greater tendency toward depression compared to men (38).

So why women are more likely to engage in ruminative coping when distressed? Nolen-Hoeksema's and Jackson's study found out that the gender differences are mediated by a group of three belief variables. First, they hypothesized that women more than men believe that negative emotions are difficult to control leading themselves to more ruminative acts. This difficulty in controlling negative emotions stems from their belief that they were not socialized to use active coping strategies during their childhood as much as men were. This first belief contributes to gender difference in rumination. Second, they hypothesized that women would feel more responsible than men for maintaining positive relationships and this responsibility leads women to greater rumination. Third, they hypothesized that women are less than men in controlling over important events in their lives. Their analysis showed that women scored lower than men on a measure of mastery leading to more ruminative acts and consequently this contributes to gender differences in rumination. The combination of all these characteristics leads to the gender differences in rumination and subsequently in depression

From all the studies presented, we can see a coherent support to "Sylvia Plath Effect" theory that emphasizes: first, the link between poetry to mental illness in relation to eminent writers; and second, the role of gender in accounting for the differences in depression. The study is going to introduce in the following part the confessional movement in poetry and to apply Kaufman's "Sylvia Plath effect" on Sexton's quest for identity after long struggle with mental illness.

Midcentury America was a country struggling towards readjustment during the time of Cold War that started in 1947, when the population was threatened by nuclear armaments and

the whole conflict affected both the individual and the society. Lucy Collins maintains that “a fractured society, then, was the result both of the traumas of war and of a culture unsure of its own extraordinary progress” (198). Midcentury America also witnessed a time of economic growth and technological advancement which at once, “benefited and victimized the individual,” (Collins, "Confessionalism"198). The sense of a victim is important in altering the status and the behavior of the literary protagonist. It resulted in a “fragmented individual” who sought wholeness through aesthetic expression, so in poetry, the poem provides “a means of validating feeling in a threatening world,” (Collins, "Confessionalism"199). Hence, it is clear to notice that the personality was under threat during the late 40s and 50s in American life, and the themes of fragmentation and loss became a predominant theme in the writers' works. Philips maintains that “yet it could be argued that we are living in a great Age of Autobiography. We no longer believe in the general truths about human nature, only the subjective ones” (xi).

Since 1959, there had been a number of American poets who intended to be always true to their own feelings. Poets started writing a new kind of poetry since the world had changed. At this time in American history, key literary figures, including W. D. Snodgrass, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsberg, Stanley Kunitz, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell, emerged for what has been known as a confessional poetic style. They were born between the turn of the century and the end of the First World War and were “varied in temperament” and “gifted in genius” as their previous generation (Davison, 11).

### **Anne Sexton: A Search for Authentic Identity**

I am torn in two

But I will conquer myself (lines 1-2).

Sexton, "The Civil War"

Anne Sexton is one of the confessional poets who had been subject to personal difficulties and mental struggles with which she was not able to cope except through writing. These struggles masked an identity that repressed its protest against societal and conservative norms. Her internal quest for authentic identity and rebirth started with her poetic writing that she undertook upon the advice of her psychiatrist Dr. Orne and which gave her balance to her life. Prior to this recognition, she had a profound lack of self-worth leading to her belief that she was only capable of prostitution. Writing poetry was part of her self-admiration and a way of helping other patients of similar experiences. This part starts with Sexton's brief biography, her poetic birth which is seen as a reaction to mental struggle and a quest for authenticity after her break.

In 1953 she gave birth to her daughter Linda. In 1954 she was diagnosed with postpartum depression, suffered from her first mental breakdown, and was admitted to Westwood Lodge, a neuropsychiatric hospital she would repeatedly return to for help. In 1954, her great-aunt Anna Dingley died which was a devastating loss that Sexton never resolved. Dingley's death became



a recurrent subject in her poetry. In 1955, following the birth of her second daughter Joyce, Sexton suffered another breakdown and was hospitalized again. That same year, on her birthday, she attempted suicide. During her time in hospitals, she wrote poems that deal with feelings of chaos, despair, and alienation as "Music Swims Back To Me" in which she describes her inability to find the direction of home "Wait Mister. Which way is home?/ They turned the light out/ and the dark is moving in the corner. There are no sign posts in this room" (lines 1-4).

She was encouraged by her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, to pursue an interest in writing poetry she had developed in high school which had been stopped by her mother's accusation of plagiarism, and in the fall of 1957 she enrolled in a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education taught by John Holmes. In the introduction to *Anne Sexton's Complete Poems*, the poet Maxine Kumin, who was enrolled with Sexton in the 1957 workshop and became her close friend, declares that it was the writing of poetry that gave Sexton something to work towards and develop and thus enabled her to endure life for as long as she did.

In 1974 at the age of 46, despite a successful writing career, she was not able to reconcile with her mental struggles and committed suicide. During her eighteen years as a writer, she published eight books of poetry and earned most of the important awards available to American poets. Her poetic career was "a successful response to a set of conditions that she could not change very much except by writing about them" (Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* xx). Like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, who exerted a great influence on her work, and other "confessional" poets, Sexton offers the reader an intimate view of the emotional anguish that characterized her life. She includes in her writing "the social confusions of growing up in a female body and of living as a woman in postwar American society" that thousands of women have shared (Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* xx).

In addition to the personal anguish of her poetry, she made the experience of being a woman a central issue in her poetry and was concerned with the pressure of social expectation that faces "a suburban housewife" who is also a poet (McCabe, 218). All of Sexton's major themes and subjects are represented through these discussions: religious quest in her *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), transformation and dismantling of myth in *Transformation* (1971), the meanings of gender in *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), inheritance and legacy, the search for fathers, mother-daughter relationships in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), sexual anxiety and love in *Love Poems* (1969), madness and suicide in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and in *Live or Die* (1966), and issues of female identity as in her first collection. Middlebrook acknowledges madness, fear, and anguish as "authentic responses to the dynamics of family life, and by extension, to life in postwar American life" ("Anne Sexton" 6). Through writing about these issues and the feeling of loss, Sexton "enlarged and enhanced the possibilities of endurance in that air of lost connections which so many of us inhibits" whether in a family life or society that oppresses women (Boyers, 205).

Joyce Carol Oates believes that "Sexton has been criticized for the intensity of her preoccupations: always the self, the victimized, bullying, narcissistic self" (144). The term "narcissistic" describes a type of writing that represents its creative processes and which is

textually, "self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential" (Hutcheon, 1-2). The language of the confessional text is transitive and referential, and is considered to be a truthful representation of the author's experience, "something worth learning/ in the narrow diary of my mind," (Sexton, "For John, who Begs" lines 4-5). Narcissism is viewed by Jo Gill to be a retreat from the feeling of loss in contemporary society. However, Sexton's self-disclosure includes the external reader or audience "At first it was private./ Then it was more than myself;" ("For John" lines 21-22), which implies that "the self can only be perceived as part of a larger social context, as one among many" (Gill, 39). The following part is going to present the process of Sexton's transformation into the poetic world after the emergence of her buried self which culminated with the death of her parents and the publication of her first book of poetry in 1960.

On her twenty-eighth birthday in 1956, Anne Sexton attempted suicide. A month later, she began writing poetry; two and a half years later, her first book was published with the title, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). "It was," she said, "a kind of rebirth at twenty-nine" ("With Patricia Marx" 70). She conveys this transformation in the metaphor of breakage from her identity into a poetic world. In an interview with Barbara Kevles in 1968, Sexton related,

Until I was twenty-eight I had a 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 a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down. I was trying to lead a conventional life for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself (84).

Sexton started writing poetry as a form of therapy and "a way of formalizing past traumas, and of coping with an increasing sense of disorientation in her conventional role of suburban wife and mother" (Johnson, 171). She saw an educational program by I. A. Richard explaining the sonnet form. She told herself, "I could do that, maybe; I could try" ("With Barbara Kevles" 84).

In dealing with her depression, Sexton undertook psychotherapy or the "talking cure" which is "the process of verbalizing or free association in which the psyche is coaxed to disclose its private symbolisms" ("Becoming Anne"11). In "Said the Poet to the Analyst," the speaker explains that her "business is words" (line 1). What is revealed under the "buried self" is a "linguistic self whose associations and metaphors are, in theory, keys to the origins of the illness" ("Becoming Anne"11). She thought that psychotherapy wasn't helping her. Instead, for her "the life of poetry is saving me. . . "(qtd. Middlebrook, Anne sexton 122). The new role Sexton took as a poet was beneath the surface which is a mirror reflecting "the American Dream." Her "break" was a break into language and poetry. The surface is a psychic safety



device. Breaking and unmasking one's illusions is painful, "for beneath that guarded network is the vulnerable identity who has erected a symbol system to serve as a self-defense" (Capo, "Redeeming" 88).

Sexton wrote poetry which includes a discourse that "bypasses rational thought to express repressed truths that are frequently socially unacceptable" (Juhasz, 309). She broke new ground and shattered taboos that twenty years later seem less daring. In the *New York Times*, she spoke about her self-exposure:

It's very embarrassing for someone to expose their body to you. You don't learn anything from it. But if they expose their soul, you learn something. That's true of great writers: They expose their souls and then suddenly I am moved and I understand my life better. ("Oh, I was" D1, D7).

The personal difficulties she experienced in her life as a woman become the universal issues of identity and social role that concern the culture that stands for diminishing stereotypes of women and gender barriers. Sexton's confessional writing was a reaction against such stereotypes to find and affirm the lost and socially repressed identity. In such a discourse, she discusses her quest for finding her identity after the presentation of her two versions of female self that are incarnated in one woman. The first version represents the woman as culture creates her who finds identity through the reflected power of males and who is described in "Her Kind" as "a woman like that is misunderstood" (line 13). The other woman finds her identity in the assertion of her female self and in her literary female quest for declaration who "is not ashamed to die" (line 20). After her psychotic break, she started to confront the exposure of her reality by discarding the conservative female version and asserting her literary female version through launching her identity quest that moves from her present struggle, toward confronting her past memories with guilt, and toward her death and suicide impulses which are features of the courage she took in asserting herself. These stages of her quest constitute the symptoms of her mental illness and the themes that are recurrently discussed in confessional poetry.

It is crucial to dig for the sources of the break of Sexton's "buried self". Her creative impulse grew from the need to make meaning from the "chaos" of her biographical and psychological realities (Sexton, *Anne Sexton*, 39). Studies of her life and work are related, since for her, "biography and textual analysis are often mutually illuminating" (Hall, 1). It is difficult to discuss thematic analysis of the symptoms of her illness without referring to the biographical data of her life. Sexton's madness was a sort of psychological safety device to hide her breaking identity which is the result of the loss of identification. It has its roots in her earlier childhood familial experiences, as "family relationships are the foundation of all tragedy, all joy" (George, *Oedipus Anne* 31). George maintains that her "preoccupation with childhood was part of her illness, and she knew it" (*Oedipus Anne* 113). In "Those Times. . .", Sexton describes the humiliations she lived through in her childhood manifested by her sense that she was "the unwanted, the mistake," used by her mother "to keep Father/ from his divorce" (lines 16-18). Her feeling of being rejected by the most important environment for the child had affected her identity

causing subsequent fragmented identity and mental illness. This experience of the loss of familial connections can be explained in terms of John Bowlby's "Attachment and loss" theory. Bowlby explains: "Once the child has formed a tie to a mother-figure, which has ordinarily occurred by the middle of the first year, its rupture leads to separation anxiety and grief and sets in train processes of mourning" (317). Such processes will "take a course unfavorable to future personality development and thereby predispose to psychiatric illness" (317). Her reaction to this experience was not to fight but to withdraw instead and the emotional deprivation has lasting effect on her life. This withdrawal created a life of privacy that resulted in an altered poetry which is biographical and personal.

*Life Studies* by Robert Lowell, the leading father of this movement, exemplifies the cultural breakdown of postwar American life and its subsequent effects. The cultural fragmentation in part one led to the fragmentation of familial ties in part two, to the fragmentation in the lives of people in artistic circle in part three, and finally to the mental breakdowns of Lowell. His poetry presents a journey from a cultural to a personal level and an attempt to compensate for his losses and fragmentation through writing. Similarly, Sexton's "break" into poetic world was a culmination of her mental breakdowns that were signs of her frustration to identify with someone. Writing personal poetry was a therapeutic method taken by the encouragement of her therapist, and a way to document her female quest to stand as a female identity and as an artist.

As Sexton's break into poetry was the reaction to her mental breakdowns and internal fragmentation, the topic of mental struggle and its symptoms has preoccupied her early confessional poetry. Sexton declares, "In the first book, I was giving the experience of madness; in the second book, the causes of madness; and in the third book, finally, I find what I was deciding whether to live or to die" ("With Kevles" 94). Her confessional writing is a quest for self-exploration and identification after she lost her connections. Sexton's "break" into poetic world was a culmination of her mental breakdowns that were signs of her frustration to identify with someone. Writing personal poetry was a way to document her female quest which starts from present struggle, to exploration of past causes of madness, to finally rebirth and authenticity through suicide

As writing is the way towards creating one's self, the muse in "Flee on Your Donkey," "Everyone has left me / except my muse," is a good nurse as it helps in the therapy of one's madness (lines 20-21). The unification of herself with its parts, and with its past and present is only possible through writing about present, past, and her decision to live or to die.

Sexton attempted a successful suicide after her choice to live. Her suicide justifies her personal struggle; she could not tolerate "the brutal reality of her world or an idealism which could not be fully justified by faith" (Barry, 47). Faith here refers to her art which includes questions of art and madness, themes of the roles of woman, victim, and poet, and the search for truth. Her victimization is a metaphor of the destructive madness of the age's science and politics, an age that is incapable of compassion. Parallel to Christ's role, Sexton adopts a role of a twentieth-century female poet who finds salvation only in art. Being a female victimizes her

and gives her a special sensitivity that enables her to perceive truth. Though she committed suicide, her courage lies in the "break" and the expression of this truth through her art.

Sexton's conflict is between the emotional sensitivity of the poet and the sterility of modern science. Her struggle with mental illness cannot be cured with the scientific technology of psychotherapy as in electric shock therapy. Such methods destroy the patient more than cure her. Only the power of faith (art) is capable of curing the patient and leads to her resurrection through death. The resurrection she seeks in her art implies death.

Sexton has undertaken a radical journey against conservative roles in an attempt to assert herself. Her quest is "to descend into herself and backward in time in an attempt to heal her despair, to unite her split self" (Scarborough, 184). Her quest is that of an artist who has left the role of a housewife in an attempt to reunite with her lost part that results from the rejection experienced by women. However, Sexton's awareness of the patriarchal norms, that find their source in "the myth of feminine evil, expressed in the Fall" and "reinforced by the myth of salvation/redemption by a single human being of the male sex," extends her despair and disrupts her quest (Daly, 198). Through death, Sexton attempts to win over madness as "an inner psychical fragmentation caused by outer forces, is the inevitable result of domination of women by men, of countries by other countries, of art by business, of creativity by sterility" (Barry, 64). Her death will create life in the reader.

As Sexton admits that her "break" is a break against the conservative norms, she describes her creative self as a witch. This description describes the woman artist as an evil in contrast to the good housewife. Margaret Scarborough explains this notion stating that "a woman cannot be both an artist and a mother, and to choose the life of the artist is to abandon good and to take up with evil, to aspire beyond proper limits" (191). However, she recognizes that writing is an expression of a need for the reunion of her separated parts. This act momentarily fulfills her need of reunion. But the uncertainty toward the aspects of herself leads to the failure of her quest. She attempts to find salvation and reunion of her parts only through death.

This article presents an analysis of Sexton's break into poetry and the apparent symptoms of her illness including mental struggle, guilt which is tied with memory and loss, thinking of death and attempts to reconcile with life during mood swings, and suicidal impulses. The choice of the symptoms is intended as they are found to be stages of a female journey from the depth of the fragmentation of female identity to the rebirth of a new identity. As the struggle with mental illness constitutes the female dilemma, and her break into poetry and language over the past experiences is a search for reunion with the lost self, her suicide and death is the way to her rebirth and reunion of her parts. Her quest is a quest for self-exploration and identification after she lost her connections with people from whom she had found her self-esteem. This journey moves from Sexton's present experience with struggle and pain, to her past memories as sources for the present struggle, and finally to suicide as the only route to her salvation and the unification of her split parts.

Sexton's suicide presents her failure to achieve a unification of identity in postwar American society where women feel denied. Furthermore, her suicide presents an example of

the vulnerability of females to suicide more than men as illustrated in the studies of manic-depressive illness. Though her poetry started as a form of therapy, the choice of personal discourse and her rumination over her personal experiences made it difficult for her to find meaning in life. However, suicide opens a new life for her as she took the Oedipus courage for enlightenment and sacrificed her life for such quest.

As Lowell's attempt to redeem his loss was through art, Sexton's quest for the reunion of her divided parts started through art and transcended to death (rebirth) after her failure to be in terms with her present. Lowell's apparent success to control the cultural fragmentation manifested in his mental breakdowns is contrasted to Sexton's failure to control her loss. As emphasized earlier in the studies of chapter one, the female sensitivity to personal experiences and her inability to overcome her problems led to Sexton's ruminative acts and consequently worsened her situation leading to suicide. Yet, she did not submit to her failure, but took the courage to die for the sake of reunion and identification.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

Sexton, Anne. *All My Pretty Ones*. Sexton 47-92.

---. *Anne Sexton: A self Portrait in Letters*. Ed. Linda Gray Sexton

& Lois Ames. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977. Print.

---. "Author's Note." Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 94.

---. *Live Or Die*. Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 93-170.

---. "Oh, I Was Very Sick." *New York Times* 9 Nov. 1969: D1, D7. Print.

---. *The Complete Poems: Anne Sexton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999. Print.

---. *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Sexton, *The Complete Poems* 1-46.

---. "With Barbara Kevles." Colburn 83-111.

---. "With Patricia Marx." Colburn 70-82.

## Secondary Sources

- Barry, Ann Marie Seward. "In Praise of Anne Sexton's *The Book of Folly*: A Study of the Woman/Victim/Poet." Bixler, 46-65.
- Booker, M. Keith. *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism*. London: Pearson Education, 1996. Print.
- Bowlby, John. "Processes of Mourning." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 42 (1961): 316- 40. Print.
- Capo, Kay Ellen. "' I have Been Her Kind': Anne Sexton's Communal Voice." Bixler 22-45.
- Collins, Lucy. "Confessionalism." Roberts 197-208.
- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon, 1973. Print.
- Davison, Peter. *The Fading Smile: Poets from Robert Lowell to Sylvia Plath*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. *Notes Towards the Definition of culture*. London: Faber &faber, 1948. Print.
- Felman, Shoshana. *Writing and Madness (Literature/Philosophy/ Psychoanalysis)*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming." *On Freud's "Creative Writers and Daydreaming"*. Ed. Ethel Spector Person, Peter Fonagy and Servulo Figueira. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. 3- 13 Print. Contemporary Freud: Turning Points & Critical Issues.
- George, Diana Hume. *OEDIPUS ANNE: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*. City: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Print.
- Gill, Jo. *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics*. Gainesville: University Of Florida. 2007. Print.

- Hall, Caroline King Barnard. *Anne Sexton*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.  
Print. Twayne's United States Authors Series.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo:  
Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980. Print.
- Jamison, Kay Redfield. *Touched with Fire: Manic-depressive Illness and the  
Artistic Temperament*. New York: Free Press, 1996. Print.
- Johnson, Greg. "The Achievement of Anne Sexton." Colburn 170-187.
- Juhasz, Suzanne. "Anne Sexton." *Modern American Women Writers*. Ed. Eliane  
Showalter. N.c: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993. 309-320. Print.
- Kaufman, James C., ed. *Creativity 101*. New York: Springer Publishing  
Company, LLC, 2009. Print. The Psych 101 Series.
- Kaufman, James C. "The Door that leads into Madness: Eastern European Poets  
and Mental Illness". *Creativity Research Journal*, 17.1 (2005): 99-103. Print.
- . "The Sylvia Plath Effect: Mental Illness in Eminent Creative  
Writers." *Journal of Creative Behavior* 35.1 (2001): 37- 50. Print.
- Kaufman, James C., and John Baer. "I Bask in Dreams of Suicide: Mental Illness,  
Poetry, and Women." *Review of General Psychology* 6.3 (2002): 271- 286. Print.
- Mccabe, Jane. "'A Woman Who Writes': A Feminist Approach to the Early  
Poetry f Anne Sexton." McClatchy 216-243.
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. New York: Vintage  
Books. 1991. Print.
- . "Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell." Bixler 5-21.
- National Institute of Mental Health. "Bipolar Disorder." *NIMH*. N.d. Web. 25  
April 2013.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, Susan, and Benita Jackson. "Mediators of the Gender  
Difference in Rumination." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25 (2001):37-47. Print.



Oates, Joyce Carol. Rev. of *Love Poems*, by Anne Sexton. McClatchy, ed., 143- 145. Print.

Phillips, Robert. *The Confessional Poets*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois

University Press, 1973. Print. Crosscurrent/modern critiques.

Scarborough, Margaret. "Anne Sexton's 'Otherworld Journey'." Bixler 184-202.

Snow, C. P. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. Print.