



I MADE YOU TO FIND ME

Anne Sexton's depiction of guilt and loss in the poem "The Double Image," through the portrayal of complex mother and daughter relationships.

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Foreword

I began reading Anne Sexton (1928-1974) when my mother, for my seventeenth birthday, gifted me a collection of Sexton's poetry. I have rarely stumbled over such genuine, compelling descriptions of the female bodily experience, what it means to be a woman, a daughter, a mother, what it means to desire -- to long for something. To me, it felt essential to choose a female author or poet for this essay and to write about themes connected to gender and sexuality. I ultimately landed on Anne Sexton, a poet who both celebrates and mourns womanhood. In many ways, she writes about things that are difficult to find the right words for, yet in her poems she discovers a way to depict common lived experiences down to the tiniest little detail - as something big, something small, something empty, something wonderful, something lost.

Thank you to my supervisor Elin for guiding me through the process of working on this project. And thank you to my teacher in literature, Jon Henrik.

This essay is dedicated to my mother. I am infinitely grateful for you.

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Do you know 60s poet Anne Sexton? I worship her.

- *Madonna*

1.0 Introduction

“The Double Image”¹ is a complex and intricate meditation on motherhood and daughterhood, confronting themes such as guilt and loss. The poem was published as part of her debut *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). Together with famous writers such as Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton is considered a central poet within the confessional movement.

At the end of “The Double Image,” Sexton writes: “I needed you. I didn't want a boy, / only a girl, a small milky mouse / of a girl.” The relationship between mothers and daughters is a central theme in Anne Sexton’s work, as well as in the works of many of her contemporaries and modern-day poets.

Poet Maya Angelou, born in 1928, the same year as Sexton, writes about her mother in “Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me”: “Mother / During those early, dearest days / I did not dream that you had / A large life which included me, / For I had a life / Which was only you,” (Angelou, 2006)

Poet Sharon Olds, born in 1942, writes about her daughter in “First Thanksgiving”: “She came into my life the/second great arrival, after him, fresh/from the other world—which lay, from within him, /within me. (1980-2002)²

And in her long, thirty-six-page poem, “The Glass Essay”, poet and essayist Anne Carson, born in 1950, writes about visiting her mother: “You remember too much, /my mother said to me recently. / Why hold onto all that? And I said, / Where can I put it down?” (Carson, 1994)

All these quotes ponder the overwhelming love, happiness, and vulnerability, as well as conflicting emotions, that come with being a daughter or a mother. Anne Sexton writes in “The Double Image”: “You scrape your knee. You learn my name, / wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying. / You call me mother and I remember my mother again, [...]” (Sexton, p.41)

These are a few examples of how mid-century and modern poets have brought the intense bond between mothers and daughters to life in their writing. However, in her classic book *Of*

¹ Please see page thirty to read the full poem.

² From *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems* by Sharon Olds (1980-2002.) Borrowed from Poetry Foundation

Woman Born, Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), the poet and essayist Adrienne Rich argued that the mother-daughter relationship is “the great unwritten story” and explains how patriarchy has minimalized the daughter's role in the literary canon, as well as the relationship between mother and daughter: “Yet this relationship has been minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchal structures. Whether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad.” (Rich, p.226)

In any case, the bond between mother and daughter is a recurring theme in several of Anne Sexton’s poems. In “The Double Image” Sexton contemplates feelings of loss, particularly as it manifests itself in the voices of mothers and daughters. Adrienne Rich also considered loss as a central mother-daughter experience - not only through death, but also through division, anger, conflict and jealousy. Loss is many things. Rich coins it as “the essential female tragedy”, and in her book, compares it to well-known literary works that we consider great human tragedies. The tragedies she exemplifies are written by playwrights Shakespeare (King Lear and Hamlet) and Sophocles (Oedipus Rex.)

The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture. (Rich, p.237)

Guilt is also a major theme in “The Double Image.” The poem’s speaker deals with it as the mother of her young child, but also as the daughter of her elderly, sick mother.

By closely reading Anne Sexton’s poem “The Double Image”, alongside Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born*, this essay aims to explore guilt and loss in Sexton’s “The Double Image”. Anne Sexton’s poetry is heartbreaking and raw, “The Double Image” is no exception. The poem both conforms to, and transcends, the confessional label. This essay specifically intends to analyze Sexton’s poem through the lens of Adrienne Rich’s reflections on mothers and daughters in *Of Woman Born*. Rich’s chapter on mothers and daughters will function as a primary theoretical text.

2.0 Anne Sexton (1928-1974)

How did a mad housewife become a star?

-Diane Wood Middlebrook

Anne Sexton, or Anne Gray Harvey, was born in Massachusetts on November 9th, 1928. Sexton attended Garland Junior College, which used to be a liberal arts women's college in Boston. Her education here lasted a year before she married Alfred, or “Kayo” Sexton, when she was nineteen. She had her first daughter at age twenty-five and her second daughter at twenty-seven. Diane Middlebrook, the author of *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (published in 1991), writes about Sexton's mental breakdowns and how Sexton began experiencing “terrible spells of depression” shortly after the birth of her second daughter, Joyce.

Sexton was diagnosed with postpartum depression, and her psychological state gravely worsened over time. Her children, Linda, and Joyce were taken care of by their paternal grandparents (Middlebrook, p.31-35). Sexton’s psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne (1927-2000), wrote the foreword to Middlebrook’s Anne Sexton biography. Here he reflects upon her feelings towards being a mother:

She felt helpless, unable to function as a wife and mother, and expressed resentment at having her children taken away from her. Yet at the same time she recognized that she was truly unable to care for them. (...) Although she was trying her best to live up to the 1950s image of the good wife and mother, she found the task completely beyond her. (Middlebrook, p.13)

In his foreword, Dr. Orne reveals intimate information about Sexton, as does Middlebrook herself, revealing details about Sexton’s incestuous, abusive behavior towards her daughter Linda. On the one hand, these revelations provide Sexton’s readers with a deep understanding of the themes explored in her poetry, on the other hand, the publication of her therapy tapes raises important ethical questions. Dr. Orne was heavily criticized for giving Middlebrook access to the recordings of his therapy sessions with Sexton, by many considered a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality. In a 1991 opinion piece for *The New York Times*, Orne defended himself: “In 1964, when I left Massachusetts, I offered to return all of the therapy tapes to Anne. She asked that I keep them to use as I saw fit to help others, though she retained a few for herself.” He continues: “Anne Sexton chose disclosure of her therapy in keeping with what she stood for as a confessional poet. Indeed, she alluded to my identity as her therapist in her 1960 book.” (Orne, 1991.)

Here he is referring to the very first poem in her 1960 debut, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. “The Double Image”, of course, also appears in this collection. The poem Dr. Orne refers to is titled “You, Doctor Martin”: “You, Doctor Martin, walk / from breakfast to madness.” (Sexton, *You, Doctor Martin*, p.3/4) According to an article in The Los Angeles Times, the release of Sexton’s therapy tapes was approved by Sexton’s daughter and literary executor, Linda Gray Sexton, who read Middlebrook’s manuscript before it was published. (Berry, 1991)

Anne Sexton’s mental illness would carry on throughout her life and show itself in her writing. In 1974 she committed suicide.

Sexton attended several poetry writing classes during her lifetime and got to know other poets, including Sylvia Plath and Maxine Kumin. (Poetry Foundation). She did not begin writing seriously before her earlier mentioned psychiatrist Dr. Orne encouraged her to do so. Unlike Sylvia Plath whose work is often compared to Sexton’s, Anne Sexton never aimed to be a famous writer. Professor in English Literature at Mesa College Peter R. Jacoby writes about the two poets in his research paper on postmodern poetry:

The difference between Plath and Sexton was that Plath always wanted to become a famous writer [...] Sexton on the other hand, never thought she was special at all. She learned poetry only when she needed it to survive; it gave her something to do and (supposedly) kept her from killing herself (Jacoby, 2000, p.8)

In her 1991 New York Times review of Diane Middlebrook’s Anne Sexton biography; poet and critic Katha Pollitt notes that “within 10 years she [Sexton] was one of the most honored poets in America.” (Pollitt, 1991). Although this may not have been her outspoken goal, Sexton became a significantly influential poet in the American literary universe. She published nine poetry collections and in 1967 she received a Pulitzer Prize for her third book *Live or Die* (1966). Today, almost fifty years after her suicide, she is still widely read and discussed.

3.0 Confessional poetry

3.1 The confessional movement and Anne Sexton as a confessional poet

How did I come to writing about myself? How did I come to be a confessional poet who vomits up her past every ugly detail onto the page?

- Anne Sexton, from a lecture held at Colgate University

It is almost impossible to discuss Anne Sexton's work without considering the confessional movement. According to Poetry Foundation, the confessional movement is a mode of exploring the self and the private. Anne Sexton and other well-known poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and W.D. Snodgrass are all often labeled as confessional poets, because they all wrote personal and intimate poetry. “Confessional poets wrote in direct, colloquial speech rhythms and used images that reflected intense psychological experiences, often culled from childhood or battles with mental illness or breakdown.” (Poetry Foundation)

Postdoctoral researcher Carmen Bonasera has written a study on bodies and self-disclosure in American female confessional poetry. Here she views the growing interest for intimate psychological matters and details in the 1950s/60s in light of the confessional movement:

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the considerable interest in troubling private psychological matters—and, more importantly, the impulse to expose them in the arts—began to cast its shadow over several American writers, who were labelled “confessional. (Bonasera, p.38)

The phrase was first used in 1959 when poet and critic Macha Rosenthal reviewed Robert Lowell's poetry collection *Life Studies* (1959). Rosenthal wrote that although being personal is closely associated with writing poetry, Lowell had removed a “mask” which earlier poets had worn before. (Poetry Foundation). Significant parallels can be drawn between Sexton's life and her poetry. She was a glamorous but mentally ill 1960s- housewife, writing groundbreaking and highly personal poetry about subjects such as the female body, depression, rage, desire – and motherhood. “The Double Image,” the selected poem for this analysis, can be seen as one of Sexton's most self-revelatory and confessional poems. Indeed, the poem refers to many facts we know about Sexton's own life. Sexton's children being sent away due to her suicide attempts and struggles with getting well resemble the speaker's journey in the poem. It is certainly no coincidence that the name of the young daughter in the poem is Joyce, or “Joy”, which is also the name of Sexton's second daughter.

3.2 Critique of the confessional movement

“Many of [the poems] are true. Others are about lives I haven’t led”

- Anne Sexton

Although it may be necessary to read Sexton through the lens of the confessional movement, maintaining a critical eye on such labeling is also vital.

Sexton's work is recognizable by its raw and honest exploration of themes such as female sexuality, mental illness, and suicide - these subjects were by many seen as taboo during Sexton's lifetime, especially coming from a woman. The poet James Dickey, for instance, took issue with Sexton’s poetry collection *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) in a 1963 New York Times book review. He wrote that “it would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of the bodily experience.” (Dickey, 1963). According to *Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters* (1977), Sexton responded to Dickey’s review by cutting it out of the paper and keeping it in her wallet.

In a letter to her friend³, poet Gene Baro, she expresses her frustration with Dickey’s review and writes: “I must say I am tired of being grouped with Robert Lowell and Snodgrass . . . I admire them separately, but I really feel we’re all quite different. There are lots of other poets you could lump together with us.” (Sexton, 1963, p.167)

Robert Lowell and W.D Snodgrass are both, as already mentioned, defined as confessional poets. They were also friends of Sexton. Plath, Lowell, Snodgrass, and Sexton are often “lumped together” when discussing confessional writing. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*, Journalist Deborah Nelson states that the roots of the confessional movement can be found in Robert Lowell’s poetry classes. These classes were all attended by Sexton, Plath, and Snodgrass. (Nelson, 2013). With this in mind, comparing and pinning the poets together makes sense. However, as Sexton expresses in her letter, she was tired of being categorized together with Lowell and Snodgrass. Sexton wrote graphically, intimately, and closely about the female body, desire, menstruation, madness, and depression. Her work and creativity reached beyond the mere confessional. Her poems are not simply personal revelations, not acts of whining, not confessions one would share with a friend,

All quotes from letters used in this essay are from *Anne Sexton – A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977), edited by Sexton’s daughter Linda Sexton and Sexton’s friend Lois Ames. The book includes letters Sexton wrote from year 1928 to her death in 1974.

therapist, or priest. They are more than that. They tackle universal human experiences and can be read and understood regardless of the biography of the poet. Sexton also always wrote many drafts, she cared deeply about language, form, and voice – what a poem could do, how it might touch the reader. According to her letters, she was a big reviser – this includes “The Double Image.” She sent a letter with drafts of this piece to fellow poet and friend W.D Snodgrass, requesting feedback.

Dear De, here is the poem, done for the moment (“The Double Image”). I only want to know if you think this works, if it has a reason for its violence, a reason for being written (or rather read) aside from my own need to make form from chaos. [...] You told me I hadn’t found my voice. But this poem has a voice. A changing, lame, but real voice, I think ... (Sexton, 1959, p.43)

To reduce the art of writing down to just “confessional”, risks losing sight of the lonely, vulnerable, and difficult thing that the writing process actually is. In her letter to Gene Baro, Sexton continues: “[...] All this is wrong; writing a poem is a lonely thing, each word ripped out of us.” Sexton’s writing is direct but also symbolic. Her voice is controlled, vulnerable, appalling, and intimate. In the previously mentioned New York Times 1991 review of Middlebrooks biography, Katha Pollitt writes about the representation of female sexuality in literature: “Male sexuality might have been a shocking subject for serious literature at the time, but at least it was acknowledged as a subject. Female sexuality -- Sexton's other major theme -- was just trivial and embarrassing.” (Pollitt, 1999)

In a 1967 review of Sexton's third book, *Live or Die* (1966), the Pulitzer Prize winning poet and critic Louis Simpson asserted that Sexton's poem *Menstruation at Forty* was “the straw that broke the camel's back.” (Pollitt, 1999). As previously noted, Macha Rosenthal, in his review of Robert Lowell, described confessional poetry as a writer removing a mask. When the poet is a woman, however, and concerns a woman’s sexuality, critics (mostly male) would find the whole thing embarrassing. It is as if the reviewers begged: *Woman, please keep your mask on!*

But is it possible for writers – regardless of gender, regardless of labels like *confessional* – not to use themselves and their experience in their writing? In a book titled *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance* (2007), author Paula M. Salvio quotes one of Sexton’s lectures at Colgate University: “I like to lie, I like to confess, I like to hide” (Salvio, p.63)

This quote is paradoxical. Is it possible to lie, confess and hide at the same time? Sexton’s predecessor, poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), once wrote in a letter to her pen-pal Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not

mean me, but a supposed person.” (Higginson, 1891.) When confessing to a priest, it usually means telling one’s innermost truth – *the facts* – but poets like Sexton, and Dickinson, and numerous other poets and writers, don’t reach the truth through a precise summary of the facts, but through a precise relationship with language and form. They imagine many lives. Recall the epigraph for this chapter: “Many of [the poems] are true,” Sexton wrote in a draft introduction, “Others are about lives I haven’t led.” A poet works within paradoxes, so yes, she will hide and reveal herself at the same time.

The label “confessional writing” is not as frequently in use in our time as it was in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. “Autobiographical fiction”, often called autofiction, and “autobiographical poetry” are terms we are more familiar with today. The Norwegian novelists Vigdis Hjorth (1959-), whose novel “Er mor død”⁴ (2020), explores the relationship between a grown-up daughter longing for her mother, and Karl Ove Knausgård (1968-) concentrating more on the father-son experience, are two authors who are often associated with autobiographical fiction. Their revelatory writing has been widely discussed and debated. French author Edouard Louis writes personally and intimately about his upbringing in France's lower class in his novel *The End of Eddy* (2014) and the Vietnamese American poet Ocean Vuong draws heavily upon his own experiences in his poetry. The French winner of the 2022 Nobel prize in literature, Annie Ernaux, who has also explored mother-daughter relationships, writes in her novel *Happening* (2001):

These things happened to me so that I might recount them. Maybe the true purpose of my life is for my body, my sensations and my thoughts to become writing. In other words, something intelligible and universal, causing my existence to merge into the lives and heads of other people. (Ernaux, p.91)

The art of writing is so much more than simply trying to understand yourself, it is trying to understand the world through your own experience, to give experience form.

Anne Sexton’s intertextual way of working is yet another argument against the reductive confessional label: Sexton was very well-read, and often referenced other literary works in her poetry. Painted portraits are mentioned throughout “The Double Image.” For instance, in the poem’s 20th stanza, Sexton makes use of an intertextual reference. “I rot on the wall, my own / Dorian Gray.” (Sexton, p.41) This is a nod to Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which will be examined more closely later. In William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

⁴ English translation: *Is mother dead*

(1606), the three witches represent darkness, conflict, vulnerability. They symbolize Macbeth's inner thoughts and temptations. So do the witches that appear in "The Double Image." "I let the witches take away my guilty soul." (Sexton, p.36)

Later in life, Sexton wrote poems heavily inspired by the tales told by the Brothers Grimm. These fairy tale-poems were published in 1971, in her book *Transformations*. The poems were inspired by fairytales, but still embodied the themes Sexton is known for exploring: depression, female sexuality, desire, and rage. And of course, the mother-daughter experience. For example, in her poem "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," Sexton depicts the "beautiful objectification" of women through an exploration of Snow White – one of the most famous daughters (or stepdaughters) in the realm of fairy tales: "The virgin is a lovely number: / cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper, / arms and legs made of Limoges [...]" (Sexton, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, p.224)

4.0 Theory - Adrienne Rich on mothers and daughters

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies.

- Adrienne Rich

She was not in any conscious or self-defined sense a feminist, but she did some things ahead of the rebirth of the feminist movement. She wrote poems alluding to abortion, menstruation, menopause, and the painful love of a powerless mother for her daughters, long before such themes became validated by a collective consciousness of women [...]. (Rich, 1974)

The quote above is from the eulogy delivered by poet and essayist Adrienne Rich at Anne Sexton's funeral in 1974.

Like Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) wrote about sexuality, identity, and the female experience. Motherhood and daughterhood were themes that occupied them both. In her book *Of Woman Born*⁵, *Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, first published in 1976, Adrienne Rich attempts to define motherhood and to view it from a feminist perspective.

[...] the mothers, if we could look into their fantasies—their daydreams and imaginary experiences—we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation, we would see the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood. (Rich, p.279)

The book is an urgent expression of the frustration, the vulnerability, the rage, and the happiness related to being a mother. In chapter two, titled "The Sacred Calling," Rich also

⁵ Adrienne Rich's title is also a reference to Macbeth.

reflects upon patriarchy and the hold it has on childbirth and motherhood. She sees motherhood as something institutionalized. Women are expected to have a maternal instinct rather than intelligence, self-identity, and awareness of their own bodies. “Motherhood is “sacred” as long as its offspring are “legitimate” – [...] It is woman’s “highest and holiest mission.” (Rich, p.42)

Adrienne Rich specifically writes about mothers and daughters in chapter nine, titled “Motherhood and Daughterhood”, in *Of Woman Born*. She calls this chapter “the core of her book” (Rich, p.218). Here, Rich writes about the female body, the profound bond between mother and daughter, and the “unwritten story” of mothers and daughters. She writes that the cathexis between mother and daughter, is essential, distorted, and misused. (Rich, p.225). The word “cathexis” is defined by Cambridge English Dictionary as: “The act of directing your mental energy towards a particular person, object, or aim.” By “cathexis” Rich most likely refers to an emotional bond, or something one must try to hold on to. The mother must try her hardest to hold on to her daughter, and the daughter must try her hardest to hold on to her mother. By “essential,” she perhaps means that the love between daughter and mother, two alike bodies, is essential for psychological well-being. One simply has trouble functioning without a mother’s love. However, this emotional bond can be so intense that it becomes twisted out of shape, false and misused.

5.0 “The Double Image” (1960) by Anne Sexton

5.1 “The Double Image” – style and form

“The Double Image” is one of Sexton's most famous poems and was first published in 1960 as part of her debut *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. The poems of her debut *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* consider many different subjects and depict experiences in Sexton's life, such as depression, time spent in mental institutions, life as a housewife and, of course, the intense, complicated bond between mother and daughter. These are all themes that “The Double Image” dwell on. This essay refers to the poem as it appears in *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton* from 1981.

“The Double Image” portrays the tangled, tricky, and deep relationship between three generations of women: the speaker, her young daughter, and her elderly mother. The poem is

seven pages in *The Complete Poems*. It is numbered into seven parts/chapters. The parts have different amounts of stanzas and lines (110 lines altogether). Part one, two and six have four stanzas each, part three and seven have two stanzas each, part four has three stanzas, and part five has six stanzas, (twenty-five stanzas altogether.) Sexton is particular about form and style but is also free in her approach to traditional rhyming schemes. She makes use of irregular rhymes, actual rhymes, imperfect rhymes, and alliterations. The poem's voice is insistent, precise, direct, and sometimes even playful. In the entire second part of the poem, which consists of four stanzas, the experience of having a portrait done is repeated at the end of each stanza with a different pronoun in the last line: First "I", then "she", then "I" again, and finally "they". For instance: "Your smile is like your mother's the artist **said** / I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait / done **instead**," and "I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother **said**. / And she never could. She had my portrait / done **instead**," and "Too late to be forgiven now, the witches **said**. / I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait / done **instead**." (Sexton, p.37). In this second part, the word "said" always comes before "instead." It is through these four stanzas where the imperfect rhyming scheme is most regular.

Here are examples of other rhymes and wordplays: "On the first of September she looked at me / and said I gave her **cancer**. / They carved her sweet hills out / and still I couldn't **answer**." (Sexton p.36,) and "I checked out for the last time/ on the first of **May**; / graduate of the mental cases, / with my analyst's **okay**. [...]" (Sexton, p.39). Perfectly and imperfectly. In conclusion, sometimes she rhymes, and sometimes she does not, her themes are deadly serious, but her approach to language and tradition is playful and often darkly humorous.

"The Double Image" switches between the present and past tense. When the speaker is looking back in time, she reflects on events in her past life – such as admission to a psychiatric hospital, her life as a new mother, her daughter's first few years and her visit to her own, elderly mother. In some cases, the poem changes back to the present tense again. When in the present, the speaker and her young daughter are watching leaves falling from a tree. There is a regularity here, the poem seems to switch back to present tense when the speaker is talking directly to her young daughter. Two examples are from the poem's third and fourth stanza: "I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel. / **Today** the yellow leaves / go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed / in itself, or else it fell." Using "today," the reader understands that the story is the present. "**Today**, my small child, Joyce, / love your self's self where it lives [...]" (Sexton, p.36).

Additionally, in the present, the speaker reflects upon painted portraits of her and her mother, painted in the past, depicting how they hang on the wall, stuck in time: “In north light, my smile is held in place, / the shadow marks my bone” and “In south light, her smile is held in place, / her cheeks wilting like a dry / orchid.” (Sexton, p.40). It is also somewhat shown in the 23rd and 24th stanza. “[...] I rot on the wall, my own / Dorian Gray,” and “[...] that double woman who stares / at herself [...]” (Sexton, p.41).

Sexton uses the lyrical “I” when referring to the speaker, for the most part, “she” when referring to the elderly mother, and “you” when referring to the young daughter. However, Sexton can be playful in her use of pronouns, forcing the reader to think about voice and perspective. The three women in the poem merge at some point, an observation this essay will consider later.

In the poem, Sexton depicts a heartbreaking and challenging relationship between the speaker and her young daughter and the speaker and her elderly mother. Here are guilt-ridden bonds with the question of forgiveness looming over all the relationships. The poem takes the reader on a journey, observing the speaker in the role of mother, daughter, and woman struggling with guilt and depression.

5.2 *To be a mother and be gone* – Loss in “The Double Image.”

And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
-Anne Sexton

“The Double Image” opens with the speaker, nearing thirty, and her young daughter, in her fourth year, watching the seasons change. It is November, a month frequently seen in Sexton's writing. For Sexton, like many poets, November usually signifies melancholy. In a letter to Elizabeth Holland from 1864, Emily Dickinson wrote: “It is also November. The noons are more laconic and the sunsets sterner... November always seemed to me the Norway of the year” (Stein, 2014)

In the first stanza of Sexton’s poem, in the autumn month of November, we learn that the mother and young daughter have spent time apart. Loss is one of the recurring themes in the

poem, the loss of a daughter and the loss of a mother. “And I remember / mostly the three autumns you did not live here. / They said I'd never get you back again.” (Sexton, p.35). The first stanza continues and ends with: “I tell you what you'll never really know / all the medical hypothesis / that explained my brain will never be as true as these / struck leaves letting go” (Sexton, p.35)

The speaker's mention of “medical hypothesis” is a way of explaining her brain, hinting that mental illness is why she and her daughter have been apart. This becomes clear as the second stanza opens with “I, who chose two times / to kill myself.” (Sexton, p.35). Here, the speaker no longer finds herself in the present, and begins reflecting on past events. Suicide is touched upon several times throughout the poem and is one of the reasons for the speaker's guilt. This is also the reason for the enormous loss felt by the speaker and her daughter and the speaker and her elderly mother.

The third stanza goes into more detail about the speaker's first suicide attempt and admission to a psychiatric hospital: “Death was simpler than I thought [...] I pretended I was dead / until the white men pumped the poison out, / putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole / of talking boxes and the electric bed.” (Sexton, p.36).

The words “pretending to be dead” is worth noting here, as if the speaker is playing a game. Always paradoxical, Sexton's voice is both tender and terrible. On the one hand, it seems like the speaker is trying to explain her suicide attempt in the simplest, gentlest manner – as if she is explaining it to a small child. “Rigamarole” is a fun word to pronounce, meaning something lengthy, like a time-consuming process or explanation. The speaker wishes to refrain from telling her daughter about it all, sparing her for the ugly details. On the other hand, the brutality of the situation is clear to the reader when noting words such as “pumped the poison out”, “armless” and “electric bed”. It is easy to assume that “electric bed” refers to the fear and horror of electroconvulsive therapy - a common procedure for psychiatric patients during the 60's. Interestingly, Sexton's therapist advised against electroconvulsive treatment for Sexton. (Lehrich, 1992)

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich makes the following observation about the mother-daughter relationship: “The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement” (Rich, p.226.) Rich argues that the flow between two biologically alike bodies, where one has spent time inside the other and one has labored to give birth to the other, is

what ultimately makes the connection between mother and daughter so intense. The bond between the mothers and daughters in Sexton's "The Double Image" is intense, very much so. Although the poem begins on a sinister note, the image Sexton creates of the young daughter and the mother standing beside each other in the first stanza, "watching the yellow leaves go queer" (Sexton, p.35), shows this "deep mutuality" Rich writes about. The image illustrates the love that the speaker has for her daughter. The speaker compares the medical conclusions about herself with the struck leaves letting go from the tree. This has a hopeful tone – things such as medical conclusions and diagnoses will never triumph over, or change the facts of life, death, birth, love, suffering, vulnerability, and heartbreak. It will not alter the love she, a mother, has for her daughter. Everything changes all the time, that fact is eternal. The struck leaves – full of holes, yellow, brown, wet – fall to the ground, which they do every year, they let go. Everything changes all the time, that fact is eternal.

In the poem's first part, the speaker visits her young daughter during wintertime: "The time I did not love / myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove. / There was new snow after this." (Sexton p.36). Sexton's speaker does not love herself. She visits her young daughter who is living somewhere else. The shoveled walks where the speaker visits her daughter symbolizes control, orderliness, and something stable. However, she feels the opposite of this; uncontrolled, uncivilized, unfit to be a mother, unstable. She is not a shoveled walk. At this point in the poem, she can barely tolerate herself and is full of shame. She cannot love herself, and therefore struggles to love her daughter. Due to the loss of her daughter, loss of control also comes into play here. Losing control of oneself, of meaning, of motherhood.

The shoveled walks described in this passage are later snowed down. "There was new snow after this." The speaker seems to be quite content with the new snow in "The Double Image". The new snow on the shoveled walks can be compared to the leaves in the poem's very first stanza. A new beginning. It seems as if the speaker finds comfort in the fact that nature changes.

In the poem's second part, the speaker tries to stay calm and remain in control while time passes. "They sent me letters with news / of you and I made moccasins that I would never use." (Sexton, p.36) The speaker is frustrated by her daughter's absence and not being able to watch her grow. The visualization of the speaker making pairs of moccasins, one pair after

another⁶- which she has no intention of using – captures the image of someone erratic trying to regain control of her anxiety and mental illness. Interestingly, the making of moccasins is not only a theme in “The Double Image,” but also in Sexton’s poem “You, Doctor Martin,” which - as earlier mentioned - is addressed to her psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne.

[...] I make moccasins all morning. At first my hands / kept empty, unraveled for the lives / they used to work. Now I learn to take / them back, each angry finger that demands / I mend what another will break. [...] Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself, / counting this row and that row of moccasins / waiting on the silent shelf. (Sexton, “You, Doctor Martin”, p.3.)

These lines from another poem similarly expresses the feeling of urgently wanting to take something back.

The speaker feels guilty for being absent. She describes how her daughter at one point does not recognize her voice. “You did not know my voice / when I came back to call.” (Sexton, p.36). Yet, when the speaker visits her daughter, there is a sense of love and familiarity. The daughter holds her mother’s glove, and new snow falls. Adrienne Rich writes: “Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other – [...] a knowledge that is subliminal, [...], preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.” (Rich, p.220.) *Subliminal*, something that exists below our consciousness, something that is there, without us necessarily being aware of it. *Preverbal*, something existing or occurring before the development of speech. Rich implies that mothers and daughters somehow have a secret language, or a way of being that is stronger than any other relationship. Mothers and daughters find their way back to each other. The daughter in “The Double Image” is very young and has been away from her mother during the first years of her life. Nonetheless, she is still drawn to her mother, and holds her glove. There is new snow after this.

Sexton writes: “When I grew well enough to tolerate / myself, I lived with my mother.” (Sexton, p.36.) This is in the beginning of the poem’s second part. Later Sexton gives the reader more context as to why the speaker resides with her mother: “[...] Part way back from Bedlam / I came to my mother’s house in Gloucester, / Massachusetts.” (Sexton, p.37.) The word *bedlam* has two definitions. It can be used to describe a scene of uproar, unrest and confusion but also work as a common term for psychiatric asylums/hospitals. The title of Sexton’s debut collection where “The Double Image” was published is, as mentioned, *To*

⁶ Soft shoe made from leather.

Bedlam and Part Way Back, hinting at Sexton writing many of these poems during and after her own admission to a psychiatric hospital. Both definitions of the term *bedlam* align with the speaker's situation. She is on her way back from unrest and has only grown to tolerate herself after being in a mental institution, indicating that she is still unwell. She is still not reunited with her daughter and has come to stay with her own mother. In the ninth stanza, the speaker sends a picture of a rabbit to her daughter, "as if it were normal / to be a mother and be gone." (Sexton, p.38)

In many ways, the poem is a letter of both rage and sorrow, but also of love. In "the letter", the speaker addresses the state of Massachusetts - where Sexton herself grew up and lived her whole life. In the poem's fifth part, specifically the 18th and 19th stanza, there are detailed descriptions of traveling through Massachusetts. "[...] past the hatchery, / the hut that sells bait, / past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's / Hill. [...]" (Sexton, p.40) Knowing that Sexton has a strong familiarity to Massachusetts, it is no wonder that she depicts the state in such detail.

The speaker expresses paradoxically that losing her mother was a result of coming to live with her: "Part way back from Bedlam / I came to my mother's house in Gloucester, Massachusetts. And this is how I came / to catch at her; and this is how I lost her [...]" (Sexton, p.37). One could argue that Massachusetts in many ways represent the speaker's mother. To *catch* and to *lose* are two things that contradict each other. The speaker spends time with her mother, but at the same time, she loses her. In the seventh stanza, the speaker voices her anger about having to stay with her mother: "I lived like an angry guest, / like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child." (Sexton, p.37) She feels like a guest in her own mother's house, she is angry, feels almost ruined and like a child trapped in an adult woman's body.

The mother has the speaker's portrait done. There is much to say about the meaning of the portraits in this poem. One interpretation can be that the mother wants a portrait of her daughter so that she can hold on to a "perfect" version of her. A perfect image. The poem is, after all, titled "The Double Image" and is concerned with images, portraits, pictures, and different versions of reality. In the tenth stanza, the reader learns that the mother falls ill with cancer. The speaker deals with watching her mother lose her battle with it. In the beginning of the poem's fourth part, the speaker learns that her mother most likely will not recover from her illness, "That winter she came / part way back / from her sterile suite / of doctors, the

seasick / cruise of the X-ray, [...] Surgery incomplete, / [...] the prognosis poor, I heard / them say.” (Sexton, p.38.) The mother decides to have her own portrait painted too, and the women’s portraits hang on opposite walls. Two women, a mother and a daughter who have lost each other in different ways, resembling each other, stuck in time. All four stanzas in part six, stanza 20, 21, 22 and 23, depict the two portraits staring at each other.

In north light, my smile is held in place, / the shadow marks my bone. / What could I have been dreaming as I sat there, / all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone /of the smile, the young face [...]
In south light, her smile is held in place, / her cheeks wilting like a dry / orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown love, my first image. [...] (Sexton, p.40)

The quote above is from the 20th and 21st stanza, where the speaker compares her own face in the portrait with her mother’s. They resemble each other, but Sexton dwells on the differences in their appearances. In the portraits, the speaker has a young face, the mother’s face is described as something wilting away, like a dry orchid. Even so, the speaker still sees her mother as her “mocking mirror.”

In the poem’s 22nd stanza, the speaker continues: “[...] we smiled in our canvas home / before we chose our foreknown separate ways. [...] / I rot on the wall, my own / Dorian Gray.” (Sexton, p.41). In the 23rd stanza, the portraits of the speaker and her mother are described as a “double woman” who stares at herself, as if she were “petrified in time.” (Sexton, p.41). As mentioned, there is a direct intertextual reference to Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* here. In this 1890 novel, Dorian Gray attempts to capture his beauty forever, while making a portrait of himself instead. In “The Double Image,” the speaker and her mother also try to capture something, or perhaps stop the time, be petrified in it. The speaker describes herself as “rotting on the wall,” and compares it to Dorian Gray’s portrait, which rots whenever Dorian sins. The speaker is so full of shame. Perhaps she too feels that she is sinning.

There is also something very tender about how the speaker, in the 21st stanza, calls her mother her “first image.” In the beginning of her chapter on motherhood and daughterhood, Adrienne Rich manages to put this “first image” into words: “The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. [...] Hers [my mother’s] was the first female body I ever looked at, to know what women were, what I was to be. [...]” (Rich, p.218/219)

In the 21st stanza, the mother is described as the speaker’s “overthrown love,” overthrown meaning defeated or lost – often by force. They have their portraits, they hang on opposite

walls, they will do so forever. Their bond, however, is lost – and they already both knew that they would part, “before we chose our *foreknown* separate ways.”

In the 18th stanza, the speaker is reminded of her childhood: “That October day we went / to Gloucester, the red hills / reminded me of the dry red fur fox / coat I played in as a child; stock-still / like a bear or a tent, / like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.” (Sexton, p.40). It makes sense that the speaker is faced with memories of her childhood, especially when she feels like an “outgrown” child having to be taken care of by her mother. The red fur fox coat, which the speaker played with as a child, is mentioned later in the poem. In the 20th stanza, where the speaker considers her face in the portrait, she describes herself as the “foxes’ snare.” A snare is a trap for catching animals, also used for foxes. This suggests that the speaker, and the child she once was, is trapped in time, trapped in something that is not anymore, trapped in the portrait. When the speaker and her mother choose their foreknown separate ways in the 22nd stanza, the speaker says: “The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.” (Sexton, p.40) Conclusively, “The Double Image” deals with the loss of a child, loss of self, loss of a mother and loss of what once was.

5.3 *And this was my worst guilt* – Guilt in “The Double Image.”

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl,
needed another
life, another image to remind me.

- *Anne Sexton*

Due to the speaker’s absence from her family, her suicide attempts, and her desperate, hopeless efforts at being a daughter and a mother, guilt plays a massive role in the poem as a whole. It is a theme from beginning to end.

At the beginning of the second stanza, the reader learns that the speaker has attempted suicide twice. “I, who chose two times to kill myself [...]” (Sexton, p.35.) She looks back on the earlier stages of her young daughter's life and the depression she experiences. The speaker remembers saying her daughter's nickname (which the reader later learns is *Joy*) in the “mewling months” right after her daughter was born (Sexton, p.35). A *mewl* is defined as a whimper or a cry associated with babies. One can picture the speaker as joyful, hearing nothing more than mewling for the first few months of motherhood. However, in the second stanza, the speaker remembers where things started going wrong – the daughter falls ill, with a “fever rattling” in her throat. The speaker does not know what to do with herself or her

daughter. “Until a fever rattled / in your throat and I moved like a pantomime / above your head.” (Sexton, p.35/36.) Throughout the poem, Sexton gives voice to the speaker's depression. Sexton does this extensively in her work, such as in the poem “Wanting to Die” from her collection *Live or Die* (1966), where she manages to breathe life into death and the desire for death. She illustrates death as something sad, something waiting, wounded, bruised. In this poem, death is a woman, referred to as “she.” “Death's a sad Bone; bruised, you'd say / and yet she waits for me, year after year / to so delicately undo an old wound / to empty my breath from its bad prison.” (Sexton, *Wanting to Die*, p.143)

In “The Double Image,” Sexton depicts the speaker's guilt and shame as witches talking in her head, blaming her for how things have turned out. In the second stanza, the terms “ugly angels” and “green witches” are used to personify the voices in the speaker's head, telling her that she is to blame for her daughter's – and her own --- illness. “Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame/I heard them say, was mine.” (Sexton, p.36) Sexton uses metaphors of doom and hopelessness when depicting motherhood. “They tattled / like green witches in my head, letting doom/leak like a broken faucet; / as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet / an old debt I must assume.” (Sexton, p.36) In this passage, the speaker feels that her fate is doomed and that it is directly affecting her young daughter. Adrienne Rich reflects upon guilt through her own experience with motherhood. “Soon I would begin to understand the full weight and burden of maternal guilt, that daily, nightly, hourly, Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much?” (Rich, p.223) However, one can argue that the speaker's maternal guilt is on an entirely different, more toxic, level than what Rich attempts to demonstrate in this passage. Sexton uses the image of a broken faucet as a metaphor, illustrating it “leaking doom”. She portrays doom as filling the speaker's stomach and spilling into her young daughter's bed. The speaker concludes that this is all because of a debt she owes - perhaps to the witches.

The speaker moves in with her mother in the poem's second part, and in the fifth stanza the blaming witches come to light again: “Too late, / too late, to live with your mother, the witches said. / But I didn't leave. I had my portrait / done instead.” (Sexton, p.36/37) For the entirety of the second part, each stanza ends with the speaker getting her portrait done. In the sixth stanza, the mother tells the speaker that her suicide is unforgivable. “I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said. / And she never could. She had my portrait / done instead.” This again can confirm the theory that the speaker's mother is so hurt by her daughter's

suicide attempt that she feels that she has lost her. The mother desperately wishes to hold on to a perfect image of her daughter by preserving and protecting it inside of a painting. The speaker is overwhelmed with guilt and shame, and agrees to do the portrait, presumably because she feels that she also owes a debt to her mother. In the tenth stanza, it is revealed that the thought behind the portrait is to keep the speaker “well.”

“They hung my portrait in the chill / north light, matching / me to keep me well. / Only my mother grew ill. / She turned from me, as if death were catching, / as if death transferred, / as if my dying had eaten inside of her. [...] On the first of September she looked at me / and said I gave her cancer. / They carved her sweet hills out / and still I couldn’t answer.” (Sexton, p.38)

In the same stanza the speaker is engulfed with even more guilt when the mother blames her for giving her cancer. The mother distances herself from the speaker, believing that she is the one who caused her illness, as if the speaker’s suicide was infectious. The speaker does not know what to do with the mother’s claim, she cannot answer, she cannot defend herself, she cannot ask for forgiveness. She cannot say *but of course it wasn’t me who gave you cancer!* She is completely silenced by guilt.

Sexton chooses a vivid way to illustrate an image of the mother’s breast cancer surgery, describing it as “carving sweet hills out.” There is a much later poem by Sexton, titled “Dreaming the Breasts,” from her collection *The Book of Folly* (1972.) Here, in the third stanza, Sexton depicts breast cancer surgery in a raw, tender but also somewhat brutal way. “In the end they cut off your breasts / and milk poured from them / into the surgeon’s hand / and he embraced them. / I took them from him / and I planted them.” (Sexton, *Dreaming the Breasts*, p.315)” It is relevant to note that Anne Sexton’s own mother died of the illness in 1959, and that it is likely that her detailed depictions of it stems from this.

The speaker feels guilt in relation to her mother, but also in relation to her daughter. In the poem’s fourth stanza, the speaker feels guilty about letting her daughter grow elsewhere. She does this while questioning God: “Today, my small child Joyce / love your self’s self where it lives / There is no special God to refer to; or if there is / why did I let you grow / in another place” (Sexton, p.36) The speaker denies the likelihood of a God, and continues that if there is one, how could he bring such destruction to the bond between herself and her daughter. The speaker acknowledges, however, that it is she and not God, who initially brought destruction to the relationship: “why did I let you grow/in another place.” The meaning of “love your self’s self where it lives,” might be the speaker urging her daughter to grow up, become her own person and not turn into her mother. At the end of this same stanza, the speaker visits her

daughter. Line 42 begins with “The time I did not love / myself” (Sexton, p.36). The speaker does not love herself, and she is scared that the daughter will have the same fate.

When the speaker lives with her mother, she is confronted with memories of a restrictive form of religion she grew up with: “There was a church where I grew up / with its white cupboards where they locked us up / row by row, like puritans or shipmates / singing together.” (Sexton, p.37). When examining this eighth stanza, it seems like a normal visit to the church, but the speaker has unpleasant memories of it. It is likely that this is the reason for the speaker doubting God when talking to her daughter. The stanza continues: “My father passed the plate. / Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said. / I wasn’t exactly forgiven. / They had my portrait done instead.” In this passage, the speaker seems to be in the same church again. Her father passes a plate, and the speaker implies that the church has “a time of offering”.⁷ Even though the speaker may offer something to the plate, (the poem does not reveal if she does), the witches tell her that she cannot be forgiven. This stanza ends with “**They** had my portrait done instead.” The pronoun choice of *they* can either refer to the speaker’s parents, or the witches. Since the speaker feels like she owes a debt to the two, one can interpret it as both things.

As earlier mentioned, the speaker’s mother also gets her portrait done. This happens in the poem’s fourth part. “During the sea blizzards / she had her own portrait painted. / A cave of a mirror / placed on the south wall [...]” (Sexton, p.38). Sexton describes the two portraits facing each other as a “cave of a mirror,” as if the two portraits cannot be distinguished. In lines 112-114 the three women (or rather, the two women and the girl) merge: “Matching smile, matching contour. / And you resembled me; unacquainted with my face, you wore it. But you were mine / after all.” (Sexton, p.38/39.) When Sexton uses “you,” she refers to the daughter, however, here “you” could be anyone. Who is “you”? Is it the face of the speaker? The mother? The daughter? The daughter is unacquainted with the speaker’s face, the mother has become unacquainted with the speaker’s face, and perhaps the speaker too has become unacquainted with her own face.

In the poem’s fifth part, the speaker tries to live life normally. “All that summer I learned life / back into my own / seven rooms, visited the swan boats, / the market, answered the phone /

⁷ “A sacrifice ceremonially offered as a part of a worship / a contribution to the support of a church. (“Offering.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary)

served cocktails as a wife / should [...].” However, still absent from her daughter, the speaker is haunted by guilt: “And you came each / weekend. But I lie. / You seldom came. I just pretended / you, small piglet, butterfly girl with jelly bean cheeks, / disobedient three, my splendid / stranger.” (Sexton, p.39).

The speaker feels such intense guilt that “pretending” her daughter feels like the only option. She lists several nicknames she has for her daughter, which is normal for a mother to have. However, the last nickname which the speaker lists is “my splendid stranger.” The speaker loves her daughter, but at the same time, they are complete strangers. The poem continues: “And I had to learn / why I would rather / die than love, how your innocence / would hurt and how I gather / guilt like a young intern / his symptoms, his certain evidence.” (Sexton, p.39/40). The speaker must face the fact that she would rather die than love her young daughter. She also needs to confront the guilt that follows. Like a young intern, an inexperienced doctor who sees disease in every single symptom – the speaker sees guilt in every little thing.

In the poem’s seventh and final part, the speaker’s daughter comes to stay for good.

For the last time I unpack / your things. We touch from habit. / The first visit you asked my name. / Now you stay for good. / I will forget / how we bumped away from each other like marionettes / on strings. It wasn’t the same / as love, letting weekends contain / us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name. / Wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying. / You call me *mother* and I remember my mother again, / somewhere in greater Boston, dying. (Sexton, p.41)

The speaker retells an emotional memory of the birth of her daughter: “You came like an awkward guest / that first time, all wrapped and moist / and strange at my heavy breast.” (Sexton, p.41). This works as a contrast to the speaker’s earlier mentioned arrival to her mother’s house: “I lived like an angry guest, / like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.” (Sexton, p.37). Although things are looking up, guilt still looms over the poem. Towards the end, amidst the lovely depictions of the speaker and daughter’s reunification, the speaker concludes with her biggest guilt of all.

I needed you. I didn’t want a boy, / only a girl, a small milky mouse / of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house / of herself. We named you Joy. / 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. (Sexton, p.41/42)

The speaker implies that she never felt entirely comfortable or confident in her role as a girl, a woman, and a mother. As a result, she felt the need for “another life, another image” to give her a sense of purpose or identity – she needed her young daughter to somehow cure her, because she has not been able to do that herself. The final line is probably the most crucial

one in the poem. Sexton describes the speaker's "worst guilt" -- that she created her daughter as a way of finding herself. She states that this particular guilt is something that cannot be cured or soothed. It is a persistent and painful part of the speaker's life

6.0 Conclusion

Dearest Joyball with a tiny bit of jellybean cheeks.

- *Anne Sexton in a letter to her daughter Joyce Sexton, 1974.*

This essay has analyzed Anne Sexton's poem "The Double Image," mainly focusing on the poem's mother-daughter relationships and how they relate to themes of guilt and loss. Adrienne Rich's thoughts on motherhood and daughterhood have supported several of the essay's arguments. The speaker, the mother, and the young daughter are all affected by significant loss. The mother and the young daughter deal with losing the speaker to her mental illness, while the speaker loses her daughter, her mother, and herself when feelings of guilt, depression, and temptations of death take control of her. All this loss results in the speaker experiencing overwhelming guilt: she does not know how to be a mother, a daughter, or herself.

The poem "The Double Image" was published over sixty years ago as part of Sexton's debut collection. Mothers and daughters, loss and guilt are universal themes. We are daughters, we have daughters, we know daughters. We know loss and guilt.

Anne Sexton continues to be labeled as a confessional poet. Yet, she is so much more than that. Sexton's poetry considers us all – regardless of gender and age. Full of paradoxes, she lies, she hides, she confesses, but never loses sight of love. Her poems, with all their sadness and chaos, continue to speak to generations of readers, young and old – women *and* men.

Perhaps Sexton's poetry, specifically "The Double Image", was made to find me.

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This essay's cover image is borrowed from Linda Gray Sexton's memoir *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother* (2011). Pictured is Anne Sexton with her first daughter Linda Sexton, at their home in Newton, Massachusetts – 1953.

Appendix: "The Double Image" (1960) by Anne Sexton

1.

I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I'd thought.
The day life made you well and whole
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out,
putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole
of talking boxes and the electric bed.
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.
Today the yellow leaves
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice
when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
The time I did not love
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.

2.

They sent me letters with news

of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did her best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait
done instead.

There was a church where I grew up
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,
row by row, like puritans or shipmates
singing together. My father passed the plate.
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.
I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait
done instead.

3.

All that summer sprinklers arched
over the seaside grass.
We talked of drought
while the salt-parched
field grew sweet again. To help time pass
I tried to mow the lawn
and in the morning I had my portrait done,
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.
Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit
and a postcard of Motif number one,
as if it were normal
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill
north light, matching
me to keep me well.
Only my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside of her.
That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.
On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer.

4.

That winter she came
part way back
from her sterile suite
of doctors, the seasick
cruise of the X-ray,
the cells' arithmetic
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard
them say.

During the sea blizzards
she had her
own portrait painted.
A cave of mirror
placed on the south wall;
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all.

I wintered in Boston,
childless bride,
nothing sweet to spare
with witches at my side.
I missed your babyhood,
tried a second suicide,
tried the sealed hotel a second year.
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this
was good.

5.

I checked out for the last time
on the first of May;
graduate of the mental cases,
with my analyst's okay,
my complete book of rhymes,
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life
back into my own
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly bean cheeks,
disobedient three, my splendid

stranger. And I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love, how your innocence

would hurt and how I gather
guilt like a young intern
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

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

We drove past the hatchery,
the hut that sells bait,
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's
Hill, to the house that waits
still, on the top of the sea,
and two portraits hung on the opposite walls.

6.

In north light, my smile is held in place,
the shadow marks my bone.
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
of the smile, the young face,
the foxes' snare.

In south light, her smile is held in place,
her cheeks wilting like a dry
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
that stony head of death
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;
we smiled in our canvas home
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.
The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.
I rot on the wall, my own
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time — two ladies sitting in umber chairs.
You kissed your grandmother
and she cried.

7.

I could not get you back
except for weekends. You came
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit
that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack
your things. We touch from habit.
The first visit you asked my name.
Now you stay for good. I will forget
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes

on strings. It wasn't the same
as love, letting weekends contain
us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name,
wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.
You call me *mother* and I remember my mother again,
somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce
so we could call you Joy.
You came like an awkward guest
that first time, all wrapped and moist
and strange at my heavy breast.
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,
only a girl, a small milky mouse
of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house
of herself. We named you Joy.
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.