

SMITH, VIRGINIA, M.A. Finding the Feminist Poetics of Anne Sexton. (2014)
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Anne Sexton described herself in a letter as “the woman of poems, the woman of the kitchen, the woman of the private (but published) hungers.” I argue that because she wrote about taboo subjects and improper appetites she expanded the collective consciousness and gave greater freedom to women. Her titles alone could shock a reader who was accustomed to the image of a docile and obedient 1950s “housewife.” She wrote “Menstruation at Forty”, “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” and “In Celebration of My Uterus” with noteworthy candor in tackling subjects of female anatomy which had been deemed improper for polite conversation. Her poems were and are powerful tools for consciousness-raising because if the personal is political, then the poems of a woman who writes about her hungers for sex, success, personal identity and more are charged with an urgent social message. This paper investigates the feminist poetics of Sexton’s writing including her writing about illicit appetites, her shattering of the image of the 1950s housewife, the role of revisionist mythmaking and her embodiment of the grotesque.

SMITH, VIRGINA, M.A. *The Arrow, The Sty, The Spur and The Blessing: Desire in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats.* (2014)
Directed by Dr. Anthony Cuda. 26 pp.

William Butler Yeats wrote “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (405). This paper will explore the ways in which Yeats quarreled with himself over the subject of desire. Yeats wrote poems throughout his life that wrestled with the issue of desire. Desire is present throughout his entire collection of poetry and shown in many different incarnations with contradictory facets. Desire is figured as a destructive force symbolized by a bow and arrow in his early love poetry. In the rebellious and defiant poems Yeats wrote in the voice of female personas, desire is unabashedly celebrated, even if it is not a heavenly mansion but rather a jovial sty since “love has pitched his mansion / in the place of excrement”. In his later poetry Yeats came to terms with his desire and realized that desire is a spur to self-knowledge and creativity. At the end of his life Yeats was able to represent moments of transcendent wonder and see desire and the body as a blessing.

FINDING THE FEMINIST POETICS OF ANNE SEXTON
AND
THE ARROW, THE STY, THE SPUR AND THE BLESSING:
DESIRE IN THE POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

by

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FINDING THE FEMINIST POETICS OF ANNE SEXTON

Anne Sexton described herself in a letter as “the woman of poems, the woman of the kitchen, the woman of the private (but published) hungers” (Wagner 11). I argue that because she wrote about taboo subjects and improper appetites she expanded the collective consciousness and gave greater freedom to women. Capo describes her writing as “exploding decorum for the sake of truth” (24). Her titles alone could shock a reader who was accustomed to the image of a docile and obedient 1950s “housewife.” She wrote “Menstruation at Forty,” “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,” and “In Celebration of My Uterus.” Sexton wrote with noteworthy candor, tackling subjects of female anatomy that had been deemed improper for polite conversation. Her poems were and are powerful tools for consciousness-raising because if the personal is political, then the poems of a woman who writes about her hungers for sex, success, personal identity and more are charged with an urgent social message.

Anne Sexton continually shattered images of proper femininity and wrote what had heretofore seemed unspeakable. Her poetry gave voice to appetites that women were not allowed to have. In the section of my paper “Lessons In Hunger” I will explore the role of forbidden appetites in Sexton’s poetry. The next section “Some Women Marry Houses” outlines the ways Sexton negotiates the 1950s Suburban landscape and the narrowly proscribed role of wife and mother. In the third section of the paper I will explore Sexton’s use of Witches and revisionist mythmaking in her poetry to destabilize

patriarchal assumptions. The next section of the paper will investigate the body and sexuality in Sexton's poetry. I will then explore Sexton's use of the grotesque and explore the genre of Confessional poetry. I will argue that confessional poetry has far different stakes for marginalized people than for privileged people and that her poetry takes on social significance because of her gender and the taboo topics she discussed. In the section "Writing Like A Woman" I will highlight how Sexton wrote from an explicitly female subject position and show how this is a feminist act. In the last section of the paper I will tackle the issue of Sexton's debatable feminism. I will argue for the recognition of a feminist poetics in Sexton's work. Lauter describes the audacity of Sexton's writing as "a new boldness in a stance that I call 'impudent' because its most important feature is a refusal to observe decorum. In her case it was a refusal to cover up, gloss over, or withdraw from what she saw—a refusal to be shamed into silence" (147). I believe this audacious impudence, this voicing of the appetites that society would rather she have kept quiet, is what makes Sexton's work feminist.

"Lessons in Hunger"

A vast majority of Sexton's poems could arguably represent illicit female appetites—in that they break societal norms of propriety and so are representing hunger for something forbidden—but in this section I want to focus exclusively on her many different interpretations of hunger. The idea of insatiable hunger runs throughout her entire collection. She describes her heart as the "old hunger motor, with its sins / revved up like an engine that would not stop" (192). Sexton's poetry is fascinated with and often

haunted by unfulfilled hungers. Sometimes these hungers are unfulfilled because of the heterosexist, patriarchal society she inhabited. These hungers most often deal with her non-normative sexuality. It is unclear, however, if Sexton had the awareness that it was society that was unhealthy or if she believed that her hungers were pathological. Her poetry reflects a fierce insistence on her hungers with a simultaneous undercurrent of fear that her hungers are driving her insane.

When I write “hunger” I am indicating desire for everything from food to attention, sexual and romantic love, success, and a connection to the divine. Hunger in Sexton’s poems is hunger for all of this and more. The ability for hunger to encompass many different kinds of appetites is apparent in her poem “Food.” She writes:

I want mother’s milk,
that good sour soup.
I want breasts singing like eggplants,
and a mouth above making kisses.
I want nipples like shy strawberries
for I need to suck the sky. (488)

Here the food she hungers for is both literal and symbolic. She wants food, love, and connection. This hunger, and its inability to be filled, is made clear when she writes, “I am hungry and you give me / a dictionary to decipher” (488). Hunger, for Sexton, ranges from bodily appetites to the ambiguous needing to “suck the sky.”

Sexton explicitly links the word “hunger” to sexual appetite. In her poem “Barefoot,” for example, she describes a tryst with her lover:

In the morning I run from door to door
of the cabin playing *chase me*.

Now you grab me by the ankles.
Now you work your way up the legs
and come to pierce me at my hunger mark. (200)

Sexton also links hunger with a desire for love and approval. In her poem “Lessons in Hunger” she is mourning the silence of a man, after she asks: “Do you like me?” The man in the poem never answers and she is left “riddled with what his silence said” (613). This could be a romantic figure or any male authority figure—it is unclear which. When referring to the man she writes: “I asked the blue blazer”(612). There is an anonymity that makes the blue blazer possibly any man: lover, doctor, critic, or father. What is clear is that she hungers for his approval and is left unfed.

Sexton makes the link between her excessive hunger to her role of being a poet. She begins her poem “The Black Art” by writing:

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents!
As if cycles and children and islands
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
and vegetables were never enough. (88)

She feels that her hungers are insatiable and this very insatiability— the feeling that conventional life is “never enough”— is what leads her to write. It is unclear whether she views hunger in this context as a positive or negative force. Her insatiable feeling of never having “enough” drives her to write poems but it is also what makes it impossible for her to have a normal life or connect with the male in the poem.

Hunger is also linked to Sexton’s longing for the divine. In her poem “The Play” she writes, “To be without God is to be a snake / who wants to swallow an elephant”

(440). Her poem “When Man Enters Woman” could be read as another one of her celebrations of erotic love, but the language of hunger and the connection to the divine elevate it to more than merely a description of sexual fulfillment. The poem concludes:

This man,
this woman
with their double hunger,
have tried to reach through
the curtain of God
and briefly they have,
though God
in His perversity
unties the knot. (428)

The “double hunger” of the two people is not only lust but also a longing for the divine. The problem, in Sexton’s mind, is that the connection to something divine does not last: a perverse god “unties the knot.” The sacred moment of sexual union is fleeting and the hunger for both sex and God always returns.

Sexton’s conflicting attitudes about whether hunger is a productive or destructive force can be seen in her poem “Flee on your donkey.” The poem is riddled with a perpetual refrain of “oh my hunger, my hunger” (99). Sexton recounts her return to a mental hospital, the “Bedlam” from which she only came “part way back” in her first book. She describes her return to the “scene of the disordered senses” (97). I would like to note the aural pun on the word “census”: She has gone back to *Bedlam* to be counted in the census of the disordered because she identifies as one of them. Sexton outlines the contradictory feelings of resignation and desperation at having to be back where “upstairs a girl curls like a snail; / in another room someone tries to eat a shoe” (99). She resents

her mental illness and the ways in which she perceives it has narrowed her life. She laments “Six years of such small preoccupations! / Six years of shuttling in and out of this place! / O my hunger! My hunger!” (99). She views hunger, in this poem, as leading to madness. She then writes “This is madness / but a kind of hunger” (104) and in the next stanza decisively takes a stand against her tormenting hungers. She decides to put down her hungers and flee the asylum, into the world of normalcy. She writes, “Turn, my hungers! / For once make a deliberate decision” (104). She sees her hungers—for answers that do not come, for attention, pills, death over life—as a force to flee. That she is not successful in turning from her destructive hungers becomes apparent in both her life and the content and quality of her later poems and will be explored in the final section of this paper.

It makes sense that Sexton would not know if her own hungers were pathological given her time, place and identity. She was an American housewife in the 1950s. Betty Friedan writes: “If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself” (19). The ideal American housewife: upheld by advertisements, women’s education, and the propaganda of an entire culture was “healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home” and “had found true feminine fulfillment” (18). Except that most women didn’t actually feel that elusive fulfillment. In “Flee on Your Donkey” Sexton is tortured by her unfulfilled and illicit appetites. She feels trapped in her role as a 1950s housewife and sees her hungers as leading her to madness. Friedan can shed light on this: “It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife... but the chains

that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, or incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off” (31). The image of the American housewife as beautiful, happy and most importantly—singularly devoted to her husband, children and home—was made and constantly reinforced by culture: “by the women’s magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis” (34). Friedan argues women were defined exclusively by their sexual roles as wife and mother and not as human beings with limitless potential and the need for personal identity and growth. Thus women were taught to exist only in relation to their husbands and children, to live through other people instead of living a full life that encompassed both family and healthy individual growth and autonomy. In the next section I will argue that Anne Sexton wrote the poetic companion to “The Feminine Mystique.” Friedan’s first chapter is entitled “The Problem That Has No Name.” I believe that Sexton’s poems were instrumental in helping name that problem.

“Some Women Marry Houses”

The first line of Sexton’s poem “Housewife” is a humorous, literal description of the role she had been given. When spelled out as “Some women marry houses,” it is easy to deconstruct the absurdity and weight that both the moniker and the identity of “housewife” carried for her. Middlebrook writes that Sexton chafed against her role as a proper Boston housewife. She could not be satisfied within the confines of this identity

and thus became a poet of “damage and resistance” (211). The poem “Housewife” is condensed, lasting only 10 lines. Ostriker described the poem as crackling and “almost over before it starts, like a shorted fuse” (72). The speaker asserts that the house becomes “another kind of skin” for the woman. There is something monstrous about this image. Sexton routinely embodies the grotesque in her poetry and uses this embodiment to make implicit social commentary. If women are socialized to “marry houses” and must devote all of their time to the arts of becoming a housewife, then this house can become a monstrous second skin or outer body complete with “a heart, / a mouth, a liver and bowel movements” (77). A subversively comic and ironic tone critiques the image of the blissful and devoted housewife: “See how she sits on her knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down” (77). In a 10 line poem Sexton troubles the fixed image of the happy housewife. Sexton’s poetry went on to challenge the roles of motherhood as well.

If a woman is defined solely through her role as a wife and mother than it puts heavy demands on these relationships. Friedan writes that a woman’s husband and children become symbols: “For when a woman defines herself as a housewife, the house and things in it are, in a sense, her identity; she needs these external trappings to buttress her emptiness of self, to make her feel like somebody” (271). Sexton explores this dynamic in her poem “The Double Image”. She ends the poem writing to her daughter:

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. (42)

This candor about her feelings of guilt, confusion and lack of identity help speak to the larger social problem of the socialization of women of the time. Middlebrook agrees, “The disturbing subject of the *Bedlam* poems is Sexton’s experience of the female roles of mother and daughter as in themselves a sickness, and not merely her sickness” (209).

Friedan implicated the role of capitalism in creating and sustaining the feminine mystique when she asked: “Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house*” (206). Friedan found that the image of the housewife needed to be upheld by materialistic values and reinforced by advertisements. The Feminine Mystique “seems to require increasing mindlessness, increasing emphasis on things: two cars, two TV’s, two fireplaces. Whole pages of women’s magazines are filled with gargantuan vegetables: beets, cucumbers, green peppers, potatoes described like a love affair” (65). But this cornucopia of images, the abundance in advertisements and in the actual lives of the American housewife, left them feeling essentially hollow. The increasing affluence did not lead to an increase in wellbeing. No matter how modern her home, how full of the newest appliances, it could not make up for the loss that occurs when a person’s entire existence is shrunk down to only a house. As Friedan points out “A baked potato is not as big as the world, and vacuuming the living room floor—with or without makeup—is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge any woman’s full capacity” (67).

Sexton shatters the image of suburban tranquility in her poem “The House.” The family members are composed of “orange and pink faces / carved and dressed up like

puppets” (71). The family is wealthy with “patent-leather fenders” on the car, the father wearing “custom-made pajamas”, and the mother “sorting her diamonds like a bank teller” (73). The family has a maid, houseboy and gardeners. This affluence cannot protect them from the undercurrents of alcoholism and incest, however. The dysfunction and abuse make the speaker want to “slam the door on all the years she’ll have to live through” (74). The disconnect between the image of suburban perfection the family projects and their secret life of desperation and abuse make the speaker envision the family as inhuman. At the age of 35 she remembers the house of her childhood as a “machine” that waits with “rooms, stairs, carpets, furniture, people— / those people who stand at the open windows like objects / waiting to topple” (75).

Sexton writes about the constraints of gender roles and envisions a different kind of existence in her poem “Consorting With Angels”. The poem begins: “I was tired of being a woman, / tired of the spoons and the pots, / tired of my mouth and my breasts, tired of the cosmetics and the silks” (111). The choice of details here echoes Friedan’s critiques of women’s magazines as being “crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and the spirit?” (36). Sexton finds this absence of mind and spirit a terrible one. The speaker of the poem has become “tired of the gender of things” (111). She has a dream that she believes is “the answer” and “will outlive my husband and my father” (111). She dreams of a fantastical place, a world without gender, where

the nature of the angels went unexplained,
no two made in the same species,
one with a nose, one with an ear in its hand,

one chewing a star and recording it's orbit,
each one like a poem obeying itself,
performing God's functions,
a people apart. (111)

She enters the city and loses her gender: "I was not a woman anymore, / not one thing or the other" (111). She concludes by declaring: "I'm no more a woman / than Christ was a man" (112). The poem argues for individuality outside of the gender binary. Each person would be like a poem, unique and obedient—not to outside constructs of behavior—but only to their own individual and perfect logic. The final line of the poem plays again with conceptions of gender. Christ is the son of God who takes the earthly form of a man but he is also, importantly, something far more than a man. He is divine and this greater part of his identity exists outside of his gender. Christ was and was not a man and in the same way the poem argues for an identity outside of and greater than "the gender of things" (111).

Sexton tackled sexual hungers that were not allowed by society while also shattering the ideal social roles which she found limiting. In "The Farmer's Wife" Sexton confronts sexuality within the confines of patriarchal marriage. The poem voices the inner thoughts of a nameless woman, who is only identified by her marriage to the farmer. We see how unsatisfying this narrow role—of only being someone's wife—is for her. The poem begins, "They name just ten years now / that she has been his habit" (20). Vossekul finds significance in Sexton's use of the word "habit." She writes, "Nunlike, the farmer's wife wears her role like a habit" she finds that though the wife participates in the "love act with her husband, she is mentally chaste" (121). I do not agree with this

assertion. The text of the poem highlight that the farmer's wife enjoys the "brief, bright bridge of the raucous bed" but that being *just* this man's wife is not enough for her. I do agree with Vossekuil when she writes, "The only knowledge one has of this woman is in her responses to and relationships with others; as the title suggests, she is trapped in her life as a reflected image" (121).

The farmer's wife keeps her dissatisfaction to herself but Sexton the poet writes it large across the page:

she will not say how there
must be more to living
than this brief bright bridge
of the raucous bed or even
the slow braille touch of him
like a heavy god grown light,
that old pantomime of love
that she wants although
it leaves her still alone (20).

This isn't a woman whose husband rapes or abuses her. This isn't even a woman who has a horribly unsatisfying sex life. Their bed is "raucous" and the bridge is "bright" even if it is "brief." She longs for physical connection with him even though it leaves her still alone. The poem continues:

built back at last,
mind's apart from him, living
her own self in her own words
and hating the sweat of the house
they keep when they finally lie
each in separate dreams. (20)

She has to build herself back after their sexual encounter, something about being with her husband necessitate that she limit or diminish herself. This woman must constantly sacrifice her sense of self in order to be married. When she is “built back at last”, she has freedom to think and feel as herself. She is living as “her own self”, with “her own words” instead of having an identity as merely or solely his wife and helpmate.

The anger that results from this life of diminishment finally ignites in the last lines of the poem:

and then how she watches him,
still strong in the blowzy bag
of his usual sleep while
her young years bungle past
their same marriage bed
and she wishes him cripple, or poet,
or even lonely, or sometimes,
better, my lover, dead. (20)

Sexton shows us the rage of a life that is un-lived or lived only in relation to others. She shows the quiet, marriage ideal of the 1950s to be pulsing under the surface with fury and desperation. Her language in the last lines is outright antagonistic. This woman has a quiet killing rage that the poet may or may not have with her own lover.

The theme of a woman who is both sexual and full of rage recurs in her poetry. Her poems of female anger challenge notions of acceptability. Sexton depicts wives who are helping their husbands but who quietly, inside, are burning with a killing rage. The anger in Sexton’s poetry embodies an element of the grotesque or the monstrous since society had only allowed women to be helpful, cheerful, and self-sacrificing. To claim

that underneath all that chipper self-abnegation was violent resentment and rage is to voice a taboo.

The idea that women must balance their anger within their social roles is the subject of her poem "Again and Again and Again." The poem sets up a pendulum between rage and love "You said the anger would come back again / just as the love did" (195). She describes the anger as a "black look I do not / like" (195). Sexton does not shy away from the scatological and describes the anger as a frog that sits on her lips and defecates. She tries not to feed the "black look". There exists a good look as well, and "I wear / it like a blood clot. I have / sewn it over my left breast. / I have made a vocation of it" (195). It is important to note that as much as she has worked to starve the bad look she has tried to cultivate the good: she has made a vocation out of her love or "good look". The images are not peaceful or beautiful but rather painful and self-harming. The love or good look is worn like a blood clot and she has sewn it to over her breast. That she must wear the look implies that it is not authentic to her true self. It is something she wears stitched into her skin. She writes of the good look: "Lust has taken plant in it / and I have placed you and your child at its milk tip" (195). The love has become conflated with lust and sexuality and also maternal love. It is unclear whether the speaker feels happy in her roles of sexual and maternal love until the final stanza. She writes: "Oh the blackness is murderous / and the milk tip is brimming / and each machine is working" (196). The speaker of the poem cannot balance the two looks, she is run by two machines, one of love and one of rage but does not seem in control of either. The poem concludes with the sense that rage will win out over her vocation of love. She concludes "and I will kiss you

when / I cut up one dozen new men / and you will die somewhat, / again and again” (196). The poem ends on a threatening note. The violence at the end of the poem is not self-harming but rather directed at men and her male lover. It brims over with a promise of rage. Both the grotesque and a woman’s rage are part of our patriarchal cultural understanding of witches. Sexton took on the identity of witches both in her poem “Her Kind” and in her book *Transformations*.

“I Have Been Her Kind”

Anne Sexton began every one of her poetry readings with “Her Kind.” She made this anthem of a poem her signature. In the poem she adopts the persona of a witch, a woman who is “misunderstood” (15). Johnson finds her line “a woman like that is misunderstood” to be a “wry” understatement in a poem that is a “serious attempt to understand such a woman—her sense of estrangement, her impulse toward death—by internalizing evil and giving it a voice: a chortling, self-satisfied, altogether amiable voice which suggests that “evil” is perhaps the wrong word after all” (85). She likens herself to a witch who is a “lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. / A woman like that is not a woman, quite. / I have been her kind” (15). She is voicing the pain of being a woman who doesn’t conform to the role society has chosen for her. The disparity between her true identity and her social role causes her to feel insane, dangerous and evil. She cannot be “a woman, quite” in the way she has been taught to be a woman.

In the next stanza she changes the refrain to “A woman like that is misunderstood. / I have been her kind” (16). She is explaining that she is not evil, really, but rather has

only been viewed that way. Her last stanza demonstrates a fatalistic attitude towards these confining, alienating roles of proper femininity. She writes:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages gone by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind. (16)

Sexton is describing a witch being burned at the stake but she also infuses the image with sexuality. The combination of waving “nude arms” and flames that bite the thigh characterize this woman as erotic and sexual as well as exposed and vulnerable. Gill notes that “ridden” has an aural pun with the word “written” and finds that this “indicates that it is the writing which invites punishment” (24). The rhyming is so powerful that it functions like incantation. The poem about a witch seems to cast its own spell.

In the final stanza, she transforms her fallen woman, her evil witch into the brave hero. This “misunderstood” not-quite woman has learned “the last bright routes” and is a “survivor” who is ultimately not afraid to die. The poem refers to an “other” that is the forbidden female; she is evil, insane, lonely and sexual. She is also resourceful, powerful, free and unabashed. This other woman is compared to the “driver” of the cart, the patriarchal forces of society. And finally the refrain constantly claims this other woman into the poet’s own sense of self: “I have been her kind” (16). This integration of the witch-self into the poet-self is ultimately empowering because it shows that Sexton has been this kind of woman—the misunderstood, sexual witch—but she is also more than

this role. By claiming the witch self into a greater identity of poet, Sexton shows finally, that it is only a partial identity, a sliver of herself but not the entirety. She is not reduced to this other witch woman but rather brings the misunderstood witch into the greater holistic self of the poet, a woman who is not being burned at the stake but rather writing and publishing.

Sexton continues embodying the witch in her book of poetry *Transformations*. The book is a retelling of fairy tales. In a line from an earlier poem Sexton writes: “Maybe Rose, there is always another story, / better unsaid, grim or flat or predatory” (33). *Transformations* tells that other story, the one lurking behind or underneath the story as we know it. The poems offer a subversive and troubling commentary on the classic fairytale. She also locates herself in the story from the first poem: “The speaker in this case / is a middle-aged witch, me” and declares that she is ready to tell us a “story or two” (223). Hedley describes this persona as “an outlaw storyteller who is mockingly inward with her own society’s myths of gender” (26).

The poems in *Transformations* have a mocking tone. For example, after Snow White has been warned by the dwarves and tricked by her evil step-mother two times already the poem speeds up and comments on this repetitive process:

Beware, beware, they said,
but the mirror told,
the queen came,
Snow White, the dumb bunny,
opened the door. (228)

The poems inhabit a liminal space between the mythic and the real, the past and the present. There are colorful, modern details like “She was as persistent as a Jehova’s Witness” (236) and “Poor thing, to die and never see Brooklyn” (234). The poems are also startlingly moving and full of evocative details like: “A cold sweat broke out on his upper lip / for now he was wise” (230).

Sexton subverts the idea of “happily ever after” much in the same way that she pulled back the curtain on conceptions of suburban tranquility. She writes,

and thus they passed their days
living happily ever after—
a kind of coffin,
a kind of blue funk.
Is it not? (232)

In one poem she describes the girl as a “Poor grape with no one to pick” (233). This is a subverting of our normal expectations. If the girl is a grape than she, the object, would be the thing to be picked. She would not be the subject that picks something or someone else. Sexton blurs these assumptions about binaries like masculine and feminine, subject and object, sane and insane, and ultimately good and evil. Sexton creates in *Transformations* an upside down, topsy-turvy world of fairytales that are ripe with commentary, subversion and bristling with irony and humor.

The poems also voice unspoken or unspeakable realities, with themes of addiction, mental illness, lesbianism and incest. In “Rapunzal,” Mother Gothel is figured as a lesbian, and compared to an incestuous Aunt. In “Briar Rose,” the father is an incestuous, predatory figure that haunts the insomniac Briar Rose far after she has

awoken from the sleeping spell and is married to the prince. *Transformations* allowed Sexton another way to speak about mental illness. She writes: “I am mother of the insane. Let me give you my children” (250). These poems highlight Sexton as a traveller, as a tour guide or spy between the world of the mental hospital and the suburbs. She liked to dance between these worlds, to be the poet of the liminal space between the sane and the deranged, the normal and the deviant, the mundane and the magical. She always includes herself in the accounting of the insane. For instance in her poem “Iron Hans” she describes people who are acting insane and how if you saw them “you’d run away” or “you’ll move off” (250). She refers to herself:

Take a woman talking,
purging herself with rhymes,
drumming words out like a typewriter,
planting words in you like grass seed.
You’ll move off. (250)

She revels in her border crossing. She knows that in some contexts her behavior would repulse people but in her poetry they might take a second look. As an artist who is mentally ill she is able to give a different perspective and show the mentally ill as something other than frightening. With the character Iron Hans, for example, even though he appears monstrous she speculates: “Perhaps he was no more dangerous than a hummingbird” (252). She makes her audience question the repulsion and fear they feel when encountering mental illness. Further, by including herself as part of the “insane” she embodies the grotesque and shows the good that can exist in the “ill”. Not even that what people assume is damaged and threatening is actually benign and harmless but

perhaps that there is something special, even divine about the “crazy”. Maybe they are as she claims in a poem “Christ’s boy child” or like her description of being in the mental hospital: “we are magic talking to itself, / noisy and alone” (4).

Sex and The Body

In “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” Sexton critiques a culture that punishes women for their sexuality. The girl in the poem has given birth to an illegitimate child and although she bonds and connects with her child she ultimately cannot keep her because of the shame it would bring. After beautiful descriptions of the tenderness she feels for this child the final line of the poem strikes with grim weight. She writes:

I tighten to refuse
your owling eyes, my fragile visitor.
I touch your cheeks, like flowers. You bruise
against me. We unlearn. I am a shore
rocking you off. You break from me. I choose
your only way, my small inheritor
and hand you off, trembling the selves we lose.
Go child, who is my sin and nothing more. (25)

This poem again highlights Sexton’s recurrent fixation on hunger. She describes the child at the mother’s breast by writing: “so small and strong / at my breast. Your lips are animals; you are fed / with love. At first hunger is not wrong” (25). Sexton draws a painful portrait of the loss that a sexually shaming society creates. In her later poetry she critiques patriarchal assumptions about sexuality but also breaks free of them to write many poems which rejoice in her own sexuality

Anne Sexton wrote poems that were exuberantly sexual and celebrated desire. In “Knee Song” she describes being kissed on the back of the knee in almost orgasmic detail. There is a pulsing sexual urgency that propels the poem. The short poem ends:

yes oh yes yes yes two
little snails at the back
of the knee building bon-
fires something like eye-
lashes something two zippos
striking yes yes yes small
and me maker. (205)

The breaking of hyphenated words on the line break makes the poem catch and trip to again catch up with itself. The repetition of “something” and “yes yes yes” create a fevered feeling, a sexual urgency that makes proper sentence structure impossible because it is interrupted by pure pleasure.

I believe something that is not given enough recognition is the fun, play, and euphoria in Sexton’s work. Her poems about sexuality voice a woman who is often vibrantly, robustly sensual and who is experiencing transcendent sexual pleasure. This can be seen in the ecstatic pacing of the end of the poem “Us”. The last stanza builds to a triumph of pleasure:

I stood up in my gold skin
and I beat down the psalms
and I beat down the clothes
and you undid the bridle
and you undid the reins
and I undid the buttons,
the bones, the confusions,
the New England postcards,
the January ten o’clock night,

and we rose up like wheat,
acre after acre of gold,
and we harvested,
we harvested. (203)

The poem rushes forward to a blissful release. Her sexual pleasure serves to undo religious inhibitions, like the psalms she beats down. Sexual desire helps her break from social roles, like the clothes that she cannot take off but must “beat down”, and frees both her and her lover into a natural, Edenic state of harvesting bliss. Sensuality and fulfillment are figured as something impossibly beautiful that can take a person out of their own body, “the bones,” and their own mind, “the confusions,” and even a sense of space and time “the January ten o’clock night” in order to offer ecstatic release. This prioritizing of erotic joy for a woman of her time was a transgressive feminist act.

The sexuality of her poems often troubled readers and critics. Sexton’s poetry was shocking not only in its detail but in its scope. She wrote “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,” which is radical in that she is speaking of masturbation as a woman, and because it presupposes that women attain erotic fulfillment on their own. In “For My Lover Returning to His Wife” she writes about an extramarital affair. Poems that are even more subversive deal with Sexton’s bisexuality. Here it is important to note that if robust female sexual appetite was forbidden in the 1950s, a woman’s sexual desire for another woman suffers under yet another level of repression; it is doubly forbidden. In her poem “Song For a Lady” she recounts a sexual encounter with a woman. Sexton is aware that this poem will shock more than her other poems. Her final lines confirm this awareness and yet rejoice in the erotic union with her lover: “even a notary would notarize our bed /

as you knead me and I rise like bread” (205). In her poem “The Fierceness of Female” she confronts the religious shaming of her bisexuality. She uses the metaphor of “touching like a choir of butterflies” to evoke the beauty and sensuality of their lovemaking. Her lines become even more sexually explicit as the poem continues and finally she confronts God with her “truth”. She writes that she bows her head not in prayer but to

the breast, the melon in it,
and then the intoxicating flower of it.
Our hands that stroke each other
the nipples like baby starfish—
to make our lips sucking into lunatic rings
until they are bubbles,
our fingers naked as petals
and the world pulses on a swing.
I raise my pelvis to God
so that it may know the truth of how
flowers smash through the long winter. (547)

The audacity and joy of this poem, her confidence in showing God “the truth” are radical, defiant, feminist acts.

Sexton’s writing about sexuality is closely tied to her writing about the body. Ostriker noticed the subversive nature of Sexton’s poetry of the body: “Far more than Plath, Sexton challenges our residual certainties that the life of the body should be private and not public, and that women especially should be seen and not heard, except among each other, talking about their messy anatomies” (252). Sexton’s writing about the body encompassed both the grotesque and the sublime. Grotesque in that she wrote about everything from menstruation, masturbation, cancer, surgery and feces. Sublime in that

she celebrated the body, especially the female body, sexuality and a prioritization of pleasure. As mentioned earlier in the paper, Sexton saw sexual pleasure as a way to encounter the divine. Sexton created poems that both excavated all the awful, all the grit of living in a body that is prone to decay, damage and ultimately death, while also writing poems that gave voice to the feelings of deep contentment and joy that can occur in a body. “In Celebration of My Uterus,” for example, there are a flood of images that lead to a euphoric sense of belonging both in the world and in her own body.

The female body is again celebrated and blessed in the poem “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” which she wrote for her eleven-year old daughter. This poem gives a message to her daughter and all young women to trust themselves and their bodies. She is observing her daughter on the cusp of becoming a woman. She remembers being that age and the “old wives speaking of *womanhood*. / I remember that I heard nothing myself. I was alone. / I waited like a target” (146). In contrast she tells her own daughter to embrace the changes happening in her body and to trust herself and feel confident and autonomous. She accepts her daughter’s imminent sexuality saying “let high noon enter—“ and that men will come “but before they enter I will have said *Your bones are lovely*” (147). She encourages her daughter to feel at peace in her body: “Oh, darling, let your body in, / let it tie you in, / in comfort” (147). The poem ends in a blessing of love:

Darling,
stand still at your door,
sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone—
as exceptional as laughter. (148)

The Grotesque and the Taboo

Shattering beauty or propriety to get to the real is a hallmark of Sexton's poetry. In her first poem of her first books she writes: "Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself" (4). She set aside the façade of the beautiful and pleasing housewife to tell her own ugly truths. This bravery is one of the great strengths of her writing: her willingness to say what is prohibited or private so that another person can understand. This willingness combined with her mental illness and self-loathing meant that she also, very often, embodied the grotesque. She does this, of course, when she writes herself as a witch. In later poems she refers to herself as a rat. As much as she is sometimes able to rejoice in her body and the joys of sexuality she also frequently finds her own body disgusting. In the poem "Those Times..." for instance, she writes "my body, the suspect / in its grotesque house" (118). She writes about cancer, her scars from surgery, her feces, her father's genitals. These subjects can cause readers discomfort. With its visceral detail and sometimes scatological content, her poetry is not for the squeamish or the easily offended.

She voices the grotesque not only in her descriptions of the body but in her writing about mental illness as well. She does not whitewash the details of her illness. That she was destructive, suicidal, addicted to alcohol, drugs and sex are not parts of herself that she left out of the poems. Sometimes she writes about the grotesque with a levity that might further offend critics or readers because it does not strike the correct tone of gravity, solemnity or penitence. In "Cripples and Other Stories" for instance, she writes a 20-stanza poem with an exact a-b-c-b rhyme scheme about her mental illness.

The rhyming of this poem undercuts the content. It makes playful and jaunty what is serious and sad and gives it a funny, confident tone. She writes about the fascination people have with deformity or illness. She had injured her arm as a child and the doctors were at first unsure if it would be deformed. She writes that “of course”, she had known she was “a cripple from the start” but

the surgeons shook their heads.
They really didn’t know—
would the cripple inside of me
be a cripple that would show? (161)

When her arm heals and is not deformed her mother is disappointed:

unfortunately it grew
though Mother said a withered arm
would put me in *Who’s Who*

For years she described it.
She sang it like a hymn,
by then she loved the shrunken thing
my little withered limb. (162)

The poem tackles our fixation with other people’s deformities while also giving full voice to her own current mental illness in messy detail. The grotesque is everywhere in the poem; from the feces she mistakes for rats in the toilet to her disturbing sexual relationship with her therapist. She calls her therapist “father-doctor” or “father” and refers to the way he treats her like a child. In the final stanza she conflates her father, her doctor and the biblical Adam and Jesus:

Father, I'm thirty-six,
yet I lie here in your crib.
I'm getting born again, Adam,
as you prod me with your rib. (163)

This inclusion of the grotesque is what caused her first poetry teacher, John Holmes, to urge her not to publish her poems. Middlebrook, in her biography of Anne Sexton, writes that Holmes did not like Sexton's poetry or her person. He had a palpable distaste for her drinking, her loudness, and her intensity. He disliked her poetry even more. When Sexton gave Holmes a draft of her first book and asked for his advice she received not a critique of her poems but an attempt to silence her. He begged her not to publish her work. He objected to the content of her material, her writing about her experiences in the mental hospital. He claimed the work was "selfish" (Middlebrook 203). He advised her to turn from these unseemly subjects which she would certainly "outgrow" and warned her that if she did publish this shameful content it would "haunt and hurt" both Sexton and her children (203).

Middlebrook points out that Holmes's motive was "not to critique but to censor" Sexton (203). Sexton turned this attempt at hushing her into the poem "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further." The title is an allusion to Schopenhauer's statement that the philosopher must be like Sophocles's Oedipus but that "most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further" (34). Hedley describes the relationship between the allusion and Sexton's work in this way: "Oedipus had to learn the whole story of his relationship to Jocasta in order to lift the curse that was

on his people; Sexton's claim is that her story is likewise one that an entire society needs to know" (34).

Through this poem she writes a defense of her manuscript, but also what Middlebrook sees as a defense of the entire genre of confessional poetry. Middlebrook sees Holmes's criticism of Sexton as ultimately serving an important purpose in that it disclosed "to her, in opposing him, her definitive strengths as a poet" (202). I agree with Middlebrook but also think Sexton is asserting the political activism of this type of poetry. She asserts that the personal is political and that "the narrow diary of" her mind offers something to others outside of herself. The fear "which is an invisible veil between us all"— i.e. Holmes's fear of her publishing what he sees as her shameful secrets—this fear is what limits us, alienates us and obscures the interconnections between us all. She is writing a poetry that represents "my kitchen, your kitchen / my face, your face" (35). She believes that telling her personal experience will help other people. She writes, "There ought to be something special / for someone / in this kind of hope" (35). This poem serves as her refusal to be shamed into silence and a persistent belief that her personal story could help others.

"With Mercy for the Greedy" is yet another defense of confessional poetry. Sexton dedicates the poem to a fan who had given her a crucifix and asked her to make the religious sacrament of confession. She writes that she wants to believe in religion as she touches the crucifix but that she cannot acquire religious faith solely through her own desperation because "Need is not quite belief" (62). Instead of finding faith or solace in

the confessional sacrament of religion she makes an argument for the confessional sacrament of poetry. She writes,

My friend, my friend I was born
doing reference work in sin and born
confessing it.
This is what poems are:
with mercy
for the greedy,
they are the tongue's wrangle,
the world's pottage, the rat's star. (63)

Sexton loved palindromes and so the last words would especially please her. Also, she routinely refers to herself as a rat so the idea that poems are the rat's star would be beautiful to her. No doubt she also loved the recurring guttural sounds from the g's in "greedy", "tongue", and "wrangle". There is an insistence again, like in "For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" that telling her truth through poetry can connect people, and that the making of art offers transcendence and connection. It is the act of writing, of making the poem, that gives her the ability to make it "my kitchen, your kitchen / my face, your face" (34).

Sexton's poems were often the product of her "reference work in sin" (63) and in this way she embodied the grotesque and broke the cultural of silence. The sacrament of confession, at least with publishing poetry, had very different political and social stakes for women, however. Robert Lowell, in contrast, came under some of the same attacks for his confessionalism about his addictions, affairs and mental illness but it is much safer for him as a man, as an already established poet and tenured faculty member at Harvard to write about his dirty laundry than for Anne Sexton in her first book. There is also the

fact that his behavior was not judged as harshly as hers because of his gender privilege. Indeed one of the ways Holmes attempted to silence Sexton was to appeal to her duty as a mother. Her poems were so obscene in his eyes that they would haunt her children. Holmes could not see through the cultural demands of Sexton's role as a mother and wife to realize her full self and her need for artistic expression.

She destabilized an unequal power dynamic by addressing John Holmes, her former teacher and mentor. Sexton defends her writing to a person who is in a position of power over her due to gender, age, authority and his status within the literary establishment. Her biographer, Diane Middlebrook, describes Sexton's problems with Holmes not as problems with him as an individual but with "Holmes as the Man of Letters: paragon of correctness, arbiter of taste, warden of the literary tradition" (209). In taking on this censoring force she was able to carve out a space for herself where she could pursue her truth, her writing, and her perceptions of life as a woman.

Writing Like a Woman

Through her audacious writing Sexton gained popular attention and what Katha Pollitt articulates as "much critical unease" (82). Pollitt asks:

How could it have been otherwise? At a time when American poetry was nearly as male-dominated as football, she wrote frankly, extravagantly and without apology about the experiences of women. While most of her colleagues were scholars and critics and translators with university affiliations, she was a junior-college dropout and suburban matron who began writing poetry after watching a television program called *How to Write a Sonnet*. (67)

Sexton, unlike Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, was outside the literary establishment. Middlebrook posits that this is one of the reasons that Sexton's early work is so bold and free. Unlike the early work of Plath or Rich, which "indicate that they were excellent students, striving for correctness" (199), Sexton never labored under the pressures that come from within the establishment.

This outsider status might have given Sexton the freedom to write boldly without trying to fit correctly into the canon, but it also speaks to the bravery she mustered in order to write at all. She was without any credentials save negative ones: her experience of having been hospitalized for her mental illness and her therapist's encouragement to write.

What is remarkable about her poetry is that Sexton's voice from even her first book was unmistakably female. Hedley points out that "both the middle-aged witch and the seductively vulnerable subject of Sexton's confessional poems are inescapably, transgressively female" (26). Hedley calls this decision to write explicitly as a woman transgressive because "for women who came of age during the 1950s, the decision to speak as a woman in poems could not be taken lightly" (26). Contrast this with Adrienne Rich's own admission that in her early work she tried very hard not to identify herself as female. Rich writes: "I had been taught that poetry should be 'universal,' which meant, of course, nonfemale" (277). Hedley distinguishes Sexton from other female poets publishing in her time like Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov by pointing out that they had a "problem with voice" and were not comfortable using female pronouns while "Sexton, meanwhile, was venturing into women-only territory that both Rich and

Levertov considered off-limits” (32). At a memorial service for Sexton after her suicide, Rich commended Sexton for writing about such taboo topics as abortion, masturbation and menopause “long before such themes became validated by a collective consciousness of women” (32). Hedley further emphasizes Rich’s point by arguing “Such themes were not just unmistakably, they were *unspeakably* female: these were the things that we had learned to do—and suffer—without expecting to read or write about them” (32). Sexton wrote about themes that were off-limits like incest, domestic violence, and bisexuality while also writing from a decidedly female viewpoint. Hedley notes that “Sexton’s transgressiveness involved not only her themes or subject matter; it also had to do with the positioning of her poems’ aggressively female speakers” (32).

If Sexton’s poetic identity was explicitly female (writing as a woman, dealing with subjects that women experience) her implied reader was very often male; she was writing *to* a man, addressing a male interlocutor or authority figure. She was often the victim or the person of inferior power addressing male authority figures but she also found voice outside of this binary, most notably as the witch storyteller of the *Transformations* poems.

Sexton’s poetry typically addresses itself to an “adult male, a father-doctor-mentor figure whose authority the poem’s speaker both covets and is seeking to undermine” (Hedley 25). In addressing her poetry so often to a male she is pointing out that the gender difference is often coupled with a power difference, on top of the fact that the gender difference in and of itself is already a power difference. Hedley describes it this way “there is a difference not only of gender but also of status or power between the

speaker and her confessor—a difference that is taken for granted by the society at large, but that Sexton’s poem highlights, troubles, and destabilizes”(25). Sexton confronts masculine authority figures in particular and patriarchal thinking in general in her poetry and by taking on authority and rupturing the image of the docile, pleasing woman she created greater freedom for female writers.

The Feminist Poetics of Anne Sexton

Where Sexton fits in the narrative of feminism is a subject fraught with debate. McCabe claims that Sexton cannot truly be considered a feminist because “So much of Sexton’s flirtatious parading, her glamorous posing, her sexual exhibitionism—understandable and forgivable—is clearly unacceptable to a feminist’s sense of the sources of her own value” (217). This disqualification of Sexton’s feminism serves more to show the limits of the term “feminist” in McCabe’s mind than to actually negate the feminist nature of Sexton’s work. Implicit in McCabe’s criticism is that Sexton’s sexuality and her exhibitionism are somehow anti-feminist, or at least not in keeping with feminist ideals.

Feminists are wary to claim Anne Sexton as one of our own. She is seen as neurotic, death-obsessed, promiscuous, addicted and mentally ill. All of this is true. Her messy personal life may make feminists want to distance themselves from her. Perhaps feminists seek to loudly claim someone strong, thriving and healthy and not someone who is destructive to the point of suicide. She is certainly not the ideal of a feminist author in the way Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde were. Both Rich and Lorde were able to

write creatively and academically about their personal experiences and engage directly with the feminist movement. They were able to call themselves feminists, academics and poets. Sexton, on the other hand, laid no claims to being a feminist. It is important to note, however, that she died in 1974 and Rich by her own admission did not discover her own feminist poetics until 1978.

Anne Sexton is not seen as a feminist poet. She is not placed with Rich and Lorde but rather with Plath. In many ways linking Plath and Sexton makes sense, they are both famous for what became called “confessional” poetry and they both wrote about their own struggles with mental illness. They both also committed suicide. Sexton’s suicide seems more perplexing to many than Plath’s, however. Plath killed herself when she was 30 and although she was alive to see her poems come to some success, her work became much more famous after she died. Sexton, on the other hand, committed suicide at 45 after winning the Pulitzer and going on to publish best selling books. I think readers of her poetry wanted to see her get better. We wanted to see her evolve and grow instead of spiral ever further down into her own illness. Her later poetry is almost uniformly panned by critics and scholars. Often critics note that they think the decline in the quality of her work is directly linked to her mental health problems.

In Sexton’s last poems you can see her mental illness and self-disgust writ large. “The Addict” gives a sadly accurate picture of her addiction. Speaking of the pills she takes she writes: “I like them more than me” (165). You can feel the growing insanity in her later work which became sloppy, voluminous and repetitive. She began to use Nazi and Holocaust references to describe her interpersonal relationships which shows a lack

of serious introspection about the reality of the holocaust and also an artistic laziness or shorthand. Pollit condemns “the comparison, borrowed from Plath, of Sexton’s husband to a Nazi and herself to a Jew” (71). She explains, “The equation of marital failure with the genocide of millions is both monstrous and telling” (71). Pollit finds this “imprecise feverishness on anything and everything” as caused by Sexton’s growing mental illness. Despite her illness Sexton kept pushing the poems out while her mental health plummeted. In the poem “Frenzy” she writes that she is “on the amphetamine of the soul” and that each day she is typing “very quick. Very intense, / like a wolf at a live heart” (466). In her poem “Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women” She writes:

Now that I have written many words,
and let out so many loves, for so many,
and been altogether what I always was—
a woman of excess, of zeal and greed, (537)

She attempts to pray for mercy but finds “the effort useless” (537). She is consumed with self-loathing: “Do I not look in the mirror, / these days, / and see a drunken rat avert her eyes?” (537). Again her hungers seem pathological to her. She writes: “Do I not feel the hunger so acutely / that I would rather die than look into its face?” The poem ends on a tone that can be read as resigned, hopeful or ironic. She writes “I kneel once more, / in case mercy should come / in the nick of time” (538). Sexton is still looking for mercy but now she is averting her eyes from the mirror. She cannot face the damage she has wrought in her personal life.

Reading through Sexton’s *Collected Poems* there is some part of me that wants her to *know* better; to learn from the past. Her early work is filled with outlining the

details of her illness but it is always veined with hope and a deep love for life. Lacey makes a connection between Sexton's healthy and destructive hungers. He writes, "The hunger for death in Anne Sexton's poems is equally a hunger for meaningful life, for choice and for affirmation" (109). In the poem "All My Pretty Ones," she writes about her deceased father and his alcoholism. The poem ends with a hopeful, redemptive line: "Whether you are pretty or not I outlive you / bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you" (51). This line is so strong because it is an acknowledgement of the painful past while also a declaration that it can be survived. There is also redemption in the poem: an insistence on seeing the gritty reality even when it is not pretty coupled with the possibility of living beyond it and forgiving it, letting it go. Unlike the poem's speaker, however, Sexton could not move beyond her past. The problems with her painful past continued to haunt her, rattling inside her and consuming her.

Do feminist not want to claim her because of her suicide? Does her suicide make us retroactively read her poetry very differently, like the notes to a crime scene? Does it make a poem like "Her Kind" less of a triumphant anthem and seem more like a detailed outline of how she and her talents, her ability to make magic, have been killed. Does the weight of her death make these poems too sad for us to see how radical and transformational they were and are? The shadow of her biography obscures the feminist elements in her poetry. I understand all this. Knowing her life makes reading the end of "Live or Die," the book for which she won the Pulitzer, absolutely gut-wrenching. In the ending of the last poem in the book she exclaims "I say, *Live, Live* because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable gift" (170). For Anne Sexton writing was at least a temporary

way of keeping alive. It is impossible not to feel the loss. That writing alone was not able to sustain her, that her problems were too numerous, too complicated, too entrenched for her to heal.

Although some critics have questioned “Sexton’s vision in general and the always vexing question of her debatable feminism in particular” (Leventen 138) and have criticized her for not being a feminist, I strongly disagree. I believe that voicing what is forbidden in Sexton’s case was a feminist act. Sexton did not self-identify as feminist but she wrote about topics that had been buried under shame and propriety and she wrote about them with wit, fury and clarity, over and over again. Capo agrees, “Resistance is the base for any paradigm shift, and Sexton invented a tone of resistance to patriarchy which made her voice exemplary” (22). Middlebrook points out that “Sexton knew the poetry was a revelation and a critique, faithful to the female unconscious; it reflected the high cost of socializing women into feminine roles. Hers were truths that had not been put into poetry before, or with quite the same emphasis, by a woman writer” (210).

By writing about her sexual appetites she exploded open a previously closeted subject for women. I agree with critics that Sexton’s relationship with feminism is not a neat or clean fit. Pollitt claims that “The women’s movement came too late for Sexton, who admired its goals but could not internalize its values,” but points out that Sexton did add to the women’s movement. She writes, “The 16-year-old girl who slept with Sexton’s poems under her pillow in 1972 is probably in law school today” (68). As a former lawyer who certainly did sleep with Anne Sexton’s *Collected Poems* under my pillow, hidden from my Southern-Baptist mother, I couldn’t agree more.

I believe that her audacity in writing about taboo subjects allowed other women writers the same freedom and gave women a language that was no longer whispered to talk about the underbelly of female experience. Pollitt sees Sexton as having a positive influence on the way critics review work by female poets: “Thanks largely to Sexton’s own influence, it is no longer shocking for a woman to write poems about menstruation or her uterus or abortion—or, for that matter, about erotic joy, of which Sexton also had her share” (68). Pollit, writing in 1981, goes on to claim that “No doubt many critics still wince in private at women poets who claim for themselves the sexual frankness long ago claimed by their brothers, but they are much less likely to wince in print, and when they do they look squeamish rather than authoritative” (68). Thankfully, more than 30 years after Pollit issued that statement we have critics who are markedly less squeamish about all of women’s different appetites in private and in print.

Sexton started writing because of the encouragement of her doctor. He told her that her poems might help someone someday and this gave her a “feeling of purpose” (Juhasz 334). I believe her writing helped many people, particularly women. Sexton, through writing about her own problems, unveils and articulates greater societal problems. The articulation of her personal story speaks to a larger collective experience. Juhasz describes the phenomenon this way: “Though her poetry began as therapy for her personal salvation, because it is a public act it reaches out to others” (341) and adds that “the poet’s words affect other people: they may even cause changes, action. It is a voice of power” (343). Her writing saved her for a while but the products of her writing have offered hope to innumerable people. When she wrote “there ought to be something for

someone in this kind of hope” she was exactly right. Her brave poems were and are gifts,
lampposts, maps given to the world.

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THE ARROW, THE STY, THE SPUR AND THE BLESSING:
DESIRE IN THE POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

William Butler Yeats wrote “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (405). This paper will explore the ways in which Yeats quarreled with himself over the subject of desire. Yeats wrote poems throughout his life that wrestled with the issue. Desire is present throughout his entire collection of poetry in many different incarnations with contradictory facets. In his early love poetry desire is figured as a destructive force symbolized by a bow and arrow. In the rebellious and defiant poems Yeats wrote in the voice of female personas, desire is unabashedly celebrated, even if it is not a heavenly mansion but rather a jovial sty since “love has pitched his mansion / in the place of excrement” (121). In his later poetry Yeats came to terms with his desire and realized that desire is a spur to self-knowledge and creativity. At the end of his life Yeats was able to represent moments of transcendent wonder and see desire and the body as a blessing.

Desire as a Destructive Force

In his early poetry Yeats depicts sexual desire as a disruptive, chaotic and wounding force. The portrayal of desire as harmful could spring from his well-documented unrequited love affair with Maud Gonne. Yeats refers to the day he first met

Gonne, January 30th, 1889, as the day “the troubling of my life began” (*Memoirs* 40). In the poem “No Second Troy” the speaker laments that his desire for his love has “filled my days with misery” (37). He sees the object of his affection, as creating a destructive desire, like Helen of Troy. Men desire this woman and cities are destroyed as a consequence. The final couplet shows how powerless the speaker feels in the face of his desire: “Why, what could she have done, being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?” (37). The last line envisions Helen as solely responsible, as if she burned down Troy all by herself. Yeats has conflated the person that is desired with desire itself and the unrequited desire he feels causes him to see the object of his affection as a destroyer.

Yeats described the beauty of Maud Gonne in violent terms as well. In “No Second Troy” and “The Arrow” Yeats imagines Gonne and her beauty as weapons. Yeats portrays Gonne’s physical charms as “beauty like a tightened bow” (37). In “The Arrow” Yeats recounts being wounded by his desire. He writes: “I thought of your beauty, and this arrow / made out of a wild thought, is in my marrow” (30). The depictions of a bow and arrow in these poems lie beyond the benign and characteristic idea of cupid’s arrow. There is a visceral jolt in describing beauty as being “like a tightened bow” and a palpable grit, offset by the rhyming, in having an arrow lodged in one’s marrow. In his early explorations with desire Yeats writes most often of the tortures of not having.

The suffering in his poetry reflected the suffering in his life. After rejection from Gonne and a separation from his first lover, Olivia Shakespear, he wrote:

It was a time of great personal strain and sorrow. Since my mistress had left me, no other woman had come into my life, and for nearly seven years none did. I was tortured by sexual desire and disappointed love. Often as I walked in the woods at Coole it would have been a relief to have screamed aloud. When desire became an unendurable torture, I would masturbate, and that, no matter how moderate I was, would make me ill. (*Memoirs* 125)

Yeats feels tortured by desire and wants to scream. He can only comprehend desire as destructive given his feelings of strain, sorrow and powerlessness. Yeats famously declared that although a poet “writes always of his personal life” the poetry is different than the poet himself—“the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast” (*Reader* 422). In the poetry the poet’s life has “been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete” (422). This distinction can be seen in the difference between Yeats’s personal feelings at the time as seen by his description in his memoir which are candid about his suffering but not masterful works of art like his poem “No Second Troy.”

The destructive force of desire is not only shown in images of Maud Gonne harming Yeats but also in a counter desire on Yeats’s part to wound and destroy Gonne because his love is unrequited. In “He wishes his Beloved were Dead” he imagines the joy he would have if she were dead because if she were “but lying cold and dead” she would then come to him (28). He imagines that after her death they could experience the kind of union he very much wishes to have with her living body:

You would come hither, and bend your head,
And I would lay my head on your breast;
and you would murmur tender words,
Forgiving me, because you were dead. (28)

Unrequited desire and longing have so tortured the poet that he fantasizes about a spiritual union that can only occur if his beloved were dead because the living Maud Gonne continually rejected him, insisting on “an absolutely platonic friendship which is all I can or ever will be able to give” (MacBride 85).

Even in his later poetry, which I will argue shows desire as spur for self-knowledge, creativity and even transcendent happiness, there still exists echoes of the idea that desire is a destructive force. In his famous and controversial sonnet, “Leda and the Swan”, for example, he depicts the rape of Leda by Zeus. The sense of violence propels the poem from the first line “A sudden blow: the great wings beating still / Above the staggering girl” (102). Leda is thrown off balance and her neck is caught in the swan’s bill. The violence of this desire arguably begins to consume Leda as well. Her fingers are “terrified” but “vague” and her thighs are “loosening” against “the feathered glory” of the swan (102). The poem seems to sometimes inhabit Leda’s psyche, or to at least empathize with her experience of wonder at her interiority. When she is being raped the poem asks “and how can body, laid in that white rush, / but feel the strange heart beating where it lies?” (102). The poem can be seen as an eroticization of violence, or dangerously read as the argument of a rape apologist. Some scholars, like Helen Sword, have interpreted the poem as a reflection of how Yeats felt about the creative process and that the poem can be read as a “fable of divine inspiration” (305). The argument is that Yeats feels powerless and devoured by the creative process and is left with a momentary knowledge and power before the “indifferent beak” of the great idea or imagination can let him drop. Haswell disagrees with Sword’s argument and views Yeats creative process

as occurring from the daimon within and not from an outside force. She further argues that Yeats's creative process did not usually entail the kind of "sudden blow" of powerful inspiration and that for Yeats "there are no flashes of inspiration but rather painstaking labor and endless revision" (132). Whether or not the poem is read as a Yeatsian experience of creativity, it certainly reflects a deep ambivalence to the powerful force of desire.

"Leda and the Swan" shows the violence of desire. Lust causes Zeus to transform himself into a swan. Yeats depicts Zeus as transformed by his own rapaciousness into something monstrous and terrifying, confronting the reader with the image of great wings beating above a staggering girl. The poem was criticized as pornographic and obscene and began a censorship debate. Yeats envisions sexual appetites as transforming a God into a beast and sexual desire is revealed as causing rape and bestiality. Passion is also, even despite violence and coercion, still portrayed as impossible to fully resist. Desire is envisioned as a destructive force that no matter how unwillingly encountered becomes consuming. Also, the consummation, the "shudder in the loins" leads to even more destruction in the future: "the broken wall, the burning roof and tower / and Agamemnon dead" (102). Desire here creates every expanding ripples of destruction.

In the eroticization of violence and the murky portrayal of Leda's consent it is easy to see why readers and feminist critics could have problems with the troubling sexual politics of this poem. In the ways in which Leda's response is seen as approaching arousal or consent, the poem can reinforce misogynistic notions that women are naturally sexual and submissive and crave their own violation. The poem can reflect the

unquestioned beliefs of a patriarchal rape culture. At the same time, Cullingford points out that Yeats was fighting against censorship with this poem that was attacked as being pornographic. During this time he was also fighting for issues that would help empower women, advocating for birth control and divorce against the repressive Catholic church. Cullingford explains this contradiction: “We cannot make a tidy separation between positive liberal-historicist hermeneutic and a negative feminist one” (164). She continues that “to read ‘Leda and the Swan’ along the contrasting axes of Irish history and women’s history reveals” what she calls “an intimacy between liberation and oppression” (164).

The poem can give easy fodder for a feminist critic, along with “A Prayer for my Daughter” and “Micheal Robartes and the Dancer” to attack Yeats. The sexist beliefs underpinning some of these poems do not neatly map onto Yeats’s own personal life, however. Cullingford writes “Yeats loved, liked, collaborated with, and respected women—most of the time” (9). She points out that he “encouraged their intellectual and creative work, assumed their professional competence and chose them as allies” (9). Although certain poems like “A Prayer for My Daughter” help reify patriarchal ideas that women should be passive and intellectually empty, waiting to be filled and defined by men, the actions of his life contradict this belief. In *Yeats and the Idea of Women* Toomey points to his relationships with Madame Blavatsky, Maud Gonne, Florence Farr, Olivia Shakespeare and Lady Gregory as proof of his admiration of strong women. She writes, “All these women were, to a greater or lesser degree, unconventional: an occultist, a political activist, an actress, a novelist and an aspiring writer” and all were economically more powerful than Yeats (xvii). Yeats might have created sexist portraits in “A Prayer

for My Daughter”, and depending on your interpretation in “Leda and the Swan” but he was fascinated by strong and independent women.

The fascination with strong women makes its way into his own poetry. Yeats wrote of women not only as desirable objects but as desiring subjects. He wrote poems that celebrated women who reveled in desire. Not only is Yeats approving of women who desire by creating sympathetic depictions of female characters, he also wrote poems directly from their perspective. In a series of poems Yeats writes in the voices of a female character, Crazy Jane, and allows this female persona to speak boldly about sexual desire.

Desiring Women

In this section of the paper I will look at the Crazy Jane poems to see how Yeats handles the subject of women as desiring subjects. In these poems Yeats writes from the viewpoint of a woman named Crazy Jane. Crazy Jane speaks with practicality and levity of her sexual experiences and is contrasted to the character of the bishop who seeks to shame her for her sinful actions. Jane is fiery and unapologetic in her radical non-conformity to societal standards. Haswell notes: “No wonder Jane is branded as ‘crazy’—her attitudes work against the grain of male standards; her actions jar male sensitivities; her vision of life challenges long-standing tenets of social practice and philosophical values” (115).

The Crazy Jane poems play with a ballad form. Cullingford finds that the choice of ballad gave Yeats the freedom he needed for the content he was writing. She explains,

“the ballads provide an appropriately non-canonical form for a man trying to speak as a woman” (204). Ballads were not the typical form of love poetry and Cullingford argues that by using an unconventional form Yeats can more easily explore unconventional characters and viewpoints, in short, turning love poetry on its head. She writes, “The ballad helps Yeats to reinflect the canon of Western male love poetry by presenting it from the woman’s point of view: inverting the master tropes of the genre he allows the object of the gaze to interrogate the gazer” (205). The ballad form takes on even more resonance after considering the issue of social class. Since the ballad is popular form associated with the lower classes. Cullingford notes that Yeats “emphasized the messy, libidinous, and subversive powers of folk culture” (233). The ballad is a perfect form for the lower-class character Crazy Jane.

Yeats is most frank and audacious in his discussions of desire when he is writing behind the mask of a character, especially if that character comes from the lower class. Yeats is more explicit in his discussions of sexuality when voicing desire from the perspective of a beggar man or Crazy Jane than in any of his other poems. In “Beggar to Beggar cried” the beggar describes desire as the “devil between my thighs” (48). In an analysis of the Crazy Jane persona it is important to read her not only from the perspective of gender but also from the standpoint of class. Cullingford points out: “Crazy Jane speaks as a sexual woman, but also as one of the disenfranchised rural poor” (232). Crazy Jane inhabits a place of intersectional oppression. She talks back to the Bishop who has power over her due to his institutional position within the church, his gender and his class. Yeats creates a sympathetic portrayal of the candid and brazen

lower class juxtaposed to the hypocrisy and coldness of the church. Cullingford agrees: “class and gender issues meet in the personae of the defiant old peasant woman and her lover outfacing the bourgeois and puritanical Bishop” (232).

Yeats was writing in a time when the state, under pressure from the Catholic Church, regulated women’s sexuality through denial of divorce and birth control. Yeats campaigned and argued for both divorce and birth control. Yeats also disagreed with the church’s stance on censorship. The Crazy Jane poems can be read as Yeats’s poetic response to the controversial political issues of his day.

Cullingford believes that through the Crazy Jane poems “Yeats conducts his resistance to censorship through a poetics of desire in which sexuality is celebrated in the metrics, stanza and refrains of the popular ballad form” (233). Yeats’s interrogates Catholic doctrine in his poem “A Last Confession”. Cullingford points out that Yeats chooses the Catholic religious practice of confession and the poem “mimics the trajectory of Yeats’s struggle with the Catholic Church in the 1920s. Within the framework of religious discourse, the confession, Yeats introduces the oppositional voice of defiant female sexuality” (224). The woman does not follow a repentant confessional model, however: “The ecstatic affirmation shatters the propriety of confessional discourse” (223). If Yeats the male senator butted heads publicly with the Catholic choice on social issues he also bucked the Church by creating an unrepentant female character, full of desire.

Cullingford writes, “Against the power of what he called the ‘ecclesiastical mind, Protestant and Catholic’ he pitted an erotic and licentious female figure, the old madwoman Crazy Jane” (227).

The female voice of these poems is transgressive because it embraces sexual desire and acts on desires. Crazy Jane is also doubly transgressive because she has separated sexual desire from both romantic love and reproductive necessity. In “A Last Confession” she candidly talks about her many lovers in a casual, comic manner. Cullingford explains, “the woman who has had many carnal lovers and neglected to take them with the seriousness demanded by the tradition provides a powerful oppositional and parodic voice” (223). The poem shows that “a woman has imperative physical “needs” that can be satisfied by sex without the framework of romantic love” (223). Even more than in his poetry where the speakers are male, in poems with female speakers Yeats is not “willing to soften or cloud the facts of sexual desire with poetic diction” (223). Not only do the female voices in these poems break convention in their denial of a romantic justification for sexual activity but Crazy Jane also engages in sexual desire and activity without the justification of procreation. Cullingford explains that depictions of an aging woman’s desire were scarce: “Post-menopausal desire is rare in the love lyric: Crazy Jane’s lust violates generic expectations” (235). Not only does post-menopausal desire violate generic expectations, even more importantly it violates religious proscriptions of acceptable female behavior. These poems become political by depicting women breaking acceptable rules. Cullingford argues it is possible to read “Crazy Jane not as the eccentric spokeswoman for Yeats’s private desires, but as the figure for an eroticized politics of female transgression” (229).

Crazy Jane becomes a political figure not only through her sexual behavior but because she audaciously stands up to the Bishop. The pairing of Jane against the Bishop

is not an a-political move on Yeats's part. He has placed a marginalized, lower class woman against a Bishop to symbolize Catholic ideology and institutional power: "Jane's primary antagonist is the Bishop, who represents the forces of organized society and culture arrayed against the marginal female figure" (236).

Jane is brave and defiant. The reader admires her candor, strength and humor. In her conflicts with the Bishop the reader see her indignation as righteous because the bishop is a hypocrite. She refuses to be shamed by the bishop. In "Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop" the bishop insults her body and attempts to convince her to repent of her sins now that she is older. Jane refuses to repent and is not tempted by the "heavenly mansion" but instead stands firmly grounded. Jane's defiance combined with her life of fulfilled sexual desires break with the acceptable gender roles of the day. Cullingford concludes, "Yeats's celebration of female sexual transgression opens an imaginative space for women's desire and pleasure in a culture that occludes them" (238). The poems show women who are capable of great, robust desire while also being pragmatic and casual about their desires. The poems show women expressing that desire in brazen and defiant ways and standing up and telling truth to a shaming authority figure.

If Yeats was able to be express desire more freely while writing female characters it provokes the question: how much are the characters expressions of him? How much is this "crazy" female voice actually giving voice to Yeats's own desires? Cullingford posits that it is impossible to completely disentangle Crazy Jane from Yeats himself. She writes, "A female speaker created by a man, Crazy Jane is inescapably hybrid. She undermines Yeats's representations of himself as a 'sixty year-old smiling public man'" (234). Yeats

was a Senator and Nobel Prize winner but this role “with his silk hat, and his armed guards was an establishment persona with whom Yeats was never completely at ease. Crazy Jane is both his opposite and his grotesque alter ego: unlike him she is mad; like his she is old but still a desiring subject” (234).

Cullingford points out that even though Yeats is writing poems from the viewpoint of female characters the reader cannot escape his masculine presence, that of his name on the page. She writes that Yeats “sought poetic impersonality by speaking in female voices, but since the poems are signed such impersonality is shadowed by Yeats’s sexual identity. The poems are double-voiced: the poet as male is textually absent but contextually present” (204). Her argument is even stronger when the issue of Yeats’s fame is considered. He wrote the Crazy Jane poems later in his career. He had won the Nobel Prize a decade before these poems were published. So his name was not only gendered by the assumption that “William” is a name for a man but by the fact of his fame.

Haswell argues that Yeats developed a nuanced and complicated view of gender that informed all of his work. She writes: “Yeats’s vision of gender is radical on many levels. First, masculine and feminine are not limited by biology; male daimons inhabit women, female daimons inhabit men; women are not wholly female, men not wholly male” (5). That Yeats believed there was a feminine presence inside himself becomes clear from his letter to friend and fellow poet Dorothy Wellesley: “My dear, my dear—when you crossed the room with that boyish movement, it was no man who looked at you, it was the woman in me. It seems that I can make a woman express herself as never

before. I have looked out of her eyes. I have shared her desire” (*Letters* 108). Haswell finds this to be “A disarming claim, until we realize that Yeats meant it literally. He seriously believed that ‘the woman in me’ was a real rather than figurative or imagined part of himself” (3). She argues that Crazy Jane is the voice of Yeats’s daimon. She writes that the Crazy Jane poems are “not a triumphant achievement of a male poet who represses his own voice to assume the alien voice of a female persona. Instead, his mature voice is ‘double-voiced’ in a way unique to Yeats, ‘double-voiced’ because it enacts a male poet and a female daimon vying for momentary dominance with a given text” (4). Haswell finds that Jane articulates “a kind of gospel that encapsulates Yeats’s own vision of the world. She adamantly defends the importance of body, and with it the dignity of physical pleasure” (112). I believe the most vital link between Jane and Yeats is that they are both old and still desiring. Desire and aging became a tangle, a recurrent knot to which Yeats would continue to return and try to disentangle in his poetry until his death.

Desire and Ageing

In the famous first lines of “Byzantium”: “This is no country for old men” (84) the elderly Yeats recounts his feelings of exile from the land of youth and lust. In the poem the young are in one another’s arms, the birds, salmon and “mackerel crowded seas” (84) are all teeming with desires and he feels excluded from this world of appetite because of his age. The hungers he still feels become pathological because his body is old. He laments, “consume my heart away sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal” (85). His heart is sick because it is still so full of desire. Aging has made him

more aware of “the dying animal” of his body. In youth, when we are robustly healthy, it is easy to forget the inevitability of death because our good health seems fixed and enduring. We can live unaware of the reality that our bodies are always aging and that bodies are, inescapably, dying animals. Yeats writes of the unsettling feelings of desire that occur with age, the feeling of being banished from the country of fecund sexuality and youth. If desire is a place he does not feel he is allowed to inhabit it any longer.

Banishment from the land of desire may have seemed bittersweet to a younger Yeats, however. In his youth Yeats wrote poems where he envied the peace and wisdom he assumed would come with age and the dimming of desire. In an early poem “Ephemera” Yeats writes that love has made them weary and “Passion has often worn our wandering hearts” (7). Even though they are weary and worn down the couple attempts to comfort one another:

Although our love is waning, let us stand
by the lone border of the lake once more,
together in that hour of gentleness
when the poor tired child, Passion, falls asleep. (7)

The image of passion as a poor, tired child reflects the younger Yeats’s conception of desire as a wounding, disruptive, chaotic force. Once passion falls asleep, then the lovers can exist together in an “hour of gentleness” (7). When Yeats was young, he longed for the mellowing he assumed would happen with age. He believed it would bring comfort and wisdom. He hoped to look back fondly on the follies and torments of the desire of his youth. In his early poem, “When You Are Old” he asks his beloved to think back on his love. He imagines her old and “full of sleep and nodding by the fire” (15). This

description of age sounds similar to “that hour of gentleness” when the “tired child” of passion can finally be at rest. Being full of sleep and nodding by the fire creates a cozy and peaceful image. Desire is still present in the poem but only as a memory and this memory is a comfort, a kind remembrance and mutual tribute instead of a twisting, nagging, present urge. Passion with its fiery disruptive urgency has ebbed with age. At least that is how Yeats as a young man imagined it would happen.

In many of Yeats’s poems he contrasts youth with age. Youth is burning and vibrant while age is sedate, wise, worn out or worn down. Youth is also connected to a state of innocence “when I was a boy with never a crack in my heart” (10) while age is equated with wisdom. Yeats also wrote about how the wisdom of age is incomprehensible to youth. He writes, “I could have warned you; but you are young / so we speak a different tongue” and “But I am old and you are young, / And I speak a barbarous tongue” (50). In a later poem he writes about two lovers meeting again as older people in “After Long Silence”. He is not sentimentalizing age as much anymore when he writes “bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young / we loved each other and were ignorant” (122) but still finds some wisdom gained with age.

So if wisdom does happen with age, why did the comfort and peace he believed would attend age, and the diminution of desire, not happen as well? The problem that Yeats as a young man could not foresee is that his desires would not stop just because he grew older. He would not ever fully outgrow his wanting, longing, desiring younger self. This creates a dissonance that he must come to peace with in his later poetry. He must come to terms with his still very present and unabated desires. In “A Song” he writes, “O

who could have foretold/ that the heart grows old” and explains that “I have not lost desire but the heart that I had / I thought ‘twould burn my body / Laid on the death bed” (62). This poem shows that even though Yeats still has desire he is not plagued with it, he has lost the heart that he had as a young man. This could be seen as Yeats tempering his longings with the wisdom of ageing.

The idea that desire is tempered by wisdom as a person grows old can also be seen in the poem “Men Improve with Years”. In the poem Yeats compares youth and old age and argues that the latter is an improvement. He claims he is “Delighted to be but wise, for men improve with years” (61). However, while claiming to be delighted by his wisdom, age and improvements, here and in many other poems, desire still flickers. He has a moment where he turns, like Lot’s wife, to get one more glance, nostalgic for the fire of his youth, pining after desire itself. At the moment he has decided that age and the waning of his fiery appetite is an improvement he turns wistfully back, always to desire and writes:

and yet, and yet
Is this my dream, or the truth?
O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth! (61)

Even though he is attempting in this poem to come to peace and even celebrate his age, the erotic always calls and he keeps looking back to that exiled country of youthful desire.

This same looking back is repeated in more poems. He becomes more and more comfortable with this longing and in his last poem it becomes a wistful celebration. In his

final poem "Politics" he contrasts his role as a Senator who should be making important decisions and listening attentively to political discussions but instead is gazing at a beautiful young girl. The poem handles his desire with a levity and joy that is missing in the earlier more tortured poems of his life. He can fondly end his poem with the lines "But O that I were young again / and held her in my arms" (151). The poem reaffirms that the erotic is an important and vital part of being alive and that even though he is an old man he can and does still desire. In his last poems he has finally accepted his unabated hungers. He is even comfortable with his own identity and is able to joke and make fun of himself. In a "Prayer for Old Age" he writes, "That I may seem, though I die old / a foolish, passionate man" (128). Here he has embraced his identity of a passionate person full of desires, and even though that may make him appear foolish because of his age, he does not care; he welcomes the identity of "foolish, passionate" old man.

Yeats is finally able to integrate desire into his aging identity because he begins to see the erotic as a vital life force. Yeats conflates sexual longing with life itself, with feeling young, vibrant, robust, and alive. Yeats creates a poetics in which desire keeps a person young and engaged with life. In "The Song of Wandering Aengus" the character is old but passion has kept him ever youthful. His yearning and searching make him seem young. He is old but his longing is just as fervent as the first day the "glimmering girl" appeared to him and called his name, his hope is still as strong. The structure of the poem reinforces our conception of Aengus as ever young. The poem plays with temporality so that the first day he caught the fish and saw the girl seem far more present to the reader

than all the subsequent years of searching. It locates the reader in the past but it feels like the present so that when Aengus admits that he is old it comes as a surprise. Decades have passed in the white space between the second and third stanza. The reader does not mourn that Aengus has grown older, however, because he is still just as fervent about the chase and certain that he will find the one he desires. His hope has a rejoicing quality when he declares that he will find her and “pluck till time and times are done / the silver apples of the moon / the golden apples of the sun” (23).

“The Song of Wandering Aengus” highlights how desire can keep a person feeling forever young. It also gives a vision of how desire can lead to self-knowledge. Aengus goes out into the hazel wood “because a fire was in my head” (23). He is searching for something. He catches a fish and it turns into a “glimmering girl” (23). In the moment the fish transforms into the beautiful girl “someone called me by my name” (23). Before she runs away and fades the poem repeats that this is the beautiful girl “who called me by my name” (23). Feminist theorist and poet Audre Lorde describes desire in her essay “The Uses of the Erotic” as a force that leads us to self-awareness. She writes:

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (54)

Lorde was writing specifically about the uses of the erotic in the lives of women but I believe her description of the erotic can help us understand all people, regardless of gender. The erotic can help us know ourselves more deeply and chasing desire, even if it

is painful, leads to greater awareness of a person's true self. Lorde writes, "We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way" (53). "The Song of Wandering Aengus" follows a man on his constant, endless pursuit of desire. The longing drives him for his entire lifetime but he still has hope to find that "glimmering girl" and he creates a beautiful, hopeful picture of what life will be like when he catches up with his glimmering girl. Desire called him by his name and lead him to a lifetime of chasing desire and self-discovery.

Desire as Spur to Creativity and Action

Curtis Bradford contends that Yeats's unrequited love of Maud Gonne helped him become a man of action. Bradford writes, "Yeats's love of Maud Gonne in all its changing guises was, I believe, the crucial experience in his personal life. If he had not known her he might not have thrust himself into the world of action" (472). Both Bradford and Gloria Kline see Yeats inhabiting the role of the Courtly Lover in regards to Maud Gonne. Seeing that Yeats attempted to court Gonne in "the old high way of love" (33) and also noting that in courtly love the beloved is elevated above the lowly love-struck poet, and functions as a muse and symbol for abstract qualities: like goodness, beauty, purity, etc. Kline describes courtly love poetry as presenting "the woman as an elevated figure who has a spiritual influence on the man, can provide him a unifying image, and for that reason is reverently, sometimes fearfully, pursued or 'courted' by him" (4). Kline comments that many poets of this time found a muse in ideas of the

feminine: “But whereas Mallarmé, Baudelaire and others were fascinated by the female in the abstract, Yeats attempted to find his symbolic woman in flesh and blood” (3).

Desire for Gonne spurred Yeats to create poems and inhabit the role of the courtly lover. In “A Poet to his Beloved” he begins “I bring you with reverent hands / the books of my numberless dreams” (25). He gives her his poetry as an offering of love. The poem ends “White woman with numberless dreams, / I bring you my passionate rhyme” (25). In the very next poem, “He gives his Beloved certain Rhymes,” Yeats reiterates the theme that desire for his beloved has been the spur to his creativity. He offers her verse he makes “out of a mouthful of air” (26) as a tribute to her and proof of his love.

Dierdre Toomey argues that Yeats had originally used Gonne as a symbol or an ideal and for the first decade had written “poetry which turned on a conception of Maud Gonne as supernaturally noble and pure” (9). Her admission to Yeats of her secret life—her extramarital affair with Millevoye and the birth of her two children and death of her son—shattered the image he had created of her. Toomey describes the revelation “that ‘The Rose of the World’ had been for about twelve years the mistress of a middle-aged married French politician and was the mother of two illegitimate children, one living” as catastrophic to Yeats’s conception of Gonne. Toomey writes: “A woman viewed as essentially, supernaturally, virginal was dragged down into sexuality and motherhood” (7). Toomey claims that the hiatus in Yeats’s poetry—there were no love poem written after Gonne’s admission in 1898 until Yeats wrote “The Arrow” in 1901—was “evidence of the collapse of an imaginative world built upon an erroneous conception of Maud Gonne” (9).

Desire originally spurred him to offer poems of courtly love and after the image of his beloved was shattered desire still caused him to create again. He used the pain of her rejection and then the pain of her revelations about her private life to continue to create poems. The pain of desire led to the creation of beautiful poems because as he believed: “He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs” (*Reader* 406). Maud Gonne certainly believed that unfulfilled desire spurred Yeats to creative achievements. In her now famous justification for her rejection of his many marriage proposals she claimed: “You would not be happy with me. You make beautiful poetry out of what you call your unhappiness and you are happy in that.... The world should thank me for not marrying you” (Macbride 329). It is clear in another letter to Yeats that she viewed the pain she caused him to lead directly to the creation of his poems. She imagines his poems as their children: “Our children were your poems of which I was the Father sowing the unrest and storm which made them possible and you the mother who brought them forth in suffering and in the highest beauty and our children had wings” (302).

In his poem “Broken Dream” Yeats describes himself as the “poet stubborn with passion” who “sang us / When age might well have chilled his blood” (67). Desire led Yeats to greater searching and self-awareness and to a prolific productive career. He refers in his poem “The Spur” to desire as one of the reasons he is able to continue to write poems. He writes in this short poem a playful celebration of his still rampant appetites. He rebukes an audience that might be judgmental by claiming that the only reason he writes is because of his lust and rage:

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song? (137)

Conclusion

The poetry of W.B. Yeats is veined, throughout, with desire. In his early poems he is tortured by the painful romantic longing for Maude Gonne and finds desire to be destructive. His later poetry celebrates sexually libidinous women and attempts to liberate women from repressive Catholic doctrine and socially proscribed roles. The erotic continues to haunt Yeats as he ages and he does not achieve the peace and comfort that he assumed would happen when he grew old and desire abated. This leads him to feel disconnected from the world of youth, where sexuality is allowed, by his aging body. The disconnect he feels as a lustful and ageing man spur him to create poetry. Yeats had to interrogate his own desire when he was young because they were unrequited and hurtful to him and when he was older because they were still needling him, still persistent and pulsing.

Although Yeats is often struggling with desire in his poetry, his verse affirms that desire keeps a person young, that wanting makes a person feel alive. Yeats had to contend with his desires from when he was young till he died and this engagement leads him to ever more self-awareness and creativity. Like Wandering Aengus he spends his lifetime if not chasing desire than at least negotiating with his untamed longings. What changed in his understanding over his lifetime? Did he find a precarious balance or peace? Does Yeats's work make us see desire as a force that balances? Does desire age

you when you are young—making you worn out with dreams, burned through, arrow shot? But as you age does the spark of desire then become the spur or the necessary friction to stay alive and aware, vibrant and engaged in the world around you? Does desire, counterintuitively, make you older when you are young and younger when you are old?

I believe Yeats became a man mostly at peace with his desires. He accepted the wisdom of his years but also felt deeply nostalgic for his youthful appetites and finally welcomed this feeling of nostalgia. He is troubled by his hungers throughout but is finally able to attain some measure of peace and acceptance. He can embrace that he is a “foolish, passionate man” and realizes that longing even though it is painful is where his creativity comes from. Desire might not always be as beautiful and idyllic as picking silver or golden apples but it is the genesis from which all creativity and action spring. In his later poem “The Circus Animal’s Desertion” he writes, “I must lie down where all the ladders start / in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (150). This description captures the pain and misery that can attend desire. Yeats certainly understood the dark sides of desire “the mire and blood of human veins” (116) and he explored them in his poetry.

There are also moments of tremendous peace, of a transcendent joy that occur in his poetry as well. In his poem “Among School Children” he writes a last stanza of euphoric celebration of the body. He proclaims:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut tree, great rooted bloomer,

Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (103)

Cullingford sees this as “Yeats’s most complete and satisfying celebration of the unbruised, undeprived body: the body whose desires have been fed” (187). She also points out the move from the individual to the collective: “Two apostrophes combine with two rhetorical questions to produce a heightened coda in which the individualist ‘I’ is replaced by the collective we” (201). Cullingford posits that this poem was influenced by William Morris’s ideas of bodily integrity and the sacred nature of physical pleasure.

In a pamphlet Morris writes:

To feel mere life a pleasure; to enjoy the moving one’s limbs and exercising one’s bodily powers; to play, as it were, with sun and wind and rain; to rejoice in satisfying the due bodily appetites of a human animal without fear or degradation or sense of wrong-doing: yes, and therewithal to be well-formed, straight-limbed, strongly knit, expressive of countenance—to be, in a word, beautiful—that also I claim. (200)

Cullingford argues that Yeats integrates these ideas from Morris and “bases his new conditions for making and doing, blossoming and dancing, on physical perfection, rather than on the images of bodily torture offered by the Catholic iconography” (200).

Audre Lorde describes the erotic as a force that can inform every aspect of our lives with meaning, a drive towards self-awareness that can imbue our lives with pleasure and purpose. She writes, “For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (54). In “Vacillation” Yeats captures a moment when he felt completely present and full of joy. He writes,

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop, An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.
While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless. (117)

Here Yeats captures a time when he felt alive and blessed in his body. He feels his body “blazed” and that he is connected to the entire world around him. He is blessed but can also bless others with his presence and awareness. This same kind of transcendent wonder is captured in “A Dialogue of self and soul”. In this poem he has come to peace with his past and decides “I am content to live it all again” (110) despite the pain of desire. In the last stanza he is able to reconcile even his regret. He writes:

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measures the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing
We are blest by everything.
Everything we look upon is blest. (110)

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