

The Death Instinct in Sexton's Poetry

Synopsis

This paper , part of my theis **Woman, Death and God: A Thematic Study of Anne Sexton's poetry** , examines the death instinct in the poetry of Anne Sexton. It also investigates Sexton`s insight into the nature of death; her poems show a wide range of treatment of the subject of death. Death is perceived in several ways as: a lover, loyal friend and a visitor; it is also the gateway to wider knowledge and the sole path to meet God. The paper also shows that Sexton`s death poems are closely related to her life events, suicidal attempts and obsession with death.

المخلص

البحث هو جزء من رسالتي للدكتوراة الموسومه :المرأة الموت الله دراة موضوعية في اشعار ان سكتون. يتناول بالدراسة النزعة الى الموت في شعر آن سكستون. كما يتناول ايضا رؤية الشاعرة المتفردة لطبيعة الموت حيث تكشف دراسة قصائدها الشعرية معالجات ورؤى وصور مُنوعة للموت. وتشخص الشاعرة الموت بصور متعددة فهو الحبيب والصديق والزائر كما أن ه يظهر في بعض قصائدها كيوابة لنيل المعرفة والطريق الوحيد لله. ويبين البحث ايضا ان القصائد الخاصة بالموت ترتبط ارتباطا وثيقا بالأحداث الحياتية للشاعرة ومحاولاتها للانتحار واستحواذ فكرة الموت عليها.

The Death Instinct in Sexton's Poetry

Death looms nearly in most of Sexton's poems; the vast majority of her work ponders on her relationship with death. Death, suicide and mortality are Sexton's primary concerns as a poet. Her own fascination and obsession with suicide and her lifelong yearning for death are nearly expressed in every work. She seems to be afraid to die, but she is even more afraid to live. Her works are largely contemplations of suicide and death that are perceived in several ways. Death is used as a symbol of love, evil, rage, hatred, blood, wounds, operations, fever; she is also described as a loyal friend and an infant that she cradles in her arms. The poet is fond of predicting her own death, thus her poems depict many states of her life in death and her death in life. She tries to create "the perfect death" (Rosenthal 1976 429).

The poet lives a solitary suicide throughout her poems; she is a "chronic suicide," who invents various types of death to be enjoyed till activating the actual death and "postpones death indefinitely at a cost of suffering which is equivalent to a partial suicide, a living death" (Menninger 88). She is torn between two choices either death or controlled life. Death exceeds its sense in her thoughts to "become a way of claiming power when she feels powerless" (George 35). She uses suicide as a symbol for female liberation and control over one's own life. Suicide turns into a symbol of spiritual liberation and power; thus, suicidal impulse can stand for other positive concepts like strength, defiance and relief.

Reading suicide as the principal theme in Sexton`s poetry is unjust in presenting accurate interpretation of her poetry. It neglects the fact that suicide in her poetry is used as a literary device to examine other subjects like female creativity. Suicide here can be read as "female rebellion against patriarchal chain" (George 31). George`s analysis focuses on "the connection of the death wish to a specifically feminine desire for power and control; and deeper still, an ironic relationship of the death wish to a protest against human mortality" (32).

Sexton struggles with pain through a search for God for her "Dying self, the one only way to life in God" (Mantle 10). In the same way, she deals with her pain through writing. The speakers in her poems bear the same burden that she does, and as the speaker is able to find a solace, Sexton also wishes to find a release from her pains. She searches for this spiritual relief through pouring her sufferings in writing. She does not write for entertainment, but for the purpose of finding her lost God and her lost identity. She needs to write to heal her past wounds. Between her first suicide attempt and her final successful one, she wrote at least twenty poems to explain her need to die. She presents the theme of suicide to her readers in spite of being a vague and horrible subject. She explains that her desire for death is a lust and her death is inevitable.

Sexton`s "Wanting to Die" (1946) carries many answers for unseen questions and questioners. When Sexton describes her suicide attempts in her "Wanting to Die", she announces her own wish and decision to kill herself; the speaker of this poem does not attempt to "recruit company for her agony," rather she is asking "to be understood" (George 31) by her readers. She also explains suicidal desire in the poem, and asks to be excused. She emphasizes the inevitability of death; everyone has his own death and everyone is waiting for this moment. Sexton decides to choose

her own moment without waiting or enduring the frailty of old age. She parallels herself with Christ who rides to Jerusalem searching for his death. "Wanting To Die" adopts the "form of dramatic monologue" (Hall 63) and stands as a journey in the world of suicide. The questioner may be a person who cares for the speaker. She begins her poem with answering a question which is asked outside the limitation of the poem. Sexton in this poem frees her reader from the traditional passivity by making him an active sharer of her experience. The question is about her insistence to escape from life and its answer is so calm, open and detached:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.
Even then I have nothing against life. (C.P. 142)

The poem is concerned with her desire for death. The smell of death pervades on every line of this poem to such extent that death adopts myriads of faces in this poem. Death appears in this poem as a lover for whom the speaker hides "unnamable lust" (C.P. 142). Death appears again as an escape and a release from the prison of the body. She announces herself to be an expert in translating "the foreign language" of death (Wagner-Martin 217). The language of suicide tends to action rather than words; thus she selects three concrete images to show via them her passionate essence so as to simplify the translation of the suicidal language.

Though "carpenters are creators and builders", Sexton regards the process of self- destruction as "a kind of building, a kind of creating" (George 218); she seems to glorify death decision and show the nobility of the dead who pass the death gate before her. The selection of lust which is associated with helpless attraction to a situation that is better to avoid

and her depiction of attraction to suicide refer to her final choice of death. She selects carpenters, planners and architects to be her equals in creativity. For these creators there is no word that translates "why", but there is a translation for the word "how" because it is definitively for the carpenter to find a way to build just as the speaker to find the way to suicide. As the three creators: carpenter, planner and architect are building, via killing, she also builds her death. She wants to know how to commit suicide and make it reasonable; so she "Like carpenters they want to know which tools. / They never ask why build" (C.P. 124).

After portraying death as a lover and friend, she regards death as a part of her skeleton to be her "sad bone". To select this position for death is to clarify her everlasting tie with death to be "the core or essence" (George 220) of her soul. Death comes to be a relief from the "enemy", life. Death is personified in this poem to welcome her decision of deserting life and:

yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.
Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet. (C.P. 142)

Erica Jong, Sexton's friend, suggests in her article entitled "Remembering Anne Sexton,"(63) that Sexton's suicide is her inevitable destiny that she has little choice of avoiding it ;thus, "she deals with suicide and death in all her books " (Jong 63). She shares the attitude that shedding light on suicide only, marginalizes other significant themes like womanhood. Jong hopes Sexton's poetry can be read accurately to explore its actual content in the coming era and her poetry "will be understood in time not as 'women's poetry' or 'confessional poetry' but as myths that expand the human consciousness"(63). So Sexton does not

see suicide as destroying but as a building factor. "Wanting to Die" historicizes Sexton's two previous suicide attempts. She sees her suicide as a heroic deed that she is proud of. Thus, she does not have any humiliation in explaining them since she regards these attempts as a kind of self-declaration. Through these attempts, she tries to possess life and not lose it. She admits that:

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have taken on his craft, his magic.
In this way, heavy and thoughtful. (C.P. 124)

Sexton resorts to another image to add a touch of innocence to her suicide when she regards her attempt of self-killing as a still-born child who admires easy death. If it is born alive, it will be eager to return to the security and warmth of the womb which is viewed by the speaker as the source of death. Her hunger for death equals her hunger for life. This image also proves the existence of a thin line between death and life. Perhaps the still-born child represents her unachieved death that will see light after her loss of life. Thus, the equation of existence is reversed in Sexton's view. Her insistence on involving childhood in the theme of death is part of her approach to add innocence so as to beautify her horrible action and add inevitability to her decision of suicide:

Still-born, they don't always die,
but dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet
that even children would look on and smile.
To thrust all that life under your tongue! (C.P. 143)

In her poetry Sexton creates a distinction on the basis of gender between imposed and chosen death. She offers her division of death according to gender to be male and female deaths. Male death is characterized by heavy slow death while the female's is characterized by

easy and controlled one. Sexton writes in one of her letters "when death takes you and puts you through the wringer; it is a man. But when you kill yourself it's a woman" (Sexton and Ames 231). She genderizes death and yearns "to conquer death, to master the existential dread" (Axelrod 1975 188).

In this poem, she shows her passion not only to control death, but also to have equal control over life. Life stands for a drug or agent of death. She admits that death is part of her skeleton and her "old wounds" stand for her unsuccessful attempts to die. She waits for death to reopen these wounds and treat them:

Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,
and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.(C.P. 143)

Sexton is eager to persuade her hearer of her need to die, she did not see life and she "did not feel as if she really existed" (Lester, 50). She proves to fall in love with death when she tries to experience it inside the poem. Perhaps she wants to show her questioner the thin line between death and life and prove the simplicity of this type of departure. She closes the poem with appalling silence of death when she refers to Plath's image of leaving the page open. She wants the questioner to be a participant in the recollection of her past experience of suicide; she presents practically an attempt of suicide through this poem by the sudden withdrawal from the poetic arena of the poem to leave the questioner alone looking for her. She shows that this poem is "a kind of suicide attempt" (George 220). She says:

leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,
leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
Something unsaid, the phone off the hook. (C.P. 143)

In this poem, Sexton falls in the trap of double languages; she tries to convince her hearer of the necessity of death and at the same time she presents moral lesson like Death is "a sad bone" and "Suicides have already betrayed the body"(C.P.168) . In spite of the waiting of this death, she refers unconsciously for the opposite. She expresses her attitudes concerning her vague fascination with death. She is encouraged by people to write this poem as an answer to many 'whys' for her attempt to death "they [readers] keep, every year, each year, asking me 'why why'? So here is the why-poem or both us." (Rosenthal, 1970 33)

Sexton starts her "Suicide Note" (1965) with a conclusion and decision to settle an old conflict in her soul between the worms of the young girl's blood and death. Death is portrayed "as a release and liberation of the self into the divine path toward God and it is a union which triumphs over life`s confining power," (McGrath 151). It is mere a note of communication to be left to tell a friend of her planned suicide. Alvarez writes, "In these terms, her suicide becomes the whole point of her story, the act which validates her poems, gives them their interest and proves her seriousness" (1972 40). She chooses to be thrown into her "old room" (165) of death. The beauty of June fails to tempt her to cease self-destruction and delay her escape to her death. She finds death:

Better,
despite the worms talking to
the mare's hoof in the field;
better,
despite the season of young girls
dropping their blood; (C.P. 156)

After her conclusion to die, she gives her listener, her friend, a life in the poem to tell him that she will be right after death in which there is no more of pain and stings. She will be immune from every suffering. She

equates herself with the Christ who rode to Jerusalem to his death young just like her who rode to her suicide. She tries to impose control on her destiny by selecting her death and leaving without suffering:

But surely you know that everyone has a death,
his own death,
waiting for him.
So I will go now
without old age or disease,
wildly but accurately,
knowing my best route, (C.P. 157)

She resorts to metaphoric death by trying to kill her false self and acknowledge the rebirth of her new pure soul. She alludes to the divinity of her suicide that is regarded as a purgatory step and aligns her death with Christ. She foretells her rebirth and resurrection:

Dear friend,
I will enter death
like someone's lost optical lens.
Life is half enlarged.
The fish and owls are fierce today.
Life tilts backward and forward.
Even the wasps cannot find my eyes. (C.P. 157)

The motif of life reappears again to remind her of the harmful beauty of life. This memory makes her hesitant if she is not at "that old fire" (C.P. 158) seeking for death. She admits she is "only a coward", but she is forced to die and leave the "bad prison" that should be emptied from breath. The image of the moth "suck[ing] on the electric blub" (C.P. 158) elucidates her undying obsession of death without having any reasonable cause. She cannot be but this moth that sticks to her death without having the power to say why. She wants to be remembered after her death. She regards death as a step for everlasting life and all must die either naturally or unnaturally to explore the secrets of the self since death emerges as a

gate to everlasting life. The request to be remembered after death suggests her pity of many people who fail to escape like her.

"Suicide Note" is peculiar in its time and location. All suicidal poems explain the desire for death and her ways of doing it as post-attempts. There is no poem that anatomizes her planned impending attempt of suicide whether it is fictive or real save this poem. She kills herself after ten years of writing this poem. Reading this poem is a peculiar experience as one receives a note from a dear friend prior to her death. The first response is "why" Sexton fails to answer in "Wanting to Die" in spite of being expert in the language of death! Due to her uncontrolled suspense to live her death, she practices different types of death. In this poem she decides to kill her false self and gain pure rebirth. Death appears as her "best rout" to prove the thought of Alvarez when he regards her suicide as "last act [she is] born to die as soon as possible" (Alvarez 1972 121).

In "The Addict" (1966), Sexton describes the stage before her existence to show her admiration of non- existed stage when she was nothing but "borrowed" and "numb". She turns to be addicted to death. She aligns herself with Jesus to add divine touches to her death. In "The Addict" the distance between life and death is vanished to be one. Death appears as a frequent visitor to her through her addiction to the pills and suicide:

with capsules in my palms each night,
eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
I'm the queen of this condition.
I'm an expert on making the trip
and now they say I'm an addict.
Now they ask why.
Why! (C.P. 165)

Sexton regards madness as a type of death since in both one should endure social separation; thus she tastes death before dying. She describes her ingestion of pills as "a kind of war/ where I plant bombs inside/myself " (C.P. 165-66). But Suicide is certainly the most fearful calamity for the institutions in power, because while addicts may be partially controlled, suicide escapes all power control. She acknowledges her surrender to death:

Yes
I try
To kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupation.
Actually I'm hung up on it. (C.P. 166)

The speaker rejoices suicide and regards the frightful way of her death as a happy and sweet journey. The whole process of death is "a kind of marriage" She turns to be the expert and pioneer in suicide field .This poem unfolds the conflict between life and death inside her spirit and reveals that "the final victory is for the death will" (Oates 1981 63). Her suicide is a happy event and it is associated with music and tennis. It is explored as a ritual and becomes a sacred knowledge. She describes death as a:

...ceremony
but like any other sport
it's full of rules.
It's like a musical tennis match where
my mouth keeps catching the ball. (C.P. 166)

Death appears as green leaves in "The Leaves Talk". The green leaves invite her to escape the bar and confinement and join them. This poem adopts the form of a dream and proves the untold obsession of Sexton towards suicide. The poet is also fond of predicting her own death via dreams and reverie. Freud proves the connection between dreams and related reality to such extent that he explains that dreams can reveal the

real "disguised wishes" (George 78). Death, coffin and suicide appear green in this poem to reverse the classical connection between happiness, goodness and greenness. Death is no longer associated with blackness; it is linked with greenness. For Sexton, victory and happiness lie in death. The green leaves try to attract Sexton to quicken her death:

the leaves,
green, green, wearing their masks
and speaking, calling out their Sapphic loves,
are here — here — here —
calling out their death wish:
"Anne, Anne, come to us."
to die of course. Come when listening. (C.P. 540)

The leaves keep on calling Sexton to join green death. The effortless insistence of the leaves reflects the inevitability of Sexton's death. She cries because she is in her prison and behind bars. She fails to join them:

They call, though I sit here
sensibly behind my window screen.
They call, even if I'm pinned behind bars.
They call, they call their green death call. (C.P. 541)

In "The Death Baby", death is delineated as "a frozen baby" (354). The speaker proves the existence of death in human soul as every one carries his own death from birth and concludes by transforming death into a baby that she cradles in her arms. Again the speaker manipulates the positive image of childhood to refer to negative image of death. She does her utmost effort to embellish her death to be a common decision for her people:

The baby turned to ice.
Someone put her in the refrigerator
and she turned as hard as a Popsicle. (C.P. 354)

For Sexton, the womb that is the symbol of generation turns to be the source of death; thus, death seems mingled with life in this poem. The life of the baby is the path for his death. In other words, death and life are interchangeable. To emphasize her dire need for death, Sexton employs many images to reflect her death like: child, ice, frost and fetus. Her "Death Baby" reflects her identity and her wish for suicide. She selects the image of dead baby to reflect the connection between her and death:

I was an ice baby.
I turned to sky blue.
My tears became two glass beads.
My mouth stiffened into a dumb howl. (C.P. 354)

The death baby is "still- born aspect of the self" (Lauter 92). The death baby seems to read his victim`s history:

you know all about me.
You have worn my underwear.
You have read my newspaper.
You have seen my father whip me.
You have seen me stroke my father's whip. (C.P. 358)

The poem presents a new type of death that Sexton experiences due to her frequent attempts of death; she introduces the psychic death and "the fact that the poet comes to life again with death mark still on her forehead" (George 84). She turns to be a pioneer in suicide since she experiences death in life, life in death and death in the poem itself as she does at the end of "Suicide Note"; she acknowledges her flirtations with death by referring to her attempts of suicide warmly:

I died seven times
in seven ways
letting death give me a sign,
letting death place his mark on my forehead,
crossed over, crossed over. (C.P. 356)

She shows the birth of death in everyone as a baby inside human spirit:

And death took root in that sleep.
In that sleep I held an ice baby
and I rocked it
and was rocked by it. (C.P. 356)

She defies any social chains that prevent her from gaining her death. She beats her death when she decides the time of her departure:

To beat death down with a stick.
To take over.
To build our death like carpenters.
When she had a broken back,
each night we built her sleep. (C.P. 357)

Sexton frequently uses a positive vision to counter negative view. She uses life's birth to be her vehicle of death. The cycle of life drags man to his death. The interference between life and death in Sexton's poetry is not simple. In this interchange, Juhaz offers a persuasive analysis of Sexton's views:

Through the process of living one transforms oneself into one's own death each birth only hasten the process, so one grows from birth to child to daughter to mother: in the last act of birth to own my death. I am my mother's baby, I am my mother, I am my baby, I am my death. (137)

In "Sylvia's Death" (1963), written after six days of Plath's suicide, she mourns the death of her close friend. In this poem, she glorifies the process of dying and appreciates anyone who has passed away into his last death. In this poem, she seizes the opportunity to speak of her yearning to death that takes a new mask to be a sort of confinement and disclosure. The poet blames her friend of upstaging to death and breaking their pact to die together to take the raising potatoes and leave the bees. Wagner-Martin notes that death in this poem is seen as "a pathetic

completion between suicides, one is accomplished and one potential, full of petty, jealousy and envy masquerading as eulogy" (216). It is clear that between the two there is a grand scheme of death. Sexton reaches the "stone place" (C.P. 126) to admit of their addictive yearning for death and their foresworn bond to die together. Death appears in this poem as "our boy," the "sleepy drummer," (C.P. 162) and such a romantic dream at the poet's consciousness. Her lust for death is identified as a release from undisclosed pain:

the sleepy drummer
who beat on our eyes with an old story,
how we wanted to let him come
like a sadist or a New York fairy
to do his job. (C.P. 126)

The poem refers to the female suicide as hunger for love that is free from terror. Death is delineated as a soft boy or dreamy drummer who tells his stories to them. This appearance stands as a contrast to the traditional image of death. Through Sexton`s depiction of their death, she fails to capture her envy and jealousy of her friend who died before her:

Thief! —
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
the death we said we both outgrew. (C.P. p 126)

Their death is conceived, by Gilbert and Gubar, as an act of "dangerous impersonation of their own metaphors" and a conception which echoes Lowell's understanding of the "imaginative risks" that is inherent in suicide poetry (549). In Sexton`s opinion, Sylvia diminishes her identity via this death to be merely "a blonde thing" that has deprived her of "special language":

what is your death
but an old belonging,
a mole that fell out
of one of your poems?
O friend. (C.P. 127)

"The Starry Night", the first poem in Sexton's *All My Pretty Ones*, is technically Sexton's first suicide poem; or at least it is the first poem that directly addresses her suicidal desires. In the first stanza, the poet acknowledges the denial of life in her soul and expresses her wish to die. Death is compared to a dark tree:

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die. (C.P. 53)

The figure of the "drowned woman" is transformed and becomes an agent of the poet's suicidal desire. The second stanza progresses from the image of the tree/drowned woman:

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons - -
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die (C.P. 54)

According to Sexton, this is the difference between forced and selected death. Interestingly, the tree flows up, not down, although drowning is usually associated with sinking into water. Instead, it becomes an ascent to the sky. This elevation of attention to death links suicide to a glorious death; she insistently emphasizes that she wants to select her death to suit such a calm nightly location via her repeated refrain "This is how/ I want to die" (C.P. 54). Sexton yearns for death without any criminal funeral

"into that rushing beast of the night, / sucked up by that great dragon, / to split from my life with no flag, / no belly, / no cry " (C.P. 54).

In "Flee on Your Donkey", Sexton defines a persistent "hunger for death, which started after another breakdown and suicide attempt: "I have come back but disorder is not what it was. / I have lost the trick of it! /The innocence of it! "(C.P. 103). The phrase "I have come back" refers to her return to madness, and alludes to the state of her recovery. She regards death as an escape from her suffering and madness that is evident in her repeated use of prison metaphors to describe her condition. She describes herself in a mental hospital "fastened to the wall like a bathroom... she fell in love with jail". She finds the release via death:

Anne, Anne,
flee on your donkey,
flee this sad hotel,
ride out on some hairy beast,(C.P. 102)

The suicidal desire is vivid in "For the Year of the Insane" (1963) where Sexton describes death as a space separating her body from mind. She admits that she experiences death in her life via her madness when she sees her mind desert her body. This unique separation allows her to observe herself carefully and live death. Thus, her physical death offers her a golden opportunity to escape her social death and madness:

In the mind there is a thin alley called death
And I move through it as
Through water my body is useless.
It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet.
It has given up. (C.P. 128)

She is alienated from herself, during her self-destruction state, She states that her body has no will or power to resist death and "My body is useless. /It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet/ It has given up" (C.P. 128) to its

destruction. The ritual of drinking wine is a sort of possession by death and madness:

a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman
who comes riding into my mouth.
The glass tilts in on its own
and I am on fire.
I see two thin streaks burn down my chin.
I see myself as one would see another.
I have been cut in two. (C.P. 129)

Sexton fears the coming of her "horseman" that stands for death in this poem. She states that the body is trapped through birth.

"The Abortion" contains a vague refrain that evaluates death to such extent that it places death before even life; she writes: "Somebody who should have been born / is gone". The natural sequence of life-death is questioned here. According to the poet death wins the first location; she hints that death can be life or the opposite "the manner of her death is at once frightening and fascinating to those who responded to her poetry, sharing as they do many of the same fears and insecurities she articulated so well" (Levertov 45-60).

Death does not appear in "Her Kind" as a personal wish of Sexton, but as a general wish for all her kind: madwoman, misunderstood wife, and mother that are torn like her. She contemplates the different roles played by her, though none of them points to her actual self. Sexton's hunger passes from "private to published hunger" (Johnson 107). In this poem, she probes the reality of women with reference to herself. She also views reality objectively as reality has been conventionally associated with real people in their life; she also selects the women who should be released by death and praises the bravery of suicide in this poem. The

speaker adopts a magical power to check the suffering of women who are in need of death in different stages:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind. (C.P. 15)

She generalizes her wish for death to be a feminine task in Western society. Women are in dire need for new rebirth in a healthy form via death. She invites women to die and if housewives are "not ashamed" to die, a new collective identity can emerge. The poem ends with a seemingly courageous step towards death: "a Woman like that is not ashamed to die. / I have been her kind (C.P. 14). Capo draws the attention to the use of "ashamed" in this poem which demands an awareness of the isolation of audience from the self. (36).

In "Firebombers", Sexton finds a suitable location for death. She selects America to be the "grocer for death" and undergoes in the "death market" (Bixler 53). She selects America to be the ground of death; she hints at the suffering of people, in particular women in this land that stultifies them to find no vent save death:

We are America.
We are the coffin fillers.
We are the grocers of death.
We pack them in crates like cauliflowers. (C.P. 306)

In "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator", Sexton regards death as a new type of love and an "extension of love" (Bixler 144) that has the

power to remove the burden of pain softly. She is fed up with life. Suicide is better than waiting and dying every day:

The end of the affair is always death.
She's my workshop. Slippery eye,
out of the tribe of myself my breath
finds you gone. I horrify
those who stand by. I am fed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.(C.P. 196)

Being an expert in death and its language, Sexton does not wish in "Letters to Dr Y" for a common death; she aggrandizes her demand to wish for the perfection of that death. She wishes her death to be complete and integrated:

To die whole. To die as soft and young as a leaf.
To lie down whole in that green god's belly.
Have the leaves always talked? Even when you were
young?
you ask. (C.P. 577).

She seeks a complete integration with death that has the power to add perfection to its heroine. Sexton fears the frailty of age; thus, suicide offers such merit of dying young. In "Letters to Dr Y", death takes a new form to be a murderer in a nightmarish shape:

Death,
I need my little addiction to you.
I need that tiny voice who,
even as I rise from the sea,
all woman, all there.(C.P. 561)

In "Killing the Spring", Sexton finds out that death has superpower to penetrate and paralyze her soul in spite of being alive; Death is a "creative personal thing" (Bixler 62). She feels the death of spring within her soul. She shows that suicide is an old craft that is related to the idea of sacrifice and it can be a sign of love for other people as it occurs with

Jesus. She does not only equate her death with Jesus, but she also equates her soul as an artist with Jesus as well. She states that she is similar to Jesus in sacrificing her soul for humanity. Death reappears in the same poem to be a path towards eternity. Her spiritual death is announced even by her books and papers; her eyes are turned to blinders. She presents various justifications for her life longing for death. Sometimes she tries to explain the irritable 'why' for her suicide, in other times, she fails to explain suicidal obsession:

Then I ignored spring.
I put on blinders and rode on a donkey
in a circle, a warm circle.
I tried to ride for eternity
but I came back.(C.P. 321)

In "Ambition Bird", Sexton sees her death and coffin in her creativity. The poet creates a union with the ambition bird "He wants, I want". He stands for part of her. The bird seems to drag her for her death. In spite of her attraction to death, she becomes aware that it is not her ally. She refers to her suicide attempts as enemy; in "Wanting to Die" she writes "twice I have possessed/ possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy" (C.P. 143). She notices that suicide is a betrayal for the body, she says openly in her "Live" (1966) when she feels suicidal" that became a perjury of the soul /it became an outright lie". She finds life as a trap in which man is caught like fish and forced to live. It is clear that Sexton delineates death as a human everlasting trap; she traces the series of trap as "the body was caught/ in the first place at birth, / like a fish " (C.P. 167). In spite of her promise in the last stanza to choose life, she acknowledges at the first stanza the existence of death as a hell in our life that cannot be escaped; thus, we are in front of a paradox.

In "For Mr. Death Who Stands with the Door Open", Sexton presents death as part of sexual macabre. She prepares for her death like the virgin prepares for her wedding. The speaker acknowledges her suicidal tendencies and her indefatigable searching for her end. This poem enumerates various masks of death in the speaker's life like "valentio", "bait" and "fasto". She holds a dialogue with her death to reach eventually to a compromise with her death stating "But when it comes to my death let it be slow" (C.P. 352).

In "O Ye Tongue, Tenth Psalm", death becomes a freeing experience, a release into a spiritual freedom. It offers a freer world of existence whether death is symbolic or literal. She concludes that "god was large at death hole", death appears here as a freedom of the soul to fly toward God. It can achieve a quick union which "triumphs over life's confining power" (Bixler 151). The speaker tries to add a divine halo over her decision of suicide by depicting it as a sole path to God. Death appears as a key to human suffering:

For death comes to friends, to parents, to sisters. Death comes with its bagful of pain yet they do not curse the key they were given to hold. (C.P. 411)

Sexton acquires new confidence in her poems; she no longer hides her suicidal lust under the cover of "cry for help or suicide note" (Bixler 152). In "The Wall", she presents death as the only alternative to life; the suffering of life can vanish by embracing death. She seems to possess death that is reserved for a certain type of people. Sexton's poetry seems to "shift from personal to transpersonal" (Lauert 25) when she invites other people particularly those who are in pain to adopt her map of death by removing life just like putting off clothes and creating an everlasting union with god by death:

clumsily,
take off your life like trousers,
your shoes, your underwear,
then take off your flesh,
unpick the lock of your bones. (C.P. 445)

Sexton equates her gift of poetry with the worshiping of saints; both seek the glory of heaven. She no longer endures her mortality. She hints at fulfilling a higher achievement of knowing God Who cannot be known in living. Thus, self-destruction is the sole vehicle for having spiritual knowledge. In her opinion, man cannot be relieved from mortal trapping without death and her worried spirit is a reaction to incomplete understanding of life. Sexton attempts to gain spirituality through killing herself. She seems desperate to receive an answer from God. Her poem contemplates death while struggling to see what lies beyond the grasp of mortal understanding.

Sexton's "The Poet Ignorance" reveals that death is an escape from the control of the body that is portrayed as a prison. Sexton cannot control her "yearning for larger experience that rushes of near-certainty" (Wagner-Martin 58). Through death, she searches for eternity and truth since she claims that the self is immortal not the body:

Perhaps I am no one.
True, I have a body
and I cannot escape from it.
I would like to fly out of my head. (C.P. 432)

In "The Assassin", death is personified as a playful pursuer, one that the author seems to welcome with a kind of tacit acceptance. Death is portrayed via the speaker's confrontation with it as a dangerous sexual encounter. Previously she stated that death knew her history and the details of her life; now she can read her death and discover him. Her dual attitudes for death sometimes appear in the same poem:

He[death]will bend down toward me
and his veins will tumble out
like children . . . Give me
his flag and his eye.
Give me his hard shell and his lip. (C.P. 310)

In "Faustus and I", death appears as an evil looking for souls and the speaker adopts the character of Doctor Faustus, who sold his soul to the devil for knowledge and power. Sexton believes that the higher consciousness lies behind the wall of death and life hinders gaining such grace "I have made a pact and a half in my day/...The rest of the words turned to wood in my hands. /I am not immortal. Faustus and I am the also-ran" (C.P. 353).

Death appears as a butcher in "Imitation of Drowning", the result of this personification is that man turns to be a mere animal under death's control "Death, that old butcher, will bother me no more" (C.P. 107). She seems to have the decision of death due to her numerous attempts of suicide. She is addicted to death to such extent that she wants to practice death through her dream by drowning in white water. She ponders "This August I began to dream of drowning. / The dying went on and on in water as white and clear" (C.P. 107).

In "All My Pretty Ones," Sexton examines the cyclical nature of life by exploring the death of her parents, who passed within months one after another. Her attitudes to death are slightly different in this poem, as she discovers the perspective that accompanies the passing of her mother and father. Here, death is a bringer of reconciliation and peace, and Sexton cannot help but find a measure of forgiveness for the two that raised her, however imperfectly:

Father, this year's jinx rides us apart
where you followed our mother to her cold slumber;

a second shock boiling its stone to your heart, (C.P. 49-50)

Sexton reverses the common attitudes to create death from life and she comes to view death as mere a passage towards a new life. This new equation is injected in her "The Fury of Sunrise". She shows her life waiting the new brightness of death or new life. Death emerges as linkage with a new beautiful life and only death can offer a complete union with God. She hints at adopting religious grounds as excuses for self-destruction:

more God, more God everywhere,
lighter, lighter,
more world everywhere,
sheets bent back for people,
the strange heads of love. (C.P. 377-78)

The speaker feels that death is the only way for her to reach God, a goal through which she grants suicide a halo of sacredness. The only way for her to do this is through suicide. Making it a divine act to reach God is an attempt to gain excuses for her self-destruction. In her opinion, if there is God, she will feel it is worthy and if not, there is nothing to live for anyway and at least her poetry will live on. Sexton sees the constant loss and gain of her faith as a tiring journey, which is wearing her down. By killing herself, she finds that it is the only way to end the religious strife of finding and losing the sense of total peace and happiness that God provides. Therefore, this is a divine action, which is sacrificing herself to find God.

In the "Hog", Sexton describes her yearning for death just like fat "brown bacon machine, / how sweet you lie, / gaining a pound and a half a day (C.P. 458). Her little death seems to be her approach and her toy to sleep and enjoy temporary death:

I lie in my bed at night
in the closet of my mind
and count hogs in a pen,
brown, spotted, white, pink, black, (C.P. 458).

In "The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos", she mixes death and birth with devotion. Death is joined with a beautiful mother's song:

This singing
is a kind of dying,
a kind of birth,
a votive candle. (C.P. 366)

Sexton insistently flirts with death and sees it embodied in the first light of life. This appears in "The Stand Inn" where the speaker dreams of being victimized by "a yellow star" killer. She is cooked in an oven without any salvation. When death appears, Jesus appears to tell her that "this is the start / this is the end. / This is a light. /This is a start" (C.P. 526). She looks for salvation and portrays herself as a sacrificial victim. In "The Children" she seems to abandon all types of death like "little death" or "psychic death" or figurative death that she practised previously. She decides to make a step forward into a real death:

Listen.
We must all stop dying in the little ways,
in the craters of hate,
The place I live in
is a kind of maze
and I keep seeking
the exit or the home. (C.P. 420)

Death emerges as a vital means of silencing human fear; Sexton makes full use of this saying to set out the formula for death in "The Death King". The speaker views death as a relief from the fear of dying. The word fear is repeated more than eight times in this poem to show the panic the speaker endures:

Death will be the end of fear
and the fear of dying,
fear like a dog stuffed in my mouth,
fear where water turns into steel, (C.P. 587)

Suicide is seen as a heroic decision and a brave action to conquer the human dilemma of this life. So, Sexton's "Courage" is about the nature of bravery in the face of life's many adversities, from childhood till the moment of one's death:

if you faced the death of bombs and bullets
you did not do it with a banner,
you did it with only a hat to
cover your heart.
You did not fondle the weakness inside you
though it was there.
Your courage was a small coal
that you kept swallowing.(C.P. 425)

In "The Sickness unto Death," the speaker commits suicide, and is rewarded with the love of Jesus. This shows that Sexton feels that her self-destruction is not forbidden and that it would be looked upon as a positive thing for her to do. She wants to add divinity to her suicide by imagining that after her killing, she finally feels the peace she was yearning for. Death is regarded as "a new healer" (Middlebrook 381). Jesus comes upon her at this point, as if he has answers to all the questions, which she never tells the reader. Jesus' breathing his air into the speaker can be interpreted as the Holy Ghost being put into the speaker granting her the knowledge of a new life. The speaker has finally found the peace she has struggled to find for a long time.

At the end of "Sickness into Death", the speaker, after long hard spiritual journey looking for calmness in the island of God, decides to do something to end her pain. She chooses to kill herself. She slowly eats her own self, causing her death, and then:

Jesus stood over me looking down
and He laughed to find me gone,
and put His mouth to mine
and gave me His air. (C.P. 36-39)

Sexton's quest for suicide represents her search for a divine experience. Thus killing herself is part of her divine journey to bring her to heaven. Her desire to gain knowledge urges her spirit even if this means to take her own life and it is a goal that she feels she must immediately attain. While she makes attempts to uncover the underlying truth behind religion, she fails to reach full comfort and security in her thoughts of religion. The journey to God in itself is a divine effort; therefore, she implies that the act of committing suicide in order to attain this goal even sooner is a divine action.

Sexton adds again a halo of divinity to her suicide as part of her technique to convince the readers of her death. She tries to validate her own suicide by making her suicide a way to get closer to God, to feel his presence all around her. She makes her divine quest for God as a searching for knowledge. After her frustration to find answers for her questions, she selects death so as to open the door of knowledge to her. In her "Snow", God fills her empty pail paralleling Him fills her empty soul, to the depression of hopelessness as she longs for the Lord in certain selections:

There is hope.
There is hope everywhere.
Today God gives milk
and I have the pail. (C.P. 468)

In "The God-Monger", Sexton rejects the fruits of the Lord. She is torn between faith and ignorance. Her spiritual loss sweeps her soul to such degree that she reflects the ache of her tormented soul. She admits that:

The soul was not cured,
it was as full as a clothes closet
of dresses that did not fit.
Water. Beer. Gravy. (C.P. 458)

To conclude, it can be said that death occupies a large body of Sexton`s poems and wears different masks. It is personified variously to have human characteristics; it appears as a lover, visitor, loyal friend, companion and as an escort to heaven and God. Unfortunately death emerges in her life and poetry as her single option of relief; it is the magical stick to solve her problems and bring her peace. It can heal the pain that life creates upon her and makes her feel unfit in this world. Her suicidal poems illustrate her lust for death. Sexton glorifies suicide and takes it God as a way for her escape to God. Could this attempt fail to bring peace? Sexton will not care, because it is her final resort and she has run out of options.

Works Cited

- Alvarez, Alfred. **The Savage God: A Study of Suicide**. New York: Random House, 1972.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. "The Sexton's Rowing Toward God". **Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale**. Ed. Steven E. Colburn. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP.1988.
- Bixler, Francis. **Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton**. New York: Arkansas, 1988.
- Capo, Kay Ellen Merriman."I Have Been Her Kind", **Anne Sexton's Communal Voice. Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton**. Ed. Francis Bixler. Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1988.
- George, Diana Hume " Anne Sexton's Suicide Poems" from **Journal of Popular Culture**, (18, fall 1984).
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. **Madwoman in the Attic**. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980.
- Hall,,C. "Transformations: A Magic Mirror". Francis Bexler , ed. **Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton**. Conway: University of Arkansas, 1988.
- Jong, Erica. "Remembering Anne Sexton." **New York Times** 27 Oct. 1974, sec. 7: 63.
- Lauter,E. **Women as Myth Makers. Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth Century Women**. Bloomington: Indiana up, 1984.
- Lester, David. **Suicide in Creative Women**. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc, 1993.
- Leverto, Denise. " Anne Sexton: Light Up the Cave" in **Anne Sexton: Telling Tale**. Ed, Steven E Colburn. Anne Arbor: the university of Michigan press, 1988.

- Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, eds. **Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979.
- Menninger, Karl. **Man Against Himself**. New York: Harcourt. Brace and Co. 1938.
- Middlebrook, Diane. **Anne Sexton: A Biography**, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, Virago, 1991.
- Oates, Joyce Carol "The Rise and Fall of a Poet" in **The New York Times Book Review** (oct. 18,1981) 3-37.
- Rosenthal, M.L. " Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry" in **The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium**. Ed. Charles Newman. London: 1971.
- Sexton, Anne. **The Complete Poems**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
 All the subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
 Hereafter referred to as C.P.
- "Said the Poet to the Analyst". **The Selected Poems of Anne Sexton**. London: Virago, 1993.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. **Critical Essays on Anne Sexton**. Boston: G.K CO.1989.