

*LIVE OR DIE: UNMASKING THE MYTHOLOGIES OF ANNE SEXTON'S POETRY*

by

Edward Francis McKenna

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Dr. Greg Keeler

Approved for the Department of English

Dr. Linda Karell

Approved for the Division of Graduate Education

Dr. Carl A. Fox

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Edward Francis McKenna

April 2008

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those whom inspired it, namely Dr. Michael Sexson who opened my eyes, Dr. Gregory Keeler who guided me, as well as all of the critics who analyzed confessional poetry on such a personal level- thank you for leaving the door open.

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## ABSTRACT

Confessional poetry is supposedly drawn directly from the poet's personal life as if the poems are simply a diary. Further, confessional poetry is often dissected with such a finite Freudian, Bloomian, Jungian, etc., scalpel by reviewers, pundits, and critics, that the true roots of the poems are constantly overlooked; that of the essence of mythology. Critics, scholars, and purveyors of Anne Sexton continually refuse to acknowledge the influence of mythologies, the inspiration of previous and contemporary poets, and that Sexton admittedly relied on myths to write poetry. Utilizing Northrop Frye's theory that all of literature is displaced myth, I have displayed that so is the poetry of Anne Sexton. I have attempted to illustrate that when the poems of Sexton are juxtaposed with many of the common themes of myths, Classical and Christian, it becomes apparent that she is mythologizing herself.

To prove my thesis I utilized the works of Northrop Frye as well as Mircea Eliade, Jessie Weston, and Robert Graves who expound on concepts of rituals, cults, and the mythological roots of literature. I also researched Classical and Christian mythologies so to be able to juxtapose them with Sexton's poetry. In addition to thoroughly studying the poetry of Sexton (most specifically, *Live or Die*) I also read biographies and essays on her, and examined all available journals and collections of letters. A poet's personal memoirs often expose sources and inspirations for their poetry, allowing the critic to trace the poetry to a previously published piece of literature or well-chronicled myth. Finally, by reading the aforementioned resources I deduced the influences of Sexton's poetry, and purveyed them as well.

In conclusion, this project has confirmed there is nothing original about confessional poetry; especially considering the familiar themes such as death, rebirth, and resurrection, and the universal controlling forces of many of the poems such as the moon, sun, God, etc. Sexton's poetry is not "confessional" at all other than that it reveals an intrinsic reliance on the past and myths to tell of a quest relative to that of many Biblical characters, including Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

*Poetry is socially primitive. It thrives on the simple sensational language which nature inspires in human emotion: myth, legend, the fabulous, superstition itself, are the very lifeblood of poetry.*<sup>i</sup>

- Northrop Frye

Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, posited that myths permeate our lives, and throughout this piece I will apply- yet, also expand upon- his theory that all literature is displaced myth to the poetry of Anne Sexton; a poet, based on my research, generally left unscathed in regards to this concept.<sup>ii</sup> It is from Frye's notion that I have begun to understand that the background of every person's story, and the experiences of a person's life, were established and written about thousands of years ago and have been retold in myriad ways. This notion also transcends life and explicitly permeates literature. Why and how is this the case? The roots of all literature, and life for that matter, are not only displaced myths, they are inevitably tied to rituals- rituals embracing nature, marriage, love, creation and death, sacrifice, and rebirth.

Mircea Eliade expounds upon the concept of rituals as the roots of mankind in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, in which he explores rituals regarding nature, the lunar myth, the annual re-creation of the world, the need and inevitability of sacrifice, the cyclical nature of death, and states with much relativity to confessional poetry that neither the objects of the external world nor human acts have any autonomous intrinsic value.<sup>iii</sup> In other words, all human actions and all literature become valuable, or real, if and when

they repeat a primordial act or a mythical example. Jessie Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance*, also postulates that stories- in this case the Grail legend (Percival, Gawain, etc)- are based on nature rituals, which were established and celebrated well before any such tales of the Grail were developed or relayed via literary or oral tradition. Weston traces the roots of nature rituals back to the earliest days of the Aryan Race and juxtaposes the undertakings in these rituals to that of the actions undertaken by the heroes of the Grail stories. She notes the significant influence that the hero in the Grail stories has on not only the king, but, more importantly, on the fertility of the land. Essentially, these stories, as well as the rituals, are centered on sacrifice, death, and rebirth. Similarly, the construction of a poem is a quest in itself, and the themes at the center of the Grail stories are also at the center of much of confessional poetry, including that of Sexton's most acclaimed collection *Live or Die*. Throughout this volume, the author makes mythological proclamations leading to a mythos, or central theme, of a quest for salvation, deliverance, and rebirth, leading to a new identity. Weston and Eliade's theories support Frye's notion that we must backup from a poem in order to find its roots, and that myths give meaning to rituals by putting them into words.<sup>iv</sup> Poetry, including confessional poetry, increases the prevalence of myth in our culture.

It is necessary to establish several issues before I delve further into my definitions of myth, Frye's theories, and Sexton's poetry. First, Sexton's poetry was labeled confessional because of the poets she worked under and with, but more so because academics and critics felt the need to directly correlate her words with her life. Naturally, this makes examining her poetry much "easier." What the academics failed to recognize

is Sexton's admission of not writing factually; her recognition of myths permeating her poetry, and the inevitability of myths (and archetypes) being intrinsically embedded in all literature. Further, academics, critics, scholars, etc., also overlook the roots of literature, that of oral tradition, which stemmed from mythological tales and morphed into written stories, which were belied with archetypes, symbols, and metaphors. The easiest way to adopt, remember, and re-tell a story is to implant it with archetypes so to be able to recall the most significant aspects.

Secondly, by applying Frye's theory to Sexton's collection, *Live or Die*, I am neither suggesting that this is the only way to examine hers or any other confessional poet's work, nor am I concluding that archetypes represent or allude to only one mythological element. As I have dictated in the following chapters that the trees and fish in *Live or Die* are archetypes of Christ, I just as easily could have determined that the trees were archetypes of fertility and the fish symbols of an underwater god or goddess. Further, if I had so chosen, it would have been facile to apply any theorist's concepts to Sexton's poetry because the allure of poetry is that it is considerably open to interpretation.

It is my vexation at narrow-minded and repetitious academics, however, that has led me to move outside the common notions of Sexton's poetry being "that of the couch," or as transcripts of her therapy sessions. How difficult is it to apply Freudian principles to any aspect of literature? Oh, look, she is writing about a tree, that must represent her father's penis sprouting from her subconscious. Oh, and here we have a child. This is the poet's desire to go back into childhood, kill her mother, and fuck her father. Perhaps the

same could be said about Frye's theory. But considering the research he has done, having read thousands of books, and the ability of the serious scholar to be able to trace allusions, references, and myths to their roots, I disagree. Again, that does not purpose that the quest myth I have attached to *Live or Die* is decisive, rather it merely suggests that there is more than one way to examine Sexton's poetry. Further, the speaker of confessional poetry does not have to be the author. By applying theories of authorship or of Freud, to Sexton's poetry, critics overlook the mythological aspects of her poetry; and they resonate.

What are myths? For the purposes of this expose of sorts, I have relied on definitions provided by Robert Graves and Northrop Frye as well as the concept of revisionist mythmaking from Alicia Ostriker. Frye described myths as such: "Every primitive verbal culture contains a number of stories, of which some gradually assume a particular importance as 'true,' or in some way more deeply significant. These are the stories that are most readily describable as myths, and they are the ones that take root in a specific society and provide for that society a network of shared allusion and experience," and, he continued, "A mythology is a construct belonging to art and not to nature: it is not a description of the outer world, a crude form of philosophy or science, but a cultural model, expressing the way in which man wants to shape and reshape the civilization he himself has made," (Spiritus 19, 21). Robert Graves noted that "a large part of Greek myth is politico-religious history," (17), and that "A true science of myth should begin with a study of archaeology, history, and comparative religion, not in the psycho-therapist's consulting-room," (21). Though Graves insisted on getting to the

archeological bottom of Greek myths and worked with what he termed “True myth,” he noted, “...genuine mythic elements may be found embedded in the least promising stories, and the fullest or most illuminating version of a given myth is seldom supplied by any one author,” (12-13). Ostriker modifies these ideas of myth, in essence rendering it more appropriate to the genre of confessional poetry, particularly Sexton’s. She expounds:

*Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.<sup>y</sup>*

To summarize, myths stem from stories told to shape a society’s ideals and cultural traits; and all poetry is based on mythological, literary, and oral traditions. The poetry of Sexton, however, may be considered revisionist myth. Whether revisionist or plainly displaced, *Live or Die* is indebted to, and embedded with, myth.

The mythological, literary, and oral traditions I have spoken of, and will focus on, are those from Christianity, more specifically the Bible, (sacrifice, the fall of man, resurrection, paradise, creation, quests), and from the elements of Classical mythologies (love, the defeat of darkness, death, sacrifice, revival, and again, quests). However, the separate stories of gods and goddesses overlap so much so that it is the themes that matter most. Much as Sylvia Plath’s poetry in *Ariel* is dictated by Robert Graves’s Moon Goddess<sup>vi</sup> and appears to be written by a mythologized and newly empowered goddess,

so too is the poetry of Sexton- dictated not specifically by a moon goddess, but by the speaker's desires to be united with a goddess, (possibly the Virgin Mary), as well as with the divine being we know as Christ. In fact, because the Bible was conceived out of myths, Classical and others, is it appropriate to announce that Sexton's poetry is as well? In certain instances, *Live or Die* reads like a reinterpretation of several of the stories of the Bible. Like Plath and other contemporaries, Sexton paints her poetry with a mythological brush so as to disguise the poem's roots. This is both intentional and done unconsciously. And the speaker appears to be in awe of the powers of the higher God- that who is larger than humanity; thus, the inspiration and acceptance of the quest.

Associating the poems from *Live or Die* to mythologies should start with the recognition of forms as symbiotic representations of nature. The contents and designs of all poems are based on ritualistic rhythms and mythological concepts. In fact, Sexton wrote with the same constraints, both in form and content, as any other writer. The nature of things, of life, of the cyclical and structural order of life, controls not only the content of every poem, but also its form. Poems are rituals, and most rituals are performed on behalf of the non-human element of nature. For instance, all poems go through a birth, death, and re-birth process just as the moon has three phases related to the matriarch of the female, and as the seasons follow a similar cycle. In addition, meter and its singsong rhythms are a representation of chanting and singing performed at rituals. Sexton's use of image-laden words within rhyme schemes and metrical lines reveals this. On a similar note, the conceptual elements of confessional poetry such as metaphor and simile are basic ways of thinking. These tools established the myths of primitive societies and are

vital to the continued renewal and extension of the faiths humanity has always lived by.<sup>vii</sup> Sexton was adamant that it was the way the poem looked on paper that determined line length, meter, etc., yet she still engaged these common poetic techniques. She employed them in her own way, however, yelling “fuck you” to the critics, while noting that she, like Sinatra, would do it her way. Well, while also harnessing the power of archetypes and myths.

Archetypes often lead to the denotation and/or connotation of a poem’s “meaning.” More importantly, they depict the poem’s relationship with nature, myths, and other works of literature. All poets consistently use archetypes and symbols, as well as similes and metaphors, to illustrate more clearly the mythologies they are iterating and/or conveying. Sexton was no exception. Colors, shapes, plants, animals, and numbers provide hints to the roots of a poem. In poetry there are consistent allusions to the sun, the moon, the sky, heaven, hell, as well as labyrinths, and spirals, and darkness and light. These symbols and archetypes are not merely adjectives or nouns aiding to the descriptive genius of a poet, they are maps allowing the reader to find his way to the roots of the poem. These archetypes may be more difficult to recognize in confessional poetry, because it, the genre of confessional poetry, is considered unconventional. Yet, even if done so incidentally by the author, the inclusion of archetypes allows the reader a clearer picture of the influences of the poet and the myth being harnessed. Frye rightfully suggests, “If you try to write poetry, you will soon find that the kind of poetry you produce will depend entirely on what kind of poetry you have read and will be full of echoes of it. You may be expressing your ideas of emotions, but you can never express

them directly,” (Practical 12). But what of someone who has not read any poetry? For example, Sexton acknowledges a very scant education and did not read much of the Canon until well into her thirties. So what of her earliest poetry, which is still drenched with myths and archetypes? This suggests that myths are ingrained in our society and our experiences; and possibly in our souls and brains. *Live or Die*, though, was written at a time in her life in which Sexton had immersed herself in religious and Canonical literature, and after a period in which she had studied under Lowell and in the shadows of Roethke, Snodgrass, and Plath. Therefore, Frye’s suggestion does in fact hold true for Sexton, who writes: ‘I myself will die without baptism,’ ‘blood worn like a corsage,’ in “Menstruation at Forty,” and ‘Come, my sister / we are two virgins,’ in “Walking in Paris.”<sup>viii</sup> These are but two examples of the plethora that exist within *Live or Die*. She also acknowledged in a letter to Erica Jong: “...I keep feeling that there isn’t one poem being written by any one of us...The whole life of us writers, the whole product...is one long poem- a community effort if you will...It doesn’t belong to any one writer- it’s God’s poem perhaps” (Letters 414).

The experiences of heartache and abuse and atonement of the soul are no more unique to Anne Sexton than the experience of birth and death is to the city worker. And, rhymed and metered verse about sacrifice and rebirth, again, is not unique only to the confessional poet, but spread among every culture and every genre of literature. Sexton, like any writer, was exposed to a limited amount of language and a narrow range of experiences, which she shaped into a poem. Frye commented, “It seems to be difficult for the modern mind to take in the conception of a formal cause which follows most of its

effects. The efficient cause of a poem may be the poet; its material cause may be nature, life, reality, experience, or whatever is being shaped. But its formal cause, the literary shape itself, is inside poetry, poetry being a body of forms and categories to which every new poem attaches itself somewhere” (Fables 44). I support this statement only because it becomes evident after not only reading the works of Sexton, but of other confessional poets, that they write (wrote) in a restrictive universe of words. If we are all working from the same set of words and experiences, how can one person’s poetry be considered confessional, or directly related to his/her life and another’s not? There is no definitive answer.

Sexton, herself, went back and forth between suggesting that her poetry was confessional and related to her life and then not considering her poetry “confessional” whatsoever. For instance, on different occasions Sexton commented that her poetry was quite personal, yet she also noted that the poems were “all lies,” “partly true,” or “part of a larger community of poems.” Academics and critics failed, and still do, to comprehend that Sexton not only mythologized herself (whether intentional or not is of no matter), and that she was torn between intentionally deceiving said critics and pleasing her audience. Sexton was, after all, a pseudo rock star when it came to public readings because her fans figured they were getting Sexton, raw and uncut. Whether they were does not matter because as stated, poetry is open for interpretation. However, the term confessional should never have been coined.

When I say there is nothing “confessional” about confessional poetry, I mean that in a three-fold manner. First, to understand the poetry of a “confessional” poet one need not

know about the poet's life experiences; rather, knowledge of myths and an understanding of the poet's influences, religious background, and studies must be taken into account. Sexton's poetry iterates the words of previous poets and contemporaries, such as Lowell, Plath, and Snodgrass who were themselves predisposed to Eliot, Pound, Chekhov, etc., and retold stories they read in the Bible and works like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Ulysses*, etc. On a side note, however, it is important to comment that despite her lack of post-secondary education, Sexton did in fact immerse herself in books later in life, both from the Canon and of her contemporary poets. Amongst these were works of Philip Larkin, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Randall Jarrell, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Anthony Hecht, and Louis Simpson. From her letters we garner a much clearer picture of those works that shaped Sexton's poetry. These influences and the content of their poetry cannot be discarded as evidence of Sexton's mythological displacement. Secondly, regardless of those influences, it must be understood that poems, which are stories, are intrinsically tied to myths and it is absolutely impossible to write one without traces of a mythological theme because as Eliade noted, (and obviously I concur with this) all the important acts of life were revealed *ab origine* by gods or heroes.<sup>ix</sup> And finally, and most relative to the work of Sexton, when derived from a poet's unconscious there is a far greater chance that the poet's words will be inherently linked to myths. Mythological themes permeate our dreams and culture.

Poetry categorized as confessional is labeled so because the reader can allegedly relate the experiences relayed in the poem directly to the poet and his or her experiences in "real" life. More so, critics undoubtedly wanted to mold Sexton's poetry into what had

been termed “confessional poetry;” defined by scholars as poetry which draws on the poet’s autobiography, is usually set in the first person, makes a claim to *forgo personae*, and represents an account of the poet’s feelings and circumstances.<sup>x</sup> This is compounded by the fact that nearly every critical essay on Sexton’s poetry directly relates the work to the poet. This is expanded upon in my first chapter, “Critical Madness,” but a sample is provided here so as to provide a taste of the acidulous nonsense. In his article, “Light in a Dark Journey,” Thomas McDonnell declares, “It is by now a rather worn observation to say that [Sexton’s] poetry is not only personal but clearly the autobiography of the psyche self,” (40). There is an irony in McDonnell invoking the term *psyche*, which is derived from the Classical myth of *Psyche*. Other reviewers and critics, including Charles Gullans, Robert Phillips, Robert Boyers, Caroline King Barnard Hall, Charles Molesworth, and Denise Levertov, make similar declarations. These minions of Freud, and disciples of M.L. Rosenthal- the first to declare this type of poetry as *confessional*<sup>xi</sup>- find it quite simple to associate the words with the writer, when in fact such is not always the case. What is often overlooked is that in her poetry, Sexton seems to possess a prophetic urge to announce herself as a God, victim, soothsayer, or poet warrior, relaying stories in the hopes of inspiring or revealing, and appearing as if only she has undergone the written-about transformations. In as much as mythology is an attempt to articulate what is of greatest human concern to the society that produces it,<sup>xii</sup> relating the stories told through the words of confessional poetry is an attempt to articulate what is of greatest concern to the poet that produces it.

As noted, in some cases the author's allusions to and utilization of mythology is explicit. In fact merely looking at the titles of particular poems often times can direct the reader to the alluded myth. For instance, "The Legend of the One-Eyed Man," "Consorting with Angels," and "Protestant Easter" clearly indicate a strong allusion, and one can guess not what the poem may be "about," but what it is restating. In other instances, however, the retold myth can be discovered with simple correlations and comparisons, or rather by stepping back from the poem. This is the case in such poems as "The Sun," "Imitations of Drowning," and "Live." It is these poems, the poems which critics relate so directly to the poet's life, that need not be dissected with a Jungian (perhaps Jungian if we look at the idea of the collective unconscious) or Freudian scalpel, rather need to be looked at for what they truly are: mimetic stories and tales acted out and told from the very beginning of time, now being iterated by a mythologized-and partially self-aggrandizing- poet. There have been at least two critics<sup>xiii</sup> who have applied Jung's theory of the collective unconscious to the poetry of Sexton. And though this is relevant considering she did acknowledge her reliance on her unconscious to write her poetry, the critics failed to take this theory one step further to culminate how Jung's collective unconscious is very much a part of Frye's theory of a collective literature. Regardless, as Kroll has done so eloquently with Plath's collection *Ariel*, I will show that no matter the proposed originality of Sexton's life experiences and hence poetry, her works are all germane and indebted to mythologies; more so to the myths of Christianity.

Nothing is original. So said a former colleague of mine.<sup>xiv</sup> And as heartbreaking as that was to hear, I inevitably realized that was truly the case. It would be a severe blow to

the writer's ego to suddenly realize that the "inspiring" and "brilliant" poetry that he or she has written is but a mere aping of literature past; though I believe Sexton was quite aware of the restraints of language as well as the religious connotations of her poetry. Regardless, Sexton would probably accept that every poem is a reenactment of the quest to find the holy grail of originality, and in turn a search for identity, and every experience and piece of literature is based on mythological traditions. To show this I will present and counter criticisms and analysis of Sexton's poetry, and I will illustrate her use of archetypes as well as her reliance on her contemporaries for titles, themes, and lines of poems so to illuminate the fact that Sexton's life imitated literature (and nature). Finally, I will closely examine and dissect the poetry of *Live or Die* with a mythological utensil and show that even the supposed "personal" poetry of Anne Sexton can be correlated with the quest myth, which involves conflict, death, disappearance, and consequently, reappearance/rebirth, so as to reshape the speaker's identity. But does a new identity for the speaker result in a new one for the poet? I do not think so. Further, it should become explicit that though Sexton's poetry may have been inspired by "personal" experiences, neither the words nor the themes of her poems belong solely to her. Just as the neighborhood block, the city we live in, the state we live in, the country we live in, and the Earth we reside on do not belong to us because it is all shared, the same can be said for Sexton's poetry. It- its language and mythos- belongs to something much greater than anything she could create.

The Classical and Biblical myths from which she borrowed, and Sexton's poems, contain elements of sacrifice, birth, marriage, death, etc., in each of them. Further, the

unity of *Live or Die* is the reverberation of myth. It is not tied together by Sexton's voice or by an Oedipal complex, but rather by the retold myths of love, life, death, sacrifice, and rebirth, which all tie into the speaker's quest. Her style is apparent in how she shapes the language, and the lines, and defines the meter and rhythms of each line, but the experiences and resulting poetry is not solely hers- in that she is not the only one to have experienced or written about such topics. When read in the guise of myth, *Live or Die* becomes a metaphor for a casting out of the devils inside the speaker, which takes her on a voyage from believing that the solution for doing this lies in a physical death to realizing that the best solution is to "live." In living, however, the speaker realizes that she must sacrifice, kill the false self, marry herself and ideals to God, and inevitably be reborn so as to truly "Live." There are several aspects within this quest to "live" that emulate all other quest stories, including the refusal of the call, the questioning of gods/goddesses, and the eventual acceptance of the role.

## CRITICAL MADNESS

*When we write poetry, we do so in order to re-live or celebrate experiences, to put things that have happened to us together with others that have not—things we have imagined or appropriated from our reading, our observation, or our friends.<sup>xv</sup>*

- Paul A. Lacey

Even before words, written or spoken, were the catalyst for myths, the writing was literally already on the wall. And these acted out and cave-wall-portrayed rituals inevitably were harnessed into myths, and myths became myths, and myths shaped the Bible, and the Bible- the most popular book in the world, and one on which Sexton relied for inspiration and language- became mythologized, and soon every life became a life already lived; a life steeped in the mythological traditions of birth (usually out of Chaos), the quest (for a Holy Grail), the traditions of love (Eros & Psyche, Demeter & Persephone, Man with God), or the atonement of the soul by killing thy false self and usually involving sacrifice, (Jesus), of resurrection, rebirth, or re-creation (myth of the eternal return, the seasons, Mother Earth, the Moon or Sun Goddess), and inevitably, death. And the same holds true of literature, all of literature, even the poignant fraction of poetry critics call “confessional.” For though it is a genre embodying the experiential and trail-blazing traits of a personal poetry, Anne Sexton’s poetry is masked by and steeped in mythology.

The point of this chapter is to establish that it was, and still is, the critics that labeled Anne Sexton’s poetry confessional. In doing so, they have not only pigeonholed

the poetry of all “confessionals,” they have mistakenly conceptualized Sexton’s poetry as personal. Sexton, however, never made much effort to discount these perspectives other than to answer questions contrarily to the common beliefs about her poems. This paper is not meant to deal with the notions of authorship, but touching upon it is crucial to understand that if Sexton’s life was not as scrutinized as it was, it is likely her poetry would have been seen differently- possibly as rewritten myths. If we remove the poet from the poetry- again, this is not to say that she is not the architect of the poems, only that the poems are not solely hers; nor are the experiences- we could better understand what lead to the creation of the poem and its myth. Sexton’s poetry, and the genre of confessional poetry for that matter, could certainly be scrutinized in terms of authorship by applying theories by Harold Bloom, Jung, and Eliot to it, however, that is not my intention. There is some plausibility to each of them, however. For instance, Greg Johnson reveals that Jung suggested, “venturing into ‘obscurity and darkness’ is absolutely essential in the quest for a new stage of development, a higher individualism of self” (89). This in itself is quite relevant to the mythological journey being undertaken in *Live or Die*, but Johnson, like his peers, goes on to explain the two types of darkness in relation to Sexton’s life, making her poetry seem all too literal and related directly to her singular voice and experiences.

Confessional poetry was not deemed personal or confessional by the poets themselves, but by those who studied it and wrote about it. The first to do this was M.L. Rosenthal. And in a sort of “a ha” manner, other critics followed by consuming the same kool-aid. There were, however, occasions in which the poets would correlate their works

directly to their personal experiences. For instance, Sexton did refer to and consider her poetry as personal. In an interview for the *American Poetry Review* she remarked: “Poetry is for us poets the handwriting on the tablet of the soul. It is the most private, deepest, most precious part of us,” (Colburn 35). However, she often contradicted such statements when describing her poetry, suggesting she had manipulated stories from the Bible, and blatantly perverting what were considered to be “the truths” of her life in order to write. Further, Sexton took pride in helping to create this attitude toward poetry. She could be quite manipulative.

In response to a question about distorting the truth in her poetry, Sexton recalled, “It’s something that an artist must do to make it clear and dramatic and to have the effect of the axe.” She continued, noting, “one can confess and lie forever,” (Marx 75). If her poetry was the handwriting on the tablet of the soul as she claimed it to be, yet the soul is a universal, unconscious entity, then she clearly failed to acknowledge that her poems too, were interconnected with the rest of the world. In most cases, however, it was the critics who painted the picture of the confessional poet as writing from a deeply personal place because I do not believe Sexton could ever clearly identify her style of writing other than to say she wrote in the manner that came naturally. Even though she toyed with and often debunked critics, she wavered so much in trying to identify the source of inspiration for her poetry, that it is difficult to conclude that any answer she gave was accurate, or actually pinpointed her ink well.

Sexton did not study under the formalists, and from Lowell she was essentially taught what to leave out of the poem. But because she wrote in a similar fashion to Plath,

Snodgrass, and studied under Lowell, her poetry was labeled as being directly related to her. This may have been true with her earlier poems, but like any poet, Sexton came into her own by the time she started writing *Live or Die*, and began to write not to please others but to satisfy her own desires. Nonetheless, the poems that make up *Live or Die* are still really not “confessional” in that the poems do not necessarily tell stories of the poet’s life. As Sexton insisted, her poems were written out of her unconscious and were “a mix of truth and lies,” but her notion of truth is as much a myth as the idea of originality is.

Furiously driven by the need to understand the poems of new poets like Lowell and Snodgrass- the said pioneers of confessionalism- who no longer wrote in the style of the formalists, reviewers directly correlated the works with the author and his or her experiences. In other words, unlike the concepts proposed by Eliot about authorship, the critics gave poets the authority of being the author.<sup>xvi</sup> What these critics and experts failed to understand- and continue to miscomprehend- however, is that not only do the poems of confessional poets read like the myths of Classical (Greek & Roman) and Christian stories, in many cases they were written so intentionally. In fear of the formalist Gods, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Anthony Hecht, who took over the reigns from modernists such as Eliot and Pound in the early twentieth century, confessional poets *chose* to mythologize themselves in their poetry.

Was Sexton the exception to this because of her lack of formal education? I think not. She was privileged to have written at a time when Lowell, Plath and others had already experienced the wroth criticism of the formalists, yet stuck to their guns. She

benefited significantly from the stick-to-itiveness of her predecessors, but also from her own stubbornness, and ignorance to the influence of critics; though some would argue that she had no choice, that the way she wrote was the only way she knew how. The challenging aspect of unmasking the myths strewn throughout Sexton's poetry is that she was admittedly poorly educated and not well-read. Unlike Lowell, Roethke, and Plath, Sexton showed very little interest, nor was directly influenced greatly by, the works of the Canon, such as *The Golden Bough*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Fairie Queen*, etc; though prior to her writing of the poems that make up *Live or Die*, she immersed herself in books. She was also indirectly subjected to these stories by working with Lowell, trying to emulate Snodgrass, and working closely with Plath. She read some Eliot and Pound but there were more unique influences to Sexton's poetry than the common collection of "genius" writers (expanded upon below, but more so in Chapter 2).

Critics, scholars, and purveyors of Sexton have continually refused to acknowledge the direct or rather indirect influence, and prevalence, of mythologies, the inspiration of previous and contemporary poets- I refer mostly to Lowell, Plath, and Snodgrass, but also to Pablo Neruda, Emily Dickinson, Sara Teasdale, Theodore Roethke, Arthur Rimbaud, and Randall Jarrell- whose poetry was also steeped in Classical and Christian mythologies; and lastly, the fact that Sexton, herself, admittedly relied on and beckoned myths (mostly Christian; she was Protestant) in order to write. These facts have been blatantly overlooked in order to aggrandize, or perhaps add a pungent poignancy to, the experiences and words of this dark, mysterious poet. Furthermore, the critics excuse a basic concept proposed by Frye that "Every writer is

constantly on the lookout for experiences that seem to have a story or poem in them, but the story or poem is not in them; it is in the writer's grasp of the literary tradition and his [in this case Sexton's] power of assimilating experience to it" (Fables 43).

On the other hand, even if Sexton had not admitted- whether in personal memoirs or interviews- her grasp of literary tradition, her constant search for inspiration, or her conscious utilization of myth to compose a poem, a perceptive reader quickly realizes that within the poem she has unconsciously become a god/goddess in a mythologized story, which often contains elements of popular culture within it. For instance, though many critics suggest that her poetry *appears* directly correlated to her dark life and can pinpoint elements of it within the lines, her experiences in their own right were still in fact myths relived. Furthermore, Sexton relied on her unconscious to write her poetry noting, "Poetry milks the unconscious," and that "The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of," (Kevles 85). Moreover, the critics overlooked Sexton's blatant admissions of acquiring a persona in her writing as she suggested in regards to a question from Al Poulin inquiring as to what she was "confessing": "...I mean it's a difficult label, 'confessional,' because I'll often confess to things that never happened. I mean I'll often assume the first person and it's someone else's story," (Heyen 134). Without such a "confession" though, it does not require a keen eye to ascertain Sexton's constant allusions to the Bible and the speaker's attempted atonement with God, (an even more explicit discovery could be made by perusing her work, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*.) There was no other choice for Sexton other than "to accept the language given to [her] at birth..." (Frye, Practical 2). Sexton, like all

poets- even those of the genre confessional- was restricted by the boundaries of language, and more significantly, experience.

Whereas a couple critics look at Sexton's poetry as reinvented myth, or written from a mythic female perspective, these critics still take the poetry too literally— constantly connecting words to the poet's life, and the voice to Sexton as well. Brenda Ameter and Margaret Scarborough broach the subject of mythology in Anne Sexton's poetry, yet they still give the author too much "authority" as far as being the creator of the stories. Other scholars, critics, and academics either fail to comprehend the power of their analyses or bask in the notion that they determine how a work is perceived. It is, after all, these folks who assert the authority/creative genius to the author. Ameter denounces those critics before her who suggest that Sexton's poetry is purely autobiographical. She goes on to suggest that Sexton "understood Jungian archetypal theory, not only from her own experience with psychotherapy, but from her own experience with her unconscious," (82). I cannot argue that Sexton was aware that she utilized her unconscious, but to the extent she was keen to Jung's theories, I am not so sure. She may have lived out, according to Ameter, Jung's theories, but to suggest that because she saw in herself the universality of human themes and the collective unconsciousness of archetypes (84), gives the poet much too much credit. This is not to say that Sexton did not purposefully employ myths, it is to say that regardless of her intent, all of her poems are archetypal and mythological. Ameter also announces that Sexton "[was] exploring the collective unconscious through the details of her experience" (86). In doing so, she was rewriting myths.

Scarborough's "Anne Sexton's 'Otherworld Journey'" nearly dismantled my own correlations. She provides a creative and intuitive sketch of Sexton's use of myth, though she correlates it directly with Sexton's own internal journey of "becoming," which she classifies as purely feminine. She does, however, connect the myth of Demeter and Persephone to Sexton's journey, and acknowledges the presence of Christian mythos in Sexton's poetry as well. In all, Scarborough provides a fabulous mythological landscape to a variety of Sexton's poetry. Yet, she, like the other critics, makes the mistake of tying her poems directly to Sexton's life. For instance, when discussing "For the Year of the Insane," Scarborough suggests the poem "is a prayer-poem to Sexton's mother and to her image of the Divine Mother to see and save her from this profound internal division," (186). The problem with this is a.) supposing the voice is Sexton's, which leads to b.) suggesting that the "mother" in the poem is a real person, and c.) that the poem actually has anything to do with Sexton's life. If Scarborough had merely supposed that the speaker was beckoning a mother and praying to the Divine Mother (which she does frequently in *Live or Die*) then a correlation to Persephone would be appropriate. In her attempt to relate Sexton to this otherworldly search, Scarborough is unintentionally enacting Freudian principles.

Gale Swiontkowski suggests that Sexton "desires the father's creative potency, often symbolized in cultural terms by the phallus, and not the actual physical, personal manifestation" (33). She, like Diane Hume George, painted Sexton and her poetry into an Oedipal box. Though, George is a bit more liberating and pragmatic; and almost approaches a Frye-like take on Sexton's work. In fact, George goes so far as to add on to

Maxine Kumin's assertion that Sexton wrote with four types of *I*. George designates a most appropriate fifth type of *I*, which she calls the prophetic *I*. The connection George inevitably fails to make is the one Frye has so selflessly provided: that there can only be one *I*, and that is of the *I* who is aware of his/her place amidst literature and tradition. The mythologized *I* as *I* will now deem it, is truly what Sexton wrote in. This is not to say that she wrote as if she was Demeter or Mary Magdalene, or Christ for that matter. Nor is it to suggest that she was not "the author" of the poems- she could be considered a medium in a way, but I wish not to pursue that argument. Like the resulting poetry, the experiences that allegedly inspired the poetry of Anne Sexton imitated nature and myth. This is what makes it comprehensible to replace the "autobiographical" *I*, which Kumin has created with the mythological *I*.<sup>xvii</sup> Sexton did not write as if she were God, she wrote about a relationship with God and the struggles of obtaining such a union. This involved acts such as sacrifice, rebirth, death and even sex, which brought the speaker closer to God. George enters Frye's ring when she beckons the work of William Blake and compares it to Sexton. In her revealing analysis of Sexton's work, however, George, does not keep a consistent viewpoint throughout. Instead, after suggesting that much of Sexton's work should be viewed with the "prophetic *I*," she continually defers to the autobiographical *I*, and fails to see the parallels of Sexton's life to that of nature, ritual, and myth. (And though Sexton claimed to have communicated with God, she certainly was not accredited by any sort of authority). Swiontkowski does concede that Sexton's poems on incest are functioning at least partly in the realm of archetypal experience (43). Though she should

have seen that all of Sexton's "personal" poetry is in fact functioning in the realm of archetypes and myths.

Most critics and purveyors of this genre would suggest that the poets are influenced only by form and not in content, as the content comes directly from, or at least is inspired by, his or her experiences. Others, like Ostriker acknowledge the historical and literary influences of Sexton. However, what is to be made of Sexton's influences? She who claims to have started writing poetry shortly after a stay in a mental institution, and who claims not to be well-read and unlearned? It is a fact that she was not well-educated, (after high school anyway) but that does not mean that her poetry was not written under the influence of past poets or past literature. Most scholars would emphatically press the idea that Sexton's poetry "represents" her life. To the contemporary critic and reader it is far more glorious, disturbing, and provocative to read Sexton's poetry as if biographical. To read it with consternation at how dire and miserable her life must have been provokes feelings of sorrow, sadness, and awe. Despite the facts of her life, well-documented not by Sexton in her poetry, but in her biography by Diane Wood Middlebrook and told by at least one of her daughter's,<sup>xviii</sup> Sexton's poetry was admittedly not the truth as critics like to assume. Furthermore, considering her previous modeling career and dire need for attention in her familial and social relations, Sexton instinctually knew what it took to attract attention. Though this raises the question as to was she wry enough to purposefully manipulate her poetry so as to combine lies and myth with aspects of her struggle with mental illness, or was this amalgamation purely coincidental? Does it matter, considering myths inevitably filtered their way into her poetry?

Robert Phillips contests that you can accurately paint a picture of her life by looking at her poetry; noting that the tragic events of her life can be identified in her poetry. These events though, read like that of any myth: the abusive father, a near life scarring accident at a young age, living under the roof of a madwomen, a relationship with a disinterested man, the deaths of friends, the births of two daughters, the deaths of parents and a parent figure, her stays in mental institutions, and finally “her search for release through religion, drugs, lovers, art” (Phillips 74). The absolute irony and revelation of that last line, however, is profound. For if the archetypal and mythological themes are not evident enough with words like death, birth, and marriage, the fact that Phillips suggests that Sexton was looking for a release is all the more supportive that she was in fact reliving and retelling myths. Phillips might as well have proposed that Sexton was incessant in trying to kill her false self by drowning, thus seeking a rebirth into a more glorious paradise. Phillips changes his tune in his exposé of Sexton by stating that she is “deft at assuming personae,” and that her poetry is “populated by a gallery or ‘real’ yet totally fictitious figures” (75). He ignores the fact that all of the figures in her poetry are fictitious, or half-truths, and that Sexton is limited not only by what she can experience but also by the language and ideas she can work with. Finally, he claims, “*Live or Die* continues the poet’s search for reconciliations, her obsession with the limits of the body and its failures to be equal to the demands of the spirit” (80). To speak of Sexton’s poems as coming solely from her experiences or her imagination is incorrect, for the imagination is rarely a reproductive power (Frye, *Fables* 30). Piling on, Robert Boyers remarks, “Miss Sexton’s is a poetry of the nerves and heart. She is never abstract,

never permits herself to be distracted from her one true subject-herself and her emotions,” (205). What Boyers neglects is not only the fact that Sexton reveals that her poems are a creation of her unconscious, but more significantly, that the poems are part of a larger collection of poems, which mimic myths. Boyers is not alone.

In his article, “‘With Your Own Face On’: The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry,” Charles Molesworth suggests that “confessional poetry gathered its concerns from two cultural forces: the awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language in America and the insistent psychologizing of a society adrift from purpose and meaningful labor” (163). In regards to Sexton, this could not be further from the truth. Anne Sexton wrote what was considered confessional poetry because it was the only way she knew how to write, and as she was stubborn, and ignorant, she was not going to change her ways. Her contemporaries and predecessors may have been driven by the desires suggested by Molesworth, and therefore her work was accepted, but Sexton thought little, I am sure, of the “emotional vacuity of public language in America.” Other critics, in fact most of them, assume too much of Sexton’s autobiographical portrayal. Caroline King Barnard Hall declares: “The poems of *Live or Die* do indeed explore intimate aspects of experience, placing the literal self at the center of the poem’s encounter and using biographical evidence as the raw materials for the finished poem” (55). In his article, Molesworth continued, “In a sense she [Sexton] was from the first the most “confessional” of the four poets discussed here (Berryman, Plath, Snodgrass), if by that word we mean a commitment to recording directly as possible the shape of private pain and intimate sickness, without regard to artifice or aesthetic transcendence” (174).

Yet in another clear contradiction, he pronounces that Sexton was occupied with denying the direct, autobiographical basis for her poetry (175). So we should not take the poet at her word? Denise Levertov writes that Sexton was unable to separate her depression and her obsession with death from poetry... (79). In a review of *Live or Die*, Charles Gullans comments that the poems “are not poems at all and I feel that I have, without right or desire, been made a third party to her psychiatrists,” (131). Thomas McDonnell suggests that in poems like “Those Times...” “Anne Sexton’s confessions become almost too much the poetry of the couch,” (43). He also proposes that the poem “To Lose the Earth” “seems to me about as Freudian as a poem can get,” (43). Though he acknowledges the presence of piety in her poetry he fails to see that “To Lose the Earth” very much speaks of the defeat of darkness in a Biblical sense. Boyers comments further, suggesting that her poetry is neither therapeutic in purpose or effect (155) and dismisses any type of Freudian correlation to her poetry.

The desire to paint Sexton into an autobiographical corner is overwhelming and disappointing. Though the novice reader might assume that poems dedicated to Sexton’s daughters Joy and Linda are in fact about Sexton and her daughters, they are not. Nor are the poems which are presumably “about” her relationship with her mother, father, husband, etc. Her poetry does not belong to her. Frye expounds, “Personal sincerity in the poet is like virtue in Machiavelli’s prince: the reality of it is of no consequence; the appearance of it may be,” (Fables 45). As if Frye himself did a review of Sexton’s collection, he declares: “In literature there are two great organizing patterns. One is the natural cycle itself; the other, a final separation between an idealized and happy world

and a horrifying or miserable one” (Great Code 73). *Live or Die* is a dream of separation that is predicated on myths of death, sacrifice, rebirth, and resurrection. If we were to take the criticisms at face value and promote the notions that the poetry of *Live or Die* is actually about Sexton’s atonement with her childhood- which *was* corrupt and distressing- her incarcerations at mental institutions, her struggles as a wife, mother, and daughter, her desire to kill herself, the discovery of herself and hence reconciliation with God, and finally, her desire to actually live, does this not resemble a metaphorical and mythological descent into hell and ascent into heaven- or at least into the Kingdom of God. I assert that it does. And by presenting such a mythos, I also suggest thence looking at the works of Milton, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and before them, the Bible and Classical myths to discover the foundations and re-creations of this story.

## INFLUENCES AS CONNECTORS

*Creative people often seem to need certain types of love or friendship that make manifest for them the human relations or conflicts with which their work is concerned.*<sup>xix</sup>

- Northrop Frye

The inevitability, not anxiety, of influences on a poet is crucial to understand, and hence explicit. No person can produce a poem without borrowing form from another author or borrowing motifs/myths from mythology, history, or other poets- who themselves have rewritten myths. This chapter is purposed to establish that Anne Sexton too relied on the works of others to create her own in *Live or Die*, and is meant to exemplify how she also recited mythology, most notably the biggest single influence on her work, the Bible. A confessional poet has as many influences in form and content as any other poet. Even if the critics suppose that her poetry was “autobiographical,” “from the couch,” or from her “unconscious,” most have overlooked the notion that admittedly other poets influenced her, and those poets were influenced by works before them, and those works were founded on myths. It is a never ending and inescapable chain. Frye proposes, “If we ask what inspires a poet, there are always two answers. An occasion, an experience, an event, [or even genetic code], may inspire the impulse to write. But the impulse to write can only come from previous contact with literature, and the formal inspiration, the poetic structure that crystallizes around the new event, can only be derived from other poems” (Fables 125). In examining the poetry of *Live or Die*, this becomes explicit because within it there are traces of Dickinson, Lowell, Snodgrass, and

of course the Bible. In fact, this most significant influence on the poetry of *Live or Die* was written in verse and is filled with figures of speech, such as similes, metaphors, and puns, which Sexton employed. Moreover, like the Bible, what the reader thinks to be true within the lines of Sexton's poetry is only that what seems to be true.

Before I illustrate the direct influence of the Bible on Sexton's work, it is productive to show the influences of her contemporaries and of other works of literature on *Live or Die*. Revealed by her own comments, and by her poetry, there is no denying that Sexton is under the influence in this collection; yes, just as she was in her life. First and foremost, Sexton admitted that her poetry came from her unconscious, and how does one diagnose what exactly has penetrated the unconscious of a person? Sexton recalled in an interview with Barbara Kevles "...you realize a poem is buried there somewhere..." (102). And, she continued, "...there is a lot of unconscious truth in a poem. As you see me now, I am a lie," (115). This could be interpreted as the more she relied on her unconscious, the more "truth" and relevance to her life and suppressed desires and emotions came out. However, what this truly indicates is that because the unconscious is the harbinger of all of our inherent mythological stories, Sexton was, as has been iterated several times, recalling those stories that best retold her own. About the unconscious, Frye suggested, "the poem is made out of both conscious and unconscious materials: the unconscious is something that nobody can control, but in certain mental places it can find its own mode of expression," (Spiritus 120-1). Because of her admission to relying on her unconscious many critics have applied theories by Freud and Jung to the work of Sexton (and Frye certainly built upon Jung to formulate his own theories). These critics fail to

acknowledge that what is also buried in the unconscious are the words and works of what Sexton has assimilated after having read. Not to mention, and perhaps more significantly, that buried in the unconscious are the mythologies we are born reciting and acting out.

Frye notes that books in middle class households up to 1920 "assumed the role of a cultural monument, representative of the authority of tradition," (Spiritus 50-1). There is ample evidence to support this. Though she was not an avid reader, Sexton does reveal tangible influences. She admitted that in high school she virtually plagiarized Sara Teasdale. In addition, Sexton inexplicably was influenced by her "dark, poetic sister" Plath, as well as by Roethke, and her poetry workshop teacher, Lowell. Sexton revealed her influences and their impact on her work in several different instances. About Lowell, under whom she studied in 1958 and 1959, she said: "If you have enough natural energy he can show you how to chain it in. He didn't teach me what to put into a poem, but what to leave out. What he taught me was taste," (Colburn 5). She noted on several occasions how helpful Lowell's class was and how much Lowell was "really helping" her (Letters 51). In fact, it is quite evident that some of her most revered poems echo Lowell's poetry. Robert Boyers pointed out one such instance in the speaker's escapade at a mental institution in "Flee on Your Donkey" (156). Within that same poem there are similarities in diction as well, such as the naming of streets such as "Marlborough Street" (100), which appears again in "The Wedding Night." Lowell wrote of Marlborough Street on several occasions, most notably in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" in which he writes, "hardly passionate Marlborough Street," (187).

About Snodgrass, who undoubtedly put together the most prominent and revered collection of “confessional” poetry, which ignited the movement, *Heart’s Needle*, Sexton commented: “It so changed me, and undoubtedly it must have influenced my own poetry,” (Marx 79). In a letter to Nolan Miller, Sexton commented: “I would particularly like to meet W.D. Snodgrass because his poem ‘Heart’s Needle’ startled me so when I read it, that I just sat there saying ‘Why didn’t I write this’” (Letters 34). Further, in a letter to Snodgrass himself, she gushed: “I read ‘Heart’s Needle’ and I changed. It made me see myself new” (Letters 62). In a later letter to him she commented, “As I linger over the poems, I think to myself, ‘I must not read this. I like it too well. I am being *influenced* (her italics)” (Letters 76). In another letter to Snodgrass it can be deduced that Snodgrass consistently inferred that Sexton’s poetry was a mimesis of his and Lowell’s poetics.<sup>xx</sup> From this it could be speculated that Snodgrass inspired Sexton to write more openly about her life because “Heart’s Needle” was apparently about the death of Snodgrass’s daughter. But there again we have the retold myth of death, not really the literal death of his daughter- another possible misinterpretation by the critics. Therefore, all Snodgrass did was implore Sexton to displace myths- to mythologize herself in order to prophesize her stories. And, finally, Sexton, though she talked of poets trying vociferously to hide his or her influences,<sup>xxi</sup> she suggested: “I’m sure Sylvia’s influences are hidden, as with most of us, and if one feels compelled to name an influence then let us begin with Theodore Roethke,” (Colburn 10). Coincidentally, or not so, the quest undertaken by the speaker in Roethke’s poem,<sup>xxii</sup> “Journey to the Interior,” correlates seamlessly with the

journey of the speaker in *Live or Die*. It is, as many scholars have pointed out, a metaphorical descent into the underworld. Part of it reads:

*In the long journey out of the self,  
 There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places  
 Where the shale slides dangerously  
 And the back wheels hang almost over the edge  
 At the sudden veering, the moment of turning.  
 Better to hug close, wary of rubble and falling stones.  
 The arroyo cracking the road, the wind-bitten buttes, the canyons,  
 Creeks swollen in midsummer from the flash-flood roaring into the narrow  
 valley.  
 Reeds beaten flat by wind and rain,  
 Grey from the long winter, burnt at the base in late summer.  
 -- Or the path narrowing,  
 Winding upward toward the stream with its sharp stones,  
 The upland of alder and birchtrees,  
 Through the swamp alive with quicksand,  
 The way blocked at last by a fallen fir-tree,  
 The thickets darkening,  
 The ravines ugly.<sup>xxiii</sup>*

The influences of Sexton's poems in *Live or Die* don't cease with Lowell, Plath, Snodgrass, or Roethke. From these poets, however, we might trace a clear lineage to previous poets and inevitably, myths. If we are to trace the influences of these poets alone we would have a lineage going all the way back to Classical mythologies. Lowell acknowledged the influence of Chekhov whose "writings are rich in literary and mythological echoes and allusions," (Winner 71), and Eliot on his writing. And Kroll

clearly exemplified the beckoning of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* by Plath in her collection *Ariel*. In fact, in regards to Plath, much of her poetics were inspired by and/or taken from Roethke (with whom she studied at The Bread Loaf School of English), Walt Whitman, William Shakespeare, Carl Jung's *The Development of Personality* and Paul Radin's collection of African folktales, as well as from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and "The Wasteland." On Plath's influence, Sexton revealed: "...after her death, with the appearance of *Ariel*, I think I was influenced..." (Kevles 93). Sexton and Plath shared a similar influence as well in Franz Kafka, of whom Sexton commented, "Kafka's work certainly works upon me as an axe upon a frozen sea," (Marx 72). She also divulged that only through Kafka and Rilke could she understand herself.<sup>xxiv</sup> Further, and finally, the experiences of Sexton, if in fact we want to negate the idea that myth permeates all of *literature*, were as unoriginal and indebted to myth as is Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which was steeped in Biblical allusions and littered with metaphors born out of works from the Canon. In fact, Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* was founded on Dante's *Purgatory* (Fables 61), which is the definitive literary example of the journey of descent (Fables 59). Roethke bragged "of belonging to the brotherhood of mad poets that includes William Blake, John Clare, and Christopher Smart, with whom he identified himself as 'lost.'" More so, "His affection for Dylan Thomas had much the same base; but on the other hand, some of his longer friendships, including those with Louise Bogan and W.H. Auden, signified his unswerving admiration for those who stood in his mind as representatives of a sacred discipline" (Kunitz).

Aside from the aforementioned influences, other renowned, and lesser-known poets, influenced Sexton. During the first day of her poetry workshop with Lowell, Sexton noted that her favorite poet was William Carlos Williams, who was very much a modernist and was greatly influenced by Pound. Yet Williams was also deemed an accessible poet in his later years as he tried to break free from the chains of formalism locked around him by Pound and Eliot. His inclusion of modern affairs and his use of imagery are strewn throughout Sexton's *Live or Die*. Also, in separate interviews and commentaries Sexton noted that she read Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was noted for her poems on female sexuality and feminism; May Swenson, whose poetry was littered with sexual connotations and love; Randall Jarrell, who wrote superbly technical poetry and was a revered critic;<sup>xxv</sup> and Elizabeth Bishop, who perhaps shared a similarly disturbing and unsettling childhood as Sexton, but wrote with "technical brilliance" about the physical world<sup>xxvi</sup> and was influenced herself by Marianne Moore who worked closely with Pound and Eliot. On the latter two poets, Jarrell and Bishop, Sexton stated, "Their work shocks me into being more alive" (Marx 32). She also befriended formalist poet Anthony Hecht, who like his predecessors Eliot and Pound relied heavily on the past, more specifically, works of the Canon and Classical mythology. Sexton also appreciated her friendship with and the criticism she received from Louis Simpson. About Simpson, she gushed, "[he] has some of the best poems of our generation in it," (Letters 89). Yet Simpson was very much a formalist to begin his career. Continuing, Sexton read and was influenced by Thoreau, to whom several poems in other collections are supposedly

addressed. His influence in *Live or Die* is not overtly apparent, though they seem to share the same sense of spirituality, atonement with nature, and desire for simplicity.

More indicative of the style Sexton wrote in was the influence of surrealists Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire, whose themes included sexuality, mortality, and that of the macabre. Rimbaud, though, not only wrote in free verse, was a surrealist who wrote from his unconscious, and wrote of death, sacrifice, hell, etc., he was influenced by Charles Perrault who adapted folk tales into fairy tales such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*. Perhaps this influence on Sexton is best illuminated in her collection *Transformations*. Rimbaud's influence was more immediate. The much acclaimed and scrutinized poem in *Live or Die*, "Flee on Your Donkey," which is purportedly about Sexton's stay at a mental institution was actually inspired by a Rimbaud poem. In fact, the title and epigraph come from a Rimbaud poem, "Fetes de la faim" (Feasts of Hunger), in which the first line reads: "My Hunger, Anne, Anne, flee on your donkey." The donkey in Sexton's work can be associated with the physical side of the incarnation of Christ. Jesus was carried into Jerusalem by a donkey.

In light of these influences on both the content and form of Sexton's poetry, and more importantly what the critics suggest about each style, it was inexplicably Sexton's interpretations of each work that influenced her. I suggest that because of her lack of education and knowledge of poetic persona, etc., that Sexton read other poetry as if the speaker of the poem was the poet himself. This is not far-fetched whatsoever considering her lack of training in poetics until Lowell's workshop. That being said, it should be of no

surprise then that Sexton's poetry has been compared to, and rightfully so in a unique way, to that of Emily Dickinson.

Sexton indicated that she read Emily Dickinson, and in fact there are many similarities between the poets' works. In his essay on Dickinson, Frye notes that she knew the Bible, knew the Classical myths, and took a good deal of interest in Elizabeth Browning and the Brontes (Fables 194). Further, he added that Dickinson was deeply religious and was occupied with the themes of death and immortality and modeled her God on the image of a father (Fables 206, 285). Frye also suggested that Dickinson was the literary spokesperson, especially for female writers, who made verse out of life, love, nature, and religion (Fables 201). This should sound familiar.

Dickinson's poetry was conceived to be very autobiographical. As a reader, Sexton assuredly read it the same way, and in doing so, Dickinson served as yet another model for Sexton to mimic. Ironic, considering their personalities were similar as well. Like Dickinson, Sexton did not alter her poetry due to critical reactions. Of course most of Dickinson's poetry was received and lauded posthumously. They both stayed within the forms that they knew, and of course operated within the language that was available. For both of them, their poetry was what it was, and if that was not good enough, so be it. Though Dickinson's poetry was not considered confessional, Sexton thought it to be, and her poems of *Live or Die* reflect that, especially in regards to the religious and mythological connotations.

The facility of recognizing the influences of Sexton's work in *Live or Die* is owed much in part to Sexton herself. Thanks in large part to her dating when each of the poems

from *Live or Die* was written, and because of what she divulged shortly before and during the writing of the collection, we ascertain a better sense of the works she was writing from. The editors of *Letters* disclosed that during the summer of 1960, Sexton immersed herself in reading texts by authors such as Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Dostoyevsky, Rainer Maria Rilke, William Faulkner, and Andre Gide. She had not partaken in reading like this earlier in her life.<sup>xxvii</sup> Furthermore, in a letter to Anne Clarke in 1964, Sexton revealed her reading list, which included, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience*; *The Second Sex*; *Mere Christianity*; *Paul and Mary*; *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, a play by Edward Albee, which he suggests means who's afraid of living life without false illusions,<sup>xxviii</sup> *The Inferno; A Season in Hell* by Rimbaud; *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*; and *The Crack-Up* by F. Scott Fitzgerald<sup>xxix</sup> (Letters 233). How is it that critics overlook these influences and negate the idea that these texts could not have had a substantial impact on Sexton's writing- whether subconsciously or not? The timing, directly before and during her authoring of *Live or Die* is certainly not coincidental.

Borrowing titles and content from other authors was common for Sexton. In doing so she was using others' re-created versions of myths and injecting them into her stories. Classical and religious myths served as the foundation of all poetry. The more Sexton read and worked with other poets, the more her own work became the work of others, which was essentially the work of the creators of myths and religions. This is not to say Sexton was not the author of her poems or that she did not shape her experiences into poems, it is just to suggest that she was not unique. Like every other author of literature,

she too was indebted to the influence of others and the penetration of myths into popular culture. There are several explicit examples of this in *Live or Die*, but the borrowing did not begin with that compilation.

A previous instance concerns the title of her collection *All My Pretty Ones*, about which Sexton confessed, “The title was given to me by a friend who stole it from Shakespeare in the first place,” (Moore 43). She notes more specifically that the title is from *Macbeth*. In compiling poems for *Live or Die*, Sexton also admitted her influences and inspirations. Of the poem “Live” and title of the book *Live or Die*, Sexton pronounced the inspiration to be that of *Henderson the Rain King* by Saul Bellow, about which she exclaimed in a letter to Hollis Summers, “Right now I would rather read it than breathe” (Letters 102). Sexton was easily impressed. She expands upon this inspiration, revealing her correspondence with Bellow in which he wrote about a comment Sexton had made about the main character, Henderson. Bellow describes his inspiration for Henderson and the theme of his book to Sexton, remarking, “With one long breath, caught and held in his chest, he fought his sadness over his solitary life. Don’t cry, you idiot! Live or die, but don’t poison everything” (Kevles 96). Sexton recalls that with that one correspondence, Bellow had given her a message about her whole life, which was that she “wanted to be the one that gave birth, who encouraged things to grow and to flower, not the poisoner,” (Kevles 96). She expounded upon the notion of Bellow’s influence remarking that she realized “*Live or Die* was a damn good title for the book I was working on.” And she acknowledged that in writing the poems there was an unconscious tension and an unconscious structure that I didn’t know was going on when I

was doing it, (Kevles 96). Further evidence of Sexton's borrowing practices, and utilization of other sources as inspiration can be seen in the poem "To Lose the Earth." This poem was allegedly influenced by her friend's Lithograph (Swan 82), but still it reads of a poem of mythological denotations. In fact, it begins with an epigraph from Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, which is "about" finding your own identity. There are several other examples of this sort of purported creativity of Sexton, including the poem "And One for my Dame," which mimics a line from the children's song "Bah Bah Black Sheep." Much in the same way Shakespeare borrowed most of his stories from Holinshed, history, and popular culture, Sexton's poems were derived from other poetry, the Bible, and popular culture.

Frye promotes, "A literature grows out of the primitive verbal culture which contains a mythology; it can grow out of any mythology, but it is historical fact that our literature is mostly directly descended from the Biblical myth," (Spiritus 17). Of course there is controversy about the influence for the Bible, and for me to proclaim that it is based purely on myth may raise some questions. Nonetheless, it cannot be argued, however, that the parables, and stories of Christ, read very much like Classical mythologies. To suggest that all of our modern literature descends directly and only from the Bible may be inaccurate, but it is relevant to Sexton's *Live or Die*. As noted in the "Introduction," *Live or Die* reads no more like a collection of poems than it does the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ; or of the quest of Gawain and Arthur for the Holy Grail. Many critics or scholars acknowledge and touch upon the Biblical and religious allusions in Sexton's poetry, but few have delved further into the catacombs of these

influences. There are nearly one hundred overt references to Christianity in *Live or Die*, and by overt I mean the use of proper nouns such as God, Jesus, Christ, Mary, Adam and Eve, the Cross, Judas, etc. And these are overt mentions, not those that speak of palm oil, the gates of the city, our Father and Mother, the disciples, etc. The Bible, Sexton's readings of books related to Christianity, and other poet's religious allusions set the framework for her mythological quest in *Live or Die*. It should be clear after reading it that "the poet is taken over by a mythical and metaphorical organism," (Frye, *Spiritus* 18).

William Blake thought of "the framework of the Bible, stretching from Creation to Last Judgment and surveying the whole of human history in between, as indicating the framework of the whole of literary experience, and establishing the ultimate context for all works of literature whatever," (Frye, *Myth and Symbol* 16). Blake overlooks the thousands of years of written and oral tradition prior to the Bible, however, Sexton's "autobiographical" collection correlates well to his statement. And though she commented, "No myths or fables ever gave me any solace," she admitted that her "own inner contact with the heroes of fables, as you put it, my very closeness to Christ," did (Kevles 106). Sexton's revelations speak for themselves, and an entire book could be spent tracing the roots of the poetry of her influences. However, one should already recognize the influence of her peers as well as the lineage of the works of those peers; for how many times have I typed the names of Pound and Eliot, who are both renowned for working within the realm of mythology. Could the experiences of Sexton's familial relations, childhood and adult life have inspired her poetry? Absolutely. To not present

these experiences as shapers of her work would be unscholarly. It is these very experiences that turned Sexton to poetry, steered her “creativity” into her unconscious, and finally, led to her retelling of myths. For as has been noted in several instances, and will be further iterated, it is the very experience of reliving myth that leads to its production in words, but as Frye introduced, “...one does, in fact, become what one is through influences,” (Spiritus 11). The influence is always there. It begins by being born. It is ingrained.

*LIVE OR DIE: ITS ARCHETYPES AND METAPHORS*

*But no matter how we think of the poetic process, its end is to produce a new member of a class of things called poems or novels or plays which is already in existence.*<sup>xxx</sup>

- Northrop Frye

We live in a world of archetypes. There are spirals, and labyrinths, and mazes, and mandalas in our dreams and in every aspect of human existence. It is impossible to overlook them. Well, it may be possible to ignore the significance of them, but to not see them would signify blindness. Yet even blindness could not prevent a person from experiencing the spiral ascent or descent of a staircase. In the same manner, every poem contains symbols. Symbols, however, become something much more significant, notably archetypes, over time and through use in literature. Images become symbols due to overuse and symbols become archetypes, which can be traced to myths. For instance the moon is no longer just a noun when entrenched in a poem; neither is the garden, tree, bush, temple, staircase, highway, sheep, golden flower, rose, building, or the number three, seven, six, etc. These elements of a poem no longer simply represent something basic, or something we are accustomed to in our everyday lives. Rather, they allude to literary history and Classical and Christian mythologies. Eliade noted that rituals imitate a divine archetype.<sup>xxxi</sup> Therefore, poetry, which in itself is a ritual, is an imitation of a divine archetype. Archetypal language opens the window to the outside mythological universe in which all poets work in. Frye declared, "Every creative person has an interconnected body of images and ideas underneath his consciousness which it is his

creative work to fish up in bits and pieces. Sometimes a phrase or a word comes to him as a kind of hook or bait with which to catch something that he knows is down there,” (Spiritus 11). This was very much true for Sexton who acknowledged that it was a word or experience, (or therapy session) that served as a kind of switch that opened her subconscious and allowed the flow of words, which she shaped into poems.

Though deemed the most “confessional” and “autobiographical” poet of the genre, Sexton employed, whether unconsciously or not, as many archetypes as any modernist, formalist, or romantic, or person sitting in a confessional. Most of these archetypes were divine, as were the themes of her poems, which make up the much larger dianoia of *Live or Die*. These archetypes, the ‘wool’ from “And One for my Dame,” the ‘copper wings,’ ‘fish,’ ‘sea water’ and ‘sun’ of “The Sun,” the ‘rain,’ and ‘sunflowers’ from “Mother and Jack and the Rain,” etc., all serve as clues to the influences of Sexton’s poetics, and more importantly to the myths under which she masks herself. But it is not simply that these archetypes came from what Sexton read, for if she had read nothing of literature before she wrote her poetry and still employed these “words,” they would indubitably still tie her poems to something much larger than the poem itself. However, through Sexton’s use of archetypes-and it should be noted that most of them are accessible and concrete, including the likes of ‘rose,’ the ‘Cross,’ ‘water,’ ‘trees,’ etc.- we can glean that *Live or Die* is written like a romance; a quest for life through the experience of a metaphorical death. Further, though maybe a bit off-topic, the speaker’s life in the volume could be considered a wasteland which is inevitably fertilized and brought back to life by the Sun-god or by the Son (or even by the Virgin Mary); the sun,

as an archetype of Christ is strewn throughout. In fact, though she never read William Blake, many contemporary critics have compared Sexton's poetry, at least in its use of Biblical archetypes, to his.

Critics advise that confessional poetry is a genre soaked in realism; however, its archetypal language makes it more romantic and surreal in form and tragic in content, which is most closely related to myths. It is a world of total metaphor. The purpose of this chapter is simply to elucidate the idea that distinguishing and understanding archetypes is *crucial*. Sexton did not "create" poetry free of archetypes, and therefore neither did she write outside the restraints of literature. Her employment of images, archetypes, metaphors, and similes clearly allows the critic to trace a lineage to the root of the confessional poem and show that the stories perceived to be in the poem are not solely related to her life. The best way to show this is through specific examples. It should also be noted that archetypes differ from allusions. Though they are allusive in their own right, they do not directly refer or allude to a specific point in history or piece of literature. They are much more open to interpretation.

In his survey of the Classics Frye noticed that recurring primitive formulas provide literature with an order of words, a "skeleton," which allows the reader to respond imaginatively to any literary work by seeing it in the larger perspective provided by its literary and social contexts.<sup>xxxiii</sup> He identified these formulas as the "conventional myths and metaphors" which he calls "archetypes" (Spiritus 118). The archetypes of literature exist, Frye argues, as an order of words, providing criticism with a conceptual framework and a body of knowledge derived not from an ideological system but rooted in

the imagination itself. Thus, rather than interpreting literary works from some ideological ‘position’ – what Frye calls the “superimposed critical attitude” (Anatomy 7) – criticism instead finds integrity within the literary field itself. What does this mean? It means that most critics of Sexton’s work overlook(ed) the reality (odd word choice, I know), that Sexton’s diction was not only restricted, it was narrowed to metaphors, similes, etc. This revelation would have steered the critics down a different road than the autobiographical one in which most travelled. For instance, Greg Johnson agrees that Sexton’s poetry is a “search for identity” (170), but goes no further, and in fact makes it a literal search relating directly the poet to her poetry. Others, however, do offer some insight into the metaphorical element of Sexton’s work.

Kathleen Spivack suggested, “the desire to be immortal was a strong motive for Anne’s writing” (29). I cannot argue that Sexton saw herself in the eyes of a goddess, or at least a disciple of Christ on a quest to reach his Kingdom. However, J.D. McClatchy remarked, “Sexton’s use of imagery in *Live or Die* is primarily psychotropic-used less for literary effect than as a means to pry deeper into her psychic history,” (270). Having presumably just had lunch with Freud, McClatchy overlooks the repetitive use of vegetable, animal, mineral elements in Sexton’s poetry, which are not used as mere images or phallic symbols. She was not an imagist like Rimbaud. Sexton was a surrealist who wrote from her unconscious and in doing so wrote not about her mother, or her father, or her daughters, but about the archetypal version of each.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Moreover, it is adduced that the personal poetry, such as that allegedly written by Sexton, is supposed to reach deeply into the soul. But this, the “soul,” is in of itself an archetype. And though

Alicia Ostriker declared mythology as an ominous field for females: “Mythology seems an inhospitable terrain because of the conquering gods and heroes...we find the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtuously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, etc. (Thieves 71). About her start in poetry, Sexton revealed to Patricia Marx: “It was kind of a rebirth at twenty-nine,” (70). Inhospitable? Mythology does not exclude gender, race, or creed. In a letter to Brother Dennis, Sexton expands upon the archetypal concept that permeates her poetry: “...perhaps this ambition to be ‘the best’ and ‘to give the most’ though it starts inward goes out and from you and from me and spreads out its roots in other people. So after all, forget the original motive...” (Letters 152-3). Sexton here is acknowledging the very basis of Frye’s theory that all literature, even confessional poetry, is a part of a much larger realm.

As much as she admitted in letters and interviews, the paramount revelation of Sexton’s use of archetypes is within her poetry. Therefore, if we consider *Live or Die* a quest for rebirth, which I clearly am, we must correlate the archetypes with the mythos. First we must recognize, as Frye has provided, that the quest myth has four stages,<sup>xxxiv</sup> that of conflict, death, disappearance, and reappearance. Hence, the religious quest of *Live or Die* involves first, the conflict of the speaker and the acknowledgment of the evils that harness her life and reside within. Thus, the speaker endures a perilous journey in order to cast out the devils inside her by defeating the metaphorical dragons/monsters in her life- the archetypal evil mother, the ominous and controlling male figures, and the alluring temptations of evil from other sources- this involves entering the Leviathan (sea or cave) and sacrificing herself, the result being death (metaphorical or physical) of

herself and the monsters. From the death of the speaker/hero we thence have the disappearance (in nature myths and rituals, this would involve the death of the land and disappearance of crops, etc.<sup>xxxv</sup>) generally into an under or over world or place of stagnation. In *Live or Die* the speaker's disappearance allows for reflection and eventually her reemergence in a new state. This *is* the story of Christ. This is what we know as Easter. This is the story of Attis, Odysseus, Penelope, and so on. And, so it is the mythos of *Live or Die*. This is not to say the story from Sexton's volume is exactly parallel to Christ's or the story of Attis, but the similarities are enough to match them.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In the chapters following I will go into greater detail of how each poem correlates with the different stages of the quest. Within these next few pages, however, I merely make some suggestive statements about Sexton's use of archetypes, as well as trace some of the motifs with previous literature, most notably the Bible. First off, though, I should acknowledge the usefulness of Ostriker's suggestion that female poets employ traditional images for the body, such as the flower, water, and earth but transform their attributes so that flower means force instead of frailty, water means safety instead of death, and earth means creative imagination instead of passive generativeness (Thieves 71). This lends itself to the poetry of Sexton.

The mythos of the quest is far from original. The idea and actions of the quest permeate every aspect of our being and world. In fact, life begins with the quest of a sperm to an egg and hence a mother's quest to give birth. Even before that, however, there must be a quest for a sexual union. And I could trace this evolution on to the beginning of time- whatever that may have been. Considering its attachment to the

cyclical characteristics of nature, however, the notion of the quest can be traced back to Aryan times. Myths from this time period and hereafter tell of quests for salvation, fertility, a sword, a holy grail, and of course rebirth.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Stories stemming from these myths include *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Beowulf*, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, and, of course, *The Fisher King*. In addition, if we reason that the Bible is a collection of mythological stories or parables, then the list must include Adam's temptation in the Garden of Eden, Christ's incarnation and reincarnation, and Moses leading the people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. The idea of the quest does not only sustain in Classical, and Christian myth or Canonical literature. As noted, there are intimations of the quest in every aspect of every human life. These include macro quests that extenuate throughout a human life, and micro ventures, which can occur on a daily basis. Do we not deal with conflict, disappear into sleep, metaphorically die into dreams and reappear after battling demons, dragons, or monsters? I suggest we do. So what of Sexton's revelations? Even if they were to be considered hers by critics, are they original? Do they pertain only to her? No.

I have previously divulged some of the archetypes Sexton employs in *Live or Die*; let me continue. Just like in *Lycidas* by Milton, the images of death and resurrection in Sexton's *Live or Die* are identified with the body of Christ. Yet, they are also associated with the demonic as well. These images include the sun, the tree, water, fish, bread, wine, and so on. These are common correlations, though Frye frames it best, noting, "Christ is the sun of righteousness, the tree of life, the water of life, the dying God who rose again, the saviour from the sea" (Fables 122). Further, Sexton employs a multitude of images

found in the Bible, including the city, mountain, river, garden, tree, oil, fountain, bread, wine, bride, sheep, etc., which all serve to present a unifying principle. Significantly, the tree is in fact connotative of the tree of life, such as it was in the Garden of Eden, but also the fall of Adam and all that is tempting. The word tree or a representation of the tree is utilized over a dozen times in *Live or Die*. Explicit examples include: “The trees persist, yeasty and sensuous, / as thick as saints” (105); “John Holmes, cut from a single tree, lie heavy in her hold” (107); “I hid in the closet as one hides in a tree” (119); and “those delicate trees that bury your heart” (149). And then there are poems which unite both the tree and water such as in “Mother and Jack and the Rain,” ‘Rain drops down like worms / from the trees onto my frontal bone’ (109), and as noted, in “Three Green Windows.”

As significant as the tree, water, in its many forms, is also prevalent throughout the collection, and serves a dualistic role. It is both the giver and taker of life, and serves as means for baptism and rebirth. Whether in the form of rain, the sea, or the ocean, it denotes the water of life (or of Christ), but also the Leviathan or sea monster, which the speaker must battle and kill. Examples of Sexton’s use of water as archetype can be gleaned in the following instances: “My skin flattens out like sea water” (97); “and go down that river with the ivory, the copra and the gold,” (107); “This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying / went on and on in water as white and clear” (107); “Rain is a finger on my eyeball. / Rain drills in with its old unnecessary stories...” (109); Oh! There is no translating / that ocean,” (116); “Now there is green rain for everyone / as common as eyewash,” (117); “my medicine, my bath water,” (122); and again, “that a pharaoh built by the sea,” (123). I elicit several examples to demonstrate the magnitude to

which Sexton goes in utilizing water as an archetype. More indicative of her employment of archetype is the combination of the color green with other elements such as the water, windows, and blood. Green, symbolically standing for fertility and rebirth, adds more pregnancy to the speaker's quest. There are several occurrences of this. For example, "born in their own green blood" (105), and as noted above, "Now there is green rain for everyone." Like most aspects of the poetry in *Live or Die*, the connotation of both the tree and water changes as the speaker's quest progresses.

The leaves or fruit of the tree serve as communion symbols. In the same sense, the references to vegetation such as "artichokes," "celery stalks," "sunflowers," "roses," and "magnolias," all of which are summoned throughout *Live or Die*, are not only indicative of the female, they are also symbolically tied to Christ. In fact, the rose, as exploited in "Walking in Paris," '...by the rose window of Notre Dame,' (136), and in "Live," 'picking roses off my hackles' (168), suggests the speaker's desired relationship with the risen body of Christ; or more specifically Sexton's idea of Christ, which could be female or even a martyred witch like Joan of Arc.

Frye also notes that the hero of the quest, in this case the female speaker of Sexton's volume, is associated with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth. Most notable of these descriptives is fertility, as mentioned in "Those Times..." "Menstruation at Forty," "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman," and "A Little Uncomplicated Hymn." Fertility, as Frye suggests, means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female.<sup>xxxviii</sup> These elements appear throughout *Live or Die* in the form of: 'That red disease,' from "Menstruation at Forty";

‘There is blood here / and I have eaten it,’ and ‘I am handed wine as a child is handed milk. / It is presented in a *delicate glass*’ (my italics) from “For the Year of the Insane”; ‘...to conjure / up my daily bread,’ from “Mother and Jack and the Rain”; ‘The bowl was filled with purple grapes,’ from “Consorting with Angels”; and ‘They pry my mouth for their cups of gin / and their stale bread,’ from “Self in 1958.” Furthermore, the sexual imagery throughout the volume is indicative of two bodies becoming one flesh. This idea is also relative in that the speaker metaphorically becomes a new person before the rebirth in the final poem “Live.” Ostriker remarks, “The archetypes are symbolic of what Sexton thinks of herself as either divine or demonic (Thieves 73). If this is the case, it was certainly done so unconsciously, especially if we are to consider the speaker an unconscious version of the poet.

If we coalesce the story of the quest with that of a descent into the Leviathan or hell and eventual ascent into the Kingdom of God, it is critical to recognize further those archetypes that lend credibility to this idea; particularly those which pertain most to Christianity. For example, the fish is a symbol of Christ and is referred to over a dozen times throughout *Live or Die*. The image of the fish permeates the Bible and its significance cannot be downplayed. First, Christ took the sign of the fish, Pisces. Secondly, the parables of fishing and the story of the bread and fish which were blessed and broke so as to feed five-thousand people,<sup>xxxix</sup> is yet another representation of the people eating the bread and food of the Lord. And finally, there is the story of Jonah who fled from Christ, went to sea in fear of Him, came up on a wicked tempest authorized by the Lord, sought salvation by offering himself to the sea, was swallowed alive by a large

fish at the behest of Christ, stayed there for three days and three nights (of course), and was spit out after acknowledging and accepting Christ as his Lord and savior. In *Live or Die*, the fish serves as an archetype of Christ- “I have heard of fish / coming up for the sun” (96) – and of the speaker in the image of Christ, or Mary if we take the feminine perspective: “This time / I certainly / do not ask for understanding / and yet I hope everyone else / will turn their heads when an unrehearsed fish jumps / on the surface of Echo Lake” (158). Another example resides in “Consorting with Angels,” within which the speaker declares, “I’m all one skin like a fish. / I’m no more a woman / than Christ was a man,” (112). In the following chapters, the significance and archetype of the fish, and the story of Jonah will come to sound eerily familiar; as will the archetype of the number three, the sun, and the cross.

The number three signifies the holy trinity, or that of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Frye iterates what we all know, “God *is* three persons and yet one God” (Anatomy 142). Furthermore, Christ rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion, prior to which he had proclaimed, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” (John 2:19). The temple he spoke of was his body (thus the correlation of all buildings in myths of Christianity with Christ). Sexton, the third of three daughters, references this fact and alludes to the number three on several occasions. In the poem “Three Green Windows,” Sexton writes, “I see three green windows / in three different lights—” (105); in “And One for My Dame,” the speaker proclaims, “in his bedroom on a three-day drunk” (95); in “Those Times...” she divulges, “being a third child, / the last given / and the last taken—” (118); and finally in “Live,” she bequeaths, “Oh dearest three, / I make

a soft reply,” (169). In her continuous utilization of the number three it becomes much more suggestive than a number; it transforms into an archetype of the Holy Trinity. This should not be considered a coincidence, unless a coincidence of the unconscious.

To further enucleate Sexton’s use of archetypes, which help predicate the notion of the quest in *Live or Die*, I will provide more examples of her allusions to Christianity, and more specifically, Christ. Let us begin with the cross and/or Crucifix. Frye claims, “The cross of Christ, like the Red Sea, is both a demonic image and an image of salvation,” and continues, “As an image of what man does to God, it is purely demonic” (Great Code 149). Frye’s definitions are not, however, the final word. As an image of salvation it clearly signifies Christ’s willingness to sacrifice for his people. In this sense, the cross of Christ serves in the same role throughout *Live or Die* as water and trees. Sexton’s employment of, and the speaker’s recollections of, the cross are as follows: “If there was a mistake made / then the Crucifix was constructed wrong...” (114); “Maybe Jesus was only getting his work done / and letting God blow him off the Cross” (129); “Jesus was on that Cross,” (130); and “The black rosary with its silver Christ / lies unblest in my hand” (131). In the chapters to follow I will depict how in each instance the cross is utilized. Of note, however, is the notion that the tree can also serve as a substitute of the Cross. This will also be examined.

Finally, and maybe the most significant, at least the most prominent archetype in *Live or Die* is the sun. Much like Kroll explains of the moon in Plath’s *Ariel*, and its controlling powers, the same could be said of the sun. The sun, as depicted throughout *Live or Die*, is the controlling force because it is more than just the sun; it is a god, that of

Jesus Christ (feminine version or not). In fact, the sun dictates the most powerful lines of the entire collection from the poem *Live*: “I say *Live, Live* because of the sun,” (170). These words signify the new identity/rebirth of the speaker. Other instances of the sun’s prowess, include of course the poem “The Sun,” as well as: “We wove our arms together / and rode under the sun,” (112); “It’s only an angel of the sun,” (138); “the furniture you have placed under the sun,” (142); “under the startling sun,” (147); “you chewed on a cloud, you bit the sun” (150); and, “There was the sun, / her yolk moving feverishly,” (168). The sun, the tree, water, bread, blood, wine, vegetation, buildings, temples, etc., all serve as archetypes of the God the speaker was desperately trying to reach.

It’s easy to say that *Live or Die* is merely broken up into two mythological categories: Life and Death. However, it is much more than that. It is a story of which Sexton employs familiar archetypes to depict a quest of a person descending into hell and experiencing conflict and death; disappearing and while gone, reflecting upon her life; and finally, like Jonah, reappearing with a new perception of life and Christ. With each stage, though, come more micro versions of each myth. With conflict comes sacrifice, death and rebirth, resurrection, love, birth, and darkness; with death comes new visions, and desires; and with life comes the death of old notions and marriage to God. Furthermore, the themes or *mythos* which present themselves in this collection are that of sacrifice, reincarnation, rebirth, the sacrament, salvation, death, marriage, birth, and of course good and evil. It is evident that there are more than two mythological themes coursing through this volume, but they congregate in the quest myth. Judging by this, to

say that Sexton does not mythologize herself and in turn rewrite Biblical myths would be asinine.

## PRELIMINARY EPISODES &amp; THE PERILOUS JOURNEY

*In Christianity one may become spiritually awakened, conscious of sin and of being under the wrath of God, and bound to a life of unconditional service to God's will.<sup>x1</sup>*

- Northrop Frye

The beginning of any quest begins with the perilous journey and preliminary tribulations of the hero, or in this case, the heroine. This journey leads to a conflict with the antagonist or monster, resulting in the death of both, and results in rebirth. These broad stipulations can be applied to almost any story or any person's (fictional or real) life. In the instance of *Live or Die*, the speaker's journey is as much one into the self much like that of Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness*,<sup>xii</sup> as it is a metaphorical physical journey for the speaker. It is no different from that of Odysseus's quest home, Aeneas's quest for a homeland, Percival's quest for the Holy Grail, Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, or Persephone's journey into and out of the underworld. In *Live or Die*, the speaker does not stumble into her journey. In fact, it is very much one that she sought out. It is a quest of the speaker's own choosing, such as was the quest of Theseus to Athens.

The beginning of this journey starts with the metaphorical death of one male "father figure" into a new male figure, both archetypes of Christ, in "And One for my Dame" (95), and results in a final internal conflict in "Protestant Easter," (128) an elementarily written poem in form and style, which surveys the speaker's internal conflict with her ideas of Christ and religion. In between, however, there are several revelations and epiphanies, which detail the many metaphorical and archetypal experiences of the

speaker. Frye notes in *The Great Code*, “The central expression of metaphor is the ‘god,’ the being who as sun-god, war-god, sea-god, or whatever identifies a form of personality with an aspect of nature,” (7). These representations of God appear during and after the initial journey and conflict, and further include gesticulations of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and entail persistent allusions and archetypes. We begin with “And One for my Dame.”

To commence, let me declare that tracing the quest motif throughout this volume of Sexton’s poetry will not, and does not, require line by line explications of each poem. Rather, it merely demands that we acknowledge the archetypes and allusions, which lead to the revelation of the particular mythos of each poem, and supports the more significant theme throughout the collection. To most critics, “And One for My Dame,” the title taken from the nursery rhyme, “Bah, Bah, Black Sheep,” tells the story of Sexton’s relationship with her father and eventually her husband. Further, it is said to be about the transition of power from the male to female and “about” loss and grief. The only relevant words from those statements are relationship and father.

This mini-quest begins with an archetypal father figure selling the word of the Lord, “by selling wool,” dying a metaphorical death “on the road,” (apparently on his own journey), and being reincarnated into a new male figure (God), who reminds the speaker of her previous “father.” The wool is easily identified with the lamb, which is archetypal of Christ, or more specifically the body and blood of Christ. Further, this also implies the notion of the sacrificial lamb, which the “father” becomes while on his journey. What is the speaker encountering here that involves any type of dangerous escapade? Nothing dangerous. Rather, through the death of others, she is experiencing a

shift in who she worships or turns to in times of crisis. The internal questioning of her religious beliefs, like many in the stories of the Bible- the twelve Apostles, Jonah, etc., - is an ever-occurring struggle throughout her quest. It is a cumbersome part of the speaker's existence.

The next step of her journey is an early attempt to become one with Christ. In "The Sun," (96-7) Sexton employs several archetypal elements to promote the concept that the speaker is dying into Christ. Like the Apostles ("the fish") of the poem, the speaker not only identifies with Christ, "I am an identical being," she proclaims to be one of his followers:

*Now I am utterly given.  
I am your daughter, your sweet-meat,  
your priest, your mouth and your bird  
and I will tell them all stories of you  
until I am laid away forever,  
a thin gray banner.*

Philip Legler suggests this poem contains several Biblical elements, including "seeing and blindness, reality and dream, creation and destruction" (38). Indeed, it is indicative of the sacrament of communion. Here, however, all creatures are equal. Animal, insect, and human alike give into the sun, or Christ. The speaker's attempt at attaining relations with Christ was apparently a failure because the tribulations of her journey continue into a much darker realm- eventually descending into hell (a cave). She does not cease though.

The religious quest of the speaker, not unlike that of the Messiah or Jesus, continues in “Flee on Your Donkey” (97-105). First, however, let’s dismiss the critics who proclaim that this poem “represents” Sexton’s return to a mental institution, and declare this to be her most confessional poem. The only confessional aspect to this poem is that it reveals yet another step taken by the speaker toward the inevitable descent into a lonely cavernous hell. In examining this aspect of her journey, two Biblical allusions in the form of the donkey can be defined. First, the ass (donkey), often stupid and obstinate, is also patient and humble. It is a symbol of the protesting, but acquiescent physical body, and is associated with the physical side of the Incarnation, and as such, it was the appropriate animal to carry Jesus in triumph into Jerusalem (Frye, *Great Code* 151). Further, in *Exodus* it is noted that every first-born belongs to God. But the life of a first-born donkey should be paid for with the blood of a lamb (34:19-20). This suggests the importance of the donkey in the eyes of God. Ironic that the speaker in this poem pleads, “Anne, Anne, / flee on your donkey.” This poem reads like one written by a surrealist madwoman, yet it is actually more a like a desperate prayer for renewal/rebirth. It echoes the travails of a person seeking Christ. She repeatedly announces: “My hunger! My hunger!” This repetition indicates her desire to be satiated by the word of her “father.” This archetypal father undertakes the role of several different figures, as denoted in the following lines:

*But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,  
 were better than Christ;  
 you promised me another world  
 to tell me who  
 I was.*

And further...

*You, my bachelor analyst  
 were the new God,  
 the manager of the Gideon Bible.*

Here again, however, the speaker's journey towards a spiritual rebirth falters. She announces, "I have come back," presumably to reality, and eventually accepts the fate of a spiritual death, proclaiming:

*Soon I will raise my face for a white flag,  
 and when God enters the fort,  
 I won't spit or gag on his finger.  
 I will eat it like a white flower.*

These spiritual conflicts are not so much a part of the larger quest as much as they prompt the actual quest of killing thy false self/monster, declaring her allegiances, and being reborn. "Three Green Windows" (105-6) describes yet another situation where the speaker gives up faith and begins her descent.

Within the title alone, "Three Green Windows," we have two explicit archetypes; one of which serves as a metaphor of the Holy Trinity, the other for rebirth and fertility.

As previously noted, the color green not only signifies fertility, in nature myths and those relative to them it is indicative of rebirth. Margaret Scarborough suggests, “Sexton evidences a deep desire for and an impulse toward the archetypal ‘good’ mother, a Divine Mother. This mother is part of a verdant, green and growing world; she is an image of Demeter.” She continues, “In this fantasy, mother is both of the earth and of heaven, immanent and transcendent; she is the sky, the sea, and the earth,” (188-9). Aside from assuming Sexton as the speaker in the volume, Scarborough’s assertion of the impulse toward the archetypal good mother is not far fetched. Scarborough asserts that the desires of the speaker are purely feminine, and certainly this may be true. In the case of “Three Green Windows” it does appear the speaker is beckoning Mary and not Christ. However, the several mentions of trees and the number three indicate a more masculine audience. As the number three is equated with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the tree is symbolic of Christ, but also of the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil (*Genesis 2:9*). Certainly the Holy Spirit in this instance may be indicative of Sexton’s feminine attitude toward it.

In this part of the perilous journey, the speaker seems to be dreaming, rather reflecting, on what she has lost, but perhaps also attempting to turn to a new God— that of an Earth goddess. This only lasts temporarily. In referencing her Earth goddess, the speaker announces:

*Soon it will be summer.*

*She is my mother.*

*She will tell me a story and keep me asleep*

*Against her plump and fruity skin.*

As she continues, perhaps a bit of clairvoyance can be attested to as she alludes to the cellar, which she will soon dwell in.

*I see leaves—  
leaves that are washed and innocent,  
leaves that never knew a cellar,  
born in their own green blood  
like the hands of mermaids.*

The speaker, however, comes back to the realization that it is Christ whom she desires, noting, “It is a time of water, a time of trees.” Though at this point on her journey, these two elements do not represent what she wishes or what they had previously. They are now the antitype. Regardless, the line is quite similar to that from *Genesis*: “And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (2:9). The next spiritual step for the speaker comes in recognizing the journey the soul takes after death, though she probably does not believe hers would travel the same route or to the same divine and heavenly place as others have.

In “Somewhere in Africa” (106-7) the speaker details, how, in her mind at least, the soul of a dead body is cared for, handled, and carried away by a female God; possibly Eve or the Virgin Mary. It is the myth of what the speaker believes happens to the soul after death. This soul, the soul of a friend, and its handlers go down the river. The river, though, should not be considered that of the River Styx due to the positive tone with which the speaker addresses her deceased friend. Rather, it is a blessed and divine river:

*The thick petals, the exotic reds, the purples and whites  
covered up your nakedness and bore you up with all  
their blind power.*

Further, the speaker describes the female guide/ferryman/God in adoring and divine terms, and in doing so assigns it qualities relative to a female God:

*Let there be this God who is a woman who will place you  
upon her shallow boat, who is a woman naked to the waist,  
moist with palm oil and sweat, a woman of some virtue  
and wild breasts, her limbs excellent, unbruised and chaste.*

Here, the palm oil, traditionally thought to protect against the devil, is related to the Virgin Mary. The soul's journey continues in the wooden boat, with the twelve Apostles steering it into Heaven:

*Let her take you. She will put twelve strong men at the oars  
for you are stronger than mahogany and your bones fill  
the boat high as with fruit and bark from the interior.  
She will have you now, you whom the funeral cannot kill.*

*John Holmes, cut from a single tree, lie heavy in her hold  
And go down that river with the ivory, the copra and the gold.*

The speaker concludes her eulogy, if you will, by denoting that perhaps unlike her, the figure of John Holmes is cut from Christ, and his soul is on its way to be borne into the Father- being cleansed on its voyage. Within this poem we have an actual figure from

Anne Sexton's life. But in eulogizing him she does so within the limits of our language, instinctively mythologizing his death and his soul's journey. For the speaker, this death and ascent into heaven represents hope that her soul can be salvaged as well.

"Imitations of Drowning" (107-9) addresses the speaker's concerns of death and rebirth. Inevitably, however, she concludes that it is not death that will kill her, but the fear of dying itself. Here again, this death does not mean a literal, physical death, rather a spiritual one in which the speaker speculates that she will not ascertain God at the end of her quest. The controlling archetype of this particular passage is water. As conveyed in the previous chapter, water can serve as a means of life or death, baptism (rebirth), or death when the fresh water seas of above the sky and under the earth meet and form a drowning deluge.<sup>xliii</sup> In this escapade, water serves more as a reminder (so perhaps a blessing): "This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying / went on and on in water as white and clear." But really, water in this segment of her journey neither acts as a blessing or as divine wrath and vengeance. It does not baptize or kill her:

*But real drowning is for someone else. It's too big  
to put in your mouth on purpose, it puts hot stingers  
in your tongue and vomit in your nose as your lungs break.  
Tossed like a wet dog by that juggler, you die awake.*

Rather, she recognizes the divine aspects of drowning and how rebirth can save her. She acknowledges Christ with every breath, and adheres to the principle that "there is nothing to fear, but fear itself." In reflecting, she concludes:

*Breathe!*  
*And you'll know...*  
*an ant in a pot of chocolate,*  
*it boils*  
*and surrounds you.*  
*There is no news in fear*  
*but in the end it's fear*  
*that drowns you.*

The speaker accepts fate and whatever the divine has to offer. This would vacillate, however, as her perilous encounters and experiences continued until the predictable conflict.

After reading “Mother and Jack and the Rain,” (109-11) some critics posit that Sexton, not the speaker, is revealing her Oedipal and incestuous desires.<sup>xliii</sup> This absolutely is not the case. First, we have established that Sexton is not the speaker, and second, the fathers, mothers, and siblings the *speaker* addresses are all archetypes. And, lastly, with all of the depictions of Christ throughout this volume, it is clear that if the speaker or Sexton desired to be in bed with anyone, it is He; though maybe that is Oedipal in of itself.

Water, the central image throughout this part of the speaker’s story, suggests otherwise: “Rain drops onto it. / Rain drops down like worms...” and “There is rain on the wood, rain on the glass / and I’m a room of my own.” Here, water/rain serves to remind the speaker that Christ was and is present at all stages of her life, in the forms of water, trees, and fish: “Fish swim from the eyes of God. / Let them pass.” Further, in each

stage, the rain signifies a metaphorical rebirth. And, in the end, she realizes it is the consumption of Christ that will save her: "...to conjure / up my daily bread, to endure, / somehow to endure." How does this encourage or detract from her journey? In realizing, again, that her salvation is in Christ, the speaker must also realize that there is pain, conflict, and death to endure in order to achieve her marriage to God. Is she strong enough to accept this? The answer to this begins to surface in "Consorting with Angels" (111-12), in which the speaker believes she must sacrifice her human attributes so as to be considered worthy by the divine.

As she has been overcome by the notion of attaining Christ in all of the previous poems, this theme continues in her revolutionary "dream" in which she again invokes Biblical elements. Frye posits "angels are often invoked to account for one recurring feature of mystical experience, the involuntary journey, where a seer or visionary suddenly finds himself in a quite different place," (Myth 219). Though I have proposed that the speaker's journey in *Live or Die* is voluntary, this concept presented by Frye is still relevant. The speaker's communication, or experience, with angels is obviously something of a wish fulfillment; not in the Freudian sense, but in the mythological one because she is on a quest into God's Kingdom. This poem appears as a vivid address to a female God (Virgin Mary?) again:

*Last night I had a dream  
And I said to it....  
"You are the answer..  
You will outlive my husband and my father."*

*In that dream there was a city made of chains  
Where Joan was put to death in man's clothes  
And the nature of the angels went unexplained,  
No two made in the same species,*

---

*"You are the answer,"  
I said, and entered,  
Lying down on the gates of the city.*

Within the previous two stanzas the speaker not only alludes to a heavenly angel, she invokes the name of Joan of Arc, a person of historical importance whose story was not only a mimetic of myth, but who now evokes mythological sentiment. Further, the speaker describes "a city made of chains," which could be identified with Babylon, Egypt, or Jerusalem. Regardless, it is a city with walls, where people are put to death. Within the context of this poem, the "gates of the city" could signify the gates of hell or the gates of heaven. Either way, gates as described in the Bible were frequently considerable structures, near which was a public place of assembly. Hence the 'gate of a city' was so identified with the life of the community as to be synonymous with the city itself.<sup>xliv</sup> These gates could also be those which the speaker thinks surround the Garden of Eden, for in her "dream," she appears to be akin to Adam and Eve, but also to Psyche, who was chained to a rock and ravaged by death:

*Then the chains were fastened around me  
and I lost my common gender and my final aspect.  
Adam was on the left of me,*

*and Eve was on the right of me,  
both thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason.  
We wove our arms together  
and rode under the sun.*

Is this symbolic of the Fall of Man? Perhaps. Though surprisingly the speaker makes no mention of the tree of knowledge, forbidden fruit, or a cunning serpent.

She suggestively declares they “rode under the sun,” which, as has been illustrated, conveys that they are riding under the watch of Jesus. This could be a feminine Jesus, or the Virgin Mary, depending on your perspective. The final stanza may help define the speaker’s God’s gender.

*O daughters of Jerusalem,  
the king has brought me into his chamber.  
I am black and I am beautiful.  
I’ve been opened and undressed.  
I have no arms or legs.  
I’m all one skin like a fish.  
I’m no more a woman  
than Christ was a man.*

Who is the king? Is it Christ or Lucifer? With the contrast of the line, “I am black and I am beautiful,” it is hard to decipher. Perhaps at this point in her quest the speaker is torn because she does not know whom to turn to. Those she thought of as righteous led to the Fall of Man. Those she believed in at this point, Christ and the Mother of God have let her drown and now she wallows in misery like “an ant in a pot of chocolate” (109). And

what is she suggesting about Christ if she disavows herself as woman and Christ as man. Are they both divine? At this point of the perilous journey, she is refusing the call.<sup>xlv</sup> This refusal, however, not only leads her further into the “cave,” it prods her to identify herself with a malevolent character from the Bible; that of Judas.

“The Legend of the One-Eyed Man” (112-15), is derived from a Desiderius Erasmus<sup>xlvi</sup> quote: “In the land (country) of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.” Ironically, in this poem, the speaker equates her life-to-date to that of Judas Iscariot: “The story of his life / is the story of mine.” Judas was the Apostle who in selling Jesus to Jewish authority also sold his soul. After realizing the error of his ways he repented and hanged himself. Diane Hume George posits that this poem exemplifies “Sexton’s early appropriation of the prophetic voice” (17), however, by mythologizing herself through the character of Judas, the speaker is not prophesizing anything; she is taking her story out of the natural world and into the world of gods and goddesses. In amalgamating her life with Judas’s, the speaker suggests that she has betrayed herself, her soul, and her God: “Like Oedipus I am losing my sight. / Like Judas I have done my wrong.” She is refusing the call of her fate and of her God.

*I don't know whether it was gold or silver.  
I don't know why he betrayed him  
other than his motives,  
other than the avaricious and dishonest man.  
And then there were the forbidden crimes,*

*those that were expressly foretold,  
and then overlooked  
and then forgotten  
except by me...*

---

*Judas had a mother.  
His mother had a dream.  
Because of this dream  
he was altogether managed by fate  
and thus he raped her.  
As a crime we hear little of this.  
Also he sold his God.*

Has the speaker sold her God as Judas did? We must assume so. But, as the journey proceeds, we discover that she continues- whether voluntarily or not, it does not matter- her descent and eventual quest for rebirth. Her identification with Judas is a reflection of how she feels about her soul and about the possibility of her union with God. More so, it may indicate her Faustian willingness to sell her soul for atonement; and to achieve a new sense of self.

In the final two episodes of the speaker's preliminary and perilous journey, we observe her acquiescing with the demands of her quest. Her tone shifts from that of self-loathing to one resounding with benevolence and hope. At this point, she has recognized that a voyage into the scathing underworld will lead to her purification and unity with God. In "Love Song," (115-16), the speaker recalls her relationship with Christ, illustrating how her "small death(s)" made her more aware of her communion with Him

(Her). She declares, “There is no translating / that ocean, / that music, / that theater, / that field of ponies.” As most zealots would explain, faith, or the presence of God cannot be described merely in words; rather it is through nature and the miracles of life that God can be explained. No longer is the speaker refusing the call of the quest, she is embracing it, and maybe, just maybe, prophesizing about her eventual marriage to God.

In “Man and Wife,” (116-18), the speaker echoes the story of Persephone who is stolen into the underworld, but is eventually allowed to leave for three months out of the year. She, the speaker, denotes the omnipresence of her God, “Now there is green rain for everyone,” and contrasts herself with that of an exile: “They are exiles / soiled by the same sweat and the drunkard’s dream.” Inevitably, she realizes that through sacrifice comes communion with God. First, however, she must experience the conflict within herself- though clearly much of this has taken place- but also with the Leviathan or monster. This begins as she describes, “Those Times...”

## CONFLICT AND DEATH

*Any writer, any artist I'm sure, is obsessed with death.*<sup>xlvii</sup>

- Anne Sexton

In a letter to Anne Clarke in 1964, Sexton wrote: "I'm working like mad on this section of poems on death. I see already what a strange poem I wrote last year is all about (death) and am rewriting it enough to make it a little clearer. I think I'll make a section of them. Maybe I'll call it 'The Woods of the Suicides' (from Dante's *Inferno*)" (Letters 232). To merely suggest that the poems are of Sexton's death- her literal exit from earth- is at this point, noticeably absurd. The speaker dies in *Live or Die*, but must experience the travails of conflict first.

Like the episodes and experiences of the preliminary episodes, the conflicts, which the speaker entertains, are not always literal or physical. They are undergone internally at first, but eventually the physical, which is in fact a metaphorical death anyway, is an experience outside the body. The conflict moves the story into a realm outside of natural reality and into the very mythological underworld. Whom the speaker encounters there will be revealed shortly. Before this we must examine the conflicts that lead to the descent. To begin, we start with "Those Times..." (118-21), which is a lengthy recapitulation of the speaker's past conflicts and those that exist presently. The internal conflict resonates throughout all of literature: from the internal Oedipal conflict of Hamlet, to the moral conflicts that stifle characters such as Holden Caulfield, Hester

Prynnne, Jack Burden, and of course Faustus. More so, the internal conflict leads to an external one as well, whether metaphorically or not.

The literal and promoters of the autobiographical “I” of Sexton’s poems suggest that “Those Times...” tells of a girl/child reduced to and blamed for her body who imagines and accomplishes a transformation of her relation to that body (Gregory 39). This explication is not out of touch, but the mythos of this scene is far more mythological than that. It in of itself is a mini-journey recaptured in order to establish where the speaker stands at present. It, like nature and Christ, proceeds through a birth, death, and rebirth cycle. Further, the comparisons between the speaker and the archetypal Christ are explicit. She first announces that, like the Jews, she “was the exile.” She proceeds to exclaim herself the sacrificial lamb, not unlike Christ, and beckons the Holy Trinity in commenting, “being a third child, / the last given / and the last taken–.” Her self-exploration continues with her metaphorical references to the ways in which people live in Christ: “I hid in the closet as one hides in trees. / I grew into it like a root.” The speaker, vulnerable, yet chaste, describes familial conflicts, but inevitably celebrates her fertility and the life that sprang from within. Yet, the soliloquy ends with her still unsure of her position with God or the Holy Mother, Virgin Mary. The final poem of conflict before her ascension into the underworld is yet another internal struggle; one in which she appears conflicted about the fruit she bore, and fantasizes about meeting two male figures who have very much been a part of her life.

At first glance, “Two Sons” (121-2) appears to speak of sacrifice, marriage, and rebirth, which in smaller doses, it does. However, at closer inspection, the speaker

appears conflicted about the life she has lead thus far, “I grow old on my bitterness,” and dreams of sacrificing herself, “I’ll gather myself in / like cut flowers and ask you are and how you’ve been,” so as to “live,” which eventually she does. The metaphorical language in this episode has given way to more earthly diction. This is her acknowledgement of things to come, including her descent into the lower world and conflict with an external power. She descends to the underworld, (the depths of hell within her soul), via the metaphorical cave and it becomes her place of torment and death. Not unlike Persephone, Dante, Aeneas, Jonah, or Christ, the speaker suffers in order to survive. “To Lose the Earth,” (123-5) articulates the speaker’s descent and encounter with the alluring monster, or in this case, “the dwarf.”

The speaker’s quest moves ahead (below) with her metaphorical declension into the Leviathan where she encounters death. The cave, which she describes, is much like the belly of the whale or large fish, and we can only assume that the speaker resided here for three days. Whether this quest has been voluntary or not, the speaker is lured to the underworld (of her soul) by the pleasantries of the music being played by a sinister trickster. Why she descends is of little importance because either way she enters hell and is obsessed with it:

*Each day I think only  
of this place, only this place  
where the musician works.  
He plays his flute in a cave  
that a pharaoh built by the sea.*

Now that she has come to the place she resisted at first, it has consumed her being. It is an inferno of water. It is the deluge and fruition of all her fears. She does not describe the musician's work with benevolence either. It is not the type that draws people in because of its beauty, but because of their curiosity as to whether it is coming. The speaker details this:

*If you can find it,  
the music takes place in a grotto,  
a great hole in the earth.  
You must wait outside the mouth hole for hours  
While the Egyptian boatman howls the password  
And the sea keeps booming and booming.  
At that point you will be in a state of terror,  
Moaning, "How can we?"  
For you will see the unreliable chain  
That is meant to drag you in.  
It is called Waiting on the Edge.*

In the previous stanza we come across three mythological descriptions of the cave where the monster resides: "grotto," "great hole in the earth," and "mouth hole." These metaphors are commonplace within Classical and Christian myths. The grotto, or cave, is often the home of the monster or Leviathan. The great hole could be purgatory, the bottomless pit of hell, or, the speaker's vacuous soul. And finally, the mouth hole is that of the large fish or whale which appears in myriad quests. The sea in this part of her quest is no longer the beneficent and life-giving source it once was. It appears the waters of the over and under worlds have combined in this grotto to drown its visitors. The speaker

implies, however, that this what she and all others have been waiting for, the call to descent; the call to battle:

*This is the music that you waited for  
in the great concert halls,  
season after season,  
and never found.  
It is called Being Inside.*

Continuing, she asserts:

*It is close to being dead.  
Although you expected pain  
there will be no pain,  
only that piper, that midwife  
with his unforgettable woman's face.*

-----

*The flutist sucks and blows.  
He is both a woman  
and a man,  
abandoned to that great force  
and spilling it back out.  
He is the undefiled,  
the eternal listener  
who has cried back into the earth.*

The flutist is unidentifiable. It has no face, no spirit, and no earthly qualities. Its traits are similar to those of the fallen Adam and Eve, “abandoned to that great force.” But perhaps more so of Lucifer, as this is the underworld, and it is littered with the dead:

*From all sides of the cave  
you will notice the protruding fingernails  
of the dead.  
From their coffins  
as stale as cheap cigars,  
through the tons of suffocating dirt,  
they heard  
and dug down immediately and persistently.  
They scratched down for centuries  
in order to enter.*

Like others who have descended into the cave of hell- who have explored the depths of their souls- so too has the speaker. The calls were irresistible, the temptations too tantalizing, like the promise of being immortal. She is in the darkest depths of her soul, the Leviathan hath swallowed her, and the darkness makes its appearance, and both it and she die:

*At the far right,  
rising from an underground sea,  
his toes curled on black wave,  
stands the dwarf;  
his instrument is an extension of his tongue.*

And though alluded to as miniature in stature, this dwarf is more like a dwarf star that burns the soul; so brightly that the imminence of death was real:

*And you, having heard,  
you will never leave.  
At the moment of entry  
you were fed—  
-- and then you knew.*

With the descent comes the death of the “monster,” and the disappearance of the heroine. Though it reads like *Mephistopheles*, with the speaker being lured and appearing to sell her soul so to live forever, after reflection and contemplation she re-emerges into a new life; and with a new soul. The speaker’s demise epitomizes the statement, “Death is a release of the self into the divine, a speeding up of the rowing toward God [a reference to Sexton’s *The Awful Rowing Toward God*], a union which triumphs over life’s confining power,” (McGrath 151). In this sense we see the duality of the myths of death and marriage, and of death and rebirth.

“Sylvia’s Death” (126-8) and “Protestant Easter” (128-31) are reflections of the speaker’s soul upon its death. In describing a different kind of death in “Sylvia’s Death,” the speaker appears jealous that “Sylvia” did not have to endure this quest of sorts that she is: “how did you crawl into, / crawl down alone / into the death I wanted so badly and for so long.” Instead of an internal quest, “Sylvia” took the easy way out. There is a hint of regret in the speaker’s tone, as if she should have denied the enticements of her quest. Did she- this metaphorical replication of Sylvia Plath- however, reappear or enter the

Kingdom of God as the speaker will at the end of her journey? That should be at the center of this discourse.

“Protestant Easter” is an elementary attempt (in form especially) at retracing the resurrection of Christ, and in doing so, instilling hope that she too will resurrect. It conveys the speaker’s beliefs as a child and as an adult, and concludes with a hint of wishful thinking. She believes that by understanding the ways of Christ, she too can climb out of the hell she is in and “live.” She demands, “I just have to get Him straight. / And right now.” Further on she contemplates the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice and how that relates to her own:

*Who are we anyhow?  
 What do we belong to?  
 Are we a we?  
 I think that he rose  
 but I'm not quite sure  
 and they don't really say  
 singing their Alleluia  
 in the churchy way.*

Surely if Christ rose after his crucifixion and death, so can she. But this realization does not come as easily as she would like; not without contemplation and prayer.

## DISAPPEARANCE, REFLECTION, AND REBIRTH

*Every creature has impelled within it a desire to return to its creator, and so until everything is in God and God is in all, there will still be motive for a journey of some kind.*<sup>xlviii</sup>

- Northrop Frye

For the speaker of *Live or Die*, death did not resolve the horror of her life or the ambivalence she felt toward God, Christ, or the Virgin Mary. These issues would still very much be a part of her next adventures. Being swallowed by the Leviathan, and being held captive in the “dwarf”s” cave merely allowed for reflection on her life and decisions, very much like Jonah. The story of her death and current stage of reflection correlates well with the stories of those who “die” on an operation table, come back to “life,” and tell of their soul being able to see what was happening. Similarly, the speaker’s death inspired more prayer and eventual recognition of the course of her quest. “For the Year of the Insane” (131-3) clearly indicates that the speaker had yet to realize what would come of her soul, as she felt trapped, alone, and scared; not knowing if she would ever “live” again.

Wallowing in the dark, antiquated, and malevolent grotto, the speaker desperately calls out for salvation. Perhaps she did not like what she found on her internal quest, or maybe she feels ready to move on. It seems, however, that the former is more accurate. “For the Year of the Insane” reads like a transcript of a frantic call to the police. If words could scream off the page, these surely would. They would yell, “Help, I am dying. I am

in hell. What I have discovered is going to kill me. I do not want to be down here any longer. I get it. I get it. Now save me.” Of course the way in which Sexton shaped the poem is much more eloquent. Yet, the tone of the speaker’s voice is easy to decipher. In her prayer to the Virgin Mary the speaker dramatically pleads to be set free from the “open mouth.” She describes the horrors of hell, and declares that she is ready to be one with God. Unlike Mary and Christ, who represent all that is light and good, the speaker is swimming in a harrowing darkness. She exclaims:

*O Mary, fragile mother,  
hear me, hear me now  
although I do not know your words.  
The black rosary with its silver Christ  
lies unblessed in my hand  
for I am the unbeliever.*

The first part of this prayer is riddled with hints of desperation and self-loathing. There is a sense of regret because not only did she partake in this spiritual quest, she ventured on it unprepared. She seems to have thought that the quest itself would lead to religious fulfillment. She failed to observe that like the heroes and heroines before her she would have to undergo trials and tribulations. But she continues, as a child begging to be released from a well:

*O Mary, permit me this grace,  
the crossing over,  
although I am ugly,  
submerged in my own past*

*and my own madness.  
 Although there are chairs  
 I lie on the floor.  
 Only my hands are alive,  
 touching beads.*

She, like Judas, Jonah, Peter, and all other nonbelievers, beckons the Virgin Mary after having questioned and doubted. Yet now she screams “woe is me. I am praying to you Mother.” It is evident that despite her prayers and pleads, the speaker will remain in hell for at least a short while longer; at least until she has made some sort of penance. But she continues:

*I count beads as waves,  
 hammering in upon me.*  
 -----  
*The giver of breath  
 she murmurs,  
 exhaling her wide lung like an enormous fish.*

In hopes of evoking sympathy, the speaker describes her state of destitute, and, further on, claims that she understands the word of Christ; that she has become one with Him:

*O Mary, tender physician,  
 come with powders and herbs  
 for I am in the center.  
 It is very small and the air is gray  
 as in a steam house.  
 I am handed wine as a child is handed milk.  
 It is presented in a delicate glass  
 with a round bowl and a thin lip*

Unlike other quest stories, divine intervention from a heroine or otherworldly goddess does not take place. This despite the speaker's proclamations that she has consumed the blood of Christ from what one can only imagine is being described as the Holy Grail. At this point it is clear that she bemoans her choice to look inside her dark soul, and as iterated, her claims of a religious awakening go unheard. Her comparison to other heroines, however, does not cease, as she claims: "I see myself as one would see another. / I have been cut in two." Her allusion to the concept of sparagmos contradicts her assertion that she is powerless and naïve, for it is a trait commonly associated with those who possess unusual wisdom or power.<sup>xlix</sup> Yet in the sense that she concedes herself as a sacrifice it is very much appropriate, for this theme is also found in the myths of Osiris, Orpheus, and Pentheus.<sup>1</sup> And though Christ was not exactly torn on the cross, the indication of the wine and bread being his body and blood very much fits into this definition.

This prayer, rather, desperate call for salvation, ends with the speaker iterating that she has consumed Christ and is ready for atonement:

*O Mary, open your eyelids.  
 I am in the domain of silence,  
 the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper.  
 There is blood here  
 and I have eaten it.  
 O mother of the womb,  
 did I come for blood alone?  
 O little mother,  
 I am in my own mind.  
 I am locked in the wrong house.*

Her stagnation in purgatory continues despite her gravest pleas. However, she soon understands the cyclical process of her quest and appears at ease with the journey she has undertaken. Though her sense of ease would vacillate.

The next three episodes signify a shift (yet again) of the speaker's attitude. In "Crossing the Atlantic" (133-5) the speaker tells of a passage not unlike that of the one taken via the Red Sea: "We sail out into an oyster-gray wind, / over a terrible hardness." Frye suggest that passage of the Red Sea was "the original type of all paths of salvation," (Great Code 160). He also notes, with much relevance to the speaker's journey in *Live or Die*, that the crossing of the Red Sea was "followed by a long period of wandering in labyrinthine and frustrated directions," (Great Code 160). The speaker's journey has obviously not been direct to this point, nor does it become so after her voyage over archetypal waters and into a metaphorical paradise, in "Walking in Paris" (135-6). In which she exclaims: "Come my sister, / we are two virgins, / our lives once more

perfected / and unused.” It is within “Menstruation at Forty” (137-8), however, that the speaker has finally accepted her fate no matter the result.

Though the origin of the mythologies Sexton employs appears to change with this poem, such is not necessarily the case. It does read like stories from *The Golden Bough*, or of a story alluded to by Mircea Eliade or Jesse Weston in that the speaker appears to recognize the cyclical nature of life and nature itself. Accordingly, the poem seems inspired by an earth-goddess or by the stories of Venus and Eros or Venus and Adonis; but Christ being one with God and God being the bearer of all things good and evil, this is still very much an episode of Christian myth. It does, however, get to the very lineage of the quest, which was established in order to incite nature. The phases of the quest are precisely parallel to that of nature: birth, death, rebirth – summer, winter, spring. The speaker is certainly attune to this, as she proclaims, “I feel the November / of the body as well as of the calendar. / In two days it will be my birthday / and as always the earth is done with its harvest.” Further she invokes the idea of a son, which could be the Son of God, or the archetypal subordinate male, which represents the cycle of life and death. Essentially, we come to realize that she adopts the attitude of “whatever happens, happens. There is nothing I can do about it.” Though there are hints of vengeance and regret with that as well: “I myself will die without baptism, a third daughter they didn’t bother.” Continuing the idea of the correlation between speaker and the seasons, she exclaims, “My death from the wrists, / two name tags, blood worn like a corsage / to bloom / one on the left and one on the right – ” This is suggestive of the speaker beckoning rain. Or, as we have determined that Christ is rain, the speaker is pleading to

Christ. Frye states, “cutting oneself with a knife until blood flows is not only a dramatic way of expressing a desire for rain, but also identifies the worshipper’s body with that of a rain-god,” (Great Code 153), in this case, Christ (or Mary depending on your perspective). Inevitably, the speaker has determined that no matter the result of her disappearance and stay in purgatory, whether death or rebirth, the life that emerges is different from the life that gave birth to it.

The following several steps on the speaker’s quest mirror the attitude expressed in “Menstruation at Forty.” “Christmas Eve” conveys an overwhelming sense that the speaker feels one with Christ. By understanding the deaths of others she deduces that through death, comes new life. But she still feels the need for penance: “ Then I said Mary -- / Mary, Mary, forgive me.” At first glance, “KE 6-8018” reads as if the speaker has decided to give in to the Leviathan and stay in hell as she consistently addresses a “black lady.” But this is yet another configuration of the Virgin Mary and how the speaker sees her at this point of the quest. The speaker is gathering her strength and her convictions so as to get out of hell and renew her spirit: “I will not wait at the rail / looking upon death, / that single stone.” In the same vein, “Wanting to Die” appears to denote a turn in her spirit. Yet, from the controller (Sexton’s) of the speaker’s sentiments, we gather something completely different: 1. I don’t really think the dead are dead 2. I certainly don’t think I’ll die even tho I’m dead 3. that suicides go to a special place...4. that suicide is a form of masturbation.<sup>li</sup> Though it is not Sexton taking this quest, her words reflect a similar attitude as the speaker. Clearly this could be from the unconscious, but then we would be invoking too much Jung and/or Freud and would have to turn this

whole quest into a desire to fornicate with her father and kill her mother. Such is not the case.

As she has expressed in the previously related experiences, the speaker continues to see value in all aspects of what was her previous life. This is relayed in “Wedding Night,” (144-5) in which she reflects upon a premature union: “After that, well – / like faces in a parade, I could not tell the difference between losing you / and losing them.” Unlike that union, whether a marriage or a brief sexual encounter is of no difference, her anticipated union with God has been a life long endeavor. In “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman,” (145-8) the speaker acknowledges the idea of rebirth, stating, “...is that women are born twice.” In “A Little Uncomplicated Hymn,” she shares her newly found wisdom, declaring to her audience, “You’ll really fly. / After that, you’ll quite simply, quite calmly / make your own stones, your own floor plan, / your own sound.”

“Your Face on the Dog’s Neck,” and “Self in 1958” both read like dreams, or more relevantly, like surreal explosions of words. It is as if the speaker has been caught in a maelstrom- the storm before the calm- and in one final fit, releases the emotions and chaotic sentiments that reside inside her. Though it does not appear she wants to relive these experiences, nor sacrifice what she has learned from each, she does express the desire to move beyond them so to make penance with herself:

*and all by myself,  
I will fall,  
bound to some mother/father,  
bound to your sight,*

*bound for nowhere  
and everywhere.*

And penance with her God:

*But I would cry,  
rooted into the wall that  
was once my mother,  
if I could remember how  
and if I had the tears.*

The speaker relays her adventures with the understanding of her relationship with a god, or God, himself. The speaker's resurrection and marriage to Christ is near.

Through her metaphorical notions of death, the speaker takes another step in killing the false self and acknowledging her new soul- her reborn spirit. In "Suicide Note," (156-9) the speaker foretells of her rebirth and recounts her quest to this point. She comments on her trip to hell:

*I will have to sink with hundreds of others  
on a dumbwaiter into hell.  
I will be a light thing.  
I will enter death  
like someone's lost optical lens.*

This is a reflection of her descent- as was told in “To Lose the Earth”- into the cave where she resided and toiled. Further on she reflects upon her mini-quest in “Flee on Your Donkey,” and declares her relationship with Christ, not in death, but in life, stating:

*Once upon a time  
my hunger was for Jesus.  
Oh my hunger! My hunger!  
Before he grew old  
he rode calmly into Jerusalem  
in search of death.*

And finally, she admits that everyone must die to live, whether by choosing to explore their inner self or by being forced to: “But surely you know that everyone has a death, / his own death, / waiting for him.”

The next group of poems resounds with pleasant images and hope. “In the Beach House” paints a warm picture of summer, identifying the speaker with the ins and outs of the season. “Cripples and Other Stories” (160-3) ends with the declaration: “I’m getting born again, Adam, / as you prod me with your rib,” further promoting the idea of her understanding of Christianity. “Pain for a Daughter,” (163-4) tells of an archetypal daughter realizing the power of God and/or discovering the spirit. It echoes proclamations made by Christ on the cross. The archetypal daughter bellows “*Oh my God, help me!*” mimicking Christ’s exclamation, “My God, My God, Why have thou forsaken me?” And finally, “The Addict” (165-6) describes the speaker before her rebirth, “borrowed,” and “numb,” and crucified by her own doing. There is no turning

back, she is addicted to the idea of her union with Christ and the parallel life they have lived, and now she can live. In essence, she has evolved from the demonic Lilith to the dichotomous Eve, and into the saintly Virgin Mary.

The speaker's quest culminates with her rebirth and simultaneous proclamation: "Live." As Boyers exclaims, "Live" "...represents a rebirth of astounding proportion..." (164). More importantly, the final escapade presents a new sense of self after having endured the descent into hell, the travails of being held there, and the ascension. The speaker explains:

*Well, death's been here  
for a long time –  
it has a hell of a lot  
to do with hell  
and the suspicion of the eye  
and the religious objects  
and how I mourned them  
when they were made obscene  
by my dwarf-heart's doodle.*

At this point, she can calmly and collectively recall her experiences of refusing the call-denying the patriarchy- and realizing that her God does not have to be the cliché male figure that she heard of. Through her descent and experience with the dwarf/Leviathan in hell, she can see clearly the error of her ways in trying too hard to understand Christ for all the wrong reasons and hence spiting Him because of her stubbornness. She has gathered her strength and come to recognize that her resurrection is owed in large part to

her own resilience. Though one of the cloth would surely propose that it was God's hand that carried her. Nonetheless, she states:

*Even so,  
I kept on going on,  
a sort of human statement,  
lugging myself as if  
I were a sawed-off body  
in the trunk, the steamer trunk.  
This became a perjury of the soul.  
It became an outright lie...*

Further, however, she accounts for Christ's (again, I iterate the idea that the speaker seeks the Virgin Mary) role in her salvation and resurrection. For as much as her resilience played a role in enduring hell, it was certainly God's strength imbued in her, that helped her persevere.

*Today life opened inside me like an egg  
and there inside  
after considerable digging  
I found the answer.  
What a bargain!  
There was the sun,  
her yolk moving feverishly,  
tumbling her prize –  
and you realize that she does this daily!  
I'd known she was a purifier  
but I hadn't thought*

*she was solid,  
hadn't known she was an answer.*

Here, the speaker confesses- ironic that it is not Sexton confessing considering the genre of confessional poetry- her discovery of God, and how He has helped with her awakening. The debate as to whether it is a female God or male is moot, as throughout her quest she has alluded to the Holy Trinity in both overt and discreet ways. In “Live,” she does once again, bequeathing, “O dearest three, / I make a soft reply.” At this point, the spirit aspect of the trinity clearly represents the Virgin Mary. This spirit is the source of inspiration to complete her quest, which she signifies with the final words from this pronouncement:

*I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann.  
The poison just didn't take.  
So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,  
repeating the Black Mass and all of it.  
I say Live, Live because of the sun,  
the dream, the excitable gift.*

She is not Judas, the killer of Jesus. She is not the murderer of Jews. She defeated the poisons of the underworld and of her own mind. She will no longer mock the fundamental beliefs of Christianity or scold God for her detriments. Instead she will “Live,” and by living she has repented so to be with Christ. In this, she echoes a passage from *Deuteronomy*: “I have set before you life and death; therefore choose life” (30:19). As noted by Frye, and as the speaker has clearly come to realize “In Christianity love for

God is obviously its own reward, because God is love” (Fables 93). With the speaker it is more that because she feels united with God and feels worthy of love and reborn, she is God.

With her resurrection, the speaker can live in accord with herself and with the Holy Trinity. She has accepted that “Dying to self is the one only way to life in God” (Mantle 10). The speaker in “Live or Die” is both the Hydra and the Medusa, but in fact strived to become the feminine Christ, thus the quest of salvation into the underworld of her soul and her resurrection.

## CONCLUSION

*There is no literary reason why the subject of a confession should always be the author himself, and the dramatic confessions have been used in the novel at least since Moll Flanders.*<sup>lii</sup>

- Northrop Frye

Our souls harbor myths, and so too perhaps does our cerebral cortex. Definitively though, our culture, with its literature, music, movies, etc., is infused with the themes of mythologies. They are the undying and everlasting absorbers of each experience. To deny our past, whether mythological, historical, oral, or literal, is to deny the possibility of influences. We are not the sole creators of new works. They reside inside of us instinctively and they permeate society intrinsically. And though confessional poets are said to write directly from their souls, the soul itself is a filter through which all experiences become mythologized.

Man was born into and still lives within a mythological and archetypal universe, filled with spheres and circles and mazes and ladders and death and sacrifice and rebirth and marriage and unions to God and to each other. Even in “truth” or “history” the mythical elements always remain.<sup>liii</sup> Poets serve as mythological messengers, continuing the tradition of beckoning gods and goddesses to celebrate life, death, etc. Surely we could explicate each line, each poem, and correlate each with a poet’s life, and surely we would find similarities- maybe even exact echoes of his/her experiences- but as has been illuminated, a person’s experiences are only unique in how they are perceived. This is not

to suggest that Sexton's experiences were not real, or even experienced, but they were described- or transcribed for that matter- within the bounds of literature; in itself bound by language that is often mythological. Much like the Bible, with Sexton's poetry, there is no clear line between what is actual history and what the storyteller has distorted. To try and delineate one at all would be foolish and difficult. Was Sexton aware of such a boundary? Maybe. She enjoyed flirting with and blurring the lines between her ideas of fact and fiction. But even in retelling what one believes to be fact, there is always some truth, which is lost, distorted, or embellished.

The speaker's quest in *Live or Die* is no different than any personal endeavor to discover who we are. Understanding that allows us to acknowledge that we live in the same manner as Persephone and Demeter, Odysseus, Attis, Theseus, and/or Christ- we are constantly searching for meaning, and more often than not we look to the past to help us understand. During her quest for salvation the speaker was looking forward, acknowledging the present, but also looking back so to create a new self. Could we say Sexton's voice is a part of the speaker's? Absolutely. But to concede anything further would be suggesting that Sexton is an innovator and creator of a new language and of a new type of storytelling, which she clearly is not. And though she exclaimed, "The ragged Christ, that sufferer, performed the greatest act of confession, and I mean with his body. And I try to do that with words," (Kevles 108), it is only the speaker who relays to us her experiences of her mythological quest. Sexton's voice is filtered through mythologies and through her desires to become a goddess; therefore it becomes the speaker and not her. As we are today, the concept of originality has virtually vanished.

Moving forward, it will be even more difficult to try to write “original” works because myths continue to permeate our existences and continue to be retold in myriad ways.

Working with the past, while progressing forward makes for the most sensible type of literature. Moving forward, however, it will be up to the poet to continue and try to make the reader re-see, and up to the critic to interpret literature in new ways.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Northrop Frye, from *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society*

<sup>ii</sup> To date I have only discovered one detailed work on this concept, and that is Judith Kroll's work *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Though there have certainly been articles written, which touch upon the subject of mythology in the poetry of the confessionals, Sexton's poetry has often been considered too personal to fall under any mythological disguise. However, there are two or three critics that approach the subject but seem too timid to make a full declaration of Sexton's poetry as myth. These include Diane Hume George, Sandra Gilbert, and Alicia Ostriker.

<sup>iii</sup> For more, see *The Myth of the Eternal Return*

<sup>iv</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp 107

<sup>v</sup> See Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" *Signs*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Autumn, 1982, pp 68-90

<sup>vi</sup> See Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*

<sup>vii</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Practical Imagination: An Introduction to Poetry*. pp xvii. He expands on this, noting: "Thinking in metaphor, simile, and metonymy is in some ways a primitive way of thinking; it has no relation to telling the "truth" as we usually understand truth, where we put a body of words up against something it's supposed to describe and say it's "true" it's an adequate counterpart of that something. It's because of the primitive nature of poetic thinking that all literatures, in all human societies, begin with poetry," (Frye, Practical 10).

<sup>viii</sup> All lines of Sexton's poetry taken from *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*, Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1981.

<sup>ix</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. pp 32

<sup>x</sup> See Elizabeth Gregory's "Confessing the Body: Plath, Sexton, Berryman, Lowell, Ginsberg and the Gendered Poetics of the 'Real'" from *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, Edited by Jo Gill. Routledge, New York, 2006. Also, in *The Confessional Poets*, Robert Phillips expresses a similar notion of confessional poetry suggesting that "a true confessional poet places few barriers between his self and direct expression of that self..."

<sup>xi</sup> M.L. Rosenthal is credited (though that word seems to possess much too much of a positive connotation) with having first employed the word confessional to the type of writing being done by American poets in the 40's, 50's and 60's. In his article, "Poetry as Confession," published in *The Nation*, Rosenthal suggests about Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, "Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself..." (154). Ironically, he also comments, "To build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of the lost Self has been the recurrent effort of the most ambitious poetry of the last century" (155). Those who followed Rosenthal obviously overlooked the mythological element of that statement. See Rosenthal, M.L. "Poetry as Confession." *The Nation*. Sept 19, 1959. pp 154-5

<sup>xii</sup> Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society*. pp 72

<sup>xiii</sup> These include Brenda Ameter and Margaret Scarborough.

<sup>xiv</sup> Dr. Michael Sexson

<sup>xv</sup> Paul A. Lacey. "The Sacrament of Confession." Reprinted in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*. Edited by Linda Wagner-Martin. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989. pp 95

<sup>xvi</sup> For more, see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in idem, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977.

<sup>xvii</sup> For more on Kumin's and George's types of I, see Diane Hume George, *Oedipus Anne*, pp 96-110

<sup>xviii</sup> Anne had two daughters, Linda the elder and Joy. Linda was very much a part of the misery that ensued in the Sexton household and a victim of Sexton's instability. Joy, on the other hand, was often placed with a family member outside of the home. Linda has not been shy about divulging the details of her childhood and of her mother's "madness." This can be captured by reading Middlebrook's biography of Anne, but I also have second-hand knowledge of these facts from a source.

<sup>xix</sup> From *Fables of Identity*, pp 194

<sup>xx</sup> See *Letters*, pp 79

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- <sup>xxi</sup> She continued – “Poets will not only hide influences. They will bury them!” (Colburn 10). But such influences can never be buried. They are always revealed within the poem itself and by stepping back from it.
- <sup>xxii</sup> “Journey to the Interior” was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1961. The first poem in *Live or Die* is dated January 25, 1962. This should come as no surprise.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Roethke, Theodore. *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. New York: Doubleday, 1966. pp 187-89. I have included only the first stanza.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> See *Letters*, pp 271
- <sup>xxv</sup> See brief biography on the web site for the Academy of American Poets, poets.org
- <sup>xxvi</sup> See brief biography on the web site for the Academy of American Poets, poets.org
- <sup>xxvii</sup> See *Letters*, pp 111
- <sup>xxviii</sup> See “The Art of the Theater. No 4, Edward Albee.” *The Paris Review*
- <sup>xxix</sup> *The Second Sex* is described as a comprehensive treatise on women in which Beauvoir weaves together history, philosophy, economics, biology, and a host of other disciplines to show women's place in the world and to postulate on the power of sexuality. *Mere Christianity* describes those doctrines that the four major denominations in Britain (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic) would have in common, e.g., original sin, the transcendent Creator God, and the divinity of Jesus as well as his atonement and bodily resurrection. *The Crack-Up* was a collection of unpublished letters and memoirs by Fitzgerald.
- <sup>xxx</sup> See *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, pp 43
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Eliade stated: “Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype,” (21).
- <sup>xxxii</sup> See A.C. Hamilton, *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism*, pp 20-1
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> See Diane Hume George, *Oedipus Anne*
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> He presents the quest as having three stages first, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, but several pages later expands on all four. In *Anatomy*, he notes that the three main stages are the stage of the perilous journey and preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle resulting in death of the hero and foe; and the exaltation of the hero. (pp 187). I would assume then, with the death comes the disappearance and eventually the exaltation or rebirth.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Frye explains: “In its use of images and symbols poetry seeks the typical and recurring. That is one reason why throughout the history of poetry the basis for organizing the imagery of the physical world has been the natural cycle. The sequence of seasons, times of day, periods of life and death, have helped to provide for literature the combination of movement and order, of change and regularity, that is needed in all of the arts. Hence the importance, in poetic symbolism, of the mythical figure known as the dying god, whether Adonis or Porsepine or their innumerable allotropic forms, who represents the cycle of nature,” (*Fables*, 58).
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> It could also be argued that the quest myth which dominates *Live or Die* is purely feminine. As it has been consummated by a feminine author this is not too radical a proposal. As long as we keep in mind that Sexton is not truly the narrator in each of these poems.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> It should be of no surprise that the extent of my knowledge of the canon is far inferior to that of Frye's, thus I have relied in part on his bringing forth of examples of quests.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp 193
- <sup>xxxix</sup> See Mark 6:38, Luke 9:13, John 21:3
- <sup>xl</sup> *Fables of Identity* pp 92.
- <sup>xli</sup> This example drawn from Frye's *Myth and Metaphor*. pp 223
- <sup>xlii</sup> Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. pp 146. Frye talks of the great flood, and cites passages from *Genesis* to illuminate his point.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Critics such as Swinontkowski promote the idea that “Sexton suggests that a daughter's normal identification with her mother leads her almost inevitably and naturally to a vicarious incest with her father” (39).
- <sup>xliv</sup> From *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. Edited by Rev. C. I. Scofield, D.D., New York: Oxford University Press, 1909. See Cyclopedic Concordance, pp 142.
- <sup>xlv</sup> In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell illustrates the many steps of the journey. In some instances, one of these is the refusal of call. See pp 59-68 for more.

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<sup>xlvi</sup> Erasmus has been credited with re-writing the New Testament.

<sup>xlvii</sup> From an Interview with Patricia Marx, reprinted in *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*. Edited by Steven E. Colburn. See pp 82

<sup>xlviii</sup> Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*. pp 218

<sup>xliv</sup> See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp 192-93 and 148 for more.

<sup>l</sup> Ibid

<sup>li</sup> In a letter to Anne Clarke in 1964 – explaining the myth behind “Wanting to Die” *Letters*, 231

<sup>lii</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp 307

<sup>liii</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*. pp xviii and 32