# The Poetics of Toxic Love: Trauma, Agency, and Power Negotiation in Anne Sexton's Poetry

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## Abstract

This article examines the intricate relationship between Anne Sexton's depictions of "toxic love" and her suicidal ideation, situating her within the broader context of the American patriarchal culture. By analysing Sexton's poetic corpus alongside biographical and critical studies, the essay argues that her self-destructive tendencies were deeply intertwined with her tumultuous relationships, which both reflected and perpetuated patriarchal structures. Despite this, Sexton did not dwell in passivity but explored the complexity of the "toxic love" dynamics in her poetry, striving to assert agency within a world that sought to strip her of it. Paradoxically, while Sexton critiqued the oppressive dynamics of patriarchy, she also actively participated in and reproduced them in her work, embodying a dual role as both victim and perpetrator. This complexity is central to understanding how Sexton navigated her agency within a deeply sexist society. In this sense, Sexton's poetry evolves into a battleground for power negotiation, a realm where she not only resisted patriarchal control but also used the very tools of the system to her advantage. By focusing on the psychological and societal dimensions of her "toxic love" motif, this article probes the intersections between gender, identity, trauma, and artistic expression in Sexton's work. It sheds new light on her continued struggle with patriarchy and self-destruction, offering insights into how her poetry engages in a complex, dynamic contest for autonomy and survival within an oppressive cultural framework.

**Keywords:** Anne Sexton; toxic love; suicidal ideation; trauma and agency; power negotiation

UNISA university of south africa PRESS LASA
Journal of Literary Studies
Volume 41 | 2025 | #17659 | 16 pages
https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/17659
ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

## Introduction

Among the prominent confessional poets emerging in post-World War II America, Anne Sexton (1928–1974) stands out for her deeply personal and introspective exploration of the female experience, earning her the title of "the reigning high-priestess of the confessional school" (Phillips 1973, 6). Over the years, several critics (Crowther 2022; Horváth 2005; Salvio 2012; Swiontkowski 2003) have highlighted Sexton's Oedipal complex as a central factor in her eventual suicide. However, a more nuanced examination of the elements contributing to her self-destruction reveals a broader constellation of influences. Alongside the significant psychological imprint of her father during her formative years, her relationships with men—marked by both passion and conflict—also played a pivotal role in shaping her emotional landscape. These relationships were intricately linked to Sexton's ongoing search for meaning and identity, at times intensifying emotional turmoil and thoughts of self-destruction, yet also serving as a wellspring of her creative expression.

Equally significant is her critical engagement with patriarchy, a theme she consistently explored in her work. While she was acutely aware of the gendered oppression embedded in her relationships, Sexton paradoxically navigated and, at times, even turned the patriarchal structures she critiqued to her own advantage. Crucially, casting Sexton solely as a victim of heteronormative patriarchy does not present a complete picture of her complex identity. As her relationships often revealed, she not only suffered from these structures but also participated in and reproduced their predatory dynamics. For instance, her behaviour towards her own daughters, among others, demonstrates the extent to which she could embody the role of an abuser within these same patriarchal models. This complex interplay—between victimhood and complicity, critique and participation—necessitates a careful reading of Sexton's work that acknowledges the full scope of her lived and creative tensions.

Fundamentally, her poetic voice does not simply position her as a victim of the patriarchal systems but also as someone who engages in behaviours that assert her autonomy, even if they involve inflicting harm on others. This dual role—as both a victim and an aggressor—invites us to reconsider her complex relationship with patriarchy, especially as depicted in her poetics of "toxic love." This article examines how toxic love manifested in her relationships with her therapist, husband, and lovers, highlighting it as both a symptom of patriarchy's oppressive grip and a means of asserting autonomy within it. Sexton's ability to both critique and navigate the patriarchal structures is central to understanding her survival tactics. She lived in a deeply sexist world, and her engagement with these toxic patterns of love must be understood as part of her complex struggle for survival within it—one that unfortunately culminated in her suicide, despite her continuous effort to reclaim agency through her art.

## Seeking Love and Agency in the Wake of Incest Trauma

Sexton was a "love junkie," a term coined by Alicia Ostriker to describe her "unquenchable need for acceptance and caresses" and the "bottomless guilt that she herself has been insufficiently loving to others" (1986, 11). Deeply influenced by the American poet Sara Teasdale, whose themes of love and loss permeated her work, Sexton's early high school writings were already steeped in romantic imagery. Sexton once confessed to harbouring a passion for love so intense that it threatened to consume her:

> The aura of this thing [love] is more strong than alcohol. Not just sleeping with them: it's a ritual. If I want to push it I just say "I need you." I've been thinking, well, I'm going to die of this, it's a disease; it will destroy the kids, axe my husband and anyone else's opinion of me. Ever since George, ever since my mother died, I want to have the feeling someone's in love with me. From George to Jim. A fine narcotic, having people in love with me. (quoted in Middlebrook 1991, 212)

Sexton's compulsive attachment to the men who entered her life and her impulses to romanticise and sexualise her relationships with them were rooted in what Skorczewski terms "an aggressive and sexual Oedipal plot" to win the father and overthrow the mother (2012, 205). Some of Sexton's close friends, including Lois Ames, who was a psychiatric social worker, revealed that she was sexually harassed by her father in her childhood, a traumatic experience that profoundly shaped her psyche and interpersonal dynamics. Paradoxically, despite being an incest survivor, Sexton never directly expressed anger towards her father. In fact, she maintained a fierce and morbid love for him, dreaming of a union with him and later with a series of father-surrogates. Her incest complex, as Judith Butler interprets it, is transferred onto other objects of love: "we desire most strongly those individuals who reflect in a dense or saturated way the possibilities of multiple and simultaneous substitutions, where a substitution engages a fantasy of recovering a primary object of a love lost and produced through prohibition" (1993, 199). Moreover, her incest trauma also intensified her need to distinguish between two opposing father figures: the "demonic" father, who was indifferent, smothering, and destructive, and the "angelic" father, who was cordial, nurturing, and liberating. While her biological father embodied the "demonic" archetype in her eyes, Sexton's attitude towards father-substitutes remained somewhat equivocal. Despite her conflicted feelings, she relentlessly sought the image of the "angelic" father in these figures, hoping to secure the love and protection that she had not received from her biological father. In this search, she turned to therapists, her husband, and lovers, believing that they could offer the fulfilment she longed for and "make her whole at last" (Sexton 1985, 79). As a result, in her poetry, the self is often defined through its relationships with male figures, especially her romantic partners. A recurring theme in her work is the "rescue fantasy," where the speaker, typically a woman in distress, seeks male affection and attention as a means of validating her existence and self-worth. This theme resonates with patterns common among survivors of incest, where love becomes a fragile life raft, a way of affirming the self in the wake of trauma.

However, to frame Sexton's complex relationships through psychoanalytic theory alone risks oversimplifying the dynamics of incest trauma, particularly in terms of loss of selfhood and autonomy. As Phyllis Chesler and Elinor Cleghorn have noted, trauma survivors—particularly women—often face a patriarchal system that pathologises their pain and denies them agency over their bodies and selves. Chesler, in *Women and Madness*, argues that women's psychological sufferings, including trauma and madness stemming from incest, are framed within psychiatric discourse as "an intense experience of female biological, sexual and cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency" (Chesler 1972, 71). It becomes a condition that reinforces the power structures that oppress them, as "[s]uch traits in women are feared and punished" (Chesler 1972, 71). Likewise, Cleghorn, in *Unwell Women*, critiques the way medical and psychological systems have historically treated women's experiences of trauma as a condition that disempowers them, rather than as a response to a toxic societal framework. She encourages women to revisit and recall the pain of trauma "as an act of defiance against those power structures in the man-made world that would prefer us not to speak" (2022, 10). Sexton's desperate search for father figures, then, can be viewed not merely as a pathological condition, but as a deliberate attempt to confront her incest trauma, reconcile with her past, and reclaim agency in a society that repeatedly undermined her autonomy.

In this context, her work becomes an exploration of how the self is fragmented and reconfigured—not only by the trauma of incest, but also by a broader, more insidious cultural and institutional refusal to allow women the autonomy to fully express or recover from their experiences. Sexton did not merely transfer an incest complex onto other figures; she actively navigated and negotiated her selfhood in ways that challenged the very frameworks that sought to confine her. In this sense, her repeated search for paternal affection and protection from father-surrogates was, in essence, an assertion of her right to exist, to be loved, and to redefine herself.

## Navigating the Shadow of the Father-Doctor

Sexton's negotiation with male figures is most prominently exemplified in her relationship with her first therapist, Dr. Orne, whom she clung to as a surrogate father.

This dynamic is particularly significant as it illuminates the complexities of her search for identity and validation. In her first volume, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), Sexton dramatises multiple semi-mythical and erotic exchanges between therapist and patient. These exchanges serve a dual purpose: they both facilitate and hinder her efforts to solidify a coherent identity. The opening poem of the volume, "You, Dr. Martin," is unmistakably addressed to Orne, whose first name is "Martin":

> You, Doctor Martin, walk
> from breakfast to madness. Late August,
> I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
> where the moving dead still talk

> of pushing their bones against the thrust
> of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
> or the laughing bee on a stalk.
> (Sexton 1981, 3)

As Dr. Martin transitions from the ordinary world of "breakfast" to the realm of "madness," he effortlessly crosses the threshold between reality and illusion, assuming a god-like and mythic stature. This sense of divine authority is amplified when the speaker refers to him as the "god of our block," positioned "above the plastic sky," casting an omnipotent gaze upon his patients (3). The act of "thrust" performed by the doctor evokes male sexuality, subtly suggesting his sexual power to "cure" the patients ("the moving dead") and initiate their transition from death to life. While the speaker may outwardly declare herself the "queen of this summer hotel," her underlying sense of displacement and marginalisation is tangible. As Anissa Sboui astutely observes, Dr. Martin here represents "the extent to which Sexton affirms man's control" within the patriarchal order (2023, 59).

However, I would argue that the speaker's apparent submission to Dr. Martin's dominance masks a subtle negotiation of identity and agency. In confronting her own fractured sense of self, the speaker begins to assert a burgeoning self-recognition, no longer defined solely by her physical appearance:

> I am queen of all my sins
> forgotten. Am I still lost?
> Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
> counting this row and that row of moccasins
> waiting on the silent shelf.
> (Sexton 1981, 4)

As the speaker embraces a new self, brimming with multiple possibilities, the socially constructed, "beautiful" self fades into irrelevance. Moreover, the "moccasins," ingeniously interpreted by Skorczewski as "mock-a-sins," further underscore Dr. Martin's role in transforming the fragile, inadequate speaker into a creator of new meanings. Once Dr. Martin assumes the role of the "angelic," nurturing father, his omnipresence in the speaker's life becomes both a stabilising force and a potential site for renewal. It is within this paternal relationship—imbued with both care and control—that the speaker can rebuild her identity. Dr. Martin thus becomes a figure who, paradoxically, enables the speaker not only to confront her trauma but also to mock the "sins" of her past.

Later in her third volume *Live or Die* (1966), however, Dr. Martin emerges as an overwhelmingly oppressive "father-doctor," an archetype that is particularly evident in the poem "Cripples and Other Stories." Structured in compact quatrains with an *abab cded* rhyme scheme, this poem evokes the simplicity of a child's nursery rhyme, a stylistic choice that subtly "reinforces the speaker's subservience in relation to the

subject" (Goh 2021, 154). Through this rhyme, Sexton transforms her struggle with the patriarchal figure of the doctor into a confessional performance, where the speaker is trapped in a "child-woman" impasse, deprived of the agency to mature into an emotionally stable, self-sufficient woman—even at the age of 36. The speaker's frustration with this stunted identity is voiced with bitter clarity in the following lines:

> My doctor, the comedian
> I called you every time
> and made you laugh yourself
> when I wrote this silly rhyme […]
> God damn it, father-daughter.
> I'm really thirty-six.
> I see dead rats in the toilet.
> I'm one of the lunatics.
> (Sexton 1981, 160)

In these lines, the speaker intensely abhors the state of being infantilised, as she grows increasingly suspicious of the "father-doctor" who claims to "mend" her, yet confines her to the regressive rituals of childhood. This tension is further exacerbated by the persistence of baby talk and the sing-song cadence that pervades the poem, instigating a jarring contrast between the speaker's age and her coerced infantilisation. While the doctor may appear as a nurturing figure, his promises of healing are ultimately revealed to be cruel deceptions. In a manner comparable to the dynamics explored in "You, Dr. Martin," the "doctor-patient" relationship in this poem is also tinged with an undercurrent of sexuality and eroticism:

> Or else you hold my hand
> and teach me love too late. […]
> You hold me in your arms.
> How strange that you're so tender! [… ]
> You kiss me in my fever.
> (Sexton 1981, 162)

Here, the physical intimacy hints at a disturbing blurring of boundaries, mirroring a father-daughter incestuous dynamic that the speaker is powerless to resist. Indeed, she is a "child-woman"—sensual and infantile, reduced to a state of powerlessness and perpetually confined to the "crib" of her father-doctor. Her growing rage towards him bursts out in the defiant refrain, "God damn it, father-doctor, / I'm really thirty-six" (160), highlighting the deep contradiction in her reliance on him. Sexton's portrayal of her dependence on Orne as a father-surrogate and saviour complicates the feminist reading of her works, for rather than offering her security and wholeness, it exacerbates her struggle for self-realisation and self-actualisation. However, as the poem progresses, Sexton also signals the regenerative potential of her speaker, offering a glimpse of survival and resistance in a world shaped by patriarchal oppression. The lines "As for the arm, unfortunately it grew. / Though mother said a withered arm would put me in

*Who's Who*" (Sexton 1981, 162) convey her inner rejection of the imposed limitations of her body and identity. This growth of the arm signals her regenerative power, an assertion of agency in defiance of passive victimhood. Furthermore, the poem's lines "from the outhouse, the greenhouse / where you draw me out of hell" (Sexton 1981, 163) evoke a scene of transformation, suggesting a space where the speaker is lifted out of suffering and oppression, presumably towards some form of rebirth or liberation. The imagery of the "greenhouse" as a place of growth—contrasting with the more degrading and limiting "outhouse"—points to the possibility of healing and transformation within even the most toxic and confined spaces. Sexton uses this juxtaposition to explore the regenerative power that can emerge from struggle, implying that negotiating a patriarchal system might not only involve enduring oppression but also actively seeking spaces where one can grow and assert oneself. This is further reinforced in the provocative declaration: "I'm getting born again, Adam, / as you prod me with your rib" (Sexton 1981, 163). Here, the speaker aligns herself with a new act of creation, a rebirth not dictated by patriarchal authority but rather as an assertion of her own identity and power. Thus, the regenerative imagery in this poem becomes central to understanding how Sexton's speaker survives in a heavily patriarchal system. She is not simply a victim of male-dominated structures but also someone who fights for space, growth, and transformation within this system.

Sexton's poetic exploration of her inner tensions within the "father-doctor" relationship offers a unique perspective on her survival tactics, one that involves not only defiance but also the painful yet powerful reclamation of self within an oppressive system. In her interactions with Dr. Orne—who embodies both the caring authority of a father figure and the coercive power of a doctor—Sexton navigates the delicate space between submission and self-assertion. Her poetry about her doctor thus shapes a narrative of resistance and renewal, where she confronts and challenges patriarchal control, ultimately transcending its suffocating grip by drawing on her own regenerative power.

## Resisting Violence and Asserting Agency in Domestic Spaces

Just as Sexton navigated the delicate balance between submission and self-assertion in her relationship with Dr. Orne, she similarly grappled with patriarchal expectations and the emotional and psychological toll of her marriage to Alfred Muller Sexton II (Kayo). Early in her married life, Sexton appeared to conform to the typical expectations of a white, middle-class American woman, with her husband Kayo fulfilling the traditional male role as breadwinner in the wool industry. However, beneath this outward conformity, Sexton was engaged in a quiet but persistent struggle against the restrictive gender roles. In her complex, often tumultuous relationship with Kayo, Sexton desired affirmation of her worth—as both a creative individual and a woman deserving of love—but this affirmation was frequently withheld, leaving her to navigate a painful cycle of yearning and disappointment (Crowther 2022, 15).

Given the emotional and psychological strain in their relationship, Sexton's marriage was fraught with conflict, often pushing Kayo to explosive outbursts that reflected the

deeper tensions between them (Doherty 2021, 293). These tensions reached a violent crescendo during a heated argument about purchasing a new house, which nearly escalated to homicide. As Kayo shifted the discussion from their house-buying plans to express his intense feelings of isolation within the family, Sexton abruptly entered a trance-like state. According to Herbert Hendin, such trance states were often employed by those in vulnerable marital positions to "coerce, punish, and control those who did not meet their needs" (1982, 258). In Sexton's case, these episodes mirrored her ongoing struggle for power and control within the confines of her chaotic marriage. When Kayo resorted to physical violence, choking her in an attempt to bring her back to consciousness, it was not only a moment of extreme frustration but also a stark manifestation of the oppressive dynamics she faced. In a 1965 session, she recounted this incident to Dr. Orne: "Still I can't forgive me for not believing he tried to choke me. […] It's my whole tendency not to discuss him. He frustrates me too much" (quoted in Skorczewski 2012, 101).

In this charged environment, Sexton's poetry provides her with an arena where she could reclaim agency, wresting small moments of power from the very constraints that sought to denigrate and diminish her. In "Man and Wife," for example, Sexton starkly captures the desolation of her marital life, depicting a relationship stripped of intimacy and affection, where the couple's only bond is their shared, oppressive existence:

> Now they are together
> like strangers in a two-seater outhouse,
> eating and squatting together.
> They have teeth and knees
> but they do not speak.
> A soldier is forced to stay with a soldier
> because they share the same dirt
> and the same blows.
> (Sexton 1981, 117)

Here, Sexton evokes the futility and frustration inherent in the marital arrangement, particularly its lack of intimacy. The marriage is marred by alienation, morbidity, and absurdity, with "strangers" sharing a common situation. Despite the confining nature of this marriage, Sexton's speaker is not entirely passive. She dreams of transcendence: "I planned such plans of flight, / believing I would take my body into the sky, / dragging it with me like a large bed" (Sexton 1981, 120). These lines reveal an ambition for escape and transformation, a desire to rise above the limitations imposed by both her marriage and the expectations of womanhood. The metaphor of the body being dragged into the sky, like a "large bed," implies the struggle to reconcile her personal desires with the weight of domesticity. The speaker envisions herself as powerful and capable of moving upwards, "like an elevator," but the tension between her dreams and her reality is pronounced. This desire for "growth" and "womanhood" as a form of self-empowerment, "as one choreographs a dance," suggests that Sexton's speaker is not

simply a submissive participant in her marriage; rather, she actively plans and directs her path, even if the path itself is constrained by her circumstances.

Also, the violence and disillusionment within the marriage are starkly staged in the last stanza, as the speaker states:

> I did not know that my life, in the end,
> would run over my mother's like a truck
> and all that would remain
> from the year I was six
> was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
> so that I might hear
> the unsaid more clearly.
> (Sexton 1981, 121)

Sexton conjures a violent image of destruction and collision, depicting the speaker's life as one that "run[s] over my mother's like a truck." This violent metaphor unveils not just the speaker's frustration with the generational patterns of female sacrifice but also hints at the speaker's own role in perpetuating—or even exacerbating—the oppressive family dynamics. The act of running over her mother "like a truck" symbolises more than a mere break from her mother's experience but also the speaker's complicity in perpetuating a cycle of violence and emotional coldness. It speaks to the speaker's internalised aggression and her struggle to reconcile the oppressive, patriarchal systems that shape her with the violence she both suffers and enacts. As much as the speaker is bound by these structures, she is also implicated in them, as she acknowledges her own predatory behaviours within the family dynamic. This cycle of violence finds its echoes in her treatment of her elder daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, who would later claim to have suffered abuse at the hands of her mother.

In addition, the "small hole in my heart" left from the age of six points to an emotional void, a deep wound that has shaped the speaker's understanding of love and relationships. This "deaf spot" functions as a heightened awareness, enabling the speaker to "hear the unsaid more clearly," as she becomes attuned to the subtle power dynamics and unspoken tensions that pervade her marriage. Rather than simply being crushed by her husband's indifference, the speaker emerges with a sharpened perception, one that allows her to confront not only her own complicity but also her ability to navigate the unfathomable territories of her marriage. This means that while Sexton's speaker grapples with a marriage that is emotionally stifling and marked by a profound lack of intimacy, she simultaneously asserts her agency within the structure. In essence, Sexton's portrayal of marriage reveals a complex negotiation, one where the speaker actively engages with the constraints of patriarchal systems, even as she struggles to find space for her own identity. Her violence, both towards her mother and within her family, and her recognition of this violence signal her refusal to be a passive victim. In doing so, she seeks to unshackle herself from cycles of emotional neglect and

toxic love, a theme central to her work as a whole, where survival often entails coming to terms with one's own complicity in the oppressive system.

## Defying Limits and Surviving Patriarchy in Illicit Love

Aware of the profound psychic toll exacted by the oppressive power structures confining her to the domestic sphere, Sexton's extramarital affairs became an act of both defiance and longing. She openly declared her need to resist her husband's control, stating, "The minute somebody gives me a limit I have to hurdle over it" (quoted in Skorczewski 2012, 173). This assertion of resistance, however, was not only about rebellion against the restrictive dynamics of her marriage; it was also directed towards searching for agency, autonomy, and a sense of wholeness—things she felt were denied her within the confines of domesticity. Thus, the affairs she sought were not mere acts of infidelity, but attempts to break free from the emotionally stifling roles in marriage. In these relationships, she yearned for what she described as the "supreme expression of unity and mutuality," the sense of being "special" (a word she constantly brought up in her sessions with Dr. Orne) and valued beyond the roles imposed on her as a wife and mother (O'Neill 1997, 252).

In the early 1960s, Sexton became involved with several men, including the poet James Wright, whose brief but intense affair with Sexton would later inspire some of her most evocative verses, and Anthony Hecht, another poet with whom she had a passionate and tumultuous liaison (Yezzi 2023, 39). Through these relationships, Sexton felt a temporary reassertion of her own power and identity, often experiencing a fleeting sense of transformation—a kind of escape into a more powerful and integrated version of herself. The act of conquering another woman's partner, of finding validation and agency outside the constraints of her marriage, allowed her to momentarily transcend the limitations placed on her.

Yet, despite these brief moments of empowerment, Sexton's pursuit of these affairs ultimately proved unfulfilling. Over time, she grew increasingly aware that the "life-giving powers of sexual love" she pursued in these relationships often ended in what she called a "destructive and disfiguring" process, leading to the "annihilation and death of the self"—particularly for the woman caught in the web of such fleeting desires (O'Neill 1997, 252). While these affairs promised a form of liberation, they often brought with them a new sense of emptiness, reinforcing the limitations of external validation in her quest for selfhood. Notably, Sexton did not merely reflect on her own suffering and sense of annihilation within the trap of illicit love; she also engaged in the very predatory behaviours that even terrorise the men she wrote about. This duality bespeaks the complexities of her involvement in the very systems of dominance that shaped her world.

Sexton's constant grappling with extramarital affairs is meticulously chronicled in *Love Poems* (1969), a collection of 25 poems that primarily incarnate her tumultuous relationship with her therapist, Dr. Frederick Duhl. The complex and troubling

relationship between Sexton and Dr. Duhl has long been shrouded in ambiguity and secrecy. In 1965, Dr. Duhl assumed Sexton's treatment after her previous psychiatrist Dr. Orne, and later initiated a sexual relationship with her. The details surrounding this unethical liaison remain limited, likely due to the concerted efforts of various health professionals, including Dr. Orne, to discourage Sexton from publicly exposing Duhl's misconduct. These professionals appeared to have rallied around Duhl, effectively shielding him from accountability—a cover-up that, as psychoanalyst Charles Levin suggests, "may have contributed to Anne Sexton's eventual suicide in 1974" (Levin and Skorczewski 2020, 206). Against this backdrop of profound personal turmoil, *Love Poems* emerges as a collection far removed from the beautiful, sentimental poetry of traditional love; rather, it "deals more with loss, loneliness, and alienation than with love" (Phillips 1973, 82). In poems like "That Day," "Mr. Mine," and "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman," the speaker's identity is understood only in relation to a dominant, God-like male lover. All four poems are premised upon a miraculous reconstruction of the female's body and soul by the hands of the male. The man, like a modern-day Pygmalion, moulds and constructs the woman throughout their sexual relationship. Her heart, hand, mouth, breast, clitoris, and womb become, under the man's attention, "households" ("That Day"), "cities of flesh" ("Mr. Mine"), "the boards, / the roof, the removable roof" ("You All Know the Story of the Other Woman"). These metaphors signify the recognition that love is the tool the man uses to create the woman and her identity, thereby integrating her self into a broader social framework. Although poems such as "The Kiss," "The Breast," "In Celebration of My Uterus," and "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" indicate Sexton's burgeoning self-awareness of her feminine sexuality through physical contact with her male lover, this self-awareness is tainted by the moral burden and the temporariness of sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Indeed, this volume ironically portrays a collection of female and male personae who are not united with, but exiled from, those they love, leading to persistent remorse and anguish.

In "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts," the male persona's moral burden in his illicit love affair makes it impossible for him to be truly connected to the woman he desires, whom he describes as "not [his] real wife" (Sexton 1981, 177). Richard Morton observes that the relationship between the two lovers is "morally complex," as the adulterer is questioned by an anonymous interrogator about the ethical dimensions of his affair (1988, 63). The speaker admits that their commitment is a falsehood: "I made up a song that wasn't true. / I made up a song called Marriage," and it is one that comes with societal constraints: "we live in a cold climate / and are not permitted to kiss on the street" (Sexton 1981, 177). Yet, despite the deception, the mistress's presence is strongly felt as she plays myriad roles in his life:

> She's my real witch, my fork, my mare,
> my mother of tears, my skirtful of hell,
> the stamp of my sorrows, the stamp of my bruises
> and also the children she might bear

and also a private place, a body of bones
(Sexton 1981, 177)

The mistress assumes so many different roles that the speaker cannot pin down her true identity— "but she was ten colors / and ten women. / I could hardly name her" (178). Despite this fluidity, he believes he has emotionally secured her, binding her "in a knot" because of her uncontrollable passion for him (179).

There are also chronicles of profound deception and devastating self-immolation as the aftermaths of love affairs, where the emotional injury inflicted on the abandoned party is so intense that it becomes tantamount to physical pain and annihilation. If Sexton portrays her male lover as an embodiment of constructive, nourishing powers in such poems as "The Touch" and "Mr. Mine," she quickly repudiates this perception in other poems. In "Loving the Killer," for instance, Sexton explores the purgatorial suffering of women in love:

Bones piled up like coal, animal bones
shaped like golf balls, school pencils,
fingers and noses. Oh my Nazi,
with your S.S. sky-blue eye.
I am no different from Emily Goering.
(Sexton 1981, 187)

In this disturbing stanza, Sexton draws a chilling parallel between the destructive nature of her lover and the atrocities of the Nazi regime, particularly through the invocation of the infamous figure Emily Goering, wife of Luftwaffe Commander-in-Chief Hermann Goering. By aligning herself with Emily Goering, Sexton elucidates the sense of complicity and entrapment that women in love often feel. However, the destructive forces at play in this relationship are subverted in the final stanza of this poem, as the speaker engages in a dangerous, volatile dance where love becomes a battleground where power is both asserted and undone:

And tonight our skins, our bones,
that have survived our fathers,
will meet, delicate in the hold,
fastened together in an intricate lock.
Then one of us will shout,
"My need is more desperate!" and
I will eat you slowly with kisses
even though the killer in you
has gotten out.
(Sexton 1981, 188)

Here, Sexton actively confronts the killer—both the violent impulses of her lover and the metaphorical violence of patriarchal control—by seizing power through sensuality and desire. The imagery of eating slowly with kisses suggests a devouring force, one

that is both intimate and possessive, as if the speaker is taking control of the situation, transforming vulnerability into aggression. Even as she acknowledges the dangerous "killer" within her lover, she does not cower; on the contrary, she transforms the act of love into a subversive reclamation of power, a way to exert control and reverse the typical victim-perpetrator dynamics. This echoes her broader poetic themes of struggle and resistance, where even the most oppressive forces are used as tools to assert one's power and selfhood. Rather than merely aligning herself with victimhood, Sexton's speaker seeks to subvert the patriarchal dynamics at play in relationships, leveraging the intimacy of love as a battleground for reclaiming autonomy and agency. This contrast between passive complicity and active subversion is a key element of Sexton's work, which often challenges the simplistic notion of women as mere victims within patriarchal structures.

In "Again and Again and Again," Sexton pushes even further in her exploration of violent agency, presenting a more explicitly predatory nature that both disrupts and redefines the power dynamics in her relationships. The speaker's declaration in the final stanza, "I will kiss you when / I cut up one dozen new men / and you will die somewhat, again and again," evokes a grisly image of brutal conquest, where love is no longer an act of passive reception, but an act of destruction and reclamation. Here, Sexton departs from the more intimate and sensual forms of power found in "Loving the Killer," and boldly confronts the patriarchal system head-on with a violence that is both absolute and all-encompassing. This counter-violence, to be fully realised, mirrors the violence it seeks to dismantle. The act of "cutting up" men and putting them to death speaks not only to the dismemberment of individual relationships but also to the larger dismantling of the male-dominated order. In this manner, "Again and Again and Again" serves as a powerful culmination of Sexton's exploration of her extramarital relationships, where love and intimacy become arenas for both agency and radical subversion. Sexton's violence—both physical and psychological—emerges as a means of liberation, where even the most intimate acts are transformed into expressions of rebellion. These poems ultimately argue that the path to selfhood and autonomy for women is fraught with violence, not just from external forces, but from within: the internalised rage, the defiance, and the need to dismantle the systems that oppress. Sexton's exploration of self-destructive desire and violent subversion becomes a way for her speaker to challenge the patriarchal constraints that define womanhood, reimagining relationships as spaces of potential empowerment rather than mere passive suffering.

## Conclusion

Sexton's poetry reveals the profound complexity of her relationship to "toxic love" and the patriarchal structures that shaped her sense of self. Far from being a hopeless victim of oppressive systems, Sexton actively engaged with these dynamics, excavating both their destructive and generative potentials. Even though her expectations of love—particularly her desire for romantic and sexual validation—often led to self-destructive

cycles, Sexton's work consistently demonstrates her attempt to assert agency within a world that sought to deny it.

In her convoluted relationships, Sexton simultaneously perpetuated and resisted the very systems that oppressed her, embodying a dual role as both victim and perpetrator of patriarchal violence. Through violent imagery and predatory desires—whether in the eroticised destruction of her lovers or in the overtly murderous fantasies she expresses in her poetry—Sexton's quest for autonomy and liberation unfolds as a complex, contradictory process. Her poetics of "toxic love" goes beyond mere expressions of neurotic trauma or passive products of socio-cultural victimhood; it forges a bold space in which she wrestles with identity, power, and survival within a relentless patriarchal system.

This tension between desire and self-destruction, autonomy and subjugation, encapsulates the profound contradictions of Sexton's own identity. Her repeated attempts to escape the constraints of her marriage and to live more autonomously in her later years ultimately did not provide the liberation she longed for. Instead, these efforts exacerbated her internal conflicts, drawing her deeper into addiction and emotional isolation. As Linda Gray Sexton notes, her mother's pursuit of freedom became entangled with a desperate need for control, a struggle that ultimately intensified her turmoil (2011, 56). Sexton's life, as much as her poetry, reflects a state of unresolved contradiction—an aporia at the heart of her subjectivity, as Rose Lucas suggests, a void that made it impossible for her to fully reconcile the fragmented aspects of her identity (2011, 48).

Ultimately, Sexton's poetry stands as a testament to the paradoxical nature of her struggle—her pursuit of agency was both a defiance of and a submission to the very systems she aspired to overthrow. In her search for autonomy—whether through extramarital affairs, creative expression, or a desperate quest for divine intervention—Sexton embodied the paradoxes of survival within a male-dominated world. While Sexton's life ended tragically, her poetry remains a profound investigation of the ways in which women negotiate their identity and agency within oppressive cultural frameworks, capturing the endless tension between desire and destruction, power and victimhood, autonomy and loss. Her work not only sheds light on the intricate and often painful dynamics of internal trauma and external power structures but also serves as a powerful reference point for both her contemporaries, such as Sylvia Plath, and subsequent generations of poets, including Louise Glück, in their ongoing quests for agency, self-definition, and resilience.

## Funding

This work is supported by Jiangsu Provincial Federation of Philosophy and Social Sciences under Grant (23WWC001), the National Social Science Foundation of China under Grant (21BWW071), and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Changzhou University under Grant (ZMF23020151).

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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