The Complete Poems Study Guide

The Complete Poems by Anne Sexton

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To Bedlam and Part Way Back Summary

To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Part I

To Bedlam and Part Way Back is Anne Sexton's first book of poetry. It announces her presence to the literary world and establishes her intimate, confessional style. Given the book's highly autobiographical nature and the author's history of mental illness, the subject of the book is very obviously Anne Sexton's first breakdown and subsequent stay in a private psychiatric hospital. Part I, in particular, deals with the Sexton's loss of touch with reality and the trauma of her hospitalization. "You, Doctor Martin" thrusts the reader into Bedlam, its measured stanzas and formatted rhyme scheme belying its imagery and subject matter, which is that of a patriarchal psychotherapist presiding over his patients in a mental institution.

"Kind Sir: These Woods" is a childlike meditation on the notion of becoming lost in order to find oneself. "Torn Down From Glory Daily" describes an encounter with a group of gulls and draws a parallel between animal hunger and human sexuality. "Music Swims Back To Me" is a devastating reflection on the speaker's total immersion into mental collapse and the irony of freedom within an asylum. "The Bells" ponders upon childhood innocence and the search for patriarchal love and acceptance, while "Elizabeth Gone" mourns the passing of a friend while exploring the possibility of death as an escape. The other significant poems from Part I include "Her Kind", a poetic statement of feminine identity and sympathy with those who feel too deeply, "The Moss of His Skin", a powerfully imagined account of a young Arabian daughter being ceremonially buried alive next to her father, and "A Story For Rose On the Midnight Flight To Boston", a foreboding poem about a literal journey home and metaphorical return to partial sanity.

To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Part II

Part II consists of just three poems, one of standard length and two long poems. Part II focuses on an attempted restoration of normalcy in the speaker's life, with particular focus on the ideas of poetry as confession and an extended exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, with the author alternately playing parent and child. "For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further" is a self referential poem about the author's confessional style and a defense mounted against her teacher's criticism of her highly autobiographical subject matter. It is both a celebration of art's ability to hold a mirror up to nature and an authorial statement of intent."The Double Image" draws parallels between the speaker's issues of abandonment by her mother and the inherited abandonment visited upon the speaker's daughter during her institutionalization. The speaker of "The Double Image" is torn between the instinct to love and nurture her daughter and the worrisome guilt of her negative influence. The poem, which is separated into seven parts, follows the speaker's fears throughout the seasonal changes in New England. "The Division of Parts", a sort of sister poem to "The Double

Image", describes the death of the speaker's mother and the inheritance of emotional instability.

To Bedlam and Part Way Back Analysis

To Bedlam and Part Way Back is a dizzying work of modern poetry. The preface, a quote from a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe about the Greek tragic hero Oedipus and his search for the truth, suggests that the reader is about to be given a glance at the author's unflinching examination of self. Though clearly written after her hospitalization, Sexton's poems, particularly in Part I, place the reader in the eye of the mental storm. Sexton achieves this without relying on shock value, or making the reader's experience one of voyeurism. Rather, she appeals to the reader's empathy with plain statements of confession and an almost journalistic retelling of facts.

Even when being indirect, as in "Kind Sir: These Woods", Sexton does not attempt to disguise her condition in metaphor, but rather to plainly describe the feeling of delusion. The author not only gives insight into the feeling of madness, but perhaps its causes as well. "The Bells" suggests an unhealthy possessiveness that the speaker has for her father, and "Elizabeth Gone" muses almost enviously over a friend's death. Sexton also seems to praise the bravery of suicide in "Her Kind" while thoroughly imagining the live burial of a sacrificial young girl in "The Moss of His Skin". Sexton moves away from autobiography with "Venus and the Ark", a revised creation myth about two astronauts who populate Venus with with earthly life forms while their own planet is destroyed below. The poem raises concerns about the power of God in the hands of science, and is rife with biblical reference and cosmic irony. While distinct from the other works in the book for its story and tone, even this poem is colored with hints of madness, like something brilliant that might be found in the raving journal of a manic depressive. It is significant that Part I of To Bedlam and Part Way Back ends with "Story For Rose On the Midnight Flight to Boson", as it seems to signal the speaker's return "part way back" to stability.

The three poems that comprise Part II are, at once, a kind of rebirth and a survey of the damage in the speaker's return from chaos. "For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further" presents the author's defense of confessional poetry as a salvation from chaos and an avenue for truth. Sexton defiantly revels in the sharing of her flaws when she says, "I will hold my awkward bowl,/ with all its cracked stars shining/ like a complicated lie,/ and fasten a new skin around it/ as if i were dressing an orange/ or a strange sun" (p. 34). This poem is a kind of centerpiece for the book, neither justifying nor apologizing for the book's highly personal content, but merely holding it up, a mirror to nature.

"The Double Image" and "The Division of Parts" are the latter two Poems in Part II, and though each of them is a long and fully explored piece (separated into seven and four parts, respectively), the two can be understood side by side as counterparts. "The Double Image" finds the speaker reunited with her daughter, and while this is an undoubtedly joyous occasion in many respects, the speaker finds her own childhood

memories of abandonment and abuse revisited. The immense guilt caused by this is very apparent when the speaker, referring to her daughter (Joyce, the name of Sexton's own child), laments that her child cannot recognize her own mother's voice. Thus begins the Sexton's theme of the mother's sins being visited upon the daughter, which is further developed in "The Division of Parts". The reader is given some insight into the poem's title during Sexton's portrayal of her family's three generations of damaged women in the lines, "And this was the cave of the mirror,/ that double woman who stares/ at herself, as if she were petrified/ in time — two ladies sitting in umber chairs./ You kissed your grandmother/ and she cried" (p 41).

"The Division of Parts" is written after the death of the speaker's mother, and it runs the emotional gamut of grief, resentment, and confusion that accompanies the loss of a parent. The poem is full of Christian imagery as well, although Sexton doesn't seem to find comfort in the religious relics her mother left behind. Rather, the image of suffering presented by the crucifix only seems to increase the suffering associated with this loss. The poem's title seems to refer to inheritance, both the material, comfortless inheritance given to a family by a last will and testament, and the inheritance of emotional stability left after a lifetime of family tension. Sexton puts a brilliant, if pitch black, spin on the notion of the circle of life when saying, "you come, a brave ghost, to fix/ in my mind without praise/ or paradise/ to make me your inheritor" (p 46).

All My Pretty Ones

All My Pretty Ones Summary

All My Pretty Ones, whose title is lifted from the section in Shakespeare's Macbeth, wherein Macduff learns that his wife and children have been slaughtered, is a potent meditation on death and family. The book is divided into five parts of varying length, and each seems to convey a particular theme or color, but most all are about family, loss, death, and grief. Part I, for example, is comprised of nine poems centering mostly around the death of Sexton's parents, whereas Part III is a single, uniquely hopeful poem.

In part one, the book begins with "The Truth the Dead Know", which Sexton dedicates to her mother and father before listing their respective dates of birth and death, as would be found on a tombstone. The poem describes the moments after her father's funeral, and it paints death as a grim finality. The book's second poem, the titular "All My Pretty Ones", describes the speaker going through her parents' leftover personal belongings. While she is reminded of childhood abuse and neglect in this process, she is also graced with good memories, and comes to a realization that the peace of death can provide reconciliation. Appropriately, this poem is followed by "Young", which is a memory of childlike wonder and innocence. "Lament" is a wildly sad piece about grief and regret, while "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come To Triumph" rethinks the Icarus myth as being about joyful abandon. "The Starry Night borrows" a quote from Van Gogh in its contemplation of spirituality within art. "Old Dwarf Heart" is the speaker's examination of her own emotional insecurities, doubts, and destructive habits that are were likely shaped by her upbringing. "I Remember" softens things with a bit of nostalgia for a certain summer night. "The Operation" describes, in three sections, the speaker's painful abortion procedure, casting her all at once as a mother, mourner, and child, as well as an inheritor of death. The poem explores solipsism, fear, shame, and ironic humor in its search for feminine identity during this displacing moment in the speaker's life. It should be noted, as well, that Sexton was among the first writers to broach this topic in print.

In part two, "A Curse Against Elegies" describes the exhaustion of grief, and this is followed by "The Abortion", a less effective treatment of the subjects covered in "The Operation". "With Mercy For the Greedy" is a rebuttal to a friend's suggestion that the speaker should seek holy confession, and it makes a pointed statement about art as religion. "For God While Sleeping" is a bitter piece of existentialism that paints God as a senile old man. "In the Deep Museum" portrays the decomposition of Christ's corpse as a kind of resurrection, and "Ghosts" is an eerie, supernatural poem.

In part three, as mentioned previously, this section consists of a single poem, "The Fortress", which is about the speaker taking a peaceful nap with her daughter. The poem is brimming with maternal love and sentiments of protectiveness and nurturing.

The speaker spends time adoring her child, and makes a pledge to love her unconditionally.

In part four, this section begins with "Old", a poem about the fear of aging and mortality, and is followed by "The Hangman", which seems to center around the speaker's son and the fear of parental responsibility. "Woman With Girdle" tells of a haggard old woman's hard won redemption. "The House" is written in third person and tells the narrative story of a family not unlike Sexton's own. It speaks to the fragility of life and the strangeness of being related by blood. "Water" tells the story of fishermen in love with the sea, "Wallflower" is about the regret caused by living too cautiously, and "Housewife" is a brief examination of the tensions involved with marriage and property. "Doors, Doors, Doors" completes part four and is a sprawling tale about the interwoven lives of the inhabitants of a boarding house.

In part five, the first poem in this section is "Letter Written On a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound", which describes the speaker's encounter with a group of nuns on a ferry. This is followed by "From the Garden", which references the biblical lilies of the field while reveling in the romance of sexual abandon. "Love Song For K. Owne" follows in this vein, as it seems to describe the joy of sin experienced during an affair. "Flight" tells the story of the speaker's gleeful trip to an airport on her way to see her husband after a long separation, only to find that all flights have been grounded for the night. It is a poem of intense longing and disappointment. "For Eleanor Boylan Talking With God" describes a moment where the speaker witnesses a woman in prayer, and the simultaneous envy and pity that this evokes. "The Black Art" further explores the idea of poetry as catharsis, and it develops Sexton's continued theme of the burden of emotional abundance. The book is ended with "Letter Written During a January Northeaster", a melancholy love poem in which the speaker pines for her lover over the course of what feels like a week, but turns out to be merely a single day.

All My Pretty Ones Analysis

In addition to the quote from Macbeth, the book is prefaced with a quote from a letter of Franz Kafka to Oscar Pollak about the effect of literature upon our emotions. The quote, and its inclusion as a preface to All My Pretty Ones, seems to suggest that the purpose of art is to awaken the reader's emotions through empathy. Sexton's approach to this in All My Pretty Ones is to write poetry that is utterly confessional, that says aloud what would usually be kept silent, particularly with regard to the connection between family and mortality. Yet she manages to broaden her approach in this book, as well. A handful of the poems take more of a third person narrative approach, and Sexton often employs less direct and vivid means, achieving a kind of previously unseen elegance. In this work, the author still wallows in the dreariness and inevitability of death, but she also seeks reconciliation with her demons in life. Nowhere is this clearer than in the following lines of the book's title poem, "Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,/ bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you" (p 51).

In "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come To Triumph", Sexton rethinks the Icarus myth, taking time to celebrate while acknowledging that happiness is temporary. She allows Icarus to fly gracefully upward, blissfully ignorant of his coming demise.This is a perfect example of how every poem in this book is flavored with death, even when not explicitly stated. "The Fortress", the author's love letter to her young daughter, finds strength and comfort in the responsibilities of motherhood, but even this tender poem is shaded with the inevitability of aging and decay. Yet this is fitting, because the poet places herself at the center of the life cycle to describe a peculiar crossroads. She has buried her parents while she is raising her children and watching herself mature, both physically and emotionally. While "The Operation" may seem like standard confessional Sexton fare in its depiction of abortion, it reveals the ultimate connection between mortality and family in portraying the simultaneous termination of childhood and motherhood.

The book also takes time to ponder, slander, and surrender to religion. Christian imagery and references are frequent, and Sexton uses them both sincerely and ironically. "For God While Sleeping" imagines the deity as a senile man-child, while "For Elanor Boylan Talking With God" suggests the speaker's jealousy of those who find comfort in prayer. It is perhaps no surprise that poetry so preoccupied with death should examine such topics, but it is the author's profound indecision about the subject that makes the poems so compelling. It is as though she desperately longs to believe in a higher power, but cannot allow her rational mind to concede to such a belief. Sexton also spends some time with subjects and themes that are familiar from her first book of poetry, touching upon poetry as catharsis, the mixed blessing of emotional abundance, romantic longing, and the unique struggle of modern womanhood.

Live or Die

Live or Die Summary

Live or Die concerns itself with a particular period of time in the author's life, one in which her swings of manic depression are followed. In the preface, Sexton reveals that the poems appear in the order in which they were written, between 1962-1966, hinting that this was a turbulent time in her life, apologizing for their melancholy tone. Live or Die is perhaps Sexton's most well renowned book of poetry and the work for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1967. The poems in this book tend to be longer, more elaborate, and more fully realized than many of those prior to this period in the author's life.

The book begins with "And One For My Dame", which references a familiar nursery rhyme to explain that the speaker's father was a wool salesman before his death, just as her husband is now. In "The Sun", Sexton engages in a kind of sun worship in conveying a deep yearning to be consumed by a power greater than oneself. "Flee On Your Donkey" is a sprawling, lengthy telling of the author's mental relapse and return to institutionalization. "Somewhere in Africa" is Sexton's touching, eulogistic farewell to her teacher, the poet John Holmes. "Three Green Windows" is an attempt by the speaker to regress to a childlike state in order to escape from the world. "Imitations of Drowning" is a paranoid, nightmarish poem about the fear of sinister, internal forces. "Mother and Jack and the Rain" remembers an exciting youthful dalliance during a time of inclement weather. In "Consorting With Angels", the speaker identifies with Joan of Arc in a desire to be stripped of her gender so that she may answer a higher calling.

"Love Song" is a longing poem of nostalgia for romantic innocence, while "Man and Wife" portrays marriage as a kind of dismal trap. "Those Times" is an unflinching account of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of the speaker's mother. "Two Sons" is about a mother who feels abandoned when her sons marry and move abroad. "To Lose the Earth" is a surreal poem which seems to be about a lifelong search for meaning. "Sylvia's Death" is a collegial tribute to Sylvia Plath written shortly after her suicide, although it brims with Sexton's jealousy that her contemporary has escaped this life. "Protestant Easter" tells the story of the crucifixion and resurrection from the point of view of a modern eight year-old, and "For the Year of the Insane" continues in this religious vein as a prayer to the Virgin Mary for relief of madness. "Crossing the Atlantic" seems to be based on the journal that the speaker's mother kept during a difficult sea voyage, and a parallel is drawn between this journey and the speaker's own turbulent mental state. Similarly, "Walking in Paris" centers around letters written by the speaker's grandmother in 1890, and once again Sexton places herself as a character in these letters as a means of identifying with her heritage.

"Menstruation at Forty" mourns a time just before the speaker's fortieth birthday when she hoped to be pregnant with a son, but turned out not to be, possibly due to a miscarriage. "Christmas Eve" describes Sexton's contradictory impulses of fearing her

mother and identifying with her. "KE 6-8018" is a cryptic poem in which Sexton seems to wrestle with a psychic alter ego. "Wanting to Die" is a macabre description of the speaker's obsession with suicide. "The Wedding Night" uses the metaphor of blooming magnolia buds to describe a loss of innocence and the end of a romantic relationship. "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" is a touching poem written to Sexton's twelve-year-old daughter, Linda, in which the author marvels at her child's growth and development and tries to encourage her regarding the bodily changes that accompany adolescence. This is followed by a similar poem, "A Little Uncomplicated Hymn", addressed to Sexton's younger daughter, Joy. It praises Joy's adventurousness and resilience, even comparing her to the mythical Icarus. "Your Face on the Dog's Neck" describes a moment in time when the speaker's lover is napping next to a dirty dog, and yet the speaker is still drawn to join him. "Self in 1958" is a condemnation and casting off of traditional female roles in which Sexton suggests that she is assuming a new independence.

"Suicide Note" is fairly well explained by its title. In this particular instance, Sexton ponders the lifelong pull that death has had on her, and considers that her passing will probably be somewhat unremarkable. "In the Beach House" recounts an evening when the speaker hears, from her bed, a sexual encounter taking place in another room within a vacation home. "Cripples and Other Stories" takes on a childlike tone to describe the very adult relationship between the speaker and her therapist. "Pain for a Daughter" tells a story of a horseback riding accident involving the speaker's daughter, during which the young girl cries out in pain to God instead of her mother. "The Addict" is a confession of Sexton's struggle with addiction to prescription pills, which the author describes as merely another way of encountering death. "Live", not insignificantly, is the book's final poem, in which the author surveys her situation and makes the definitive choice to endure the pains of life for the people she loves most, her husband and children.

Live or Die Analysis

While Live or Die is largely a book about melancholy, mental disorientation, and contemplations of suicide, the question posed by the title is answered in the last poem, "Live". Yet this is not entirely surprising, given that Sexton's moments of levity are some of her most memorable. Poems like "The Sun", "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman", "A Little Uncomplicated Hymn", "Pain for a Daughter", and "Live" stand out not only for their contrast in tone, but for the sharpness in execution that Sexton brings to each. Once again, the author's primary concerns are death and family, only this time the two are set apart as opposing forces, not interwoven as in All My Pretty Ones. While certain poems are clearly works of fiction and elaboration, the majority of the poems are highly confessional and autobiographical, in keeping with Sexton's established methods.

It is almost as though the closer Sexton comes to sublime eloquence, the closer she comes to madness. "The Sun", one the book's most compelling and metaphysical poems, is noted as being written in May of 1962. "Flee on Your Donkey", the sweeping account of Sexton's ensuing breakdown, follows this and is written in June of the same

year. The author's descriptions of madness in Live or Die have become at once more vivid and more abstract, as though this latest bout with mental illness has improved the author's ability to write about it in a way that makes the reader feel slightly mad, as well. "Three Green Windows" and "Imitations of Drowning" are among Sexton's most haunting depictions of delusion and mental strife. Madness is described as a heavy, sinister force from which there is no feasible escape.

Throughout Live or Die, Sexton continues to use her own poetry as a kind of therapy. She says goodbye to deceased friends with "Somewhere in Africa" and "Sylvia's Death", and she recounts childhood trauma in poems like "Those Times". "Cripples and Other Stories" employs a childlike rhyme in describing the speaker's relationship to her therapist as that of a father and daughter, though this innocence is clearly colored with hints of romantic intimacy. Sexton assumes dual roles as both dependent child and self possessed woman in this poem, becoming vulnerable in her confessions while relishing the intimacy that results from this. While work of this nature is in no way new for the author, the poems in Live or Die achieve a more focused, fully inhabited manner. Even as Sexton's pendulum swings from determined thoughts of suicide to sentimental ruminations on her children, there remains a cohesiveness in theme that is suggested by the book's title.

Love Poems

Love Poems Summary

Love Poems is a highly romantic, emotionally charged collection of poems about passion, lust, and longing. These are not merely a collection of love letters, but a complex rendering of a romantic journey, complete with joy and peril alike. In "The Touch", the speaker personifies her own hand as an organism that longs for affectionate contact, which she eventually finds in her lover. "The Kiss" is similar to this, a poem about being invigorated and electrified by physical contact in the form of love's true kiss. "The Breast" is a sensual poem about the body's awakening and surrender to passion. "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts" is a poetic dialog between the speaker and the man with which she is having an affair. It explores the conflict between this man's devotion to his wife and his love of the speaker, concluding that their infidelity is ultimately doomed. "That Day" is a sexually charged remembrance of the previous day's lovemaking and the subsequent hours that the two lovers spent in bed. "In Celebration of My Uterus" is a rejoicing declaration of femininity, both in the most literal, biological sense and as a song of solidarity for women everywhere. "The Nude Swim" describes an intimate moment between lovers in the water, and "Song for a Red Nightgown" describes a similar moment in the bedroom.

"Loving the Killer" is a fascinatingly romantic story about a safari. It balances the speaker's squeamishness about the events of the hunt with her attraction to the man who does the hunting. "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife" is a devastating goodbye, a self deprecating poem in which the speaker painstakingly examines the virtues of her lover's spouse and comes to the conclusion that she, herself has been a temporary indulgence. "The Break" describes an accident whereby the speaker was hospitalized for a broken bone, and this incident is paralleled with her recently broken heart. In "It Is a Spring Afternoon", Sexton employs a rarely used third person narrative to tell the story of a young woman who waits naked in a tree, because the tree overlooks a river where blind men bathe. "Just Once" remembers a moment of fleeting, youthful certainty, while "Again and Again and Again" paints a portrait of a woman scorned. "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman" is yet another tale of a woman who is made to feel disposable at the end of her affair. "Moon Song, Woman Song" is an abstract and dreamlike poem that seems to be about a woman who only lives in the nighttime, and who has an almost omniscient presence in the world.

"The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" is a ritualistic, somewhat humorous take on the act of self gratification. In "Barefoot", Sexton delights in a sexual tease, and she uses a similar playfulness to seduce an ideological rival in "The Papa and Mama Dance". "Now" is a fervent, epicurean poem that implores the speaker's lover to abandon himself in her arms, and "Us" is a passionate account of a similar romantic interlude. "Mr. Mine" develops the metaphor of lover as architect as the speaker compares her lover's physical affections to various building constructions. "Song for a Lady" recounts a romantic interaction on a rainy day, and "Knee Song" describes the joy of being kissed

on the back of the knee. "Eighteen Days Without You" is a poem of epic longing that counts the days of separation between lovers, from December first through the eighteenth.

Love Poems Analysis

While Love Poems is, in many ways, a splendid departure from Sexton's earlier work, it remains utterly true to the author's tone and style. Sexton embraces romanticism with a degree of naivete and optimism, which gives these poems a certain lightness. However, the ecstasy herein is never far from feelings of abandonment, self doubt, unrequited love, and isolation. The author paints a soaring, but balanced portrait of the human heart with her characteristic frankness. The first three poems of the book plunge the reader into the midst of a sensual windstorm. "The Touch", "The Kiss", and "The Breast" are all poems about the reviving power of physical affection and the intensity of sexual desire. Sexton doesn't linger here too long, however, following these with "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts", which breaks the spell by examining the harsh realities of a doomed extramarital affair. The question and answer structure of the poem is particularly heart wrenching, as it places the reader directly in the mindset of a woman who is slowly realizing that the relationship will never work.

"Loving the Killer" brilliantly explores the animal nature of love, juxtaposing the speaker's rational aversion to the killing of animals with her overwhelming, instinctive sexual desire for the hunter. The poem seems to suggest that attraction is a powerfully innate force, and that it cannot be controlled by our reasonable humanity. Sexton then pays for her transgressions in "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife", which is perhaps the most arresting and effective poem in the book. The author creates a perfectly shattering and all too familiar emotional landscape of an ending relationship, releasing her lover to go back to his spouse while acknowledging her role in the affair as a mere frivolity. Sexton compares her lover's wife to the Sistine Chapel, and says of herself, "As for me, I am a watercolor./ I wash off" (p 190).

Mostly, Sexton uses this book to find beauty in a series of romantic moments. Poems like "That Day", "Knee Song", "The Nude Swim", and "Mr. Mine" all take delight in the simple but significant minutiae of love, and this is where the book truly finds its voice. Sexton also finds some daring humor in the taboo with "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator". The speaker's descriptions of this act are intensely private without being too vivid, and there is an almost ritualistic repetition in the line "At night, alone, I marry the bed" (p 198). "Eighteen Days Without You" is by far the lengthiest poem of the book, and it functions as a personal journal of longing. Here, Sexton veers into intense feelings of loneliness and despair, but also hope and an almost childish impatience for reuniting. She also gives an historical context to the period of time during which she is writing, referring to events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Vietnam war.

Transformations

Transformations Summary

Transformations, dedicated to Sexton's daughter Linda, is a book of classic Grimm's fairy tales that have been adapted into poems. The book's first entry, "The Gold Key", is a poem that acts as an introduction and an explanation for what the reader is about to encounter. It tells the story of a boy who finds a gold key which opens and transforms the book of Brothers Grimm tales. Sexton begins each verse story with a short poetic preface, usually to hint at the thematic elements she will be drawing upon, or in many cases, subverting. "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" is the first of the true adaptations. She also approaches the story with a feminist bent, drawing out the themes of female beauty and objectification, and highlights the graphic violence of the original story. This is followed by "The White Snake", the story of a king's servant who eats a magical snake and is given the ability to communicate with animals. He is kind to the animals he encounters, and they assist him when he is made to perform a series of challenges in order to win the hand of a princess.

"Rumpelstiltskin" tells the familiar tale of a young girl who a king has trapped in a palace under the pretext that she can spin straw into gold, which she cannot. A sinister dwarf appears, and promises to spin the straw into gold for her in return for her first born child, to which the girl agrees. The king soon marries the girl, and the two give birth to a son, which the dwarf soon comes to claim. Upon her refusal to surrender her child, the dwarf agrees to withdraw his claim if the queen can guess his name. After a messenger spies on the dwarf and reports to the queen, she guesses his true name, Rumpelstiltskin, and the dwarf is destroyed by his own fury. "The Little Peasant" is about a peasant who seeks shelter at a miller's house while only his wife is at home. The miller's wife lets him stay in the barn, but he witnesses her affair with a local parson. When the husband comes home unexpectedly, the parson hides in the cupboard, but the peasant reveals his location by pretending to have special powers. For this, he is rewarded by the husband.

"Godfather Death" tells the story of a thirteenth born child who will be christened by neither God nor the Devil, and instead becomes the godson of Death. Death promises that the boy will become a great physician, able to give a prognosis based on where Death stands over the body. If Death stands at the patient's head, he will die, if at the patient's feet, he will live. The boy does become a renowned doctor with Death's help, and is one day summoned to the deathbed of the king. Although Death stands at the king's head, the doctor flips him around so that Death is at his feet. Death warns the doctor not to meddle in such a way again, but the doctor is summoned to the bedside of the king's beautiful daughter, with whom he falls in love. Once again, in spite of Death standing at the daughter's head, the doctor flips her around and is given her hand in marriage as a reward. For this second transgression, Death takes the doctor's life. Sexton then provides a highly sexual version of "Rapunzel", paying special attention to the witch's obsessive love for her long haired prize, and portraying Rapunzel's

lovemaking with the prince as a grotesque and exciting discovery. At the poem's end, the reader is again made to feel somewhat sympathetic for the lonely, albeit villainous witch, in spite of Sexton's suggestion that her relationship to Rapunzel was abusive.

"Iron Hans" is the story of a wild madman who is caught in an enchanted forest and brought back to a civilized kingdom, where he is caged and made into a spectacle. The king's kind young son releases Iron Hans from his cage, and the two leave the kingdom together. The boy grows up to be the gardener of a nearby kingdom, where he falls in love with a princess. To win her hand, he defeats a rival army with the help of Iron Hans and his magic. When the gardener and the princess are wed, Iron Hans appears at the feast as a proud king, because the gardener in his bravery has broken the spell of madness. The author uses the story as a metaphor for mental illness, marveling at the notion that madness might be cured by a single act. Sexton then delivers a cynical version of "Cinderella", once again reminding the reader of the story's more violent elements, like the stepsisters' eyes being pecked out by Cinderella's bird friends. The happy ending is also revised, as Cinderella and her prince are now trapped for eternity in an unchanging, plastic monotony.

"One Eye, Two Eyes, Three Eyes" is the tale of three sisters, among whom the sister with two eyes is the outcast, while the one eyed and three eyed girls are doted upon by their mother. The girl with two eyes is soon married to a prince and whisked away. Years later the wicked sisters come to the kingdom as beggars, and the two eyed sister takes them in kindly, where they remain as her mystic oracles. Sexton uses this tale to repeat one of her earlier themes, the strangeness of family. "The Wonderful Musician" is about a fiddler who goes into the forest and plays enchanting music in order to trap a number of animals. A fox manages to free himself and a group of others, and they prepare to attack the musician, but the fiddler is saved by a woodcutter who has also becomes enchanted by the music and who chases the animals away with his axe. Sexton compares the musician to lustful men and the fiddle music to sexual temptation. She goes on to point out the unjust irony being saved by one's ill used talents.

Sexton's treatment of "Red Riding Hood" focuses on the bloodiness of the events in the story and the improbability of the outcome. The author suggests a deliberate emotional repression in the notion that Red Riding Hood and her Grandmother would escape from the wolf's belly unscathed. "The Maiden Without Hands" centers around a daughter whose hands are cut off by her father in order to escape a wizard's curse. The girl is discovered by a kindly king, who decides to marry her and give her hands made of silver. The king goes to war while his wife is pregnant, and she sends him a message when she gives birth to a son. This message is intercepted by the wizard, and returned with instructions to kill the child and send back his eyes and tongue. The queen escapes into the woods to avoid this fate, where her hands magically grow back. When the king returns, he proceeds to search for his wife and son for a period of seven years. They are reunited and return to the palace, making sure to keep the silver hands as a reminder of what they have endured.

"Twelve Dancing Princesses" tells the story of twelve princesses whose shoes are found danced to pieces each morning, in spite of the fact that they are locked away in a

shared room every night. The king offers the pick of his daughters in marriage to a soldier if he can solve this mystery. One night, the soldier follows the girls to an enchanted forest, where he witnesses the daughters dancing and carousing through the night with twelve enchanted princes. The soldier returns to the kingdom with this news, and he marries the oldest daughter. Sexton laments the end of the princesses' exuberant night dance, and suggests a kind of universality in this desire to escape into secret sin. "The Frog Prince" contains a preface about revulsion and guilt, which the author plays upon in her retelling of the princess who loses her golden ball in a well and promises to let a frog eat, drink, and sleep with her in exchange for its return. Sexton suggests a violation in the bedroom scene, and therefore the marriage of the transformed prince to the princess becomes an uneasy compromise.

The preface to "Hansel and Gretel" is about a mother's wild obsession for her son and the destructive nature of love. The author's version of this story plays up the darker elements, like the abandonment of Hansel and Gretel by their parents and the gruesome scene of the witch being burned alive in her own oven. Once again, Sexton highlights the strangeness of family and the harsh realities of survival. "Sleeping Beauty (Briar Rose)" is the last story in the book, about a princess who, in spite of the king's efforts to protect her, is pricked by a spinning wheel on her fifteenth birthday and lulled into a century of sleep. At the end of this time, a prince makes his way through the fortress of brambles that has grown around the palace, and he awakens Briar Rose with a kiss. Sexton adds her own ending to this tale, however bringing it into the realm of the psychological. Sexton assumes the identity of Briar Rose at the poem's end and becomes tortured by chronic insomnia, madness, and memories of abuse at the hands of her father, the king.

Transformations Analysis

In Transformations, Anne Sexton takes the already dark stories of the brothers Grimm and makes them pitch black with her own brand of brilliant creativity. The title is very apt, both for its reference to the way in which so many of the fairy tale characters are transfigured, and for its explanation of what the author does to these classic stories. In many ways the book can be best understood by looking at its last entry, "Sleeping Beauty (Briar Rose)". By fusing her own experience into the story of Sleeping Beauty, Sexton gives the poem a nightmarish quality, casting the pale of her own psyche onto the reader's entire experience of these adapted tales. Given that this is a book in which Sexton looks outside of her own life for source material, it is fascinating that she finds so many of her previous themes reflected in classic parables. The joy of sin, the strangeness of family, and the burden of emotional abundance are all explored with new vigor through these adaptations.

Sexton becomes a sort of fairy tale revisionist in bringing the sexism of these stories to the surface. This is achieved in pointing out the absurd ways in which the various female characters are objectified, vilified, and victimized. Additionally, the author challenges the reader to sympathize with the traditional antagonists, like Rumpelstiltskin, the witch in "Rapunzel", and the wicked queen in "Snow White". She

does this by revealing some of the more obvious flaws of rationale in the classic storytelling, and by making these seemingly evil characters into marginalized members of society. Predictably, Sexton makes it clear that there is no such thing as a happy ending, and she scorns the idea that a gallant masculine force must rescue and redeem the helpless young maiden. It is perhaps no surprise that this intensely dark group of adaptations is dedicated to Sexton's daughter, as it is likely that the author didn't want her child to grow up embracing these outdated models of femininity.

The Book of Folly

The Book of Folly Summary

The Book of Folly, dedicated to the author's daughter, Joy, is divided into two parts. The first section, which actually consists of twenty poems, is entitled "Thirty Poems", and the second is entitled "The Jesus Papers". "Thirty Poems" is a return to Sexton's standard confessional poetry, while "The Jesus Papers" contains nine poems which are all based around the character of Christ and various stories from the New Testament.

"Thirty Poems" begins with "The Ambition Bird", which is about the peculiarity of being a writer and the joy and agony of inspiration. "The Doctor of the Heart" laments medicine's inability to cure emotional ills. "Oh" describes the speaker's feeling that she is being pursued by death, although she seems to accept this with fascination rather than fear. "Sweeney" is thick with autobiography in fact the author uses her own full name in the poem. It recounts a visit by an eccentric press agent on the same day that Sexton's sister was killed in a car accident. "Mother and Daughter" is addressed to Sexton's daughter Linda, now eighteen, as a welcome to womanhood and a contemplation on the cyclical nature of life. "The Wifebeater" is a harrowing tale of domestic violence that binds a mother and daughter together. "The Firebombers" makes a potent commentary on war and politics. "The One-Legged Man" characterizes a crippled man's mourning of his lost appendage and describes the condition of feeling incomplete.

"The Assassin" is a foreboding poem that personifies death and portrays the speaker's confrontation with it as a dangerous, sexual encounter. "Going Gone" also personifies death, only this time in the form of a hurried but compassionate traveler. In "Anna Who Was Mad", the speaker wonders whether she had an effect on the sanity of a now deceased friend. "The Hex" describes the connection between the speaker's inability to appreciate happiness and her relationship to her mentally unstable grandmother. "Dreaming the Breasts" is about the influence that the speaker's mother has on her, even after death. "The Red Shoes" uses the metaphor of an heirloom to describe the mental condition that the author feels she has inherited. "The Other" describes a dual nature within the speaker and the fear that she has about releasing her more volatile personality into the world. "The Silence" explains the motivation to write as an attempt to remain occupied so that reminders of looming death may be kept at bay. "The Hoarder" creates a portrait of someone who hoards negative emotional experiences, as opposed to physical objects.

In "Killing The Spring", the speaker relates her own depression to the end of that temperate season. The final poems in this section, "The Death of Fathers" and "Angels of the Love Affair", are both comprised of six shorter poems, each developing the story and theme of their respective titles. "The Death of Fathers" centers around Sexton's relationship with her father as viewed through the lens of childhood. She tells of many happy family moments, but ultimately it is a poem about alcoholism, neglect, and the profound disappointment that comes with learning about the imperfections of one's

parents. The six short poems in "Angels of the Love Affair" collectively tell the story of infidelity and self corruption, as well as the gradual loss of innocence and purity.

The nine poems of "The Jesus Papers" comprise the second section in The Book of Folly, and each describes a different aspect or moment of Christ's life as imagined by Sexton. Jesus is depicted as being somewhat egotistical and headstrong, and his miracles are cast into doubt by the author. Sexton questions the logic of the gospel stories, although she suggest the presence of redemption and divinity, as well. The Virgin Mary is also characterized here as a mourning mother and as an alternate identity which the Sexton assumes during the final poem.

The Book of Folly Analysis

While the two parts of The Book of Folly, "Thirty Poems" and "The Jesus Papers" feature very different subject matter and source material, it should come as no surprise that the primary concern in each section, once again, is death. Sexton's attitude towards death seems to have changed, however, as evidenced by poems like "Oh", "The Assassin", and "Going Gone". Death is characterized as a playful pursuer, one that the author seems to welcome with a kind of tacit acceptance. Sexton also draws a thread through the history of mental instability in her family, which implies that she was beginning to understand that her bipolar disorder may be hereditary. "The Hex" and "The Red Shoes" both see the author coming to terms with these issues, as she connects the depression of her mother and grandmother to her own suicidal impulses.

It seems appropriate that the final two entries in "Thirty Poems", "The Death of Fathers" and "Angels of the Love Affair" should have the same structure, as Sexton suggests that her search for the approval of her father later led to her own sexual promiscuity. Similarly, these poems both explore a loss of innocence, one during childhood and the other as an adult. In the greater context of the book, both poems also resonate with death and passing. In "The Death of Fathers", the author looks back on the life of her father with an uneasy mixture of wistfulness and rage, and she seems to greatly regret that the two of them did not have a more substantive bond during his lifetime. "Angels of the Love Affair" is more of a spiritual poem in which the speaker desires unseen forces to forgive her actions and redeem her, even though she is painfully aware that something within her has died.

"The Jesus Papers" is razor sharp in its cynical retelling and rethinking of the stories from the New Testament. Alternately, Sexton portrays Christ as brash, pompous, practical, misguided, and well intended. It might be understood from the quotation that prefaces "The Jesus Papers" that the author is espousing her beliefs in Christianity while reserving her right to be skeptical about the details of Christ's life as told by the Bible. Sexton also lends some additional humanity to the characters of Mary and the harlot, presenting them as complex female figures. "The Author of The Jesus Papers Speaks" is a very peculiar poem, especially in relation to the others in this section. As she does in the final poem of Transformations, Sexton places herself at end of the story she is telling in order to give shape and perspective to what the reader has experienced.

In this case, the poet encounters God in a dream and is given the task of becoming a modern Mary, a conceit that Sexton uses to justify and explain the liberties she has taken in her retelling.

The Death Notebooks

The Death Notebooks Summary

The Death Notebooks, published the year of Sexton's suicide, is a confrontation with death, divinity, and the very nature of life. The poems in this book are among the author's most protracted, conceptual, and experimental. As the title suggests, the poems tend toward the morbid and macabre, although Sexton finds a variety of ways to make these qualities compelling and readable.

"Gods" finds the author working still in poetic autobiography, and she tells of her many journeys in search of the gods, only to find them shut up in the bathroom of her own home, in which she locks them. "Making a Living" retells the biblical story of Jonah in the mouth of the whale, only in Sexton's version, Jonah becomes famous for his experience by relating his story to the news media after he leaves the whale. The author draws a parallel between this story and her own life. In "For Mr. Death Who Stands With His Door Open", the speaker personifies time and death, and she acknowledges her lifelong suicidal tendencies. She enters into a dialogue with the older, bloated character of death, and ultimately comes to a compromise with him. In "Faustus and I", the speaker identifies with the operatic character Doctor Faustus, who sold his soul to the devil for knowledge and power.

"The Death Baby" is a long, erratic poem divided into six sections. Sexton begins by describing herself as a baby in the arms of death, then recounts the death of her mother, and concludes by transforming death into a baby that she cradles in her arms. "Rats Live On No Evil Star", a title based on Sexton's favorite palindrome, is a revision of the Adam and Eve tale in which Eve gives birth to a rat that is sent to a purgatory called rat's star. "Grandfather, Your Wound" finds Sexton relating to her deceased grandfather, who was a troubled intellectual. "Baby Picture" is both a contemplation on aging and an acknowledgment that the anxieties of childhood last a lifetime. "The Furies" has an epic quality and is comprised of fifteen sections, such as "The Fury of Earth", "The Fury of Rainstorms", "The Fury of Sunsets", etc. Sexton covers a number of subjects here in her search for an interconnectedness to the world's many injustices, splendors, and unanswered questions. Throughout the poem there remains a constant, if rambling, search for God and meaning.

In "Praying On a 707", the speaker imagines that when she prays to God, her deceased mother interferes with the process. "Clothes" is a darkly humorous poem in which the speaker tries to plan the outfit in which she will die. "Mary's Song" is another revision of the virgin birth, and in this particular poem Mary is pregnant with twenty messiahs, which she fears she will be unable to nurture. "God's Backside" depicts nature, particularly cold weather, as God's wrathful neglect. "Jesus Walking" is a retelling of the temptation of Christ by the devil, in which Sexton portrays Jesus as the noble bearer of a heavy burden. "Hurry Up Please It's Time" is a long, highly abstract, existential exploration of depression, gender identity, alter ego, God, and the constant invitation of

death. "O Ye Tongues" is a collection of ten psalms that ponder the question of divinity and act as a series of secular prayers to an unknown higher power. Throughout these psalms, Sexton prays for her sanity, the well being of her children, the enlightenment of America, and for relief from pain.

The Death Notebooks Analysis

It might be easy to read The Death Notebooks as the poet's personal record of her downward spiral, and indeed this could be the case. Certainly, a handful of the poems seem as though they are penned under the thick fog of madness. However, the book must also be understood as an achievement of experimentation and poetic growth, as it finds Sexton working with new styles and modes, even as the focus of her subject matter becomes more narrowed. Poems like "The Furies" and "O Ye Tongues" are a radical departure for the poet as they manage to be both exultant and apocalyptic in their sprawl, while "Jesus Walking" and "Mary's Song" suggest a reverence for the beautiful symbolism of Christianity.

While many of the poems in this book are abstracted and opaque, certain entries like "Making a Living" and "Faustus and I" are crystal clear in their use of metaphor and allusion to describe the speaker's state of being. "Hurry Up Please It's Time" is a daunting poem from the point of view of analysis, but never has Sexton so committed herself to poetically conveying her sense of utter confusion and disillusionment. "Clothes" manages to be hilariously matter of fact in its earnest search for what outfit the speaker should wear before death, and "Baby Picture" is a poignant examination of human psychology. Sexton also attempts previously unmatched level of spirituality, albeit riddled with rationalism and irony. The author seems desperate for an answer from God, particularly given her gradual realization that she cannot stay alive for much longer. In this way, The Death Notebooks speaks to the very heart of the human condition, for it deeply contemplates death while struggling to see what lies beyond the grasp of mortal understanding.

The Awful Rowing Toward God

The Awful Rowing Toward God Summary

The Awful Rowing Toward God was published in the year after Sexton's death, and in many ways it is a poetic suicide note. According to the introduction to The Complete Poems, this last book of Sexton's was inspired by something that a priest said to her when she was looking for spiritual guidance, "God is in your typewriter." Apparently, this not only kept Sexton from suicide for another year, but also led to the writing of The Awful Rowing Toward God, the poet's final effort to find meaning in life while coming to terms with death. While Sexton is obviously still concerned with many of the themes and ideas from her previous book, these last poems are generally more lucid and more cohesive as a whole. While the author certainly seems to be waving goodbye in this book, she does so with a more clear eyed resolution.

"Rowing" finds the speaker in a rowboat traveling toward an island called God, and it describes the speaker's difficult struggle with life while explaining that this is the beginning of her search for peace. "The Civil War" is about the inner conflict of the speaker, her search for the good things inside herself, and her attempt to understand the concept of God. "The Children" is a poem about injustice and indifference in which the author challenges herself and the world to listen to the voices of those who are suffering. In "Two Hands", Sexton represents humanity in the metaphor of a pair of applauding hands which God has created for his own glory. "The Room of My Life" finds the speaker tortured by the presence of the physical objects that surround her because of the emotional associations that she has with them. In "The Witch's Life", the author wonders if she is becoming an antisocial shut-in like the old woman who used to live in her neighborhood as a girl. "The Earth Falls Down" is a poem that seeks to assign blame for the world's problems, although no such blame can be found. "Courage" is about the nature of bravery in the face of life's many adversities, from childhood through the moment of one's death.

"Riding the Elevator Into the Sky" uses an infinitely high rising hotel as a metaphor for human consciousness. "When Man Enters Woman" portrays the sex act as a spiritual union between two people, albeit a temporary one. "The Fish That Walked" describes human evolution as contrary to the poet's desire to return to the earth. "The Fallen Angels" tells of the speaker's belief that she is accompanied by forces that are both protective and sinister. "The Earth" characterizes God as being jealous of the human body. "After Auschwitz" uses the example of a Nazi concentration camp to explain the indiscriminate forces of death. In "The Poet of Ignorance", Sexton complains of a deep, gnawing pain that she describes as a huge crab clawing at her heart, and guesses that this crab is her ignorance of God. "The Sermon of the Twelve Acknowledgments" gives a list of seemingly arbitrary commandments and rules for each month of the year, calling to mind the Old Testament. Sexton takes a similar approach to "The Evil Eye" by relating a series of absurd and disturbing precautions against bad fortune.

"The Dead Heart" is a deeply sad, self deprecating poem about the speaker's total inability to feel happiness. "The Play" recreates the speaker's life as a poorly conceived stage performance that is not well received by the audience. "The Sickness Unto Death" is about God's abandonment of the speaker and her subsequent lack of access to spirituality. "Locked Doors" describes a feeling of being trapped inside a constant state of despair. "The Evil Seekers" explores the notion that one must experience hardship and suffering in order to appreciate happiness. "The Wall" is about the conceptual division between God and man, which the speaker contests is not really there. "Is It True" is a long, despondent, rambling and surreal poem in which the author contemplates good and evil, and wonders whether she has become too corrupted to continue living. "Welcome Morning" is an attempt by the speaker to find God and joy in every small facet of life. "Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost" is a poem in which the speaker desires to become a part of the immaculate conception so that she may be reborn into better circumstances.

"The God-Monger" imagines God as the speaker's husband in an attempt to demystify the concept of prayer. "What the Bird With the Human Head Knew" tells the dream-like story of a search for the well of God, which is described as a fountain of knowledge. "The Fire Thief" is a retelling of the Prometheus myth. "The Big Heart" echoes one of Sexton's earlier themes, the burden of emotional abundance, in describing the speaker's overwhelming capacity for feeling. "Words" is a poem about the inadequacy of language and the delicacy of artful description. "Mothers" is a playful remembrance of childhood, and "Doctors" is a biting commentary on the shortcomings of modern medicine. "Frenzy" describes the feverish quality with which the author is attempting to write in order to find enlightenment. "Snow" is a short, surprising poem about nature and hope, while "Small Wire" illustrates that a small degree of faith may still lead to a spiritual experience. "The Saints Come Marching In" is a chronicle of the lives of selected saints in which Sexton relates the fanatical, otherworldly exuberance of sainthood to the inspiration of writing poetry. "Not So, Not So" describes the speakers feeling that God is contained within every facet of the world, and that a spiritual encounter is therefore unavoidable. "The Rowing Endeth", a companion piece to the book's first poem, depicts the speaker arriving at her destination, the island called God. There, she plays a poker game with God, which he wins based on a wild card of which the speaker was ignorant.

The Awful Rowing Toward God Analysis

The Awful Rowing Toward God is a complicated, often muddled, but nonetheless beautiful series of allegories about the search for a higher power, enlightenment, and peace. It is at once deeply spiritual, willfully heretical, and profoundly existential. Sexton begins the journey with "Rowing" by informing the reader immediately that the book will follow Sexton on her quest in search of God. Likewise, she ends the book with "The Rowing Endeth", suggesting that some measure of understanding about humanity and God has been reached. Sexton approaches the idea of God with equal portions of reverence and scorn. In poems like "Welcome Morning" and "The Small Wire", the

author relates to God's creation and influence as a comforting presence, while "The Rowing Endeth" and "Two Hands" portray the deity as manipulative and mocking.

In "The Sermon of the Twelve Acknowledgments", Sexton parodies the disconnection between biblical law and genuine spirituality, suggesting an absurdity within religious morality. Similarly, "The Evil Eye" reveals the folly of human superstition and the disparity between one's actions in life and the randomness of fortune. "After Auschwitz" continues in this vein, referencing the holocaust as evidence that God must not be watching. The author is clearly searching for answers, but she finds none in conventional morality or accepted religious texts. In many ways, Sexton suggests that the search itself is brings her closer to God, that her frenzied, poetic exploration of consciousness is in itself a religious sacrament. This is suggested by poems like "The Wall", "The Saints Come Marching In", and "Riding the Elevator Into the Sky". Sexton conveys her gift for poetry as a thing that, like the grace of the Saints, brings her closer to the glory of heaven. However, just as with the saints, Sexton is no longer able to fully inhabit her own mortality. There is, the author seems to say, an unbearable irony in achieving this higher consciousness. Man cannot fully know God while living, nor can man be easily relieved of his mortal trappings without falling completely into the unknown. Sexton, herself, ultimately chose the unknown in death over the incomplete understanding in life.

Posthumously Published Work

Posthumously Published Work Summary

Many of Sexton's unedited, rough drafts of poetry were published after her death, and these appear in this collection as three distinct titles, the poems of 45 Mercy Street, Words For Dr. Y., and six that are listed simply as Last Poems. All of these are included in this collection mostly for the sake of posterity, as they are neither finished products nor particularly noteworthy except as a glimpse into the author's process and personal life. While these posthumously published poems are a fascinating addendum to the author's body of work, they are by no means Sexton's most significant poems.

Posthumously Published Work Analysis

It is difficult to provide an abundance of analysis for a group of poems that are cobbled together for the sake of posthumous publishing, as they tend to lack cohesion. 45 Mercy Street holds together most effectively as a unified work, a return to Sexton's inward search for truth. The first section, "Beginning the Hegira", is a self described attempt at escape from turmoil, although Sexton doesn't seem to achieve such an escape during her search for mercy. She merely sinks further into her own troubled mind. This is fairly evident in such dark poems as "The Taker" and "The Risk", both of which find the author languishing over love and death, two obsessions from which she is never reprieved.

"Bestiary U.S.A" and "The Horoscope Poems" are both highly conceptual works for Sexton, as she develops a series of poems using such specific conceits as animals and astrology. This is a rare and exciting development in the author's style, which is seen elsewhere only in Transformations. While Words For Dr. Y. and Last Poems are fascinating and somewhat revealing, the editor's note makes the strong point that they lack one of the hallmarks of Sexton's work, her tireless revision and careful selection. Many of the poems here were deemed too extraneous for inclusion in her other books, and this is becomes evident when they are presented out of context and in such a raw form.

Characters

Anne Sexton as Poetic Speakerappears in The Complete Poems

The vast majority of Sexton's poems are written in the first person, and so much of her work is autobiographical. Therefore, the main character in The Complete Poems is the speaker, which can usually be understood as representing Sexton, herself. This is a significant departure from so much of the poetry that preceded Sexton's time, and it is largely for this reason that she is labeled a confessional poet. If it was the author's goal to plumb the depths of her soul in search of poetic art, then it stands to reason that she would cast herself as the central figure in her work. Sexton does occasionally employ traditional literary characterization, most notably the fairy tale characters of Snow White, Cinderella, Rumpelstiltskin, etc. in Transformations, although these usually represent various elements of the author's own psyche.

Sexton's poetic speaker might best be described as a morbid, playful romantic. She is, by degrees, willful, spirited, pessimistic, naive, jaded, and wise. She is girlish in Love Poems, parental in All My Pretty Ones, and defiant in Live Or Die. Indeed, as many elements as there are in Sexton's personality, there are in her speaker. She is also clinically depressed, and her ruminations on death and passing are at the heart of nearly all of The Complete Poems. The speaker does achieve a peaceful surrender toward the end of The Awful Rowing Toward God, and here we see a profound transformation take place inside someone who has struggled for a lifetime to understand mortality. If Sexton wishes to inspire empathy in the reader, she succeeds in this by bringing her own humanity to the character of her speaker.

Authorityappears in The Complete Poems

If one were to identify an antagonist in Sexton's work, it could most easily be found in the collective character of the forces of authority which govern the life of her speaker. While the reader might be inclined to label these forces as primarily patriarchal, it must be noted that mothers play an important, oppressive role as authority figures throughout The Complete Poems. Sexton's speaker is in constant confrontation with parents, therapists, teachers, lovers, religious leaders, and even more abstract authorities like God and Death. It is important to remember that Sexton is writing during a time of intense social turmoil, and that her poems are a product of their time insofar as they constantly question traditional power structures.

Sexton's own mother and father are often portrayed as abusive and neglectful, and indeed this seems to shape her opinion of many of the authorities in her life and work. In fact, the first poem in Sexton's first book, "You, Doctor Martin" from To Bedlam and Part Way Back, is a challenge to authority. Here, the author paints a portrait of a skilled but smug father figure in the psychotherapist which presides over her mental ward. While

the speaker acknowledges that she needs this man's help, the poem suggests that she is wary of being treated like a child by yet another person who is controlling her life. The various kings and princes that inhabit the fairy tales of Transformations are also significant characters of authority, and Sexton comments satirically on the way in which they manipulate the lives of the fairy tale women. God himself, the ultimate authority, is portrayed as a manipulating, vindictive, puppeteer in the last poem of The Awful Rowing Toward God. This says a great deal about Sexton's attitudes about power and the way in which it is asserted into our lives.

Jesus Christappears in The Book of Folly

The character of Christ appears throughout Sexton's collection, but he is most notably portrayed in the section of The Book of Folly entitled "The Jesus Papers." In this series of poems, the author represents Christ alternately as egotistical, cunning, flawed, well meaning, and genuinely redemptive. Sexton demystifies the gospel stories by making Jesus both sympathetic and utterly human, although within this heresy she allows Christ to retain some of his divine qualities.

The Virgin Mary appears in The Book of Folly

Mary appears in "The Jesus Papers" as well, although she too can be found throughout The Complete Poems. Her portrayal in this section is the most significant, however, as Sexton co-opts her identity during the book's final poem. Mary is represented as a victim of circumstance, but Sexton is quick to note that the Immaculate Conception gives the mother of Christ a powerful kind of proto-feminism. However, Mary is most effectively depicted as a heartbroken mother who must watch her son die at the hands of an angry mob.

Snow Whiteappears in Transformations

Sexton's Snow White is innocent and beautiful just as she is in the original story. In Transformations, however, she is also vapid, superficial, and dull-witted. This is less of a comment on the character herself and more of an attempt by the author to satirize the way in which female protagonists are portrayed in fairy tales. Snow White's only virtue is her beauty, and it is for this reason alone that the evil queen pursues her and the prince rescues her. She is a powerless symbol of dated femininity, propped up by the characters of the queen, the prince, and the dwarfs. Sexton suggests an irony in the fact that Snow White is the central character of a story in which she takes almost no discernible actions.

Rumpelstiltskinappears in Transformations

Sexton uses the character of Rumpelstiltskin as a metaphor for the darkness that lurks inside everyone. He appears when his underhanded services are convenient, and he

disappears afterward, returning later as a haunting reminder of past misdeeds. Sexton also makes Rumpelstiltskin a somewhat sympathetic character, highlighting his natural desire to nurture a child and the duplicitous manner in which he is deceived. He is an ugly dwarf, a marginalized member of society, and an outcast. Sexton plays upon these qualities to reinvent the story, making Rumpelstiltskin a misunderstood victim.

Mother Gothelappears in Transformations

Mother Gothel is the witch in "Rapunzel" who keeps Rapunzel locked in a tower and who climbs the rope of her hair in order to spend time with her. Sexton intimates a sexual relationship between Mother Gothel and Rapunzel, which is destroyed by the appearance of Rapunzel's prince and the ensuing romance between the two. Mother Gothel is the central character in Sexton's version of the story because she is the most complicated. She is manipulative, obsessed and abusive, but her love of Rapunzel is genuine.

Cinderellaappears in Transformations

Sexton's Cinderella is portrayed almost exactly as she is in the original tale. She is virtuous, beautiful, and hard working. She is a sympathetic victim who struggles to find happiness in the form of a princely husband. The key difference between Sexton's story and that of the Brothers Grimm is the ending. The poet suggests that although Cinderella's wish has been granted in the form of marriage to a handsome prince, she is not ultimately happy. Sexton uses Cinderella as a metaphor for a society that would have women believe that satisfaction can only be found in traditional female roles.

The Twelve Dancing Princessesappears in Transformations

The Twelve Dancing Princesses, who appear in the poem of the same name, mysteriously escape every evening from the room that they share in order to go dancing in an enchanted forest. They are caught by a clever soldier to whom the king has offered the choice of his daughters' hands in marriage, and the soldier eventually weds the eldest girl. The Twelve Dancing Princesses are significant because the represent a kind of wild feminine ideal for Sexton. They create their own happiness by subverting authority and acting out their raw emotional impulses.

Briar Roseappears in Transformations

Briar Rose is the name of the princess in "Sleeping Beauty" who is pricked by a cursed spinning wheel and cast into a hundred-year sleep. She is released from this curse by a prince who kisses her and awakens her from the spell. In Sexton's version, Briar Rose does not live happily ever after, however. She becomes an insomniac who is afraid to

sleep for fear of falling back into her former trance. At the end of this poem, Sexton switches from third to first person, assuming the identity of Briar Rose to tell of a series of abuses at the hands of her father, the king. Sexton uses Briar Rose as an alter ego for herself, and the hundred-year sleep becomes a metaphor for the author's own mental disorders.

Objects/Places

Christianity and the Bibleappears in The Complete Poems

Sexton repeatedly employs Christian imagery, Christian sacrament, and the character of Christ himself throughout her poems. She often revises stories from the New Testament to make a statement and makes frequent use of the crucifixion and the character of the Virgin Mary. The entirety of The Awful Rowing Toward God is a religious and existential struggle, and Sexton cannot come to terms with whether the spiritual force she believes in is the God of Christianity. The author also makes references to the creation story of Genesis and the old testament story of Jonah, and she freely adapts biblical psalms into long poems.

Madnessappears in The Complete Poems

Every single book of Sexton's contains an element of mental illness, whether explicit or implicit. This is no surprise, given that her own condition is the thing which inspired her to write. Sexton's bipolar disorder is expressly the subject of To Bedlam and Part Way Back and Live or Die, but it even appears in Transformations, which is based on fairy tales.

Deathappears in The Complete Poems

Death is present throughout Sexton's work, and in fact death is featured in more poems than it is absent. Death, mortality, and the realm that lies beyond our mortal understanding are Sexton's primary concern as a poet. Her own fascination with suicide and her lifelong feeling that death was stalking her are expressed numerous times in nearly every publication.

Greek Mythsappears in The Complete Poems

Sexton uses makes reference to a number of Greek Myths, usually revising them in order to relate them to some element of her inner life. The myths of Icarus and Prometheus are both employed with particular poetic effectiveness.

Fairy Talesappears in Transformations

Transformations is a book of poetry entirely devoted to the revision of Grimm's Fairy Tales. Sexton pokes holes in many of these stories in order to illustrate the dated morality and sexual politics that they contain, but she also makes many of the traditional antagonists sympathetic. In asking the reader to reevaluate the lessons that these fairy

tells teach, the author effectively calls into question society's acceptance of conventional wisdom.

The Institution of Marriageappears in The Complete Poems

Sexton alternately portrays marriage as a trap, a comfort, and a convenient social arrangement. While it seems clear that the author didn't revere the sanctity of marriage, its presence throughout her poems is fairly consistent.

Feminismappears in The Complete Poems

Sexton is among the first female poets to address certain issues in her work, like abortion, masturbation, abuse, and female sexual infidelity. The author seems intent on shattering taboos in order to create a social dialogue. "In Celebration of My Uterus", in particular, is a potent and stirring poem of feminist pride and a kind of rallying cry to women all over the world.

Motherhoodappears in The Complete Poems

In general, Sexton treats motherhood as redemptive and joyful in her numerous poems that directly address her children. The poet takes pride in passing on the wisdom of womanhood to her daughters as she watches them age, and in the case of Live or Die, she cites her responsibility to her family as the only thing that keeps her from death. Sexton repeatedly draws upon her abusive, strained relationship with her own mother, however, portraying it as a deep and bitter betrayal. Occasionally, the reader finds Sexton wishing for a reprieve from her parental duties, as they only compound her persistent mental strife.

Sexualityappears in The Complete Poems

Sexuality is most prominently featured in Love Poems, but it can be found throughout Sexton's work. It is clear that the author has a complex relationship with sex, as is evidenced by her treatment of it as abusive, transcendent, exhilarating, shameful, and spiritual. Sexton finds solace and escape in physical intimacy, but she hints at a dark undercurrent that motivates her promiscuity.

Familyappears in The Complete Poems

Family is one of the primary subjects in All My Pretty Ones, which focuses on the death of Sexton's parents, but Sexton gives many different portraits of family in her collected works. The author makes family out to be naturally vital and life affirming in Live or Die, while in Transformations she depicts family as a bizarre, often grotesque necessity.

Themes

The Inevitability of Death

Death and its looming inevitability are Anne Sexton's key preoccupations in nearly all of her poems. This is not to say that she doesn't deviate from this theme from time to time, but in the vast majority of Sexton's work, her relationship with death borders on the obsessive. Indeed, Sexton was first encouraged to write after her hospitalization from a suicide attempt, so it stands to reason that the author would use her art as a means of coming to terms with her demons. The poet perceives death in a variety of ways, personifying it as a lover, a frightening specter, a faithful friend, and as an infant that she cradles in her arms. Sexton never seems to consider death as a vague, distant conclusion, but rather as a hovering, omnipresent certainty.

The poet is also fond of predicting her own death, which can be seen in both The Death Notebooks, which Sexton originally intended for posthumous publication before overcoming a bout with depression, and in The Awful Rowing Toward God, in which the author chronicles her spiritual journey during the period of time preceding her suicide. Furthermore, she associates suicide with bravery and determination, which is made clear in "Sylvia's Death", her eulogy to Sylvia Plath. In this poem, as well as in various poems from To Bedlam and Part Way Back, the author finds a degree of nobility in facing death. Additionally, Sexton glorifies the process of dying in conveying an enviousness of friends and loved ones who have passed away.

In All My Pretty Ones, Sexton examines the cyclical nature of life by exploring the deaths of her parents, who passed within months of each other. Her take on death is slightly different in this group of poems, as she discovers the perspective that accompanies the passing of her mother and father. Here, death is a bringer of reconciliation and peace, and Sexton cannot help but find a measure of forgiveness for the two people that raised her, however imperfectly. The author realizes that because death will claim her, just as it did her parents, she must endeavor to be a better mother to her own children.

The Burden of Emotional Abundance

Sexton obviously possesses an access to her emotions, and she seems to say that this insight acts as a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it is the very thing that allows her to write such deeply realized poetry. On the other hand, Sexton often suggests in her poems that this emotional access drives her, and her poetic speaker, to the brink of madness and despair. This can be found in poems like "Her Kind" where the speaker is tormented by the power of her own feelings. "The Black Art" perfectly describes this condition as a possession of "weird abundance" (p 89). Additionally, Sexton frequently fears that the full release of her emotive personality upon the world would be destructive, as can be seen in poems like "The Other".

Even in poems from her fairy tale adaptations in Transformations reflect this theme. "Twelve Dancing Princesses" tells the story of young women who are brimming with the desire to dance gleefully into the late hours of the night, a rebellious act which helps to release the pent up emotions within them. They are ultimately punished for this, however, as their father forces the eldest daughter into marriage after discovering their secret joy. Sexton seems to sympathize with the princesses, because they, too, are the victims of their own abundant desires.

Throughout the book Love Poems, Sexton's speaker is tortured by her sexual pull toward relationships that are ultimately destructive, but from which she cannot extract herself. The passion generated by these affairs is obviously appealing to Sexton's love of abundance, but there is a devastating burden created by the accompanying emotional turmoil. The author hints at the notion that the artist must be allowed to sin so grandly in order to have access all of life's experiences, but she also suggests that the ensuing hardships are almost unbearable. This is seen in poems like "The Break" and "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife".

The Sins of the Mother Are Passed On To the Daughter

Sexton puts a brilliant revision on the classic literary theme, "the sins of the father". While many works of fiction, poems, and plays depict a father passing down his sins of infidelity, alcoholism, or violence to his son, Sexton portrays the same kind tragic inheritance from a distinctly female point of view. This theme is explored throughout the collection, rather notably in "The Double Image" and "The Division of Parts" from To Bedlam and Part Way Back, where the author explores the cyclical nature of life after the death of her mother. Sexton attributes her mental illness to her mother's neglectful and abusive parenting, which gives her cause to worry about her competence in raising her own daughter.

The first portion of The Book of Folly, titled "Thirty Poems", addresses this theme as well. "Mother and Daughter" centers around the speaker's daughter as she transitions into womanhood, which is met with both joy and anxiety by the speaker, who knows the mixed blessing of becoming a mature woman. "The Hex" truly brings this theme into focus in its examination of the way in which the speaker's grandmother made it impossible for her to experience happiness. Sexton suggests an inheritance of depression that exists over many generations, passed on from mother to daughter and grandmother to granddaughter in a vicious cycle. In fact, the next two poems in "Thirty Poems" continue in this vein. In "Dreaming the Breasts", Sexton compares her nursing as an infant to being placed in an asylum, evoking the notion of madness as a blood borne disease. In the following poem, "The Red Shoes", the author creates the metaphor of a pair of heirloom shoes, passed on from generation to generation of women, that makes each inheritor partake in "the death dance" (p 317).

"Pain For a Daughter" from Live or Die tells the story of a horseback riding accident during which Sexton's daughter has her foot crushed. In pain, she cries out for God instead of for her mother, and in this Sexton finds an immediate identification with her

daughter. She knows that her child has inherited her morbid associations with pain and death. She also recognizes that her daughter has become emotionally detached and independent from her, bypassing the natural order and fulfilling her heritage as a daughter who has been irreparably damaged by her mother.

Poetry As Catharsis, Confession, and Religion

Anne Sexton's label as a confessional poet is not merely something that was foisted upon her by the literary world, but rather something that the author herself cultivated within her work. Even as a dedicated patient of psychotherapy and a wavering church goer, Sexton ultimately found more solace in her pages than she ever found on the therapists couch or in the confessional booth, and she very often proclaimed this fact in poetry. This stands to reason, as it was her doctors and her priests who encouraged her to write in order to gain perspective on her numerous mental and spiritual problems. To Bedlam and Part Way Back is largely an account of Sexton's first institutionalization and her battle to overcome the madness that was plaguing her. It is clear that once she begins to write about such personal issues, she receives some backlash from friends and colleagues, and her first response to these critiques seems to be "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further". The poet makes a bold proclamation in this piece, pledging to look into the darkest corners of her psyche in order to make sense of her struggle.

"The Operation" from All My Pretty Ones provides another example of Sexton at her most confessional and cathartic. Here, the author reveals the details of her recent abortion, laying bare the medical facts while divulging her fear, shame, and sorrow. Almost the entirety of Sexton's Love Poems is a confession of infidelity and affairs with married men. One of the author's most pointed poems regarding this theme is "With Mercy For the Greedy", which Sexton dedicates to a friend who has sent her a rosary and urged her to attend confession. The author explains that poetry itself is her means of confession, that poetry has become her religion because of its immediacy and its influence in her life. Other examples of poems that express this theme are "The Black Art", which shows Sexton's anxiety about her constant need to reveal her emotions in writing, and "O Ye Tongues", in which the author borrows the form of the biblical psalm for a series of poems, thereby giving her poetry its own religious texture.

Style

Point of View

The vast majority of Sexton's poems are written in first person, as she was usually attempting to give the reader direct access to her state of mind when each poem was written. The notable exception to this is in the book of fairy tale adaptations, Transformations, in which Sexton adopts a standard third person narrative method, as one would find in the original stories. There are other instances when the author deviates from first person, such as in "Doors, Doors, Doors", "The Jesus Papers", and "The House", but generally speaking, Sexton's speaker is merely thinly veiled version of herself.

Setting

The setting of The Complete Poems might best be described as the speaker's mind. Sexton puts a high value on imagery and description, but these are usually employed to evoke a feeling rather than to describe a physical place. Sexton lived in Boston for the entirety of her life and the occasional reference is made to New England, although this cannot be said to be the setting for her poems any more than can an asylum or a seaside.

Language and Meaning

Sexton makes frequent use of metaphor, usually as a means of describing something intangible with something physical. In "The Red Shoes", for example, the author uses the metaphor of a pair of heirloom shoes to describe the condition of manic depression that has been inherited by one generation of women after another. In The Awful Rowing Toward God, Sexton describes her gradual progression toward death as a trip in a rowboat toward an island called God, and she depicts her meeting with God as a rigged poker game. This effectively conveys the poet's feeling that she has been somehow tricked or swindled by forces beyond her control. Transformations is a series of adapted Grimm's fairy tales that Sexton revises for her own purposes. While it may appear that she is simply telling an adapted version of "Cinderella", for instance, the author is actually making a potent commentary on the institution of marriage.

While the poems in this collection frequently rely upon metaphor and allusion to convey a deeper meaning, they are just as frequently plain in their confessional approach. Sexton's brutal honesty in poems like "The Operation", "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife", and "Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" serve to plunge the reader directly into the author's mindset and emotional state. The poet's believes that an honest appraisal of one's psyche can create compelling art while providing the artist with a sense of order. This is seen throughout her complete collection, and Sexton's practice of it makes for some very arresting poetry.

Structure

A handful of Anne Sexton's poems employ a formal structure of measured stanzas coupled with a predictable rhyme scheme. Some notable examples are "You, Dr. Martin", "The Truth the Dead Know", and "Doors, Doors, Doors", all of which are from Sexton's earlier work. Later on, the author borrows the biblical structure of the psalms for "O Ye Tongues", but by this point her work has become far less structured. In general, Sexton's poems are free of structure, and it is evident when reading The Complete Poems chronologically that the author becomes increasingly reliant upon free verse. While she continues to find ways to turn the occasional rhyme, her stanzas and verses become more erratic and experimental as her work progresses through time.

Sexton will frequently separate a book into several sections, as is the case with All My Pretty Ones, which is divided into five. Even so, there is a looseness within these divisions, and one section will often consist of several poems while another will contain just a few, or even a single poem. These divisions tend to be made along thematic lines, or in places where a break helps to convey the arc of a particular book. Additionally, Sexton will often create a series of sub-poems under the heading of a single poem for the purposes of developing a theme or a metaphor. This method can be found in poems such as "The Death of Fathers", "Angels of the Love Affair", "The Death Baby", "The Furies", and "O Ye Tongues".

Quotes

"A woman like that is not ashamed to die./ I have been her kind." From "Her Kind" in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, p 16.

"I will hold my awkward bowl,/ with all its cracked stars shining/ like a complicated lie,/ and fasten a new skin around it/ as if I were dressing an orange/ or a strange sun." From "For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further" in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, p 34.

"You come, a brave ghost, to fix/ in my mind without praise/ or paradise/ to make me your inheritor." From "The Division of Parts" in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, p 46.

"My friend, my friend, I was born/ doing reference work in sin, and born/ confessing it. This is what poems are . . ." From "With Mercy For the Greedy" in All My Pretty Ones, p 63.

"There is too much food and no one left over/ to eat up all the weird abundance." From "The Black Art" in All My Pretty Ones, p 89.

" . . . I see now that we store him up/ year after year, old suicides/ and I know at the news of your death,/ a terrible taste for it, like salt." From "Sylvia's Death" in Live or Die, p 127.

"Death's a sad bone; bruised you'd say,/ and yet she waits for me, year after year,/ to so delicately undo an old wound,/ to empty my breath from its bad prison."From "Wanting To Die" in Live or Die, p 142.

"Sweet weight,/ in celebration of the woman I am/ and of the soul of the woman I am/ and of the central creature and its delight/ I sing for you." From "In Celebration of My Uterus" in Love Poems, p 182.

"She is so naked and singular./ She is the sum of yourself and your dream./ Climb her like a monument, step after step./ She is solid./ As for me, I am a watercolor. I was off." From "For My Lover, Returning To His Wife" in Love Poems, p 190.

"Cinderella and the Prince/ lived, they say, happily ever after,/ like two dolls in a museum case . . ." From "Cinderella" in Transformations, p 258.

" I tied on the Red Shoes./ They are not mine./ They are my mother's./ Her mother's before./ Handed down like an heirloom/ but hidden like shameful letters." From "The Red Shoes" in The Book of Folly, p 316.

"The gallowstree drops/ one hundred heads upon the ground/ and in Judea Jesus is unborn." From "Jesus Unborn" in The Book of Folly, p 343.

"This is my death,/ Jonah said out loud,/ and it will profit me to understand it." From "Making a Living" in The Death Notebooks, p 350.

"Someday,/ heavy with cancer or disaster/ I will look up at Max/ and say: It is time./ Hand me the death baby/ and there will be/ that final rocking." From "The Death Baby" in The Death Notebooks, p 359.

" . . . there will be a door/ and I will open it/ and I will get rid of the rat inside of me,/ the gnawing pestilential rat./ God will take it with his two hands/ and embrace it." From "Rowing" in The Awful Rowing Toward God, p 418.

"Saints have no moderation,/ nor do poets,/ just exuberance . . ." From "The Saints Come Marching In" in The Awful Rowing Toward God, p 470.

"I'm mooring my rowboat/ at the dock of the island called God." From "The Rowing Endeth" in The Awful Rowing Toward God, p 473.

Topics for Discussion

Why is Anne Sexton classified as a confessional poet? Give examples of specific poems that seem to be confessions, and identify to what the poet is confessing.

What is Sexton's attitude toward death? How does she personify death, and what specific literary devices does she use to depict death and dying?

Identify examples of feminism within Sexton's poetry. How does the author speak to the condition of modern womanhood?

Give examples of changes in Sexton's tone and style during the chronological progression of her published works as presented in The Complete Poems.

How does the author adapt the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm to suit her own themes in Transformations? Provide examples of contrast between the original stories and Sexton's adaptations.

In what ways does Sexton embrace religion and in what ways does she blaspheme religion, specifically with regard to the character of Jesus Christ?

Provide examples of Sexton's allusions to Greek Myth and the Bible. How do these allusions enhance her poems and how does she relate these ancient stories to modern life?

The mother/daughter relationship is the subject of many of Sexton's poems. Select one such poem, and describe Sexton's view of the specific relationship within it.