

# **Transformations Study Guide**

## **Transformations by Anne Sexton**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Transformations Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-5.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 6-9.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 10-13.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 14-17.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>



# Chapters 1-5

## Chapters 1-5 Summary

In "The Gold Key," the poet addresses her contemporaries, announcing that she has a story to tell. Sexton asks where these people are and what things do they remember from their childhoods. What stories were read to them as children? Are the memories forgotten now that more important things have taken hold?

The poet refers to a sixteen-year-old boy who is in possession of a gold key. The boy found the gold key but does not know what it opens. The boy begins to search for the key hole. The gold key turns out to be the item needed to unlock the book of transformed fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm.

"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" revisits the classic fairy tale of a porcelain-like maiden who is the subject of jealousy from her stepmother, a queen who is facing the ravages of age. Sexton states that no matter who the reader is or what kind of life one leads, there is always an appreciation for the virginal girl who is lovely and fragile.

When Snow White turns thirteen, the girl's stepmother begins to realize that her age is catching up and that the beauty she once possessed was beginning to fade. The Queen is vain and cannot stand to have anyone in the kingdom that is fairer than she. In order to ensure that she is the fairest of them all, the Queen consults a magic mirror every day. One day, the mirror reveals that while the Queen is still beautiful, Snow White has surpassed her and is now the most beautiful in the kingdom. The Queen flies into a rage and orders Snow White taken into the woods and killed. The huntsman ordered to do the job should kill Snow White and return with the girl's heart so that the Queen could eat it.

The huntsman cannot kill the beautiful princess and instead sends her off into the forest. The huntsman kills a boar instead and presents the heart to the Queen who eats it, proclaiming the return of her status as the fairest of them all.

Snow White wanders through the forest for seven weeks until she comes to the Seventh Mountain. It is there that Snow White finds the cottage belonging to the Seven Dwarfs. The Seven Dwarfs take Snow White in, thinking that the beautiful princess would bring them luck.

The magic mirror tells the Queen of Snow White's existence and location. The Queen dresses up as a peddler and goes to the cottage to kill Snow White. The attempt fails, soon to be followed by another. The second attempt also fails but the third attempt does not. Snow White bites into a poisoned apple and falls down, dead.

The Dwarfs cannot bear to bury the princess and so they put her body into a glass coffin atop the Seventh Mountain. A prince rides by one day and is so taken by the princess that the Seven Dwarfs give Snow White to the prince. On the way back to the kingdom,



the prince's men drop the coffin. The poisoned apple pops out of Snow White's mouth and she awakens.

Snow White and the prince are married. At the wedding ceremony, the Queen is forced to wear iron shoes and dance in a fire until dead.

"The White Snake" tells the tale of a person who could hear the animals speak. At first that person is Sexton, who tells of the day when the animals spoke to her. The story shifts to a servant who worked for a king "as wise as a dictionary." Each day the king eats a special meal that gives him wisdom. Against the rules, the servant eats some of the dish, which was a white snake. Suddenly, the servant can hear the voices of the animals. The servant begins to do incredible things and is handsomely rewarded. Along the way, the servant makes friends with many of the animals who promise to come to the man's aid if ever it was needed.

The servant accepts a challenge given by the princess, the prize being the princess' hand in marriage. The task is followed by another, with increasing difficulty. Because of the man's relationship to the animals, he is able to complete the tasks and win the princess.

"Rumpelstiltskin" is the tale of a miller's daughter who is trapped inside a room where she must spin straw into gold or "die like a criminal." Despite the miller's claims, the girl does not know how to spin straw into gold.

An ugly dwarf, only eighteen inches high, appears in the girl's room. The dwarf claims that he can spin straw into gold and proves it to be true. The girl is grateful and gives the dwarf a necklace as a reward.

The king rewards the girl by putting her into a larger room to spin even more straw into gold. Once again, the girl is desperate and the dwarf comes to her aid. This time the dwarf receives a ring for his trouble.

The girl is put into yet another larger room. This time, if the girl succeeds in spinning all of the straw into gold, the king will marry her. The dwarf appears once more and promises to turn all of the straw into gold so that she may marry the king. However, the girl must promise to give the dwarf her first born child. The dwarf has no chance of ever having children, something he greatly desires.

The deal is made. One year later, the queen gives birth to a child. The dwarf comes to claim the child, as was promised. The queen is devastated. The dwarf feels bad and tells the queen that if she can guess his name, she can keep the baby. The queen guesses the dwarf's name to be Rumpelstiltskin. The dwarf explodes into a rage, splits in two and dies.

"The Little Peasant" tells the tale of a peasant who is so poor that he kills his only cow to sell the hide at market. During the peasant's trip to town, there is a nasty hail storm and the man is forced to seek refuge at the house of a miller.



The miller's wife permits the peasant to wait out the storm, even with his cowhide and a raven that had joined him along the way. The peasant eats a stale chunk of bread and then pretends to sleep in a corner. While the peasant is pretending to sleep, a parson comes to the door. The parson and the miller's wife eat heartily and have sex. The peasant observes it all.

The miller returns home, unaware of the parson's presence. The miller wants to know why there is a cowhide in the corner of the kitchen. The miller meets the peasant, who claims that the cowhide is magic. The peasant can tell the miller five things about himself. The fifth thing is a secret, however. The miller agrees to buy the cowhide for a handsome sum and the peasant reveals the whereabouts of the parson without giving away the wife's affair.

## Chapters 1-5 Analysis

In chapter one, "The Gold Key," Sexton prompts her contemporaries, as well as the reader to think back to childhood memories and the fairy tales that were read to one at night. There are many things, including age, that steal away memories of those childish pleasures. Sexton wishes to remind people of the stories they had once loved while adding a modern touch as well as a bit of analysis and underlying truth.

Chapter two, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," is a classic tale of jealousy and karma. Snow White represents the naïve, innocent virginal princess who is oblivious to her stepmother's jealousy. The princess is so sweet and lovely that the huntsman takes pity on her, as do the seven dwarfs. The dwarfs also feel protective of Snow White and repeatedly warn the princess that the Queen will surely find her. Although Snow White is told that it would be unwise to answer the door to strangers, Snow White lets the disguised queen into the cottage.

Sexton likes to point out that Snow White is incredibly naïve and not so smart since the princess allows the Queen to enter the cottage three times, each time with murder on her mind.

The seven dwarfs show how they have become attached to Snow White beyond the promised good luck and cannot bear the grief of her death. Giving Snow White to the prince shows sacrifice.

Snow White triumphs when the poison apple falls from her mouth and she comes back to life to marry the prince. Karma plays a part when the queen is forced to dance the fire dance in iron shoes until she dies. At the end of the tale, Snow White looks into a mirror as some women do, a hint that the obsession with beauty will continue.

In "The White Snake," the servant goes against the rules and still manages to be rewarded. Although there is deception, the servant manages to use his new talent of speaking to the animals to his best advantage to get the most highly sought after prize in the kingdom.



In "Rumpelstiltskin," a young girl is given over to a king who is told that she can spin straw into gold. The miller is trying to gain favor with the king while being completely aware that his daughter does not have the ability to perform the task.

The girl is beside herself with worry, knowing that the king will keep the promise to kill her should she fail to spin the straw into gold. Rumpelstiltskin appears. Rumpelstiltskin is a dwarf only eighteen inches high. The man is desperate to have a child, which will never be. Under the guise of helping the girl, Rumpelstiltskin does the job for her.

Each time the girl is sentenced to spin straw into gold, Rumpelstiltskin comes to the rescue. Finally, the dwarf strikes a deal in which he will receive the one thing he has always wanted, a child.

The queen does not truly believe that Rumpelstiltskin will take her son. When the dwarf appears, the queen is devastated and convinces the dwarf to give her a way out. While Rumpelstiltskin goes on about how the queen will never guess his name, the dwarf reveals the name to the queen. This shows the dwarf's arrogance. When the queen guesses his name, Rumpelstiltskin is destroyed.

The Little Peasant is a poor man but crafty in his ways. By convincing the miller that the cowhide was magic, the man makes much more money than he ever would have at market. By the time the miller realizes that the cowhide is not magic, the peasant will be long gone.



# Chapters 6-9

## Chapters 6-9 Summary

"Godfather Death" speaks of a godfather that shuns the thirteenth child with no one to take his place. Therefore, the thirteenth child, the chosen one, would belong to Godfather Death whenever the Godfather wished it. The doctor, the chosen one, was sent to save the king's daughter from death. As the doctor fell in love, he was taken away by Godfather Death as promised.

"Rapunzel" is the classic tale of a maiden with long golden hair. The story begins with a girl who has been locked away by an aunt who fears that the boys will steal her niece away. While locked away, the women touch old breast to young breast.

There is a witch's garden that is lush and filled with many wonderful things. The garden is well protected by a fence so that no one could steal the fruits of the woman's labor. However, there is a woman nearby who is with child and craves rampion so much that she feared death should she be denied. The woman's husband is afraid and so climbs the fence to steal the rampion for his beloved. The witch catches the man and declares that as a thief, he must die.

The man pleads for his life. As was common in the day, the witch spared the man's life in exchange for the unborn child. The man and woman give birth to a daughter named Rapunzel. The witch takes Rapunzel and locks her in a tower with no door or staircase. When the witch wants to get to Rapunzel, she calls out for the girl to let down her long hair so that she may climb up to the tower.

One day a prince notices the ritual and having heard Rapunzel's singing, falls in love. The prince calls out to Rapunzel who lets down her hair. The prince and Rapunzel fall in love.

The witch learns about the prince and cuts off Rapunzel's hair. Using the blond tresses, the witch lures the prince to the tower. When the prince discovers that Rapunzel has been banished, he throws himself from the tower and lands in thorns that cause him to go blind.

Years later, Rapunzel finds the prince in the woods and her tears heal his blind eyes. Rapunzel and the prince marry. The witch's heart shrinks to the size of a pin.

"Iron Hans" is a tale about a madman in an enchanted forest.

A king has an enchanted forest in which the king's huntsmen and dogs routinely disappear. One day, a huntsman sees a dog being dragged into a black brook. Upon draining the brook, the huntsman finds a wild man at the bottom.



The wild man is put into a cage with the intention of being kept there forever. One day, the king's son lets Iron Hans out of the cage and the pair goes into the forest. The boy depends on Iron Hans for protection and care although he is a wild man.

The boy grows up and continues to rely on Iron Hans for help. Eventually, the boy, now a man, captures the heart of a beautiful maiden. The young prince is shocked to see that Iron Hans was actually a king and the maiden's father. The prince had broken the spell and Iron Hans has been transformed.

"Cinderella" is a classic tale of a beloved daughter who becomes little more than a peasant in her stepmother's house after her father dies. The stepmother was once pretty, as are her daughters, but their hearts are black. Cinderella is treated like a slave. In the girl's hour of need, she visits her mother's grave, upon which she had planted a tree. In the tree lived a white dove. Whenever Cinderella needed something, the white dove would deliver.

It came time for the ball, and although the wicked stepmother tries to make it impossible for Cinderella to attend, the dove makes it possible.

Cinderella meets the prince and the two dance for the entire ball. Each night, the prince walks Cinderella home where she promptly disappears. After the third night of this, the prince coats the steps of the palace with cobbler's wax, hoping to capture Cinderella. The girl's shoe is left behind and the prince begins the search for the one who would become his princess.

The prince travels door to door and although many try, no one can make the shoe fit. The stepsisters even maim their feet to fit into the shoe but nothing works. Cinderella is found at last. At the wedding ceremony, the wicked step-sisters come to curry favor and the white dove pecks out their eyes. Cinderella and the prince live happily ever after.

## Chapters 6-9 Analysis

In Godfather Death, Sexton speaks of one who is shunned at his christening and therefore shall have no choice but to follow his fate until the end.

In Rapunzel, the parents of the girl did not think that the witch would follow through with her promise, yet had no recourse. The witch, whose name was Mother Gothel, liked having the girl locked in the tower and wanted to keep Rapunzel all to herself. The two played games together and the witch managed, for many years, to keep people away from the tower.

The prince was so enthralled by Rapunzel and the bizarre situation that he could not live without the golden haired girl. The prince and Rapunzel devised a plan for escape, which is mysteriously uncovered by the witch. The witch is angry and cuts off Rapunzel's hair as punishment before banishing her. The prince discovers what has happened and is so devastated that he throws himself from the tower and becomes blind.





Years later, Rapunzel is wandering in the woods, although there is no mention of how she came to be released from the tower. Rapunzel stumbles upon the prince and heals his blinded eyes. In Sexton's eyes, the incident is rather convenient.

The tale of Iron Hans is reminiscent of Beauty and the Beast in that the king's son does not judge the man by his grotesque looks or his madness. It is unclear why the boy lives in the woods with Iron Hans and never tries to go home. However, the boy relies heavily on Iron Hans as he grows up and whenever the boy is in a jam, the madman comes to his aid.

As fairy tales go, the prince's ability to slay a warrior and capture the heart of a beautiful maiden break the spell that had imprisoned Iron Hans so that all may live happily ever after.

Sexton refers to psychotherapy and shock treatment in this story, pointing out that the only thing required to transform Iron Hans was the breaking of the spell.

Cinderella is a classic tale of jealousy between women. The stepsisters despise Cinderella, in part because she was her father's favorite child. Cinderella was well taken care of until her father's death, when the stepmother and her daughters took the opportunity to force the girl into an oppressive existence. As promised, Cinderella's mother cared for her from heaven and saw that Cinderella got her just rewards for kindness while the stepsisters were punished for their behavior and their blackened hearts.



# Chapters 10-13

## Chapters 10-13 Summary

"One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes" details the story of a woman who has three daughters. Two of the girls are born with an unusual problem. One has only one eye while the other has three. The third girl is normal. However, the mother tends to dote on the girls that are abnormal because they certainly must be more special in some way.

The mother tends to be fascinated by One-Eye and Three-Eyes and often pokes at their eyes. Two-Eyes, however, is "as common as two pennies" and therefore must wear only rags and eat scraps from the dog's dish. Two-Eyes cared for the family's goat. One day, out in the field, an old woman tells Two-Eyes that if she sings for the goat, there will always be a feast provided. Two-Eyes sings and there is indeed a feast laid before the girl.

The mother and sisters become suspicious when Two-Eyes does not eat from the dog's dish. Although an attempt to find out the secret fails at first, the family learns of Two-Eyes' secret and the goat is slaughtered. Once again, Two-Eyes weeps and the old woman comes to the girl's aid. This time, the old woman tells Two-Eyes to plant the goat's innards in the ground in front of the cottage. Two-Eyes does so, and the next day a beautiful silver tree appears where the goat's innards had been buried. The family is thrilled, yet none can take fruit from the tree. The same branches that withdrew from the mother and two other daughters came forward for Two-Eyes.

A knight comes to the cottage and sees the tree. The sisters and mother claim the tree as their own but cannot give the knight a branch as he has requested. Only Two-Eyes can give the knight the branch. The knight takes Two-Eyes away and the couple marries. Later, two paupers come to the castle begging. Two-Eyes recognizes them as her sisters and takes them in because they are in need.

"The Wonderful Musician" is a story about a man who wandered through the woods playing his fiddle-me-roo and attracting the attention of all who hear it. The musician uses the music to attract companions, first a fox, then a wolf, followed by a dog. Each time the musician finds a companion, he hurts the companion and leaves him to suffer in the woods.

The last companion the musician tries to raise, a snake, lies perfectly still.

As the musician tries to enliven the snake, a woodcutter hears the music and says he would give his life for it. Meanwhile, the other animals who had been wronged are ready to seek revenge when they are scared away by the woodcutter.

"Red Riding Hood" offers a twist on the German fairy tale, made the most famous by the Brothers Grimm. There are many deceivers, from the matron in the supermarket to the con artist to the poet herself.



The Big Bad Wolf is also a deceiver. In Red Riding Hood, the Big Bad Wolf meets a little girl in the wood on the way to her grandmother's house. The little girl is not alarmed by the presence of the wolf and chats with him. When the wolf learns that the little girl is taking wine and cake to her sickly grandmother, he runs ahead and eats the grandmother, then dons her nightgown and cap. Red Riding Hood knows something is wrong with her grandmother and soon discovers the wolf in grandmother's clothing. The wolf also eats Red Riding Hood.

The wolf, happy and full, falls asleep. A woodcutter happens by and realizes that no grandmother snores that loud. The woodcutter discovers the wolf and splits him open, freeing the grandmother and Red Riding Hood. The wolf's belly is filled with heavy stones and he dies. The woodcutter, grandmother, and Red Riding Hood have a feast.

"The Maiden Without Hands" details the story of a young woman whose hands were chopped off by her cruel father. A wizard had desired to have the maiden because of her hands, so the father felt that there was no alternative but to cut them off.

The girl leaves her father's house and goes wandering in the woods owned by the kind king. The king spots the maiden eating an apple from a tree and is entranced by her beauty. The king marries the maiden and she becomes pregnant. The king is off at war when the baby is born. A message is sent to the king but is intercepted by the wizard who wants to cause more trouble for the maiden who is now a queen.

Fearing for the life of her daughter-in-law and grandson, the Queen Mother sends them off to live in the forest. The queen's hands grow back. After the king searches for seven years, he finally finds his family and they are reunited.

## Chapters 10-13 Analysis

Once again, karma catches up to the mean and cruel characters. Two-Eyes, the common girl, is treated as a leper for not having some mystical ailment. The girl does not understand her crime and tries to make the best of it. The old woman, always the wise and often magical character, tells Two-Eyes how to survive and then prosper. The sisters, greedy over owning the tree, are shocked when the tree disappears along with Two-Eyes.

Despite all that has happened, Two-Eyes takes pity on her sisters due to their extreme need.

The Wonderful Musician is a bit of an enigma. The musician goes wandering through the woods, attracting attention like the Pied Piper. However, the musician is a bit of a sadist and tortures the animals that beg to follow. The only reason the musician does not die is by the grace of the woodcutter, who is also under the spell of the music.

Red Riding Hood is telling and comical at the same time. In the beginning, Sexton reveals how people in every day life can be deceivers - going through the motions while having other agendas or problems that remain unseen. Sexton reveals some of her own



personal depression and anxiety, recalling events where she was forced to act as the deceiver.

In Red Riding Hood, the little girl questions her mother's choice of remedies for the grandmother's illness. Surely penicillin would be a better choice than wine and cake. Even Peter Rabbit was given chamomile tea.

Red Riding Hood thinks nothing of speaking to the wolf and is naïve enough that she never suspects that the wolf means any harm.

The woodcutter is wise and uncovers the wolf's ruse right away. Feeling that death is too good for the dastardly wolf, the woodcutter fills him with stones so that the wolf might die under his own weight. The woodcutter, grandmother, and Red Riding Hood feast on cakes while the wolf's lifeless body is nearby on the floor.

The Maiden Without Hands is a strange tale about a girl whose hands are chopped off to protect her from an unrelenting wizard. The girl's hands eventually grow back as she lives in exile in the woods with her baby. As Sexton points out, it is a rather strange situation since the girl is "without resources." In the end, determination and good prevail, reuniting the king and queen.



# Chapters 14-17

## Chapters 14-17 Summary

"The Twelve Dancing Princesses" is a tale depicting the lives of twelve clever princesses who continually stump their father and the entire court by seemingly never leaving the castle, yet dancing every night until their shoes are in tatters.

The question is asked of what type of person would understand if one chose to dance from midnight to 6 A.M. Certainly, the runaway in Boston Common, who threw away everything to live on saltines and speed, would understand. The paralytic's wife who sits in a bar eating peanuts would understand. Passengers on an overnight flight from Boston to Paris would understand, as would an insomniac. The drunken poet, who makes phone calls at 3 A.M., would also understand, even as he puts you on hold to vomit. The amnesiac and the night nurse would also understand how one would want to do such a thing in the middle of the night, given the alternatives.

The real story begins with the twelve beautiful daughters of a king. The princesses sleep in a room, one bed next to the other. At night, the king locks the princesses in their room. However, when morning comes, the princesses' shoes are danced to tatters. The king is baffled about how the girls might escape. As a last resort, the king sends out a proclamation. Anyone who could discover how the princesses are escaping could have his pick of the girls for a wife. If the person fails, he will die.

Many princes try to uncover the secret. At night, a prince would sit outside the bedroom door. Each night the princesses drug the prince's wine. The princes fail one after another and are beheaded.

A poor soldier hears about the proclamation and wants to try to uncover the secret. Along the way to the castle, the soldier meets an old woman. The woman warns the soldier not to drink any wine. Then, the woman gives the soldier an invisibility cloak so that he may follow the princesses.

The soldier starts out as all the princes had, by sitting outside the princesses' bedroom door. The soldier is served a glass of wine but does not drink. When the princesses check on the soldier, he pretends to sleep. The princesses ready themselves for a night of dancing. The soldier slips on the invisibility cloak.

The eldest princess knocks on her bedpost and the bed sinks beneath the floor. The princesses climb down into an underground passage. The soldier accidentally steps on the hem of the youngest girl's gown but manages to stay out of sight.

The underground is a magical place with avenues lined with silver trees which lead to diamond encrusted trees. The princesses come to a lake where twelve princes were waiting in rowboats to take the girls across. The soldier, still invisible, climbs aboard the youngest princess' boat and follows the girls to the other side. Once they were on the



other side of the lake, the girls dance and frolic until dawn, behaving wildly, cavorting with soldiers and drinking cruets of champagne. As dawn came, the girls are forced to retreat, naked and angry, to their bedroom.

The princesses find the soldier outside their door, bleary eyed as if he had awakened from a drugged sleep. The soldier races from the post outside the bedroom door to tell the king of his discovery. As proof, the soldier produces a silver leaf and a diamond as large as a plum. The soldier is rewarded with his choice of the princesses as a bride. The princesses will dance no more.

"The Frog Prince" tells the classic tale of an ugly frog and a beautiful maiden.

The poet speaks to a doctor and an old woman, claiming that she will entertain them. However, while she speaks, frogs come from the sky like rain. The doctor and the woman will be Sexton's judge and jury. Sexton's guilts are what will be addressed.

Sexton sees frogs as being disgusting and ugly creatures that she would gladly chop up with a knife. The frog has no nerves and reminds the poet of an old cockroach without any worth. Even the sun and the moon do not want the old frog in the poet's presence. Only slime will have the frog. Slime embraces the frog and builds him a home.

The frog comes to the poet, filled with poison and parasites, wanting to gain affections. The mere thought disgusts Sexton who writes: "Frog has boil disease and a bellyful of parasites. He says: Kiss me. Kiss me. And the ground soils itself."

A princess walks in her garden, tossing a ball. The ball falls into a well and the princess is devastated. The ball was actually the moon and now the princess has lost it. The accident was preordained.

The princess looked into the well to see that the water bubbled up and revealed to her a disgusting frog. The frog tells the princess not to be afraid. After all, the frog is a cattle farmer, a vagabond, a postman, doorkeeper, or laborer. The frog says that he comes as one who has something to sell. In this case, the frog is willing to sell the ball back to the princess if only she will agree to do three things. The frog asks that the princess agree to allow him to eat from her plate, drink from her cup, and sleep in her bed. The princess agrees, although she has no intention of keeping the promise after she gets the ball back.

The princess gets the ball and runs back to the castle. That night, there is a knock at the castle door. It is the frog, come to collect on the deal. The frog announces that he has left everything to live with the young princess. The king overhears about the promise and forces the princess to keep her word.

The frog sits upon the princess' lap at dinner. The frog enjoys the food while the princess chokes it down "as if she were eating a puppy." Next, the frog drinks from the princess' cup. The princess would rather drink hemlock than share the cup with such a disgusting creature.



Soon it came time to go to bed. The princess can think of nothing more revolting than to have to sleep with the slimy frog. The princess sleeps and the frog has his way with her. When the princess awakes, she is horrified. The princess throws the frog across the room where it lands in a corner. Suddenly, there is a kaboom! In the corner where the frog had landed emerges a handsome prince. The prince is kind and he and the princess are married. The prince has the chamber guarded so that the royal couple would not be disturbed. The prince also has the well boarded over to ensure that the princess would never lose the ball again.

"Hansel and Gretel" details the story of two children who are cast out by their parents when the family becomes too poor to support them.

Sexton starts out by saying that she wants to eat the child up like fudge. The child will fit into a pan which will fit into the oven at 350 degrees. The poet refers to the child as a fritter and points out that it would only take a turn in the road for her to become a cannibal.

Hansel and Gretel belong to a family that has fallen on evil times. The situation is so awful that the mother is forced to cook the family dog. The only thing left in the house was a loaf of bread. The mother convinces the father that the only way to survive is to send the children into the forest and keep the bread for themselves.

Hansel overhears his mother's plan and as he and Gretel are being sent into the forest, Hansel drops pebbles to mark the route back home. The children go home and are fed a crust of bread.

The next day, Hansel and Gretel are sent out into the woods once more. This time, Hansel uses bread crumbs to mark the trail. The birds eat the breadcrumbs and Hansel and Gretel are lost in the forest.

The children roam the forest for twenty days and nights before coming upon a house made from food. The house is remarkable and even the chimney is edible, made of chocolate.

In the house lives a witch. The witch invites Hansel and Gretel into the house and she feeds them a big meal. Afterward, the children sleep. The witch takes Hansel and locks him in the barn so that the witch may have the chance to fatten him up. After Hansel is fat enough, the witch will cook and eat him.

The witch tells Gretel of her plan to cook and eat Hansel. Gretel, who had not spoken up to this point, simply bows her head and wept. The witch mistakes Gretel's silence for stupidity.

The witch decides that perhaps Gretel, although small, might make a nice hors d'oeuvre. The witch tells Gretel to climb into the oven to see if she can fit. Gretel asks the witch to show her how to climb inside. The witch does so and Gretel seizes the opportunity. Gretel slams the oven door and locks the witch inside. The witch is burned to death.



Hansel and Gretel escape and return home to find their mother has died. The children and their father live happily with only vague memories of the witch.

"Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" gives the reader a glimpse into the original version of Sleeping Beauty. Once upon a time, there was a king who had a baby girl. The girl is so fair that the king wishes to share her with the fairies. However, the king only has twelve gold plates so only twelve of the thirteen fairies can be invited. The thirteenth fairy, upon learning that she had not been invited, flies into a rage. As revenge, the thirteenth fairy casts a spell over Briar Rose. On the girl's fifteenth birthday, she will prick her finger on a spinning wheel and die.

The twelfth fairy is also quite powerful and is able to amend the spell. Instead of death, the prick on the princess' finger will induce sleep to last for one hundred years.

Briar Rose is blossoming into a beautiful young maiden when her fifteenth birthday arrives. Briar Rose pricks her finger on the spinning wheel and instantaneously falls asleep. The king and queen also fall asleep, as do the courtiers, house pets, and frogs. The fire in the hearth immediately dies and the trees turn to metal. The house has been cursed to sleep for one hundred years.

The only things that do not sleep are the briar roses that grow around the castle.

Over the years, many princes attempt to make a path through the briar roses in order to save the beautiful princess. Each prince is captured in the thorns and crucified.

One hundred years later, a prince tries to get to the castle. The prince is prepared to brave the briar roses, which part like the Red Sea when the prince approaches. The prince wakes Briar Rose and the castle and all its inhabitants return to normal as if no time had passed. The prince and Briar Rose marry, prepared to live happily ever after.

The couple does live happily, except for Briar Rose's deeply ingrained fear of falling asleep. Briar Rose refuses to sleep until she is so exhausted that the princess seeks the help of the court chemist. The chemist secretly concocts knock out drops to help Briar Rose sleep. Still, the fear persists and sleep remains Briar Rose's prison. Briar Rose believes that there is not time for sleep, that if sleep is to come and death with it, she should be ninety and ready to die.

In addition, Briar Rose has nightmares and the only way to avoid them is to stay awake. However, when Briar Rose does give into sleep, it only takes a kiss to awaken her, much like on the day when the prince rescued the princess from the hundred year long curse.

Sexton ends the poem by writing about her own prison. The poet speaks of a girl numb with Novocain and unable to feel if a needle would be stuck into her knee. Sexton feels as if she is dying. This state of numbness and near death is the poet's prison.

Sexton talks of being abandoned, of being passed around like a bowl of fruit. Every night the girl is nailed into place, her own type of crucifixion. Except that it is not a prince





that awakens the poet, it is her drunken father, hovering over her and then on top of her "like some sleeping jellyfish." Sexton wonders if there is a way out of this prison, if there is life after death.

## Chapters 14-17 Analysis

The Twelve Dancing Princesses uses the age-old wise woman as the one who has the answers to the soldier's question of how to catch the princesses as they sneak out of their chamber at night. The princesses think that they are far too clever to ever be caught, especially by one of a lower class. The girls are delighted with themselves when the soldier feigns sleep, and they prepare for a night of dancing.

The youngest princess feels someone step on her gown but the eldest convinces the girl that she simply got caught on a nail. The scene below the beds is an amazing one, filled with riches and temptations. Sexton refers more than once to the underground as being equivalent to Hell. The princesses cross a lake, representative of the River Styx. There is drinking and debauchery and in the end, the girls are devastated to leave Lucifer behind.

The princesses are downcast after their eldest sister marries the soldier and the end has come for all their night long festivities.

The Frog Prince is a traditional tale of a frog turning into a prince after the magic spell is broken. However, in this version, the frog is more than simply unappealing to the beautiful princess. The princess finds the frog utterly revolting and is ill at the prospect of sharing her food, drink, and bed with such a creature. Naturally, the end brings happiness as the frog turns into the kind and handsome prince.

Hansel and Gretel is a story of determination and triumph. The children are cast out by their selfish mother who would rather see her children die than go without food. The mother is angry when the children return the first time. The second time, the birds eat all the breadcrumbs and Hansel and Gretel are forced into maturity.

The witch underestimates children and is obsessed with eating Hansel and Gretel without giving them credit for their brains. While traditionally it is the male who saves the day, in this case, it is Gretel who manages to outsmart the witch by tricking her to climb into the oven.

The mother's death is representative of karma and also allows the children to return home to their father.

Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty) is another story of jealousy surrounding a beautiful princess. In this case, it is the thirteenth fairy that is jealous and outraged at not being invited to Briar Rose's christening.

The twelfth fairy's kindness and pity overrides that of her sister fairy and the princess is spared from death but shall remain imprisoned by her fear of sleep and nightmares.

# Characters

## Anne Sexton appears in Author

Anne Harvey Sexton (1928-1974) was an American poet who grew up in a middle class existence in Weston, Massachusetts. While the Harvey family was not rich, they were comfortable, thanks to the efforts of Ralph Harvey, a successful manufacturer of woollens. Anne's mother was Mary Gray Staples. In addition to the home in Weston, the family spent their summers on Maine's Squirrel Island.

While Anne had somewhat of a privileged lifestyle, the author was never comfortable with her surroundings. Ralph Harvey was an alcoholic and Mary Staples Harvey was a frustrated writer. In lieu of closeness with her parents, Anne relied heavily on the presence of Anna Dingley, a great aunt referred to as "Nana" by young Anne. There have been accusations that Anne's parents abused her either sexually or emotionally. For comfort, Anne turned to Nana. Nana suffered from a nervous breakdown which severely impacted Anne.

Anne was not a good student. The future poet and playwright did not take interest in school until the Harveys sent Anne to a boarding school where Anne began her love affair with poetry. At nineteen, Anne eloped with Alfred Sexton II. The relationship was rocky, due in part to Anne's ongoing infidelity. While Sexton was in Korea, Anne worked as a model and entered therapy for the first time. In 1953, Anne gave birth to a daughter.

Anne's depression worsened after Nana's death in 1955 and the birth of the second Sexton daughter. When Anne's husband was away with his job, Anne suffered from worsening depression and sometimes abused the children. Anne attempted suicide and once again entered therapy.

In 1957, Anne made her first major foray into the Boston writing scene. The author took on a style known as confessional poetry and eventually became acquainted with many famous authors of the day.

Anne Sexton spent the balance of her career as a highly regarded and technically proficient writer, winning many prestigious awards. Throughout that time, Sexton participated in therapy and never gave up any of her lovers.

Anne continued to suffer from mental stress, a fact that worsened after she divorced Alfred Sexton in 1973. Alone and depressed, Sexton went into a downward spiral. Anne Sexton died of self induced carbon monoxide poisoning in 1974.



## **Brothers Grimm appears in Entire collection**

Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859), often referred to as The Brothers Grimm, were German publishers of novellas and also credited with creating popularity for a large number of fairy tales, including Hansel and Gretel, Rumpelstiltskin, and Sleeping Beauty.

Jacob Grimm, the eldest of the brothers, was a well known jurist and philologist who was known in part for the introduction of his works on mythology as well as the compilation of the German Dictionary.

Wilhelm Grimm was also a jurist who was politically active, a role that caused him to be fired from a prestigious post by the king.

Together, the Brothers Grimm embarked on publishing stories that had been passed down for centuries via the oral tradition. Although the brothers were not the first to publish these tales, they tended to adhere to the age-old stories rather than the more modern adaptations which were often overly academic and less popular.

The first collection of stories by The Brothers Grimm was published in 1810 and did not meet with good reviews. Throughout their careers, the writers suffered disdain from a faction of critics who believed their versions of fairy tales were too dark and violent for the ears and eyes of young and impressionable children.

## **Cinderella appears in Cinderella**

Fictional girl who overcomes horrible circumstances to become a princess.

## **Rumpelstiltskin appears in Rumpelstiltskin**

Small, angry man who turns straw into gold for a price.

## **Friedrich Nietzsche appears in The Gold Key**

German philosopher known for his theory that God is dead.

## **Snow White appears in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**

Princess who was a target for assassination because of her beauty.



## **Sleeping Beauty appears in Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)**

Also known as Briar Rose, Sleeping Beauty is a princess who sleeps for one hundred years due to a spell.

## **Hansel and Gretel appears in Hansel and Gretel**

Brother and sister who are sent into the woods and encounter a witch who wants to eat them.

## **Rapunzel appears in Rapunzel**

Child who is raised in a tower and who plans to escape by letting a prince climb up her long golden hair.

## **Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. appears in Foreword, The Gold Key**

Famous author and iconoclast; contemporary and acquaintance to Anne Sexton.



## Objects/Places

### **Kingdom appears in Briar Rose, Rapunzel, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**

The concept of the Kingdom is one that appears in a great number of fairy tales throughout history. While specific details are rarely given, the Kingdom represents a magical place where all things are wonderful and safe. There are exceptions, however, and they usually revolve around one bad apple, such as a wicked stepmother as seen in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Overall, the Kingdom in Snow White was a beautiful and magical place, save for the vanity of the queen who could not tolerate being outdone by her step-daughter. There is typically a sympathetic character in the Kingdom, such as the huntsman who could not bear to kill Snow White.

Like Snow White, Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty) came under a magical spell that tore her away from her beloved father.

In Cinderella, the concepts of the wicked stepmother and the magical Kingdom go hand in hand. While Cinderella's stepmother ridiculed and tormented the beloved daughter of her late husband, magic and happiness lay in the salvation offered by the Kingdom, where Prince Charming lived and waited to meet his princess.

### **Forest appears in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel**

While the Kingdom was a place of untold happiness and magic, the Forest was a place thought to be filled with equal parts wonder and danger.

In Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the huntsman is ordered by the queen to take Snow White into the Forest, kill her, and bring back the heart so that the queen may eat it. The huntsman felt sorry for Snow White, and although he did take her into the Forest, the huntsman could not kill the beautiful maiden and allowed her to go free. Eventually, Snow White happened upon the cottage belonging to the Seven Dwarfs.

In Red Riding Hood, the Forest was fraught with danger. Red Riding Hood was safe if she stayed on the path but if she wandered off, there would be untold dangers, such as the Big Bad Wolf.

In Hansel and Gretel, the Forest represented many things, including abandonment, fear, determination and triumph. Hansel and Gretel were sent into the woods by their mother who chose to let them die because there was not enough food for the entire family. Hansel and Gretel survived, met a witch who also tried to kill them, and turned the tables on the situation. Triumphant in saving themselves once again, Hansel and Gretel found their way out of the Forest to return home to their recently widowed father.



## **Seventh Mountain appears in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**

Where Snow White was laid to rest in a glass coffin.

## **Palace appears in Cinderella**

Site of the royal ball and where Cinderella meets Prince Charming.

## **Seven Dwarfs' cottage appears in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**

Home to the Seven Dwarfs and Snow White.

## **Mirror appears in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**

Tool used by the famed queen to ensure her level of beauty.

## **Grandmother's house appears in Red Riding Hood**

Destination for Little Red Riding Hood.

## **Gingerbread house appears in Hansel and Gretel**

Home to the witch and object of interest to Hansel and Gretel.

## **Tower appears in Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin**

The place where Rapunzel was held; also the location of the prison for the girl who had to spin straw into gold.

## **Denmark appears in Cinderella**

Home of the luscious nurse maid.



# Themes

## Jealousy

A large number of fairy tales deal with the theme of jealousy. It is often the jealousy of the wicked stepmother that causes the majority of the problems. This theme is most prevalent in Cinderella and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

In Cinderella, the wicked stepmother was jealous of the girl's beauty as well as the fact that Cinderella had been the apple of her father's eye. The stepmother was jealous that her daughters did not receive the same beauty of attention.

In Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the wicked stepmother, who was also the queen, became more jealous by the day when it appeared that Snow White was becoming more beautiful. Where Snow White had the flush of youth in addition to beauty, the queen was aging without grace. The day the mirror told the queen that Snow White was the fairest of them all was the day that the queen decided that Snow White must die so she could remain the most beautiful in the land.

In One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes, Two-Eyes is the source of jealousy from her family. The mother of the children preferred One-Eye and Three-Eyes because they were "God's lie." Two-Eyes was the normal child and therefore the others were jealous of her and were encouraged to treat their sister with contempt.

## Triumph

Triumph of the underdog is a prevalent theme in fairy tales. In Sexton's versions, triumph is something to be celebrated even more than usual as it relates to an escape from the character's present circumstances.

Some of the most well known examples can be found in Cinderella, Rumpelstiltskin, and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. In each story, the wicked character that had inflicted pain and suffering upon the less fortunate or gifted was punished as the afflicted character triumphed. At times, the wicked character's comeuppance came in the form of death or extreme poverty. Examples of wicked characters that died can be found in Snow White and Hansel and Gretel. The two evil sisters in One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes end up being peasants dressed in rags.

Hansel and Gretel offers a good example of triumph. The children must triumph over poverty, abandonment, and attempted murder by a witch.

In two other fairy tales, triumph comes as a reward for being clever. This can be seen in The Twelve Dancing Princesses, in which a soldier refuses to drink tainted wine so that he may solve the mystery of the dancing sisters. In The Frog Prince, the frog triumphs over a magic spell and marries the beautiful princess.



## Cleverness

In Grimm's fairy tales, many of the characters must exhibit some level of cleverness if they are to survive the pitfalls of life as well as the misdeeds of others. Additionally, some of the wicked characters resort to clever schemes in order to trap their prey.

In the form of trickery, cleverness can be seen in the ways of The Frog Prince as he discovered how to break the spell that had turned the prince into a slimy frog. Hansel and Gretel were very clever in their treatment with the witch as they coaxed her into the oven. The Little Peasant tricked the miller into thinking that he had access to knowledge which had been gained by spying. In Rumpelstiltskin, the girl locked in the tower tricked the dwarf into revealing his name. The Twelve Dancing Princesses routinely put sleeping potion in the wine of every guard that tried to prevent them from dancing the night way. One soldier heeded the advice of an old woman and cleverly faked taking the potion so that he could follow the princesses into the world located beneath their beds.

In Snow White, the wicked Queen attempted to trick Snow White by dressing up as a beggar. The witch in Rapunzel cut off the maiden's hair and used it to trick the prince who attempted to rescue the girl.

Despite the cleverness of the more wicked characters, it often turns out that the good characters prevail.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view used in Transformations by Anne Sexton varies from story to story. The majority of the stories are in third person omniscient, giving the reader an overall picture of the story as well as the motives of the characters. In others, the majority of the text is in third person omniscient but Sexton interjects a narrative style or comment that is written in the first person. In a few of the poems, Sexton writes in first person.

In The Gold Key, the only poem written entirely in first person, Sexton gives an explanation of looking through a keyhole in order to find the answers.

Third Person Omniscient:

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

The Little Peasant

Godfather Death

Rapunzel

Cinderella

One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes

The Maiden Without Hands

The Twelve Dancing Princesses

Hansel and Gretel

Combination of points of View:

The White Snake

Rumpelstiltskin

Iron Hans

The Wonderful Musician

Red Riding Hood

The Frog Prince



Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)

First person:

The Gold Key

## Setting

The settings used in Transformations by Anne Sexton vary depending on the story. However, there are no concrete settings in terms of places one would look on a map. The settings used in the timeless fairy tales are abstract, allowing them to relate to nearly every culture.

The most popular settings are the Kingdom and the Forest. In the Kingdom, there is typically a sense of overall happiness, even when one of the members of the royal court - usually the Queen - is distressed or wicked. To the readers and the characters living outside the Kingdom, the setting seems idyllic. The castle offers a sense of protection and security not found elsewhere.

The Forest is filled with equal parts wonder and danger. Snow White finds both wonder and danger in the forest, as well as salvation. Hansel and Gretel are sent into the Forest to die because their parents were too poor to feed them. The danger comes in the form of the witch that lives in the gingerbread house, a character that is also the catalyst for the growth of the children as they outwit her and save themselves from death. Iron Hans and Red Riding Hood also take place in the Forest.

The last setting used in the book is a bit more unusual. In The Twelve Dancing Princesses, there is a world beneath the princesses' beds that offers them the opportunity to dance the night away. The trees were made of silver or diamonds, on the streets that led to an underground castle.

## Language and Meaning

Transformations by Anne Sexton is written in a combination of language, both modern and classic.

In retelling famous fairy tales, some of the language used relates directly to the fairy tales which may be hundreds of years old. Since many of the fairy tales originated in Germany, the text often has a European feel to it. As a general rule, European stories do not use as much slang or as many contractions as American writing, which often makes the text seem more timeless and, at times, more proper.

Transformations was written in 1971. The language Sexton uses in her monologues and narratives tends to reflect a more casual style. The language used by the poet also contains references to more modern things and people, such as Kurt Vonnegut. Sexton is also a fan of using metaphor.

The most evident example can be seen in Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty), when the poet refers to her drunken father leaning over her bed as a "shark circling the abyss" and that he lays on her "like some sleeping jellyfish."

An interesting point in the translation of fairy tales is made by Kurt Vonnegut in the book's introduction. As is common in many age-old tales, translations from one language to another are often botched so that the story takes on a new meaning or focal point. In the case of Cinderella, the famed glass slipper was originally made of fur. This is a relief to those who always wondered why someone would in fact wear shoes made of glass. The original version of the story spoke of shoes made of vair (fur). The translators substituted a similar word, verre (glass).

## Structure

The structure of Transformations by Anne Sexton is as follows:

The book, a work of prose, is broken down into seventeen stories. The shortest story is two pages in length; the longest story is nine pages in length. The average length of the stories is five pages.

Each story is given its own chapter. The structure of the text in each story varies dependent on the length of the tale. None of the stories bear any of the traditional formats of conventional poetry, but rather are written in a prose style that mirrors the short story, with appropriately placed paragraph breaks.

Interspersed throughout the text are pen and ink drawings representative of the text. Most of the drawings are juxtapositions of what the reader would expect to see, often more disturbing or grotesque rather than pleasing or pictures that might be more reminiscent of a fairy tale. However, given Sexton's penchant for examining the darker side of life, the drawings make sense. While most of the drawings accompany the text, there are a few that are given a full page.

## Quotes

"The speaker in this case is a middle-aged witch, me." p. 1

"There was a day when all the animals talked to me." p. 11

"Inside many of us is a small old man who wants to get out." p. 17

"I am mother of the insane. Let me give you my children." p. 43

"Take a woman talking, purging herself with rhymes, drumming words out like a typewriter, planting words in you like grass seed." p. 44

"Next there was a war that the king was due to lose." p. 49

"I was a professional, but you have saved me from the awful babble of that calling." p. 51

"The bird who cannot fly is left like a cockroach." p. 60

"My sisters, do you remember the fiddlers of your youth?" p. 67

"Long ago there was a strange deception: a wolf dressed in frills, a kind of transvestite." p. 76

"Let me take your pulse and set the oven for 350." p. 101

"I must not sleep for while asleep I'm ninety and think I'm dying." p. 111



## Topics for Discussion

Why do you think Anne Sexton chose to write about fairy tales? Had you ever considered the poet's different point of view?

Why is it important for Anne Sexton to bring the fairy tales into a more modern context? Does this help or hinder the stories?

In the introduction, Kurt Vonnegut reveals that the glass slippers in Cinderella were created through a mistranslation from French to English. Are there parts in any other fairy tale that would make more sense if the translation had been incorrect?

The poet states that each of us has inside a mean little man, like Rumpelstiltskin, waiting to get out. How does the characterization translate into creating a relevant character?

Out of the various fairy tales in Transformations, which is your favorite? Why?

Snow White was almost murdered due to her stepmother's vanity. Name another fairy tale in which the main character was forced to suffer because of the vanity of another.

In "The Gold Key," Sexton compares a transformed fairy tale to a paper clip becoming a work of art. What do you think the poet meant by the statement?