

Self-Reflexivity in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explain the theory of self-reflexivity in some of the early poems of the American poet, Anne Sexton (1928-1974). Self-reflexivity and narcissistic narrative were identified and the role of the mirror stage/image was highlighted based on in the French theorist Jacques Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949) and Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissist Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980).

Focus was on Sexton's poems "The Double Image" (1958), "For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further" (1959) and "An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love" (1958) illustrating the role played by the mirror and reflective surfaces in identifying the self in relation to the other. Moreover, interaction between composing the poem and reading it and the textual nature of this narcissism were highlighted .

It became evident that through her reflexive poetry, Sexton emphasized the relationship between the subject and the object world and that the self and the role of the reader/other in determining the meaning of the narcissistic text. Thus, Sexton's poetry is self-reflexive and auto-representational. It also reflects the mimetic and expressive theories of art as it is concerned with both the inside (self) and the outside (reade).

Key words confessional poetry – mirror image – self-consciousness – self-reflexivity – textual narcissism

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نظرية الانعكاسية الذاتية في بدايات شعر أن سكستون

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة لتوضيح نظرية الانعكاسية الذاتية في بعض القصائد الشعرية الأولى للشاعرة الأمريكية أن سكستون (1928-1974) حيث قامت الباحثة بتعريف معنى الانعكاسية الذاتية وما يطلق عليه النص النرجسي مع التركيز على مرحلة المرأة أو الصورة المنعكسة في المرأة عند العالم الفرنسي جاك لاكان في مقالته "مرحلة المرأة كعامل مشكل لأننا كما نتضح من خلال التحليل النفسي" (1949) وكتاب النص النرجسي: تناقض ما وراء الرواية (1980) للكاتبة ليندا هاتشون.

وقد ركزت الدراسة على ثلاث قصائد هي: "الصورة المزدوجة" (1958) ، و "إلى جون الذي يبرجوني لعدم السؤال عن المزيد" (1959) ، و "المزيج الأسر للبحث عن الوجود والخداع والحب" (1958) موضحة الدور الذي تلعبه المرأة والأسطح العاكسة في التعريف بالذات كما أن استخدام الاستعارات المتعلقة بها ساعد على تأكيد مفهوم الانعكاسية الذاتية حيث أنها تقيم علاقة قوية بين المرء وحقيقته. كما بينت التفاعل بين كتابة القصيدة وقراءتها والطبيعة النصية لهذه القراءة النرجسية. وأن النص النرجسي يثير انتباه القارئ لعملية صياغته وكأن هذه العملية قد صارت مرئية.

وقد تبين من خلال شعرها العاكس للذاتية أن سكستون تؤكد على العلاقة بين الفاعل والمفعول به ودور القارئ في معرفة معنى النص النرجسي والمغزي منه. كما يعبر هذا الشعر عن نظريات المحاكاة والتعبير في الفن لتركيزه على الذات وعلى المتلقي الخارجي من خلال النص الذي يعمل على تشكيل خيال القارئ. ولتأكيد التفاعل بين الكاتب أو المتحدث والقارئ أو المفعول به توضح القصائد الثلاث نشوء حوار بين الأثنين ومشاركتها في نفس التجارب الحياتية وهذا من شأنه تعزيز العلاقة بين المتحدث والعالم المحيط به.

Introduction

According to Jo Gill, one of the outstanding characteristics of the work of female poets across ages and cultures is what she terms their prevalent "self-consciousness of the writing" (23). She sets out that women are self-obsessed because they reflect on the actual process of producing their own poetry. They are aware of themselves in their writing. This self-awareness is manifested in a number of aspects including the contemplation of creativity or inspiration, as well as pinpointing the poet's own daring in delving into poetry as a male-dominated realm.

Given women's relative deprivation of education, women who dared to write in previous ages, particularly for publication, were violating conventions. Some women poets depicted a fervent defense of their right to read and write freely; e.g., Mary Barber's poem "Conclusion of a Letter" (1734). Those poets tackled the issue of writing as females, especially in cultures which disapprove of women engaging in such activity, or initiated debates about the then controversial issue of educating girls. Poems in this case served to defend and exemplify the rightness of their own existence and undermine any criticism that would deny their abilities. Furthermore, writers, such as Amy Lowell in her poem "The Sisters" (1922), voiced disapproval of orthodox expectations of traditional female poetry and expressed their desire to escape from the perceived dominance of earlier conventions.

In their book, *A History of Twentieth Century British Women's Poetry* (2005), Jane Dawson and Alice Entwistle recognized a technique in poems where the poet employs "various personae" to create hidden voices in dialogue so as to expose contradictory voices. The authors trace this technique in the work of a number of modern women poets (212). Dawson also proposes a peculiar intertextual relationship between women poets across history. She maintains that the relationships of successive generations of women poets are ambivalent (9). The poetic medium is used by women poets as a means of writing back to tackle earlier works, either to explore, critique or elaborate on them, whether implicitly or explicitly.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the second wave of feminism which exerted a decisive influence on the perception of poetry written by women. A key concept in this trend was the notion of “sisterhood,” which refers to the “assumed affinity of and identification between women as poets, readers and female subjects” (Gill, *Women’s* 33). Based on this notion of textual bonding between women as readers and writers, it is presumed that women will naturally relate to, identify with and support each other in the writing medium, just as they do on the personal level (Miller 125).

Gill suggests that the self-consciousness characterizing poems written by women also reflects itself in their awareness of the poetic forms they employ, including language, tone and poetic figures (*Women’s* 38). Language in particular continued to constitute one of the main concerns of women poets in the twentieth century. Poetry by women has often been observed to display a critical self-consciousness about the language and forms available to it. Some expressed their discontent about writing in a language which in its very history and structure seems to marginalize females. Indeed, for many women poets, language represents the other, estrangement and alienation (Gill, *Women’s* 40). Other poets, such as Emily Dickinson in her “Poem 427” (I’ll clutch – and clutch) (CP 204) (1945), focused their poems on the actual process of producing their writing by attempting to deliver the agony the poet experiences with language during the process of writing until the poem comes into being. Such poems have come to represent a turning point in contemporary literary studies. They have given way to a debate about the nature of language, its relation to individuals and to the outside world (Gill, *Women’s* 42), leading to discussions of whether language is an instrument that the poet can manipulate or a system that dominates the subjects as Ferdinand de Saussure argued in his “Course in General Linguistics” (59), a view shared by contemporary critic Linda Hutcheon in her book, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Narrative* (1980) (108).

Poems reflecting self-awareness of their language underline the fact that they are texts; they have both a literary and linguistic identity. The reader of these texts is made aware of the existence of

verbal structures that shape his/her imagination, so images are formed by the text. Thus, the "thin paper is the reflecting pool [of narcissus]; the text is its own mirror" (Hutcheon 14). One of the techniques revealing overt language concern and can be clearly shown in poetry is exemplified in the use of thematized forms of word play, such as puns and anagrams whose function is to pinpoint the fact that the text is composed of words that can have multiple senses, leading to an alteration of the entire overall meaning (Hutcheon 101). In rejection of the conventional unique presentation or mirroring of "reality," authors of linguistically self-reflexive texts offer a mirroring of the actual process of bringing their work to life through the use of language (Hutcheon 138).

This so-called linguistic self-reflexivity is a movement against the traditional act of reading, as it shifts attention to the semantic, syntactic, even phonetic levels in an attempt at disintegrating language (Hutcheon 119). Some of self-reflexive texts thematize the inadequacy of language in conveying feelings and thoughts. Hutcheon notes that some authors have even gone as far as voicing scorn for language, although it is the very essence of their works (11).

On the other hand, the mirror in Western culture significantly serves both as a means of self-monitoring and a constant reminder of the female model to which women must conform. According to Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, author of *The Mirror: a History* (2001), women often build their personalities based on the gaze of the other (271). Indeed, mirrors have been associated with pride, self-love, lust and envy in literature since medieval times and in fairy tales. In addition, the mirror in women's poetry has been a highly ambiguous motif, an issue explored by authors such as Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1953) (Part IV, Chapter I, "The Narcissist" pp. 597-607). According to Mark Roletta *et al.*, "In its capacity both to reflect and to distort, to reproduce and to fragment, the mirror profoundly changed the notions of physical space and ideas of the self" (64). Thus the mirror helps in achieving self-knowledge as it opens hidden areas, dark interiors and reveals secret feelings, which helps in realization of the self (Rotella 64).

The use of metaphors related to mirrors, glass and other reflective surfaces in literature has given rise to the concept of self-reflexivity (Gill, *Women's* 43). In fact, literature in its entirety has often been viewed as a mirroring process since earlier times. In his book, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1971), M. H. Abrams posits a theory of literature based on the distinction between art as reflection and art as projection in which the mind serves either as a mere reflection of external objects or, on the other hand, a radiant projector that contributes to the perceived objects (ii). He referred to these theories as the mimetic and the expressive theories of art.

The mirror motif can thus be regarded as a tool employed by women poets to negotiate their cultural position. Hutcheon attempts to theorize self-reflexivity in women's poetry depending on two elements; first, the relationship between the text and reading it; namely, the interaction between composing a poem and its reception evident through narcissistic narrative. The second is the "textual nature of this narcissism" (Gill, *Women's* 44). For example, the American poet, Anne Sexton's widely quoted "The Double Image" (1958) is centered on a series of mirrors and reflective surfaces portraying the complex relationships between three generations of women. In this poem, textual narcissism is reflected in the perfect arrangement of its seven sections showing the symmetrical action of the individuals involved. Similar to an object and its reflection, the two halves of the poem are tied together in the middle by a concise section that resembles a central mirror separating the main issue and its resolution (Gill, *Women's* 46).

Sometimes the object and its reflection are switched as in Zoë Skoulding's *The Mirror Trade* (2004) poem "At the Dressing Table" (46) in which the mirror addresses the human gazing into it. In this way, the poem covertly challenges conventional expectations about identity, subjectivity and authority. The poet also shows the poem and the mirror dependence on the reader, observer or the other to construct the implied meaning. In addition, other poems distort the conventions associated with the mirror. These reflect a male figure instead of the female subject, implying that females merely construct their subordinate identity in relation to this other. American poet Louise Glück in *The First five Books of Poems* (1997) similarly

explores the gender dynamics of the mirroring process. She seeks to reverse the readers' expectations about the gender of the subject and object of the gaze in order to critique stereotyped world views. In her poem "Mirror Image" (254), the speaker looks into a mirror and finds an image of her old father rather than her own, implying the hindrance of her self-realization.

French theorist Jacques Lacan developed his theory on the *Mirror Stage* which explores the role of the mirror in the process of self-knowledge. According to Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949), a child starts recognizing his own image in a mirror some time before the age of eighteen months. He acquires this skill assisted by the duplication or mimicry of his own body and the surrounding objects in the image even before achieving control over his body organs. Lacan recognizes this progress not merely as a sign of intelligence, but as an essential step in an entire process of "identification" in the full sense of the word (503), a transformation experience by an individual when he manages to identify his own image, thus evoking an Ego. The function of the "Mirror Stage," therefore, lies in establishing a relation between an individual and his reality. For Lacan, looking at the mirror is a progressive moment and a significant step toward the successful assumption of the "function as subject" (503). Lacan regards the Mirror Stage not as a sheer moment in an infant's life, but rather as a permanent structure of subjectivity in one's life. Hence, it has two values, a historical one since it marks a significant milestone in mental development and a more symbolic but lasting one as it highlights a lifelong relationship between an individual's body and his sense of self.

Lacan also refers to this mirror image as the "Ideal-I" since it places more emphasis on the Ego and ignores social influences. Only through interacting with the *Other* is maturation attained. The Ego is essentially dependent upon external objects and it only matures by establishing social relations through human language (Lacan 507). Lacan regards this moment of identification as that of jubilation since it yields a sense of mastery and control, as well as a promise of future autonomy and self-realization. Nevertheless, these sensations

may be false and misleading bearing in mind the dominance and omnipresence of a young child's mother.

On the other hand, Lacan describes the moment of identification as one of misunderstanding and misrecognition at which the subject becomes alienated from itself as it is introduced into the imaginary order (507). He maintains that physical limitations such as a fragmented body disturb the perfection of this image. According to Lacan, the mirror image constructed in this stage is but a minute and superficial part of the real world, for one only gets to see "veiled faces" or partial realities in his/her daily experience (504). Furthermore, it can reflect contradictory biological and physical qualities, corresponding to the conflict between the Ego and the body or image and reality. Although Lacan revised his theory and redeveloped it several times subsequently, some of his premises were refuted by empirical observations about human identity and personality.

In her book, *Narcissistic Narrative*, Hutcheon posits a model for a theory of self-reflexivity, alternatively termed as "textual narcissism" (23). She suggests that a narcissistic text is one that attempts to draw its readers' attention to the process involved both in its production and appreciation as a cultural product. She defines narcissistic literature as a "process made visible" (6). In this approach of textual awareness, focus is on *how* art is created and not just *what* is created. This purpose can be attained either explicitly and/or implicitly by means of mirroring its own creative processes as well as those likely to evolve in its own reading, thus alerting the role played by readers in creating the meaning of what they read (Hutcheon 8).

Hutcheon goes further to discuss self-reflexivity in women poetry focusing on two concepts: first, the primacy of the relationship between the text and how it is read, and second, the interactive powers involved in the production and reception of texts. She also believes that narcissism attempts to unmask conventions by mirroring (8). The adjective "narcissistic," though originally derogatory, is not intended to bear any accusation to women poets, since it is used in a purely neutral or figurative sense to describe the text itself rather than the author. In fact, it was Sigmund Freud, the

father of psychoanalysis, who described narcissism as a “universal original condition” of man, rather than as an exceptional pathological behavior. Similarly, narcissism can be regarded as the “original condition” of artistic production rather than a deviation from the norm (Hutcheon 1).

Hence, this model of self-reflexivity highlights the textual nature of narcissism and its relationship to the reading or interpretation of the text. As the reader proceeds with a text, he/she draws upon his/her linguistic, objective and subjective knowledge to relate it to the paradigm he/she is experiencing. Toward the end of the text, the cumulative effect of reading transforms this knowledge to the imaginary world (Hutcheon 140). Since referents of words are not real but rather fictive, reading turns from the traditional safe and unproblematic process into active involvement. The reader's task becomes increasingly demanding as he sorts out various threads in a literary work. The work of art becomes a multi-faceted mirror and the reader is trapped in the looking glass, but at the same time, led through it (Hutcheon 141). Language has the power to make the reader construct meaning and create an imaginary world (Hutcheon 98).

Narcissistic literature has changed all norms of old realistic traditions and can only be judged in terms of its own internal validity (Hutcheon 19), so each work would include an analysis and justification for itself. Critics, nevertheless, remain skeptical about literature that presents criticism of itself (Hutcheon 15). Hutcheon also proposes a typology of narcissistic texts. According to her classification, texts which are overtly narcissistic display self-awareness by revealing their own identity, whereas those that are covertly narcissistic are self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious (7). The paradox, however, lies in this two-way relationship: the text is narcissistically self-reflexive but also focused outward, i.e., oriented toward the reader (Hutcheon 7).

From the above discussion, it has become clear that self-reflexivity is an aspect that can be traced in women's poetry across generations and cultures. Poetry by women has been found to problematize its own relationship to poetic inspiration and it presents

a range of perspectives on its relationship to the work of female predecessors. Female poetry also reflects self-awareness of its language, hence confirming its literary and linguistic identity, and its verbal structures shape the reader's imagination. The so-called narcissism characterizing those works should be regarded as a positive feature, as it represents an attempt at self-assessment or self-surveillance and a constant questioning of its own position in poetic tradition. In addition, the mirror plays a significant role in the development of self-knowledge. The use of metaphors related to mirrors, glass and other reflective surfaces in literature has given rise to the concept of self-reflexivity. For Lacan, the mirror image can reflect contradictory qualities shedding light on the conflict between the Ego and the body or the image and reality. The narcissistic text is concerned with how art is created not just what is created. The text, though self-reflexive, is also outwardly oriented toward the reader whose perception helps in determining its meaning.

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Anne Sexton started writing poetry when she was nearly 28 years old after being advised by her psychotherapist to attend poetry classes as a kind of treatment following one of her suicide attempts. However, to claim that Sexton's poetry was just a psychoanalytic transcription is not to do justice to her great poems. Sexton's poetry helped her bring together her fragmented personality and to identify her shattered self. Moreover, as Maria Davani suggests, Sexton's "search for a personal form" leads her poetry to explore "unexplored paths" (53) and hence it is regarded as a "transgression of norms and conventions" (53). Sexton used poetic expression as a means of confession, hence deemed one of the prominent confessional poets.

M. L. Rothenthal coined the term "confessional poetry" in his review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) and the term referred to a group of poets who gave rein to their personal feelings and thoughts and made them public. Sexton refused being described as a confessional poet when she wrote in 1970, "At one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, but *mea culpa*. Now I say that I'm the only confessional poet" (Sexton and Ames 373). In confessional poetry, the reader is confronted with two issues: the

meaning of the textual "I" and the poet's sincerity since this kind of poetry cannot be considered utterly autobiographical. In the case of Sexton's poetry, it is concerned with the position of the "I." Rose Lucas suggests that Sexton's poetry is "an invitation to draw back the veil of representation in order to see and know the private self" (46). According to Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (1980), "The implied author establishes the norms of the narrative" and the real author determines the norms he/she wants to foster through the implied author (149). This can be witnessed in Sexton's poetry to emphasize that it is not autobiographical. Confessional poetry is also "a space which inscribes the taboo desire for self-effacement; and even a site of shameless exhibitionism, a hyper-representation of a self which is not believed in, or which wildly exceeds conscious control" (Lucas 48).

Nonetheless, what matters is the extent to which a poet reveals the truth. For Sexton, "To really get at the truth of something is the poem not the poet." She adds that this truth is considered a "poetic truth" not a "factual one." Therefore, the truth illustrated by a poem is a textual truth, a truth of its own world (Colburn 74). In Sexton's poetry, there is also a confrontation between the "I," the poem creator and the "You," the opposing other.

Katherine McSpadden claims that in her search for herself, Sexton had to transcend "downward" to "experience fully her physical self" and to move both "upward and outward" to "experience herself as co-extensive with cosmic figures" (*The Self*). She adds that Sexton's poetic language "enables her to seek the truth underlying roles and appearances and to celebrate her many selves for their ability to connect her with other identities" (*The Self*). In addition, she contends that reality exists in the dark moments of the self. This conforms to the definition of confessional poetry as poetry of suffering written by highly sensitive poets experiencing pain due to living in society. Hence, confessional poets give shocking details about their lives and the society where they live. According to Robert Phillips,

. . . confessional poetry springs from the need to confess. Each poem is in some way a declaration of dependence. Or of guilt. Or

of anguish and suffering. Thus, the writing of each such poem is an ego-centered, though not an egocentric, act; its goal is self-therapy and a certain purgation. (8)

Karl Malkoff also maintains that confessional poets “inhabit a world that is beyond personality; they have transformed what is particular, and very often pathological, in their own lives into something that is universal and existential in their poetry” (29). To sum up, confessional poetry helps poets to redefine the self through re-living their misfortunes and using their own individual voice. Thus, confessional poetry is concerned with the inner self, the poet and his/her society. Also, confessional poetry is characterized by truth and honesty to show that confessional poets are truly responsible for themselves.

Another characteristic of confessional poetry, as Phillips posits, is that it “displays moral courage” (17) and Laurence Lerner goes further to say that writing a confessional poem is “an act of courage” (56). According to Michel Foucault, both courage and truth are related because confession is a “ritual”

... in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation. (62)

Hence, it becomes clear that confession is a valuable technique in producing truth and that impediments and hardships make up courage or truth, two interrelated qualities.

The myth of Narcissus, who fell in love with his reflected image in a pool as a kind of punishment for rejecting the love of Echo who retreats to the woods and caves till she wastes away having only her voice remaining, has several implications in Sexton’s work. It helps setting a framework for discussing themes of self-love and desire; it gives significance to employing metaphors of mirrors and caves; and finally presents the “structural and linguistic potential of the echo” (Gill, “Textual” 64). In his article “On

Narcissism,” Freud indicates the significance of the story of Narcissus in defining the superego (70). He explains the meaning of a universal “primary and normal narcissism” (74). Freud’s normal narcissism is found in Sexton’s “For John, Who Begs me Not to Enquire Further” (1959) (CP 34-35) that makes narcissism universal and shared as it enhances the I/you dialogue and emphasizes the relation between the subject’s experience and the “implied reader’s experience” (Gill, *Textual* 64). The poem also reflects the tendency to turn inward “away from the external world” (Freud 74). Freud traces the importance of the process of observing and being observed since it is significant in understanding confessional writing and its reception as observing a person’s narcissism is always appealing to another person who has given up a part of his/her narcissism and is searching for object love (Freud 88).

Narcissism is also discussed by Lacan who mentions that narcissism, or gaze in the mirror, enables the child to identify him- or herself. Hence, “the mirror is vital to the two finally inextricable processes of finding and naming (or textualizing) the self” (Gill, *Textual* 65). For Lacan, the mirror stage enables the subject to abandon the imaginary world and enters the symbolic world of language as seen in “The Double Image” (CP 35-42). Like Freud and Lacan, Sexton’s exposing her inner self is always done while taking into consideration the reader, hence while focusing on her inward, she turns outward away from the self. Therefore, her poetry establishes a relationship between the subject and the object world.

Sexton’s *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) highlights the beginning of her search for the “I.” In this collection, Sexton establishes her voice as a confessional woman poet experiencing a painful life and striving to achieve a balance in it. “Bedlam” is a metaphor referring to madness as well as to the place where dissecting minds are reconstructed. “The Double Image” portrays the family relationship between three generations; a dying mother, a daughter who is the speaker, and an infant daughter. This poem refers to certain facts in Sexton’s life. Her parents were too busy to notice her poetic creativity claiming that her poetic capacity will never match that of her mother who was described as the writer of

the family. So, being compared to her mother may have been implanted in her personality and hence, she made it her main theme.

Courage as characteristic of confessional poetry is also portrayed in the poem which depicts a “mother’s self-imposed separation from her infant daughter” (Gill, “Anne” 435). Courage is also shown when the mother explains the reasons for being away from her daughter for three years without justifying her actions. She is keen on explaining that this separation has nothing to do with the girl, but with her mother’s problems. Nonetheless, she realizes that no explanation is satisfying. Despite her mental disorder which has taken her away from her daughter, she believes that she is guilty and that the girl will never understand that separation:

...Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine....
.....
The day life made you well and whole
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead (17-18, 24-26)

She advises her daughter, “Today, my small child, Joyce, / love your self’s self where it lives” (34-35) because “There is no special God to refer to; or if there is, / why did I let you grow / in another place” (36-38). She confesses that the time she left her daughter is “The time I did not love / myself” (42-43). Thus, for Sexton, the ability to love and live with one’s self is the same as the ability to love and live with others (Norton 81). Using first person pronoun makes readers believe that the poet is writing her biography. Thus, Sexton, the poet, is describing Sexton, the person.

The poem refers to the period in Sexton’s life when she was recovering from a suicide attempt and trying to be on good terms with her daughter. On the other hand, her dying mother was fighting cancer and instead of forgiving her daughter, Anne, for trying to commit suicide, she had her portrait done to remind herself of all the pain and suffering she had caused her: “She had my portrait / done instead” (57-58). Then, “They hung my portrait in the chill / light, matching / me to keep me well” (85-87).

Sexton seeks to find something stable outside the self. The

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"I" is totally separated from the "Mother" who became a symbol of cancer and someone who constantly opposes the subject, the speaker. Not only that, she also reflects the "dissection and disease" of the "I" emphasizing all the faults the subject considers herself guilty of and the evil she seeks to get rid of (Davani 62):

Only my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside of her. (88-91)

Due to Sexton's despair and eagerness to commit suicide and to die, she assumes responsibility for things she is not responsible for such as blaming herself for her mother's cancer:

...she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer. (93-96)

Dannyw Edding writes, "Sexton experiences considerable guilt about her mother's illness and blames herself for her mother's suffering" (143). She adds that this "personalization is characteristic of the suicidal individual" (143) and Sexton's suicidal tendency is evident in the above lines.

The poet then talked to her own daughter: "And you resembled me; unacquainted / with my face, you wore it" (112-113). The speaker realizes that she is the link between the daughter and the grandmother and she attempts to redefine herself. When the grandmother discovered that she is suffering from cancer, she had her portrait done as well. The two portraits hang together as dual portraits or double images trying to establish the lost relationship between mother and daughter.

In south light, her smile is held in place,
her cheeks wilting like a dry
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
that stony head of death
I had outgrown. (166-171)

The mirror in the poem refers to Lacan's "Mirror Stage" as a means of identifying oneself. Sexton attempts to bring the self into being through the successive images reflected in the mirror. She tries to illuminate the subject through the image, the "Portrait," or "a mocking mirror" (168) as the "double woman who stares / at herself" (179-80).

If read according to Lacan's narcissism, the poem shows how one achieves subjectivity through seeing him/herself in relation to others. The title refers to the doubleness implied throughout the poem. According to Gill, the poem "describes and finally exemplifies ... a succession of doublings or reflections mimicking only each other (the dual portraits of the speaker and mother, the image of the speaker looking at her own painted image and drafting her own textual portrait)" ("Textual" 71-72). Gill illustrates that the seven sections of the poem are "Catoptric" reflecting a "perfect symmetry of action" ("Textual" 72). The first three sections depict the daughter and then the speaker leaves home, the fourth section reflects uncertainty, and the last three sections continue the symmetry of action when the speaker and then the daughter come back home.

In "The Double Image," many phrases are repeated; such as, "Too late / too late" in section two (CP 36-37), "had my portrait done instead" in sections two and three (CP 37), and "as if" in section three (CP 37-38), which intensifies and mimics the multiple reflections the poem portrays. The irregular end rhymes also suggest the "claustrophobia" of the situation as the three characters are trapped in a room full of mirrors (Gill, "Textual" 72). Moreover, there is a constant swinging backward and forward of action (leaving and going back home) and of attention as readers are made to move from one mirrored image to another and back. Thus, the poem helps readers to realize their role in determining the action and the meaning of the text.

The symmetry of the double images and their polarity are also highlighted as the poem shows two similar portraits with the two women's smiles held "in place" in sections three and six (80, 160). The speaker's painting is lit by the north light whereas the mother's painting is lit by the south light, so they invert each other.

This inversion is pinpointed in Lacan while describing the mirror stage (2). Since the speaker speaks to the mirror image of the mother and to the reflection of the self, she emphasizes the inversion and the identity that unite them: "my mocking mirror, my overthrown / love, my first image" (168-169). The word "mocking" indicates that she is not up to the perfect image reflected in the mirror. This brings to mind the Greek myth of Narcissus who had a mocking mirror and who was deprived of his first image.

The last stanza continues to illustrate the double image mentioned in the title. The speaker finally admits that she needs her daughter "I needed you" (203) emphasizing the bond established between the "I" and "You" of the first stanza. Now it is the daughter who gives identity to the speaker, not the mother. Her failure is made up for by the daughter: "I, who was never quite sure / about being a girl, needed another / life, another image to remind me" (207-209). The "image" is the daughter created by the speaker to assert her identity exactly like the mother who created the speaker then later made a portrait of her in a futile attempt to stay alive. This leads to the final conclusion: "And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure / nor soothe it. I made you to find me" (210-211). Sexton's reference to creation here is not to the biological making but rather to the textual construction. Hence, according to Hutcheon, this is what is called narcissistic narrative. The narcissistic text is seriously concerned with how the reader receives it in an act of mirroring or thematizing its meaning and the confessional text focuses on the reader's response and creation of meaning so as to represent the utmost truth through the mutual relationship between the subject/confessor and the receiver (Foucault 66).

To conclude, the speaker in the poem sounds mature and self-understanding. The lines of the poem are loaded with emotional tension. The speaker tells the story of her separation from her daughter because of her mental illness in a tense atmosphere projected in the jagged lines and the irregular rhyme schemes and meters. The rhyme scheme in the first two stanzas is *aaabaabcdde* and *abbcabcdeed* and it alternates between anapests, dactyls and iambs, creating, as Holly Norton claims, the "unpredictable highs

and lows” which create a dramatic atmosphere. Therefore, in the poem “we see the poet and speaker, the first and third dimensions, working to create the second dimension, or voice of the poem that lies between them” (84). Furthermore, the description of self is manifested in Sexton’s choice of diction, tone and details she uses to uncover the person she wants to reveal. Hence, she depicts a “persona” in her poem by using the first person pronoun that acts as a mask behind which she is hiding. Here is a definition of “persona”:

The mask permits the poet to say things that for various reasons she could not say in her own person or could say only with a loss of artistic detachment; it permits the poet to explore various perspectives without making an ultimate commitment; it is a means for creating, discovering, or defining the self; it prevents the artist from being hurt by self-exposure or being led astray by the limitations of her own vision. (“Persona,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry* 901)

This definition is clearly manifested in Sexton’s poem as a means of expressing herself without being exposed as a poet.

Furthermore, A. R. Jones describes Sexton’s poems as “a dialogue with the self in which the self struggles to find ‘wholeness’ rather than ‘awareness’” (16). He illustrates that:

the dialogue with the self is, in effect, the dialogue between the man who suffers and the mind which creates, and the separation between is more or less complete, so much so, in fact, that they constitute something in the nature of two identities, the one struggling to organize into meaningful patterns the overwhelming chaos of the world of suffering inhabited by the other. (16)

Therefore, it seems that Sexton’s self is a schizophrenic soul; one that analyzes the problem and uses its insight to give it meaning and one that describes it as an incoherent experience. Thus, it has become obvious that Sexton’s inner suffering is the motivating force of her own creativity. She is closely connected with her inner self and this is reflected in the various themes she discusses in her poems; such as, the family relationship and searching for the self as shown in “The Double Image” as well as poetry as a means to please others and heal their injured souls as illustrated in “For John.” These

themes sincerely display the true self of the poet that was accused of narcissism.

It is significant to mention here that Sexton's confessional text has become much more like her narcissistic text. Lerner suggests that no other poet was "more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton [...] her name has almost become identified with the genre" (52). However, she is the one mostly accused of narcissism. Alan Williamson complains of the "later Sexton" who has become "the uneasy narcissist, self-indulgent and sarcastic at once" (178), and Helen Vendler gives thanks for a rare volume in which the poet "turn[s] away from the morass of narcissism" (35). Alicia Ostriker concludes that "Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist." This is so because she reveals her inner self and exposes her personal fragility (11). Narcissism is considered to be a "limiting and inadvertent error" evident in confessional poetry. It is also deemed a "sophisticated and productive strategy employed by confessional and avant-garde poetries alike in their negotiation of such shared preoccupations as language, subjectivity, representation, and referentiality" (Gill, "Textual" 61). Bearing this in mind, Sexton's poetry can be seen as "self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational" and, above all, it contemplates and interrogates its own "narrative and/or linguistic identity" (Gill, "Textual" 62). Consequently, Sexton's poems reflect truthfully her lived experiences and give a "privileged and reliable insight into personal experience" (Gill, "Textual" 62). This truthfulness establishes a strong and productive relationship with the reader and the confessional text becomes much like the narcissistic text.

Sexton also uses imagery to reveal her meaning and to get to the essence of the idea. She employs a variety of images: visual, tactile and auditory. Her use of metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy is also evident in addition to the use of symbols which enriches the images she portrays (Bixler 90-91). It is through this imagery that Sexton is capable of reflecting the pain of her inner self. In "The Double Image," Sexton uses imagery of doubles and of

similarities and differences in order to differentiate the self from the other (Lucas 52). On her deathbed, the speaker's mother accuses her of causing her deadly illness and claims that she will not forgive her. In Sexton's real life, when she was recovering from her suicide attempt, her mother believed that she has drawn death's attention to their home and because Anne survived, it chose her mother instead. Here, Sexton uses imagery to depict the inner struggle and bitterness of the speaker due to this unfair accusation. Feelings of despair haunt her in the figure of "green witches":

...Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting
doom leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume. (17-22)

The "blame" is a metaphor for the sense of guilt she cannot escape from. After her attempted suicide, they hang her portrait hoping that she becomes better. While she regains her strength, the mother's illness aggravates and they "carved her sweet hills out" which is a metaphor for the mastectomy the mother had. Apparently, Sexton has "bipolar disorder" (Edding 143) which leads her to suffer from hallucinations and delusions.

The mirror is used by some writers as a symbol that reflects the outward cultural appearance a woman stares into so as to perceive her own identity. In Lacanian terms, women use the metaphor of the mirror to develop their awareness or consciousness. Thus, mirrors are reflecting surfaces that show women's cultural point of view as well as form their identity. Susan Stanford Friedman observes that this mirror "does not reflect back a unique, individual identity to each living woman"; rather, it "projects an image of WOMAN, a category that is supposed to define the living woman's identity" (38). Sexton, as subject, is doubled in "The Double Image." She is tortured by "ugly angels" and "green witches" and at the same time she is a housewife who "serves cocktails as a wife should" (134). According to Lynn Crosbie, the "tension" of the poem is the result of the "conflict between the self as individual woman, or the

'self's self,' and the refracted image of the socially constructed self" (100). There is also doubleness in the image of the mother who is ill and dying the daughter who survived a suicidal attempt and is going to live with her young daughter. In the fifth part, Sexton appears with a "complete book of rhymes," a typewriter and suitcases (128-129), which is a "self-reflexive gesture (Crosbie 101) as Sexton comes as the poet who will take action and "learn ... life" (130) from her "splendid stranger," young daughter (141-142). In short, Sexton's poetic abilities are best demonstrated in "The Double Image." Jones claims that she has "a remarkable sense of particularities, a fine awareness of the detail that will bring the whole scene vividly before the eyes and that, at the same time, will be psychologically telling and exact" (27). He also adds that her "ability to realize complex landscapes of mind in visually concrete terms is one of the main sources of her poetic strength" (27).

In another poem, "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," the role of the reader/receiver is further illustrated showing the mutual relation between the speaker and the reader to reveal the true meaning of the text, or actually, in Hutcheon's terms, the narcissistic text. "For John" reflects a strong desire to speak directly to those who matter in the speaker's life to justify her actions. Sexton confesses that her scope is limited to "that narrow diary of my mind" and she explains that the cause of this limitation is her refusal to "tap her own head." She says:

if I tried
to give you something else,
something outside of myself,
you would not know
that the worst of anyone
can be, finally,
an accident of hope. (10-16)

John, the character addressed by Sexton in the poem, may not realize that the worst of anyone can be an accident of hope. This kind of sharing is significant in a society where all the reality one perceives is experience. The poem suggests that one's experience can be shared:

At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen. (21-24)

Sexton is comfortable to share her experience with the readers: “There ought to be something special / for someone / in this kind of hope” (35-37). Recreating a painful experience to the readers so that they can take part in making a private experience public is another characteristic of confessional poetry that Sexton uses as a means of giving meaning to her life and knowing her inner self. Sexton says in an interview with Patricia Marx, “I think it [poetry] should be a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt” (561) and her poetry both shocks and hurts.

Sexton also demonstrates the importance of courage. In the epigraph of *Complete Poems* Sexton quotes a letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles’s Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God’s sake not to inquire further. (2)

For Sexton, courage is always one of the best qualities a poet should have. In the same interview with Marx when asked about what a teacher can give his students in a creative writing class, she says, “Courage, of course. That’s the most important ingredient” (563). The speaker in “For John,” according to Norton, “is the hysteric” who “puts the master up against a wall to produce knowledge” (79).

In “For John,” there is a cracked mirror, a glass bowl, and reference to Narcissus’s pool; all indicate the subjective narcissism Sexton employs to identify the self: “the cracked mirror / or my own selfish death” (7-8). The speaker looks at the mirror and reports what she sees. The poem also reflects the joint responsibility of both the speaker and reader in perceiving the meaning. The successive shifting mirror images indicate the various untrusting manifestations

of the self. The subject is not truthfully represented and only a fragmentary reflection is given. The speaker looks in the mirror for prolonged periods and the poem is full of "images for the self, for self-admiration, idealization, and subjective pleasure" (Gill, "Textual" 74). Also the words at the end of lines indicate self absorption like "mind," "mirror," "myself," and "private" (CP 34-35), reflecting narcissism. However, the self is unseen.

On the other hand, focusing on the self in the first lines of "For John" is countered by talking of others "you," "your," "something outside," "someone," and "anyone" (CP 34-35). Sexton's confessional speaker does not appear except in line five: "in that narrow diary of my mind" and then faced by the "you," the explicit John or implicit reader whose presence is made clear in the poem. The fate of Narcissus and Echo is witnessed in the poem as the speaker and John or the unspecific reader could not be satisfied, could not remove the barrier between the self and the other.

The John referred to in the poem is Sexton's mentor and poet John Holmes, who criticized the narrow narcissism of her poetry. Hence, the dialogue between "I" and "you" is meant to be between Sexton and Holmes, or the implied author and implied addressee. Holmes accused Sexton of forcing others to listen though her work neither teaches nor helps the listeners. She quotes his words to her when she says that her poetry should "give something else, / something outside myself" (11-12). To refute Holmes's accusation, Sexton's speaker argues that she offers a "lesson" that is "worth learning" (4), "special" (35) and outside of herself. The first lines of the poem deny the fact attributed to Narcissus, which is love for his own beauty:

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind,
in the commonplaces of the asylum (1-6)

Sexton claims that it is not the beautiful object that is significant, but

the process, the ordering, the reading and the making of sense. She says that something is worth learning in the narrow diary of her mind and the common places of the asylum. It is something that can be shared between the speaker and the reader. According to Hutcheon, “[the poem] encourages an active personal response to itself and encourages a space for that response within itself” (141), hence it is narcissistic. The undefined “it” in the first line that remained undefined throughout the poem gives a sense of uncertainty that is shared between the speaker and the reader. When “it” is mentioned, the reader’s role in the body of the text is highlighted and the personal or private becomes public. The shift in tone happens when the speaker refers to the reader by “you” and at this moment her involvement in the discourse begins.

As mentioned earlier, Sexton uses metaphors to convey meaning. Here she begins with the metaphor of mirrors “cracked mirror” (7) and the inverted glass bowl (18). The role of mirrors is to help the contemplation and reflection processes. Though the speaker wants to confirm her identity by looking at the mirror, she is disappointed as she finds an inverted, disfigured reflection: “where the cracked mirror / or my own selfish death / outstared me” (7-9) and though she is trying to find life, she is confronted with death. In this poem there is no progression toward the Lacanian successful assumption of the “function as subject,” as mentioned earlier. The speaker does not see her reflection in the mirror but what she sees “outstares her”; it is the larger context surrounding her. Thus, she is seen beyond the limits of the glass. Also, when the reader reads the poem and looks at the mirror, she perceives that she is looking at something or someone different. The object she sees is herself during the process of observing. Since the mirror gives no clear image of the self but multiple aspects of the broader context, it must give different multiple meanings. This supports Gill’s opinion that Sexton’s language “is multiplicitous, elusive” and “functions less as a unifying mirror than as a prism, splitting and projecting fractured and elliptical images of its subject” (“Textual” 77). The following lines depict the subject’s image at the inverted glass bowl that acts both as a mirror and as a transparent surface at the same time. Thus it can keep or reveal, reflect or refract:

I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl. (17-20)

Here the glass bowl reflects its inside as well as its outside and helps the observer to see objects' sides to have a clear and a full picture. This is characteristic of confessional poetry and narcissism as the subject becomes reconciled with the object world. Communication with the outside world takes place in this poem when the speaker taps her head against the glass bowl, indicating that now no boundaries exist between the private and the public. This tapping of head also reflects a hope for survival.

Additionally, the glass bowl gives disfigured and fragmented reflections since it is not a flat surface "cracked stars shining" (28), emphasizing the same function of the cracked mirror at the beginning. This leads to the conclusion that Sexton's mirrors are always deformed, imperfect, curved or put in opposition to another mirror so that what one sees is multiple reflections that do not help the subject to develop since the image of the self is always fractured and dispersed. A narcissistic moment is revealed when the subject witnesses herself in relation to the outside world:

This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,
although your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all ...
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face. (38-44)

The dialogue between "I" and "you" is not only restricted to John but to multiple readers "us all." This emphasizes the fact that when one looks at the transparent and reflective bowl, he/she finds the other and vice versa, when one looks for the other, he/she finds self. Hence, what the reader sees is "my kitchen, your kitchen" "my face, your face" and the private become public. In Holmes' letter to Sexton he was afraid that her narrow gaze may lead to focus on death and nerve breaking, that is why he encouraged her to create a

new life by using her gift of poetry. He feared that she might face the fate of Narcissus.

Thus it has become clearer that Sexton's self absorption is constructive not destructive because it helps her broaden her horizons and look "outside of myself." One should not gaze upon him/herself, but share the personal experience with the reader. This is why the glass bowl makes its cracked stars shine and spread meaning to everyone and the speaker entices them to take part in the experience:

And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
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. (25-32)

The speaker thinks of dressing the bowl in shining orange skin to make it shine like a strange sun to attract readers if the bowl's mere appearance does not attract them. However, if the bowl is disguised, it will not reveal the true experience of the speaker but a fake, disguised and may be a deceitful one dressed in "new skin." So, Sexton's glass bowl does not give a clear image in the two functions it performs. It reflects an awkward, cracked image and the sun- instead of giving light and insight- is disguised. Despite this, the metaphors employed by Sexton suggest that the experience is shared and the meaning is disseminated. According to Lucas, Sexton's confessional poetry "does not so much reproduce a 'real,' as offer a distilled and complex gift that passes from the poet to the reader. As a gift, the confessional poem marks ... a textual locus which illuminates the complex desires of both speaker and reader" (46). "For John" is a poem rooted in artifice and therefore is a complicated lie (Lucas 46).

Sexton's poetry can be discussed in light of Abrams' mimetic and expressive theories of art. The mimetic theory is the most primitive and explains art as mimesis of aspects of the universe, hence, art reflects "appearance rather than truth" and "nourishes

feelings rather than reason" (8-9). However, Abrams claims that imitation is not "dominant" but rather "instrumental" (14) in creating effect upon the reader. On the other hand, the expressive theory of art indicates that poetry is the "overflow, utterance, or projection" of the poet's thoughts and emotions (Abrams 21-22). Gill explains that confessional poetry "belongs to the expressive realm" because it is "internal made external" ("Textual" 62) and at the same time it is accepted as mimetic or "textually narcissistic ... mirroring its own aesthetic processes" (63). Hence, the repeated image of the glass bowl, which is luminous and reflective in "For John" helps explain the two possibilities discussed by Abrams. This leads to the conclusion that Sexton's poetry is concerned with both the "inside" (self) and the "outside" (reader) and hence, as suggested by Gill, it is "always doubled, split, or fragmented in its perspective" ("Textual" 63).

This discussion leads to the conclusion that Sexton's "The Double Image" and "For John" are paradoxical because they are "narcissistically self-reflexive" and at the same time "focused outward or oriented toward the reader" (Hutcheon 7). In other words, the two poems are considered narcissistic because they reflect the speaker's self while being concerned with their impact on the reader. These poems endeavor to "convey a better understanding not of the experience ostensibly at the source of each but of the way in which they themselves work as confession" (Gill, "Textual" 63). The reflective surfaces, such as mirrors, bowls, glass, windows and portraits, illustrate this point overtly in "For John" where the mirroring processes are "explicitly thematized" (Hutcheon 23) and covertly in "An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscap, Trickery and Love" (1958) that shows the same processes "structuralized, Internalized" (Hutcheon 23). In addition, the narcissistic perspective indicates that the self cannot be identified in isolation, but as part of a whole, a larger context. Therefore, narcissism is deemed an "outward-looking gesture" (Gill, "Textual" 66). Hence, in her poems "The Double Image," "For John" and "An Obsessive Combination," Sexton tries to identify the self in relation to the outside world, the other. So, there must be an "I" and a "You,"

which is found in the three poems.

Sexton's poem "An Obsessive Combination" represents an "ontological investigation of the self within the discourse that runs to the very heart of poetic practice" (McGowan 8). So, the ontological inscape in the title suggests Sexton's self-inspecting and preoccupation with her own being in an attempt to "understand both Self and Other" (McGowan 8). In the poem, though there is no mirror to gaze at, narcissism is predicted in making a process visible, as suggested by Hutcheon (6). The poem implies the postmodern interest of "how art is created, not just in *what* is created" (Hutcheon 8) or simply the language. Though the adjective "obsessive" in the title may denote a complete obsession with the self, it also reflects obsession with the process of writing and the linguistic techniques of giving meaning. Additionally, the poem does not focus on the self but rather on a "more abstract, impersonal consideration of the condition of being" (Gill, "Textual" 66). In addition, "combination" implies that the minds of both the subject/speaker and the reader/object are coming together to have an effective confessional process. The subject of the poem is "the liminal space between I and you, speaker and reader, exposing and exploring the boundaries between self and object world" (Gill, "Textual" 68). The poem also traces the process by which the self and its metonyms (here imagination and ideas) manifest themselves in, and connect with, the exterior (Gill, "Textual" 68). This connection is done through language.

In light of Hutcheon's characteristics of narcissistic narratives, "An Obsessive Combination" manipulates with "word play" and "linguistic self-consciousness" and sometimes "pun" (119, 118, 120) to convey its required effect and to show the fertile suggestiveness of language. The text "features numerous puns, homonyms, and anagrams ("tiers," "tries," "rites," "right," "routes"). It also incorporates the palindrome 'RATS / ... STAR'" (Gill, "Textual" 68) implying the word play as a linguistic strategy employed by Sexton.

The poem begins:

Busy, with an idea for a code, I write
signals hurrying from left to right,

or right to left, by obscure routes,
for my own reasons; taking a word like writes
down tiers of tries until its secret rites
make sense; (1-6)

The aforementioned lines confirm the self-reflexivity of the title and the word "busy" fosters the meaning implied by "obsessive." In this part, personal experience is not the main interest but rather the "idea for a code" in line one and the "reasons" in line four. "Code" is a metaphor that suggests that confessional poetry can be ambiguous, not revealing its true idea. Sexton's language does not reflect the experience but "constructs" it (Gill, "Textual 69) which corresponds with Hutcheon's argument that "words create worlds; they are not necessarily counters, however adequate, to any extraliterary reality. In that very fact lies their aesthetic validity and their ontological status" (102-03). The progression of language from "left to right" also gives a metaphor about how the confession act makes things right and that it is actually the process of writing or contextualization which helps in this regard. However, it can also make things more complex "from right to left."

In addition, in "An Obsessive Combination" the language used, the meaning implied, and what the reader perceives change constantly:

... taking a word like "writes"
down tiers of tries until its secret rites
make sense; or until, suddenly, RATS
can amazingly and funnily become STAR
and right to left that small star
is mine, for my own liking, to stare
its five lucky pins inside out ... (4-10)

Sexton is experimenting with linguistic and ontological aspects without assuming responsibility as a writer for the changes she makes. The change of order Sexton employs in "RATS" and "STAR" has metaphoric connotations because it transforms the signification of the word. Adverbs like "suddenly," "amazingly," and "funnily" in the second part of the poem show how cheerful the writer is: "for my own liking" (9), then her denial of responsibility

and resigned tone is manifested again in the final lines:

and right to left that small star
is mine, for my own liking, to stare
its five lucky pins inside out, to store
forever kindly, as if it were a star

I touched and a miracle I really wrote. (8-12)

“As if” rises doubts about the fact that confessional poetry and what has just been mentioned by the writer may not be truthful and that the language may not express what the poet wants to deliver. The shift from the present tense to conditional if makes all hopes disappear as if they did not exist in the first place. Having conditional “if” in the poem’s conclusion manifests that Sexton likes open ended conclusions. Sexton implies that the “lucky star” that shines its “inside out” externalizes its meaning only by refraction. This confirms that her language has variable perspectives and constantly changes its implications; hence, its effect is not like a mirror that gives unified images, but like a prism that reflects fragmented ones.

To conclude, the poem’s title engages the reader in a process of inquiry trying to figure out the significance of each word in it. Thus, “An Obsessive Combination” discusses in highly reflexive detail” Sexton’s poetic art (McGowan 9) characterized by a trickery that enables both the subject and its other to be reconciled.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has become clear that female poets are self-obsessed as they reflect on the process of producing their poetry. Their self-consciousness is reflected in their awareness of the poetic forms they employ including language, tone and poetic figures. The reader is involved in the process of writing and hence the text becomes narcissistic in forming the reader's imagination.

The mirror is considered an ambiguous motif that helps in achieving self-knowledge. Besides, using metaphors related to mirrors, glass and other reflective surfaces has given rise to the concept of self-reflexivity.

Lacan explores the role of the mirror in the process of self-knowledge since it establishes a relation between the subject and his/her reality. Moreover, Huctheon's theory of self-reflexivity depends on the interaction between composing a poem and reading it (narcissistic narrative) and the textual nature of this narcissism. For her, the narcissistic text draws the reader's attention to the process of its production and describes it as a process made visible.

Sexton's early poetry is an attempt at identifying herself. The truth of her poetry is a poetic or textual truth, not necessarily a factual one. Sexton's poems: "The Double Image," "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" and "An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love" make narcissism universal and shared with the reader as they enhance the I/You dialogue and the relation between the subject's and the implied reader's experiences. In other words, Sexton's poetry establishes a strong relationship between the subject and the object world.

In "The Double Image" the self identifies itself through the successive images reflected in the mirror. The poem describes a succession of doublings or reflections mimicking each other. Readers move from one image to another, hence they realize their role in determining the meaning of the text. Thus, the narcissistic text focuses on how the reader receives it in an act of mirroring or thematizing its meaning. In "For John" the role of the reader is further enhanced to reveal the true meaning of the narcissistic text. Also, Sexton's usage of a cracked mirror, a glass bowl and reference

to Narcissus' pool indicate her subjective narcissism in order to identify the self. There is also a combination between self and other as the speaker is seen beyond the limits of the glass. This leads to the conclusion that no boundaries exist between the private and the public and that the subject is reconciled with the object world. In "An Obsessive Combination" though there is no mirror to gaze at, narcissism is predicted by making a process visible. Thus, the process of writing and the linguistic techniques of giving meaning are highlighted. From the narcissistic perspective, the self cannot be identified in isolation from the larger context. The poem traces the process by which the self is reflected in the object world through language that acts like a prism that reflects fragmented images.

Finally, described as narcissistic, Sexton's poetry is self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential and auto-representational that questions its own narrative or linguistic identity. It also reflects the mimetic and expressive theories of art as it is concerned with both the inside (self) and the outside (reader).

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