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THE HESITANCY OF A "MIDDLE-AGED WITCH": ANNE SEXTON'S *TRANSFORMATIONS*

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The United States of the Sixties and Seventies where Anne Sexton (1928-74) lived her life as a wife, a mother, and a poet, witnessed the rise of the second wave of the feminist movement; it seems only natural that Sexton's poems should exhibit the influence of feminist principles. One notable example among her books is *Transformations* (1971) that ultimately sold "more hard-bound copies than any other Sexton book" (*Self-Portrait* 319). This work is based on well-known fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm in which a "middle-aged witch" (1) gives a provoking narration. According to a currently common feminist belief, many of the women accused of being witches in the past were actually pioneers of the feminist movement—women rebelling against the male-oriented society. As the influence of those "witches" grew, the patriarchal society so prevalent at the time came to fear them; the steps it took to negate their growing influences contributed to what might be considered virtual witch hunts. It is not certain whether or not Sexton had already been influenced by the feminist theory concerning witches when writing *Transformations*. But in consideration of the feminist discourse that started to spread throughout America in the Sixties, it is no wonder that the devil-may-care attitude displayed by Sexton's "middle-aged witch" attracted such tremendous attention when the book was published. A "middle-aged witch" was just what many Americans—especially women readers—were both consciously and unconsciously seeking.

A close examination of *Transformations*, however, indicates that Sexton was as yet unable to present a strictly feminist point of view at the time she penned its lines. On the verge of making the transition from a traditional to a feminist manner of writing, she appears to have hesitated before making the final

commitment to what for her would be a new style. It was as if she viewed her surroundings and her times through a spy glass fitted with a set of lenses that were colored by the tenets of the patriarchal society at one end and by the feminist movement at the other. Until she could bring into focus what she viewed, it can be said that she would continue to be hesitant to adopt a purely feminist point of view. As a result, male perspectives still held sway in the process of deconstructing the patriarchal tales written by the Grimm Brothers to the point that she projected an old-fashioned male view of life from time to time.

Factors contributing to her hesitancy to take the final step to become a full-fledged feminist may be found in her original motives for composing the seventeen poems in *Transformations*. As a mother, she became so curious about her daughter's fascination with fairy tales that she asked her child which were her favorites. When queried about that incident later in her life, Sexton's daughter, Linda Gray Sexton (1953-), said that her mother "wrote down a list [of the titles of Grimm tales] with black felt pen on a paper napkin" (Linda Sexton 298). Concerning the background to this, Sexton commented in an interview that she only perceived "some unconscious message that [she] had something to say" while reading her daughter's original Grimm fairy tales (*No Evil Star* 144). This suggests that what she wrote in *Transformations* may have been based on model stories that were selected at random and based solely on the impressions they had made on her psyche. And yet, it is at the same time unconceivable that the poems of such an perceptive poet as Sexton were not written without the male/female dichotomy being at least an unconsciously held underlying factor. In consideration of this, it may well be that that there must be another reason for the poet's inconsistency as a woman writer in *Transformations*.

The purpose of this article, then, is to examine the irreconciliability between the aspects of *Transformations* where Sexton tries to set forth a feminist perspective and the aspects where she conforms to the existing male-oriented perspective. Using her autobiography as a reference, this essay examines the manner in which the poet projects a feminist perspective towards gender as well as the reason why she hesitates to be on the front line of the feminist movement in *Transformations*.

Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990), the author of *The Uses of Enchantment,* notes that "the fairy tale is future-oriented and guides the child . . . to relinquish his [or her] infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more satisfying independent existence" (11). He believes that if children are allowed to read about situations which are encountered and overcome by the protagonists portrayed in the respective fairy tales, they will be better prepared to make positive use of the situations they will encounter in their own lives. In contrast to Bettelheim's optimism, Sexton's *Transformations*—written primarily for adults as the first poem "The Gold Key" suggests—reaches relatively pessimistic conclusions. In fact, innocent children could possibly have negative reactions upon reading the fairy

tales as presented in this manner. In Sexton's opinion, therefore, it is necessary to present the material in such a way as to enable those youngsters whose parents or nannies read fairy tales to them in their formative years to critically examine what is being revealed from a new perspective. One plausible result of eventually growing out of infantile concepts from one's childhood is the prospect of progressively forming adult viewpoints that could possibly contribute to becoming an active member of a continuously changing society and therefore being in a position to become a factor in bringing forth a better, more realistic social order:

> I have come to remind you,
> all of you:
> Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor,
> Jane, Brian, Maryel,
> all of you draw near.
> Alice,
> At fifty-six do you remember?
> Do you remember when you
> were read to as a child?
> Samuel,
> at twenty-two have you forgotten?
> Forgotten the ten P.M. dreams
> where the wicked king
> went up in smoke?
> Are you comatose?
> Are you undersea? (1)

The truth is that the "middle-aged witch," Sexton's alter ego, presents devastating and sarcastic stories that are unacceptable for children.

In the original volume of tales by the Grimm Brothers, "The Golden Key" seems to be an almost hypnotic suggestion influencing readers to reflect upon the meanings of all the stories for the rest of their lives: "[. . .] he [i.e. a poor boy] unlocks the casket completely and lifts the cover. That's when we'll learn what wonderful things he found" (Grimm 631). On the other hand, Sexton's "middle-aged witch" acts to prevent reflection upon the past. Instead, she discloses that the "gold key" is in her hands and we "have the answer" (2). The key:

> opens [the] book of odd tales
> which transforms the Brothers Grimm.
>
> As if an enlarged paper clip
> could be a piece of sculpture. (2)

Though stories by the Grimm Brothers have been the primary paradigm as to folk tales for a great number of readers for a great number of years, a newly emerging paradigm is formed by the collection of "odd tales" joined by "an enlarged paper clip" belonging to the witch. The newly-inscribed book is actually considered "a piece of sculpture" which is destined to become an alternative paradigm of contemporary fables.

Within the pages of that new paradigm are stark examinations of the dark side of life for females in a patriarchal society along with cynical comments on their helplessness. In "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," for example, Snow White, who is "unsoiled" and "as white as a bonefish" (3), is revealed as a "dumb bunny" (8) who, despite being warned by the seven dwarfs, accepts what she is given by her disguised stepmother every time "the killer-queen" (6) comes to visit. She also becomes a victim to the male-oriented division of labor without noticing when she acquiesces to the subtle power of those seemingly gentle seven dwarfs to "keep house" (6). Snow White, who regains her high-spirits like a little girl ("soda pop" [7] or "Orphan Annie" [8]), is subordinated to the seven fathers "like small czars" (6) as a forever immature being. And then, once married to the prince who rescues her from the hands of her stepmother and the dwarfs, she "refer[s] to her mirror / as women do" (9). Brainwashed by the patriarchal concept that a woman should make herself as beautiful as possible, Snow White eventually follows in the destructive footsteps of her stepmother. The story of Snow White is a good example of a vicious pattern that causes certain women to compete among themselves while pursuing the ideal of beauty imposed upon them from a patriarchal point of view. Eventually, they destroy themselves in the manner of Snow White's stepmother who "dance[s] until she [is] dead / [. . .] flicking [her tongue] in and out / like a gas jet" (9).

Sexton's retelling of "Cinderella" provides another notable example of the gloomy fate that awaits women in the patriarchal society. First, the poem starts with amazingly caustic remarks uttered by the "middle-aged witch":

> You always read about it:
> the plumber with twelve children
> who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.
> From toilets to riches.
> That story.
>
> Or the nursemaid,
> some luscious sweet from Denmark
> who captures the oldest son's heart.
> From diapers to Dior.
> That story.

> Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,
> . . . .
> who goes into real estate
> and makes a pile.
> From homogenized to martinis at lunch.
>
> Or the charwoman
> who is on the bus when it cracks up
> and collects enough from the insurance.
> From mops to Bonwit Teller.
> That story. (53-4)

The American success stories—the so-called "American Dreams" that are apparently merely accidental strokes of good luck that bestow huge fortunes upon the recipients—are sweepingly referred to as "That story." Further, they are characterized by such contemporary cultural symbols as "From toilets to riches," "From diapers to Dior," "From homogenized to martinis at lunch," and "From mops to Bonwit Teller." This series of "That story" is an excellent example of the witch's sharp tongue that slices through every part of "Cinderella."

Studded with modern idioms which are quite familiar to the poet's contemporary Americans, the poem wryly continues to delineate how Cinderella and the other women in the story are entrapped by patriarchal ideology. According to traditional concepts of male/female relationships, the primary role of the male is to be a decent husband and father. By seeming to fulfill that role powerfully and ideally on a regal scale, the prince in the Grimm's Brother "Cinderella" is seen to be eminently attractive to women. And yet, in Sexton's poignant explanation, the figure of the prince is trivialized. The ball that takes place at the prince's palace is compared to "a marriage market" (54) with the women in attendance being exchanged as if they were profitable products. The prince frantically seeks the hand of Cinderella "for keeps" (56) for fear that such an excellent commodity will otherwise be snatched away by a competitor. And when the struggle for "the shoe" becomes self-destructive among Cinderella's stepsisters (one of them "slice[s] it [i.e. her big toe] off" to "put on the slipper" and another "cut[s] off her heel"), the prince comes to "feel like a shoe salesman" (56). Being so self-centered that he regards his future bride as simply a commodity indicates he lacks not only the ability to offer sincere love but also the thoughtful consideration necessary to understand and preserve her dignity. In spite of this, however, Cinderella and her stepsisters unwisely continue to admire him simply because he is a powerful male—a royal personage. Here, Sexton expresses her feminist message that it seems totally ridiculous that all the women in this story become confused and are wrecked as a result of seeking a successful marriage by blindly adhering to the tenets of a patriarchal society.

Of course, it cannot be overlooked that a significantly large proportion of the subsequent stanzas remain relatively faithful to the conventional patriarchal structure of the original Grimm tale—including the moral lesson that virtue is always rewarded:

> Once
> the wife of a rich man was on her deathbed
> and she said to her daughter Cinderella:
> Be devout. Be good . . .
> . . . .
> Cinderella and the prince
> lived, they say, happily ever after, [. . .] (54-6)

With her mother dead and father remarried, Cinderella's travails—meekly obeying her stepmother and stepsisters while stoically enduring her sufferings—are stepping stones that entitle her to the happy ending of marriage to the prince. Not outwardly appearing to have any emotions regarding the unfortunate circumstances of her life, she does not complain. Further, she refrains from any expression of love for the prince while simply waiting in silence for the moment to be discovered by him. According to Carol Leventen, Sexton is "consistent with her overarching conception of her characters as commodities" (140). As a passive heroine or as simply a commodity, Cinderella—as depicted in this poem—lives as she does without objection and remains silent on the negative aspects of her condition. In other words, she unequivocally accepts the role of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

The way in which Cinderella is portrayed by Sexton only contributes to further revealing the poet's venomous tongue. The often caustic vocabulary Sexton employs to remark on the fate of Cinderella subtly gives rise to an acute awareness of the passivity of the future bride towards the prince. And yet, another interpretation is possible when considering the following passage that presents a comical aspect of the protagonist: "She slept on the sooty hearth each night / and walked around looking like Al Jolson" (54). These witty words by this witty poet enable us to imagine Cinderella covered with ashes in such a manner as to mimic Al Jolson (1886-1950), the very popular white American singer, comedian, and actor who often appeared in blackface. Cinderella, in short, blackens her face on purpose. In fact, the power of whites over blacks in American society at that time is an integral part of the background to the story of Al Jolson. And as Philip McGowan states, Cinderella is not only "relegated to the lowest social rank" but also "read as a parallel to a 'comedy' act which maintained the exclusion of blacks from American forms of entertainment" in the time of Al Jolson (81). Here Sexton indicates her belief that the heroine is sleeping on the sooty hearth by choice and trying masochistically to perpetuate her role as a member of the lower ranked servant caste. This differs vastly from the conscious, unashamed acts of

Al Jolson, the white entertainer whose performances, perhaps sadistically by becoming an imitative faux-black, prevented blacks from providing entertainment to the society as they were considered to be members of a lower rank at the time.

With such subtlety—by incorporating mischievous idioms—Sexton presents and ridicules the seemingly ludicrous elements in “Cinderella.” Note the author’s excellent usage of tricky expressions in the last stanza:

> Cinderella and the prince
> lived, *they* say, happily ever after,
> like two dolls in a museum case
> never bothered by diapers or dust,
> never arguing over the timing of an egg,
> never telling the same story twice,
> never getting a middle-aged spread,
> their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
> Regular Bobbsey Twins.
> That story. (56-7, emphasis added)

Cinderella and her prince are not obliged to experience actual domestic tribulations or death. The poet appears to laugh accusingly at the fact that the only function of “That story” is simply to enchant the reader—even if it is a momentary or fleeting experience. A significant gender issue also arises from the fact that no matter how bitterly the witch/poet criticizes the absurd “Cinderella,” she is ultimately unable to subvert the male-orientation of the male-authored original story. The coercive voice of the Grimm Brothers concerning the couple’s everlasting happiness is too overwhelming to be disapproved by Sexton. To put it another way, Sexton’s witchcraft is virtually powerless to overcome their pervasive discourse. Herein she demonstrates the difficulty of deconstructing the stereotypical gender roles found in the original “Cinderella” by showing that—no matter how iconoclastic the witch/poet may be—nothing can be revised. This is so because in Sexton’s view, *they*—people, including the Grimm Brothers, who are caught up in a male-centered viewpoint regardless of their gender—remain content with the patriarchal way of thinking and have no will to change their minds. In their determination to preserve their traditional stance, such people believe, Sexton contends, that Cinderella and her prince are destined to live “happily ever after” so that even her caustic remarks against the patriarchal system cannot change the pattern of the original story.

Sexton retells the tale of “Cinderella” in her distinctive manner in order to reveal how ingrained the sexual stereotypes are. *They* believe that a woman who marries a rich, handsome man like the prince will feel happy and fulfilled and that a man who marries a beautiful, virtuous woman like Cinderella must experience total contentment as long as he lives. In spite of the poet’s objection, therefore,

the narrative continues to insist that the marriage extricates the innocent and defenseless Cinderella from drudgery in the end. The total of what is happening is praised as "That story" exactly like the episodes—most certainly American success stories—which are presented in the prologue. This does not mean, however, that the perpetuation of sexual stereotypes preoccupies Sexton. Rather, in the closing stanza, she inquires even further into how a belief in the everlasting existence of stereotyped romance is perpetuated. By freezing the prince and his bride in time and space "like two dolls in a museum case," in the last part of the poem, the couple is dehumanized and thereby able to maintain their patriarchal gender roles due to the fact that stagnation becomes their reality.

The stagnation in the couple's life is further emphasized when the couple is compared to "Regular Bobbsey Twins"—the principal characters of a series of children's novels written by several authors under the pseudonym Laura Lee Hope from 1904 to 1979 reaching a total of seventy-two volumes—who repeatedly "live happily" over and over in people's minds. What the "middle-aged witch" succeeds in revealing through her witchcraft is the fact that males are also prisoners of the patriarchal system. The warning being issued is that anyone, whether female or male, can be captured and held in thrall by the traditional patriarchal view; and that not only women but also men are denied to live on their own terms as long as they continue to read the Cinderella story retaining their views of its tenets unchanged from the first reading. Indeed it is required that both women and men discard their faith in patriarchal sexual stereotypes so that they can then live on their own terms.

As written, "Cinderella"—the poem—succinctly confirms the opinion that "*Transformations* is not structured around the idea of male and female as polar opposites and is consequently not gynocentric [. . .]" (Ostriker 232). Although Sexton challenges the tenets of patriarchy from a female standpoint as noted above, she reveals that its entire concept is also able to have a negative effect on the men captured in its thrall. Therefore, the fairy tale—seemingly based on the male-centered culture—actually tricks both women and men causing them to stagnate and end up in "a museum case." Unless a way is found to give the Bobbsey Twins virtual individuality, according to Sexton, all that contributes to the concept of "That story" continues to captivate and immobilize people.

In "The White Snake," the dark side of matrimony is also depicted by spotlighting a man of humble birth marrying a noble woman:

> they were placed in a box
> and painted identically blue
> and thus passed their days
> living happily ever after— (15)

Insisting that the life of the newly-wed couple is comparable to being in "a kind of coffin, / a kind of blue funk" (15), Sexton provides sardonic humor to "living happily ever after"—the familiar phrase at the end of numerous folk tales. By inspiring apprehension through the revision of fairy tales, the "middle-aged witch" motivates readers—both women and men—to take a positive stand to bring about the deconstruction of the stereotypes surrounding those stories, products of a patriarchal culture.

What is to be noticed here, however, is that the "middle-aged witch" sometimes shows conformity to the patriarchal ideology in *Transformations*. Consider the poem "The Frog Prince," for instance:

> Frau Doktor,
> Mama Brundig,
> Take out your contacts,
> Remove your wig. (93)

Addressing two females—"Frau Doctor" and "Mama Brundig"—the poem appears quite feminist in its essence. In the following lines, there is a condemnation of males who seek to dominate all levels of society:

> Frog has no nerves.
> Frog is as old as a cockroach.
> Frog is my father's genitals.
> Frog is a malformed doorknob.
> Frog is a soft bag of green. (93-4)

As depicted here, it seems unbelievable to Sexton that such a disgusting creature as a frog—endowed with masculine characteristics ("my father's genitals")—should even exist, much less have the ability to torment the "quite adorable princess" (95) in the Grimm version of the tale. She courageously proclaims: "I'll take a knife / and chop up frog" (93). In her uniquely defiant voice, the "middle-aged witch" demonstrates a strong determination to totally transform the original story of "The Frog Prince."

But strangely enough, Sexton's contemptuousness suddenly fades as she unexpectedly presents a fatalistic view of the situation:

> It was ordained.
> Just as the fates deal out
> the plague with a tarot card.
> Just as the Supreme Being drills
> holes in our skulls to let
> the Boston Symphony through. (95)

Whilst it is a matter of fate as to whether or not the princess encounters the frog prince and sets into motion all that follows, it would seem that Sexton—held in the thrall of the patriarchal discourse of the existing story—feels a certain amount of reluctance to question his dominant masculine role.

Of course, the poet's hesitancy does not imply that she does not get her punches in where she can—even if they are in the scheme of things relatively ineffective. When she describes the frog prince as a "tradesman" who "[has] something to sell" (96), she provides a reminder of that other prince—the one appearing in her version of "Cinderella"—who is so much like "a shoe salesman." Besides, the frog prince appears in the eyes of the princess to be an "Old Waddler" (96) who cannot have power to control others. That "Old Waddler," however, remains the embodiment of the patriarchal tenet that males dominate females. The unfortunate lady has no way of predicting that she will be disgraced by "the soft bag of green" when she innocently agrees to negotiate with him out of a desire to get back her ball, "[her] moon, [her] butter calf, / [her] yellow moth, [her] Hindu hare" (95). In the greatest part of this text, the sharp edge of the witch-poet's narration is missing. When the stanzas bringing the poem to the end state that "Thus they were married. / After all he had compromised her" (99), there is no sophisticated conclusion like that to be found in "Cinderella." Rather, the poem reveals that in his desire to monopolize his wife and fulfill his dominant masculine role, the frog prince not only "hired a night watchman / so that no one could enter the chamber," but also "had the well / boarded over so that / never again would she lose her ball" (99). In this way, the marriage of the frog prince to the princess continues "happily ever after" in a manner unlike that experienced by the other regal couple in "Cinderella." Throughout the narrative, Sexton's submission to the masculine power prevailing in the fantasy worlds of the Grimm Brothers removes any possibility of discovering any bold feminist interpretation of the original folklore.

In the poem "Godfather Death," "death" is represented as a male who must be obeyed. Through the words "Hurry, Godfather death, / Mister tyranny" (31), death is further referred to as "Mister tyranny" probably because the poet feels unable to make it read "Ms. Tyranny." In any event, the tone used creates an atmosphere similar to that of an eighteenth or nineteenth-century poem strongly influenced by the inherent tenets of the patriarchal culture. Consider the example of the supposedly submissive female attitude towards the male role that is provided by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). Having been influenced by the patriarchal standpoint so prominent in the society in which she was raised, she alluded to Death as an irresistible force of the masculine gender when she wrote "Because I could not stop for Death / He kindly stopped for me" (Poem 712). For this nineteenth-century poet, only "Death" categorized as a male has the power to decide who is destined for death. Therefore, "Death" arrives to escort the dying heroine to the afterlife in a manner similar to a gentleman arriving to pick up a lady at her

gate for a date. Likewise, Sexton—despite the influence of the feminist ideology—presents a male figure with strong authority in "Godfather Death."

Then why is such hesitancy on the part of the poet against opposing masculine power to be found now and then in her poems? To gain a deeper understanding of this point, it is only necessary to look at her real life experiences. For one thing, her marriage to Kayo Sexton did not have what could be considered a fairy tale ending. Her views on the roles to be played by women and men were—at least to a certain extent—molded by the times and the tenets of a patriarchal society. During World War II when American industry suffered from a shortage of workers, women were urged to join the work force as a patriotic duty. When the men came back from the front, however, women were released from the labor market to return to their proper place at home. Though they had tasted the fruits of independence, those women were expected to again submit to being housewives totally dependent upon their husbands. As more men returned and more women were required for the marriage market, "the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20 [. . .]" by the end of the forties, and "girls went to college to get a husband" (Friedan 16). For Sexton, marriage was at seventeen. When it ended, life in the pattern of the "Regular Bobbsey Twins" was simply a mirage when she faced reality that became "a kind of coffin, / a kind of blue funk."

Like a significant proportion of people experiencing mental illness, Sexton's own bouts were due to a variety of underlying causes including entangled parental relationships, excessive intimacy with her great-aunt, and the burden as a wife and a mother. As an unruly child, she was sometimes physically punished for her misbehavior. Those occurrences were so emotional that they became input for her poem "Cripples and Other Stories":

> Disgusted, mother put me
> on the potty. She was good at this.
> . . . .
> I knew I was a cripple.
> Of course, I'd known it from the start.
> My father took the crowbar
> and broke that wringer's heart. (*Complete Poems* 161)

A cripple of any sort, Sexton believed, could not be loved. Familial affection eroded during her formative years, and belief in her parents was ultimately destroyed. Contributing to this was the failure of her mother and father to express admiration for her poems which began to be publicized during her high school days. In one instance, her father diminished her sense of self-esteem by unthinkingly comparing one of her poems to a love letter written to him by her mother—his wife—instead of praising his daughter for her perception and talent. Worse, her mother accused her of plagiarism. The result was that Sexton stopped

writing poetry and dared not try again until her psychiatrist urged her to do so. In fact, the trauma resulting from the corporal punishment and from the mental attacks of her parents stayed with her always. This is alluded to by Maria Tatar in her interpretation of "Snow White" when she states "the stepmother's invocation of the first queen's fantasy about her child points to the underlying identity of the biological mother and the evil queen" (94). In Sexton's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," it is possible to argue that Snow White's envious stepmother and the poet's own biological mother overlap in such a way as to give her the opportunity to achieve a feeling of revenge against her mother through the inclusion of the words "red-hot iron shoes" (9) in the poem.

For a time, Nana, Sexton's great-aunt, provided the love and attention Sexton failed to get from her parents. Until she was about thirteen "when she became absorbed in attracting and teasing boys" (Middlebrook 15), Sexton was able to turn to Nana when craving unconditional love. Nana was a lonely spinster, who used to live an independent life abroad but was now taken care of by the Sextons, also starved for affection from her little grand-niece. The subtle relationship between these two women is spotlighted by the monologue of the "middle-aged witch" in "Rapunzel":

> Because Rapunzel was a beautiful girl
> Mother Gothel treasured her beyond all things.
> As she grew older Mother Gothel thought:
> None but I will ever see her or touch her. (40)

In the process of losing her hearing, however, Nana gradually withdrew into herself. Finally, not even her favorite grandniece was able to keep her company. She ended her days committed to a mental institution where she kept everyone at a distance. The period of "play[ing] mother-me-do" (40) ended between them, and "Mother Gothel," or Nana, was never again able to be a source of love and attention. Witnessing the changes that overcame Nana was a great shock to Sexton. No longer would she hear her great aunt say "Hold me, my young dear, / hold me" (42)—words that had been such great comfort. That protecting figure who had guarded against the outside influences that so strongly compelled the young woman to accept without question the tenets of a traditional male-centered way of life was gone.

Losing the companionship and protection formerly provided by Nana contributed to Sexton's falling victim to the subtle urgings of the patriarchal society and committing herself to an early marriage. Yet she was so unprepared to fulfill the role assigned to her that she failed to become what would be considered either a good wife or a wise mother. Concerning a time when her husband was away on a business trip, she wrote for her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne (1927-2000):

> Now Kayo is gone—his absence absolutely removes all reason for a day to begin or end ... I love her [i.e. Joy], she is adorable and winning—but it seems to take so much patience and energy and I was glad to see her go ...” (Middlebrook 36).

These words suggest despair brought on by a realization that she was inadequate as a wife and mother. It upset her that she was not up to the social norm which claimed that every woman should be or could be a perfect housewife. Asked by Dr. Orne what role she thought she could fulfill, she answered that she might be able “to be a good prostitute and to help men feel sexually powerful” (Middlebrook xiii). The male-centered ideology imposed upon her created a timid woman who had completely lost her self-respect. The times being what they were, she was committed to a mental institution.

Based on the knowledge and experience gained from being institutionalized, the prologue of “Iron Hans” scornfully introduces people with mental illnesses—“a girl sitting in a chair / like a china doll”; “a man who is crying / over and over”; “a woman talking / purging herself with rhymes”; “a man full of suspicions”; “a boy on a bridge / One hundred feet up”; “an old lady in a cafeteria / staring at the meat loaf”; and “a man in a cage / wetting his pants” (44-5). The characters mentioned are considered to be the progeny—“the children” (43)—of the person reciting the poem who in this case is Sexton herself. Needless to say, Iron Hans, who used to be “a wild man” (50), is among them. In another instance, in “Briar Rose,” which is the last poem in the collection, it is stated that “Briar Rose / was an insomniac...” (110)—a condition from which Sexton also suffered. The recitations by the “middle-aged witch” in these two poems are relatively dismal compared to the other poems in *Transformations*.

It is fortunate for the world of literature that Sexton again took up poetry after having abandoned it many years before. It was through her writing that she was able to retrieve her self-esteem, and the completion of *Transformations* brought a measure of pride and self-confidence. Yet she failed to free herself from her dependency on men. Though writing in at least partial accordance to emerging feminist ideology, she was unable to prevent herself from being submissive to her husband, to male doctors, and to male friends. Until her divorce in 1972, Sexton and her husband had a history of violent fights—sometimes for no obvious reason at all. In therapy sessions, one of the main subjects was her problems with her marital relationship. And yet, being deeply dependent on her husband, she expressed feelings of gratitude for his ongoing support by presenting him the wherewithal to go on an African safari when she received a grant from the International Congress of Cultural Freedom. And although it was she who proposed the divorce, without Kayo she felt miserably lonely—a factor that was a major contribution to her eventual suicide.

Kayo played an unfortunate role. In the belief that his wife's misbehavior was due to her mental instability, he forced himself to put up with his wife's relatively frequent infidelities. Numerous were the men with whom Sexton had affairs or with whom she imagined she had a love relationship. In the poem "Little Peasant," the poet casts light on a love affair between the miller's wife and the parson in such a way as to suggest the material reflects the poet's desire for close relationships with her male friends. The relevant part of the poem reads:

> The women cry,
> Come, my fox,
> heal me.
> I am chalk white
> with middle age
> so wear me threadbare,
> wear me down,
> wear me out.
> Lick me clean,
> as clean as an almond. (25-6)

These lines can be interpreted to indicate that she believed her middle-aged self to be a consummate flirt. Kayo displayed the patience and fortitude to believe that "if she ever got well, we could put that kind of thing behind us" (Middlebrook 261); and she had depended upon him for material and mental support. Nevertheless, he alone was insufficient to fulfill her emotional needs. After the divorce, she continued to rely upon innumerable male friends to provide her with what she needed until the time she decided to take her own life.

Another man who was indispensable to Sexton was Dr. Martin Orne whom she met when she was hospitalized at Westwood Lodge.[1] Even after his move to Philadelphia, she turned to Dr. Orne for advice via phone calls, letters, and occasional meetings in Boston. As a result of advising his patient to start writing poetry, he played an integral role in Sexton's eventual emergence as a poet. And her success should have contributed to being able to overcome the dependence she felt for him. But unfortunately, she became overwrought when he moved away. Concerning the care provided in the aftermath of his departure from Boston, the good doctor reported that "Sadly, if in therapy Anne had been encouraged to hold on to the vital supports that had helped her build the innovative career... it is my view that Anne Sexton would be alive today" (Middlebrook xiii). If Dr. Orne had been able to continue seeing her periodically in Boston, his words suggest, Sexton could probably have avoided the psychological pressures that eventually led

[1] Part of the study of relationships between Sexton and Dr. Orne has already been presented in my article, "Beyond the Doctor-Patient Relationship: Anne Sexton and Her Psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne" (*Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 11 [2006]: 81-92).

her to turn to suicide for relief. The reality, however, was that logistical considerations prevented Dr. Orne from seeing his patient as often as she wished. With the doctor upon whom she had depended practicing someplace else, the poet came to feel stranded and alone.

Thus, Sexton tended to rely on the men around her—a reliance which led to the development of a turbulent inner ambivalence with the attitudes of the feminist movement towards males influencing her on one side while a dependence upon members of the opposite sex pulled at her from the other. Consequently, the bewilderment caused by these opposing forces waging war within her creative mind is depicted in some of the poems in *Transformations*.

In actuality, Sexton's real life experiences at that point in her career were, in many ways, predictably insufficient to provide her what was necessary for her to become a feminist writer in a strict sense. Composing poetry, at first, was simply a means of self-help psychotherapy in an attempt to bring order to her impulsive life and questing mind. Though she had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1967 and had already begun to teach poetry at Boston University prior to the publication of *Transformations*, her emotional ups and downs were a constant cause of personal distress. In addition, her disturbing preference for flirtation troubled family, friends, and, most of all, herself. Unable to organize her own life to give it the peace and order she was seeking, it can be conjectured that she found it difficult to be actively involved with the feminist movement in her own writing. Even Adrienne Rich (1929-), one of Sexton's contemporaries whose poetry gained recognition while a student at Radcliff (B.A., 1951), managed to succeed in finding her own voice as a feminist only upon the publication of her third collection of poems, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, in 1963. In addition to her inexperience, unsettled emotions, and flirtations, Sexton—unlike Rich who benefitted from a rich and rewarding college life—only managed to get a high school diploma, and the process made it difficult for her to form her own philosophy of womanhood. In the midst of the feminist revolution, therefore, the reality of this female poet's life contributed to the inconsistency to be found in this collection of her poems. As a result, as Joyce Carol Oates rightly reports, *Transformations* became an "experimental, post-modernist work [that] draws upon tradition while boldly 'revising' it... from a feminist perspective" (256).

Thus, in *Transformations*, Sexton is inconsistent in her portrayal of the male role. In some of the poems she interprets it according to the feminist ideals of the time while in others she upholds it according to the existing ideology of the patriarchal society. That this is so is paraphrased by Kay F. Stone in a different way: "the poems of Anne Sexton... attempt[s] to re-view Märchen women both negatively and positively" (231). It can be said that when she "re-view[s]" women "negatively," Sexton abdicates the possibility of deconstructing the patriarchal stories; and that when she "re-view[s]" them "positively," she overcomes all

hesitation to give full reign to her poignant witch's tongue to bring gender issues into focus with other women (and men). In her version of "Rumpelstiltskin," she mentions a dwarf who "speaks up as tiny as an earphone / with Truman's asexual voice" (17) and insists that "it is [our] Doppelgänger / trying to get out" (17-8). "Beware ... Beware ... [of your Doppelgänger]" (18): the poet calls to herself as well as to the reading public. It is very likely that her "Doppelgänger," or shadow-self, sits on her shoulder like a miniature demon taunting her that she is but a cowardly woman who has forgotten her mission in society as a woman writer.

As Sexton's most creative period paralleled the successful emergence of the feminist movement, she constantly had to struggle with her ambivalent feelings towards gender issues. The study of other collections of her poems displaying her more established feminist credentials are beyond the scope of this paper. But both before and after publishing *Transformations*, she was continually confronted by the problems she encountered as a member of patriarchal society to the point that she hesitated to take a more consistent stand. As was pointed out at the outset, *Transformations* was a best-seller—especially to women. The fact that those readers sympathized with Sexton means that they could empathize with the emotional experiences she was confronted with by the feminist movement in the sixties and seventies. The hesitancy of a "middle-aged witch" in *Transformations* resulted from the female circumstances of that age.

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