Emotional Intelligence in the Later Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of my mother and father, Margaret and George Gibson.
ABSTRACT

During the 1950s and the 1960s the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich triggered ambivalent responses from both critics and readers. This thesis was precipitated by and focuses on these ambivalent reactions. On the one hand there were critics who viewed their poetry positively because of the way in which their poems genuinely probe the emotions. On the other hand there were critics who maintained that the poetry of these three women was just not poetry; rather their writing was compromised by their emotions. In both cases the critics make judgments about the nature of emotion in poetry and the value of these emotions and assume that emotions do not have a cerebral component. I am proceeding from the very different standpoint that the emotions have a cognitive dimension, and are an essential component in the way in which the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich is cognitively moulded. The emotions, in short, help to secure the poetry’s sense and meaning in a sense-making way. This use of emotions to shed light on the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich has to date received scant attention.

The thesis bases this approach on the work of a number of theorists of the emotions. Because of the development of theories of the emotions in the last fifty years, our appreciation of the cognitive dimensions of the poetry has flourished. This thesis reasons that the emotion depicted in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich makes evident their cognitive reactions to specific happenings. As a result of analysing the poetry of these three female poets, it is possible to see the shaping spirit and the cognitive dimension of emotion in their poetry and the way in which the individual emotions contributed to the structuring of the poetry.

Chapter Three investigates the character and role of anger in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich with the purpose of making evident the way it operates in a sense making role, acting as a cognitive “shaping” channel through which their poetry derives its logic and sense. The emotions of love, hate and jealousy are examined in Chapter Four in order to show the way in which Plath, Sexton and Rich use these emotions in their poetry to discover the sense of happenings in their lives.
and make evident a cognitive moulding agent from which their poems obtain their coherence and meaning. Chapter Five explores the emotions of grief and guilt in the poetry of these three women and demonstrates the way in which these emotions make sense of events in their lives and the way in which their poems derive their logic and significance.

This thesis demonstrates that the copious written expression of emotion has in reality quite an intricate cognitive structure and how, for that reason, it should be studied for its intellectual dimension as well as its emotional content. It argues that the emotion in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich is grounded in judgments and evaluations that these three women have formed concerning events in their lives. Plath, Sexton and Rich consciously and intelligently assessed these happenings and their emotional reactions to them. It is this cognitive dimension in their emotions which gives the allegedly unstructured “emotional” later poetry its structure.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed: .................................................................

Carol Margaret Houston
September 2007, Brisbane.
I wish to thank most sincerely my principal supervisor, Dr Jock Macleod for his unwavering support and inspiration throughout the compilation of this thesis. Not only did he lend positive feedback when things were going well, but more importantly, constructive criticism and encouragement when difficulties arose.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in 2001, David Graham and Kate Sontag remarked that “as the twenty-first century begins, the ambiguous legacy of confessional poetry persists in its influence over many American poets and it inspires ambivalent responses from critics, readers and sometimes the poets themselves” (p.2). This thesis was triggered by and addresses these ambivalent responses from critics regarding the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich.

Public unrest in America during the 1950s and the 1960s had a significant influence on the development of confessional poetry. Allan Ginsberg’s “Howl” (1959) challenged the predominant comprehension of what poetry should be. This disquiet about what poetry should be was the case especially amongst women writers in the post-war period. In addition to critiquing what they perceived to be a patriarchal society, women such as Plath, Sexton and Rich felt a strong connection to and empathised with the Jews as victims. It is this suffusion of the poets’ emotions into their poetry that divides critics.

The criticism of their poetry was of course partly political. The hostility toward the suburban Jew at this time caused societal concern and is well documented by Saul Bellow in books such as Herzog (1964). Through their poetry Plath, Sexton and Rich all articulated their concern for the way in which the Jews were treated, both in Germany during World War Two and in post-war America. These poets all claimed an affinity with Judaism, real in Rich’s case, imagined by Plath and Sexton. Furthermore, they all expressed emotion in their poems about the treatment of the Jews. Their poetry is largely about their experiences as women, with such events as the Holocaust used as metaphors. It was this public unease about which Plath, Sexton and Rich were expressing their emotional concerns in their poetry.

In addition, the limits of what was regarded as socially acceptable material were stretched at this time with the publication of such books as Peyton Place (1956) and the sexually explicit Kinsey Report (1953). Plath, Sexton and Rich brought to
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their poetry a further set of contextual issues, that is, the relationship between the sexes. Possibly one of the most important influences on post-war American cultural experiences was the shift in gender norms. A large number of married, middle-class, white women who had been in employment during World War Two were loath after the war was over, to relinquish their jobs and the financial independence that working had given them. Public figures, aided by government propaganda campaigns exhorted these women to revert to their time-honoured responsibilities as wives and mothers. Speaking broadly, we could say that the prevalent idea, particularly among men, was that if the wives and mothers were at home in the kitchen baking cookies, normally would return to a country affected by war, technology and cultural change. At this time too, the American population was subjected to a formidable flood of “experts” in areas from nutrition and parenting to mental health. Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Childcare* (1946) became a highly regarded authority on the rearing of babies and children. Psychoanalysis was also securing acceptability in America, and within this professional group were misogynists who reasoned that a woman who was not fulfilled by her role as wife and mother was, in some respect, lacking. The perception in America, in the 1960s was that men were the breadwinners and women were the carers. Women, particularly working women, were held responsible for anything and everything not acceptable in post-war America: from juvenile delinquency to homosexuality, largely as a result of political propaganda that claimed such phenomena were all the fault of the career woman. In the view of Joanne Boucher (2003) Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* strove to make known the sexist attitude towards women in America at this time. In her opinion experts and professionals such as psychologists, sociologists and educators were responsible for forcing women out of the workforce. In the words of Betty Friedan (1963):

The new feminine morality story is the exorcising of the forbidden career dream, the heroine’s victory over Mephistopheles: the devil first in the form of a career woman, who threatens to take away the heroine’s husband or child, and finally, the devil inside the heroine herself, the dream of independence, the discontent of spirit, and even the feeling of a separate identity that must be exorcised to win or keep the love of husband and child. (pp. 40-41)
Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1966) highlighted the position of post-war American women. In this novel Plath described the disease of which Friedan was to write so appropriately. In *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan wrote:

> Just what was the problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say: “I feel empty somehow … incomplete.” Or she would say: “I feel as though I don’t exist.” Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a tranquiliser. (p.18)

If it cannot be identified it cannot be cured. Friedan also likened the position of the American women of this time to that of being in a “comfortable concentration camp” – physically luxurious, mentally oppressive and impoverished. The works of Plath and Friedan, both published in the 1960s, attested to women’s increasing dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed upon them because of their gender. According to Friedan, women could no longer ignore the inner voice that says “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (p. 29).

The writings of Plath, Sexton and Rich disclose the anger and desperation experienced by women in the 1950s and 1960s when they strove to overcome the helplessness caused by the predominantly male discourse in much of the current writing. In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” (1979), Adrienne Rich wrote about the same issues: “I have been taught that poetry should be universal, which meant of course, non-female” (p.44). Rich also claimed that “this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (p.35). Anne Sexton too, was a product of the post-war American culture. Initially all Sexton wanted to do was fit into the norm, be married, have children and be happy. As she herself said however, the white picket fences were not sufficient to keep the demons at bay. Sexton was angry and wanted to express this anger in her poetry, but felt she lacked the confidence to do so.

Whilst supporting much of the work previously undertaken on Plath, Sexton and Rich, I am trying to do something different here. This thesis will examine the ways in which Plath, Sexton and Rich did begin to express emotion in their later poetry and will demonstrate how their emotions, in a *sense-making* way, serve as
a cognitive “moulding” channel by which the poems acquire their intelligence and meaning. Whilst supporting much of the work previously undertaken on Plath, Sexton and Rich, I am trying to do something different here.

The initial critical response to the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich was very positive. With their later, more emotional poetry however, the critical response changed, moving in two directions. On the one hand there were those critics who claimed that the poetry of these three females was simply not poetry. The responses were not unlike those to Ginsberg’s “Howl,” but critics were even more outraged because Plath, Sexton and Rich were women. It was suggested their poetry was compromised by their emotions. In the view of Lawrence Lerner (1989) Sexton’s poetry provoked such vehement reactions because critics were averse to hearing such private details of the poet’s life. On the other hand there were those critics who reviewed their poetry positively. Their favourable responses were based on an expressionist theory of poetry which asserts that their writings are good because they authentically explore the emotions.

What I am looking to do in this thesis is to add to the understanding of the later poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich through a new approach to the vexed question of emotion, which has been triggered by these contrary views. I do this through my use of the contemporary theories of the emotions which argue that emotions are inherently structured, cognitive ways of dealing with the world. The works of Martha Nussbaum and Antonio Damasio in particular have been critical to the development of my thesis.

Plath’s later poem “Daddy,” (1962) for instance, has been viewed by a number of critics as a poem with a high emotional content. Critics have impugned Plath for flagrantly seizing the Holocaust as a metaphor for all disconsolate melancholy, also for an extended and mournful howl. George Steiner (1970) expresses his concern that someone who was never personally involved in the Holocaust could seize such a vast amount of already available emotion and apply it to her particular and private suffering. The melodramatics of the emotional assertions in “Daddy” are also adversely criticised by David Shapiro (1977). It is Helen Vendler’s (1980) opinion that much of Plath’s poetry is written as an outpouring
of emotion, an interpretation of what Plath herself has referred to as “the zoo yowl” (p.57). On the other hand, critics such as Allan Alvarez (1966), Eillen Aird (1973), Marjorie Perloff (1986) and Robert Von Hallberg (1996) support both the structure and control in “Daddy.”

Amongst those critics who accept the emotional element in Plath’s poetry, there are a good many who defend it on the grounds that this poetry is an authentic expression of her emotions. Alicia Ostriker (1986) and Suzanne Juhasz (1989) regard the emotional poetry of “Ariel” as possessing an exceptional authentic form. Much of Sylvia Plath’s poetry then has been judged positively, when she confines herself to poems that adhere to structure and form. However there have been a number of critics who have judged her poems adversely because of the great outpouring of raw emotion they contain. These differences in the critics’ views on the emotional content of Plath’s poetry and also that of Sexton and Rich are examined in greater detail in Chapter One. The fundamental point of debate concerns the status and function of emotion in poetry.

As a result of advances in our understanding of the cognitive dimension of emotion there is a renewed interest in the emotions and cognition. My new reading of the later, less structured poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich is driven by these new theories of the emotions. A discussion of these theories is taken up in detail in Chapter Two. A number of philosophers have recently developed new theories of the emotions, based, in part, on the re-reading of classical philosophy. They support the view that emotions have a cognitive dimension. For example, R. Plutchik (1984) comments: “By emotion we refer to reaction to an appropriate evocative stimulus involving cognitive appraisal (or perception), expressive motoric behaviour, subjective experience (or feelings), physiological arousal and goal-directed behaviour” (p.3).

Different theorists of the emotions, whilst affirming the cognitive dimension in emotion, emphasise particular interpretations. One school, for example, argues that emotions are conscious, rational and purposive judgments and that they have intentionality. Martha Nussbaum (1998) claims that Aristotle links emotion to judgment, and in *The Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001)
she advances and sustains a cognitive theory of the emotions. Michael Lacewing (2005) argues that emotions are evaluative responses. He then poses the question: just how are we able to distinguish between “appropriate” and “inappropriate” emotional responses?

A second body of scholarship makes a case claiming that emotions have intentionality. York Gunther (2002) differentiates feelings from emotions by acknowledging that emotions are distinguishable from desires because emotions have intentionality and emotions embody cognitive preconditions. In examining the neuro-dynamics of intentional behaviour, Marc Lewis and Isabel Granic (2000) delineate emotions as a characteristic of intentional behaviour. Their emphasis is on the essence of intentional behaviour, claiming all our activities are emotional and accordingly they possess reason and are interpretable. Their opinions are supported by Jesse Prinz (2004), who argues that intentionality precipitates emotions to be receptive to reasoned measurement.

A third group of scholars believes that emotions are conscious. The neurologist Antonio Damasio, in Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain (1995), argues that emotions employ a critical position in intelligent decision-making. In his later book Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain (2003), Damasio is especially interested in the proposition that emotions are conscious. For Damasio the emotions employ a significant position in rational decisiveness and he goes on to argue that if the structure supporting the emotions flounders, then the rational decisiveness also falls short.

An associated, albeit somewhat distinct interpretation of the cognitive dimension in emotions is proposed by Robert Solomon (2003), who contends that emotions are rational and purposive and allows that they are generally linked by feelings. At the same time, however, he avows that these feelings are not an imperative part of the emotion. In contrast to the affect theories, Solomon argues that emotions are “rational and purposive, more like actions than occurrences that happen to us” (p.3). He further argues that “emotions are, we are told, urgent responses to desperate situations” (p.1). At times, emotions may appear irrational and ill-considered, but in reality they are purposive and often deliberate.
Using the insights provided by these various theorists this thesis argues that emotion in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich manifests judgments and evaluations that they have made about happenings in their lives. The poets make a conscious and intelligent assessment of events in their emotional responses to these events, and it is this cognitive dimension that structures their later, supposedly unstructured, “emotional” poetry.

The thesis examines the emotions of anger, love, hate and jealousy; grief and guilt in Chapters Three, Four and Five respectively. The focus is on these emotions because all of them feature profusely in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich, particularly in their later poetry. In Chapter Three the emotion of anger is examined in order to establish the extent to which it functions in these three women’s poetry — that is, in terms of cognition. In 2002 Stephanie Shields commented how anger is habitually regarded as a basic aspect of affective life and as a prominent human emotion. In her view anger is pivotal for humanity’s permanence; physiologically it allows the human body to set in progress and sustain elevated positions of enthusiasm. In “The Phenomenology of Anger” Rich’s anger has been prompted by her solicitude for a peaceful outcome to the Vietnam War. Rich (1993) claimed “anger can be a kind of genius if it’s acted upon” (p.8).

The emotions of love, hate and jealousy are investigated in Chapter Four. Although these emotions are distinct they are however in a great many instances linked. Both Martha Nussbaum (2001) and Philip Fisher (2002) argue that it is possible, at the one time, to be both in love with a person and jealous of that person, and to love and hate someone at the one time. These emotions feature extensively in the later poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. In the case of Plath for instance, the emotions of love, hate and jealousy, manifested in later poems such as “Daddy,” “Medusa” and “The Jailer,” were influenced substantially by the events of her life. Much of the later poetry of Anne Sexton was an endeavour on her part to find some semblance of meaning to her life. Poems such as “Baby Picture” and “Briar Rose” bring into prominence facets of the emotions of love, hate and jealousy which are portrayed in her later poetry. In Rich’s “After Dark,”
we witness her ambivalent relationship with her father. As the poem progresses we see how the emotion of hate cedes to that of love.

The emotions of grief and guilt are examined in Chapter Five. The focus here is on these emotions because Plath, Sexton and Rich all experienced them in relation to family members and all enunciate them in their poetry. Plath’s “Electra on Azalea Path” verbalises the grief and guilt she had experienced for more than twenty years, over the death of her father. This poem also manifests the way in which the emotion of grief and guilt, expressed through her poetry, allowed Plath to assess her situation and her perceived role in her father’s death, intelligently. There is no resolution to her grief and guilt depicted in her poem. She evaluated the situation, and made a judgment in relation to the role she played in her father’s death. Much of Sexton’s poetry too affirms her guilt and her inability, either to experience or to express her guilt. Critics such as Maxine Kumin have remarked that Sexton’s poetry was for her a means of keeping herself alive longer than would have been expected. There is, too, throughout Sexton’s poetry the idea of absolution and forgiveness. Much of the poetry of Rich reflects her ambivalence towards her Jewish heritage and the ensuing grief and guilt this caused her.

The main thrust of the argument in this thesis is that, although the above-mentioned emotions are central to the later poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich, their poetry is still coherent and meaningful. I will be looking specifically at emotions demonstrated in particular poems and how these emotions can be seen to have a cognitive dimension. By examining the emotions of anger, love, hate, jealousy, grief and guilt in the later poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich in this way, the thesis sheds new light on the motivation and form of their later confessional poetry.
CHAPTER ONE:
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines the ways in which critics have judged the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich. Their poetry has traditionally been seen in terms of a movement from early structured poems with which the critics had no problems, to poetry that is less structured and more emotional. It is with this more emotional poetry that some critics had concerns.

Just as all three women’s writings moved from structured to unstructured poetry, so the critical response shifted from positive to negative. Most critics have judged the earlier poetry positively. Those critics who view the later poetry negatively are predominantly those who adhere to the New Criticism paradigm. Whether positive or negative, however, on the whole, critics have assessed the unstructured poetry of these three women as authentic emotional expression or as an emotional howl. The “howl” concept has a great deal of cultural resonance in American literature. Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” caused uproar, both negative and positive, when published in 1957. The poem voices a subcurrent of antagonism in America in the late 1950s. To the progressive members of society Ginsberg was regarded as a non-materialistic delegate for freedom from bigotry. Richard Eberhart (1984) says of “Howl:”

It is a howl against everything in our mechanistic civilization which kills the spirit, assuming that the louder you shout the more likely you are to be heard. It lays bare the nerves of suffering and spiritual struggle. Its positive force and energy come from a redemptive quality of love, although it destructively catalogues evils of our time from physical deprivation to madness. (p.25)

The earlier poetry was positively received because it corresponded to the idea of poetry as relatively detached, structured and crafted. However, later work was considered to a greater extent more emotional and to a lesser extent less structured. The critics responded both positively and negatively to this later poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. Those who viewed their later poetry positively did so because they regarded it as being based on a different conception of poetry and
poetic value. They believed these later poems were authentic expressions of the poets’ emotions. Other critics viewed their poetry negatively because they believed it was just “not poetry” according to the New Critical conception. The debate then centred on the nature of poetry. In this thesis I am going beyond the debate by arguing that there is a strong “structuring” dimension in their later “emotional” poetry.

In broad terms in reviewing the earlier poems of Sylvia Plath many of the critics are divided, but are for the main part positive. The following critics focus on the craft and control in her poetry. Susan Bassnett (1993) says of Plath: “she conceives of poetry as word-craft, as a medium through which experience can be shaped and re-presented” (p.38). In the view of Wisker (2001) “the early critics found in her poetry a sure, highly intelligent voice matched with careful control of language and form” (p.61). Plath’s (1962) own words with regard to her earlier work endorse this stance when she says, “I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except, you know, a needle or a knife or whatever it is” (p.39). Bassnett claims that Plath examines the rigid forms of poetry, and the result of this exercise is the most conscious analysis of her poems. Plath does this linguistically as she expands and fashions language into astounding forms and moulds, and also in her choice of content, for example in “The Colossus” (1959) she is moulding the subject matter by her use of language. She likens her father’s death to that of a decaying statue. Other critics, too, have made mention of the formal structure in “The Colossus.” Roy Fuller (1966) emphasizes Plath’s craftsmanship and her ordered control. Bernard Bergonzi (1991) refers to the faithful characteristics of the poem’s style. Even “Daddy” (1962), demonstrates her use of techniques of parody and caricature. M.D. Uroff (1977) for example, argues that there is structure in Plath’s poetry which demonstrates that she was in possession of her emotions at the time of writing “Daddy.” He claims that an emphasis on the rhythm is just one example of the control and structure in the poem and the controlling rhyming and repetitive expressions are the ways in which Plath strives to avert the harmful “ghosts.” He goes on to argue that Plath is able to utilise her imagery with remarkable deftness. If, as Plath has claimed, “Daddy,” rather than being composed of uninformed
events, was in fact taken from events of her own life, this further substantiates the idea that her poems are fine examples of control and structure.

Critics such as Eileen Aird (1973), Marjorie Perloff (1986) and Robert Von Hallberg (1996) are further proponents of an intelligent structure in the poetry of Plath. Aird is keen to emphasise that the restrictive autobiographical element in “Daddy” in no way detracts from the all-encompassing melodramatic structure. When commenting on “Lady Lazarus” (1962) Aird focuses on the group suffering and the private distress. She claims there is in this poem a glaring discrepancy between the magnitude of the events recorded and the misdirected frivolity of the style of the poem. She states:

The vocabulary and rhythms which approximate to the colloquial simplicity of conversational speech, the frequent end-stopped lines, the repetitions which have the effect of mockingly counteracting the violence of the meaning, all establish the deliberately flippant note which this poem strives to achieve. (p. 82)

Aird also makes reference to the comprehensive and effective structure in “Lady Lazarus” which far surpasses the private component. If, as Aird believes, “Lady Lazarus” was carefully structured, it would also seem that Plath is distancing herself from her reader. Rather than being a poem of gruesome revelry, the form suggests it is one of unyielding solemnity. Aird also alleges that this poem is one of societal condemnation possessing a sound and instructive bent, a brilliant poem that lays bare enormously intricate cerebral capacity. Marjorie Perloff’s view reinforces the importance of the melodramatic structure highlighted by Aird when she says that “Daddy” has been excessively acclaimed for its skill “to elevate private facts into public myth” (p.33) and for overstating the “schizophrenic situation that gives the poem its terrifying but balanced polarity” (p.33). Robert Von Hallberg although clearly concurring with this view of structure and control in “Daddy” takes a somewhat different tack. For Von Hallberg the issue of concern and the bona fide biographical veracity of “Daddy,” are clearly inconsequential. It is the structure of the voice that is of paramount concern.
Allan Alvarez (1966) and Stanley Plumby (1988) are an additional two male critics to review Plath’s poetry favourably and to attest to the structure and cognition in her poems.

For Plumby, “[b]ehind the separate masks, all the masks of [Plath’s] good poems there is a unity and an integrity, and an integration of imagination that whatever the hammer-splitting of herself, behind the sad mask of the woman is the mind and heart of someone making transcendent poems” (p.68). Alvarez too refers to the form and intelligent control in Plath’s poetry. In his judgment:

The reasons for Sylvia Plath’s images are always there though sometimes you have to work hard to find them. She is in short always in intelligent control of her feelings … it seems to me that it was only by her determination to face her most inward and terrifying experiences and to use her intelligence in doing so – so as not to be overwhelmed by them that she managed to write these last poems which are at once deeply autobiographical and yet detached, generally relevant. (pp. 68-69)

It would appear from her 1962 interview with the British Council that Plath did achieve, in the eyes of many critics, just what she had aspired to:

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying – like madness, being tortured, this kind of experience – and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experiences should not be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (pp. 90-91)

It is evident from her statement that Plath’s expectation of her poetry is that it be controlled, structured, informed and intelligent.

Plath’s poetry underwent a meteoric evolution from its original control as exhibited in The Colossus (1959) to the innovative style of the poems in the Ariel (1965) group. Her poetry was now much more emotionally intense and we are better able to witness these emotions. One way to approach this shift positively, especially by feminist critics, has been to focus on the authenticity of the emotion. Thus Suzanne Juhasz (1989) argues that Plath’s poetry is indicative of performance, but in Plath’s particular case the speaker in her poems refutes the
perception of authenticity as shattered and forever fragmenting. It was only by means of poetry that Plath’s universe could be constructed and regulated. In this sense Juhasz argues that at the time of writing the poem “The Colossus” it was fabricated; in other words it deceived. In her later works, however, Plath becomes totally direct. By examining what is in her mind, Plath’s poems describe what is authentic – that is, her own consciousness. The representations of her own life are now contemplative of her life. It would seem Juhasz is putting forward an argument to support the premise that the more emotional poetry of *Ariel* is, in fact, more authentic than the structured poetry of *The Colossus*. This is similar to the argument of Alicia Ostriker (1986) who claims that Plath’s work evolved in the space of a few years from having a scholastic adherence to prescribed form into an outstanding and accomplished authentic form.

There are, however, critics who have judged her later poetry negatively for its overtly emotional emphasis. Amongst those critics who regard Plath’s emotional poetry as nothing more substantial than a doleful howl are Robert Lowell (1966), George Steiner (1970), Irving Howe (1972), David Shapiro (1977), Helen Vendler (1980), Christine Britzolakis (1999) and Tim Kendall (2001). Plath’s one-time teacher Lowell, in his introduction to the *Ariel* poems, comments that although Plath’s initial poems are well-crafted and traditional, her later poems demonstrate a reckless self-assurance and a feminine howl of female suffering. Irving Howe and George Steiner are in the company of those who denounce Plath for unashamedly expropriating the Holocaust as a metaphor for all wretchedness. Steiner poses the question regarding Plath’s Holocaust poetry of whether or not these last poems of Plath’s are wholly justifiable. Just how can anyone who was never involved in an event – and such a long time after it – call upon the simulations and paraphernalia of Auschwitz and take a magnitude of available emotion and address it to her individual and personal pain. Steiner puts forward the premise that it was only because of some dormant emotion, remembered by Plath solely as the result of the inventiveness of some terrible event, that “Daddy” appeared so real. The pain of the emotion is so inflammable that it can only be expressed by means of a primal yowl of pain. “Daddy” demonstrates the ability of
the poem to accord to reality the very considerable conclusiveness of the imagination.

In the view of Jaqueline Rose (1992) “Daddy” is unequivocally the most belligerent of all Plath’s poems. The fact that the poem deals with the murder of the father by his daughter must increase the psychological involvement. Graham Shaw (1966) wrote of “Daddy:”

> Within a week of her death, intellectual London was hunched over copies of a strange and terrible poem she had written in her last sick slide toward suicide. “Daddy” was its title; its subject was her morbid love-hatred of her father, its style was as brutal as a truncheon. What is more, “Daddy” was the first jet of flame from a literary dragon who in the last month of her life breathed a burning river of bile across the literary landscape. (p.38)

Nor did Irving Howe (1972) express any positive criticisms of “Daddy.” He believed it was nothing short of monstrous for Plath to compare her anger at her father to that directed at the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews in Europe. For Howe “Daddy” serves to emphasise how correct T.S. Eliot was in saying “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates”(p.3). Although agreeing with Howe that “Daddy” does appear to contravene shamelessly Eliot’s doctrine of impersonality, Christina Britzolakis (1999) believes that “Daddy” can be viewed as propelling Plath’s poetry to a dreadful extreme and in so doing giving this poem a manifestation of her intense anger towards her father.

David Shapiro, too, finds fault with the sensationalism of the emotional expression in Plath’s writing: “the whole tendency is to addiction dominated formlessness punctuated by hyperbole appealing to the emotions” (p.8). Helen Vendler has ambivalent views on Plath’s “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus.” On the one hand she views them as frenziedly cerebral in their random use of ideas, allegories and language and yet to a greater extent Vendler views these poems to be not at all intelligent. She justifies this ambivalence by arguing that “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” obstinately contradict, for no other reason than the dissonance of form, the balanced cogitations emanating from a centre. Rather, these poems manifest a savage dissipation of a “centrifugal spin” to more ranges
of violated emotions. In Vendler’s opinion they are written as a somewhat deafening rendering of what Plath has on occasion referred to as “the zoy woyl” (p.57).

Christine Britzolakis is of the opinion that “Lady Lazarus” is merely an emotional outburst. She regards the poem as being the one text in the canon of Sylvia Plath that has evoked the greatest condemnation because of the exploitation, melodramatic effects and ill-considered style. Tim Kendall has a singular view of Plath’s poems, arguing that the Ariel poems have frequently been dismissed for being unstructured. For Kendall however, this lack of structure is a deliberate attempt by Plath to conceal her scholarly skills. He believes on the contrary that her poetry should be construed in keeping with Wordsworth’s view that poetry is the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” rather than the result of fundamental and intentional judgment.

In summary, then, the critical consensus is that the early poetry of Sylvia Plath as exemplified by The Colossus conformed to a desirable structure and form. As Plath’s poems moved away from this structured form to unstructured poems such as those in Ariel, critics began to manifest strongly divergent views.

A similar split can be seen in the scholarship on Sexton, although the grounds for argument are different. It is the subject matter rather than the emotion that seems to be at the heart of criticism of the poetry of Anne Sexton. Perhaps more than any other female American poet, her work has been alternatively acclaimed and denounced largely on account of the topics she wrote about, issues that at the time of writing were considered to be socially off limits: topics such as abortion, the functions of the female body, suicide, insanity and adultery. The issues in Sexton’s poetry that attract much of the criticism are different from those in Plath’s poetry. Sexton’s poetry focuses largely on herself, her problems with her parents, her marriage, her children, her suicide attempts and her insanity, whereas Plath looked more at the people who caused her problems and the ones to whom she attributes blame.
Although she is frequently remembered for the confrontational component of her poetry, many critics argue that the technical structure and expertise of Sexton’s poetry surpass the contention in her work. In much of her early poems Sexton was immersed in writings that strongly adhered to structure, form and technique. “To Bedlam and Part Way Back” (1960) makes evident her use of rigorously structured metrical forms. Her later poems such as “Transformations” (1972) and “The Book of Folly,” (1974) are more unstructured and emotional.

Diana Hume-George (1989) accepts that much of Sexton’s poetry is structured; but argues that the writer is at the same time sympathetic to — and actually embraces her readers — in her poems. Hume-George also claims that even though Sexton’s canon expresses private life happenings it does not do so at the expense of authenticity and cognition. She not only focuses on the structure in Sexton’s poetry but on its emotional aspect. Unlike other critics she has positive comments to make on the emotional aspect of Sexton’s poetry. Hume-George argues that although Sexton was able to empathise with her reader she did not sacrifice the craft of her poetry. Rather, Sexton engaged her intricate adroitness to “use a metaphorical language, an analogy with something ordinary that the hearer will understand” (p.117). In other words, Sexton assimilated the superficially opposing, but deeply similar ways, of thinking represented by poetry and psychoanalysis.

Suzanne Juhasz (1976) makes a similar argument, that craft and form are the key criteria when considering Sexton’s early poetry. In addition, through Sexton’s skilful use of poetic device, the persona and voice in the poem are used both as a part of the poem for the person who is writing it and as a craft formed and structured to match the requirements of the poem. As Juhasz says: “The art of Levertov, Plath and Sexton is often so exciting because this personal quality involves, engages and commits the reader [as well as the poet] in the poem” (p.42).

Lynette McGrath (2002) affirms that Sexton’s poetry underwent textual modifications, from poetry that confronted itself and enveloped the poet to poetry that embraced the reader. In the opinion of Steven Gould Axelrod (1989) The
Awful Rowing towards God” (1974) poems characterise the unstructured style of Sexton’s later poems: “Like many another American writer, she shed the coat of form in her drive toward naked truth” (p.65). For McGrath however, this moving away from syntactically structured poems to an unstructured style does not constitute poetic deficiency; rather it demonstrates an intrepid option to engage the reader in the poem and to draw him/her into the poet’s life events. She argues that even though some of Sexton’s more unstructured poems resulted in some censorious mistakes they did in fact broaden her oeuvre. She uses the example of “The Rowing Endeth” (1974) to demonstrate the way in which Sexton combines coherence in the structure of her poems and her ability to draw the reader into the poem. McGrath further claims that much of the deprecatory reactions to Sexton’s poems are influenced by their bigoted and deficient interpretation of two cultural questions influencing poems written by females. Firstly, many readers frequently judge biographical data written by women callously or superficially, and arrive at the conclusion that they were intellectual nonentities. Secondly, critics customarily interpret such material as lacking in form and style. It can be argued then that although the poetry of Sexton demonstrates emotion, it nevertheless embodies style, form and intelligence.

Poetry has, in the view of Sarah Evans (2001) been a means of conveying open-minded proclamations on society. These writings have in the past however, been a reflection of the temperament and the emotion of the writer. In the mid-1960s Sexton began to write poetry that was less structured and was emotionally both personal and prejudiced. She moved back from the dispassionate aspect of poetry to scrutinise herself and her life and to disclose all the repulsive and exquisite aspects of her life in a totally uncensored and emotional manner.

It is not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that Sexton deliberately set out to draw adverse criticism by her choice of adversarial topics which were so common in her poetry. In Sexton’s own words “Pain engraves a deeper meaning” (McClatchy 1978 p.27). Sexton’s words resonate with those of Franz Kafka which Sexton had inscribed in one of her books: “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” (Letter to Oskar Brop. January 27 1904).
By and large, the majority of female critics have judged the later poetry of Sexton positively because it is emotionally authentic. There are, however, exceptions. Critics such as Mona Van Duyn (1974) and Patricia Meyer-Spacks (1978) have made negative comments about Sexton’s poetry. Spacks believes Sexton was aided in the type of poetry she wrote by the social climate of the time, when it was in vogue for poets, particularly women poets, to flaunt their wretchedness. For Spacks the lyrics in “Live or Die” (1966) are impaired by the screeching self-love, and the mawkishness, and for the intentional striving to innate emotion for the sake of emotion and the neglect to assess the poetry by any logical benchmarks. Spacks further comments: “art requires more than emotional indulgence, it requires a saving respect for disciplines and realities beyond the crying needs, the unrelenting appetites of the self” (p.189). She states that Sexton’s poems exhibited:

[a]n apparent incapacity for self-criticism, which was either moral or aesthetic. Scholars who disparage confessional poems suggest that they lack control over, and distance from, their subject matter, a control which they equate with the objectivity imposed by the poetic craft. Scholars who praise confessional work also accept the lack of distance from subject matter, often celebrating the poet’s rejection of formal artifice for experience. (p.21)

If there was a high degree of negativity in Sexton’s poems it was relatively negligible to the volume of negative criticism her poetry attracted. For example, James Dickey (1988) was deeply shocked by Sexton’s poetry. In his review of “To Bedlam and Back” (1960) he writes:

Anne Sexton’s poems so obviously come out of deep painful sections of the author’s life that one’s literary opinion scarcely seems to matter, one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering. (p.65)

Dickey is undoubtedly referring to the obvious biographical data in Sexton’s writing. His use of the word “naked” only serves to emphasise his view that “To Bedlam and Back” (1960) is emotional. There is, however, the suggestion in his use of the word “naked” that the emotion is unconcealed and authentic. Thom Gunn (1978) shares Dickey’s views on Sexton’s poetry. He believes that “It may well be that she is most credible when she fictionalizes her experience; certainly
she is at her best when she presents indirectly or from a distance.” (p.126). He further claims that her poems are too similar to utterances, and that she has failed to modify her experiences through her art and her art was rather too authentic a delivery.

Dickey, even whilst acquiescing that the private events of Sexton’s life give rise to her writing, denounces the poem for:

[s]training to make contrivance and artificiality appear natural … a writer of Mrs. Sexton’s seriousness, and with her terrible story to tell, would avoid this kind of thing at any price. (p.64)

Here Dickey has taken his comment on the unstructured aspect of Sexton’s poetry a step further. Even though Dickey accepts that the private events of Sexton’s life give rise to her writings, he nevertheless denounces her poetry. In his review of “All My Pretty Ones” (1962), his comments were even more scathing. He says “[i]t would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experiences, as though that would make her writing more real” (p.63).

Charles Gullans (1989) speaks for other reviewers as well as himself in his condemnation of the highly personal and biographical subject-matter of Sexton’s poetry. He argues that her poetry provoked such extreme reactions simply because reviewers objected to having so much personal information forced upon them. He comments that “[t]hese are not poems at all … and I feel that I have, without right or desire, been made a third party to her conversation with her psychiatrist. It is painful, embarrassing and irritating” (p.229).

Perhaps one of the harshest criticisms of Sexton’s skill as a poet came from Paul Breslin (1988):

The emphasis on the actual encouraged poets to forget that experience can enter poetry only as mediated by language. Lowell, Berryman and Plath had worked too long and too hard at the technical elements of their art to forget this entirely, but in a confessional poet of the second rank such as Anne Sexton, the damage done by liberalism becomes all too obvious. (p.53)
For Breslin, Sexton’s progressive inclusion of emotion in poetry was too much and in his opinion was done without due regard for structure and form.

Cecil Henley (1988) agrees that Sexton has much too biographical data in her poems. In his assessment of “All My Pretty Ones” he argues that “there is no doubt that the poet wants us to associate ourselves with the ‘I’ in the poem” (p.18). He reasons that by using the “I” in “The Truth the Dead Know” (1962), Sexton makes it obvious that it is she herself who did not drive to the cemetery. In Henley’s opinion, when Sexton begins this kind of rationalisation then the poem begins to disintegrate. M.L. Rosenthal (1988) criticises Sexton’s poetry on much the same grounds: that is, by focusing on, repudiating and nullifying the persona in her poetry:

> The poetry is in the Pity, as Wilfred Owen says – the ultimate referent is the private suffering, whose private dimensions were more self-evident in his poetry of war than in Mrs. Sexton’s poetry of madness. I do not wish to push the point any further, poetry is the issue. (p.71)

For some critics the deeply personal and biographical element in Sexton’s poetry is unproblematic. McClatchy (1978) argues that Sexton and other like-minded poets have attempted, as it were, to “de-repress” poetry and by doing so have achieved their desired outcomes by alternative techniques. Sexton chose poetry as a way to reveal her own private circumstances. It is poetry “[t]hat can include and reflect personal experience; a human rather than a disembodied voice; the dramatic presentation of the flux of time and personality; and the drive towards sincerity” (p.225).

Frederick Reisz (1983), readily acknowledging the profoundly personal suffering in Sexton’s poems, also reviews them positively:

> Sexton’s poems are intently and intensely personal. Often the imagery is striking. Feeling is paramount. For some of them, images almost run wild in a type of free association of consciousness and what arises from the subconscious. These are poems hot with the depth of suffering. (p.70)

The personal and biographical content of Sexton’s poetry is also lauded by Kathleen Spivak (1989). She maintains that Sexton employed her poetry to find
meaning for her life; that she was able to modify her emotional confusion into poems. Spivak proposes:

That she lived an inner life of tumult must be said. But what must be celebrated is her outstanding gift as a poet, her ability to transmit that private struggle into compressed, felt moving human utterance, poetry. (p.231)

Perhaps one of the most sincere compliments on Sexton’s writings, although clearly acknowledging its biographical component, came from her long-time friend, colleague and fellow poet, Maxine Kumin (1981). According to Kumin the events of Sexton’s problematic and disordered life are well-documented: there has not been another American woman poet in recent times who has wept so openly or so bitterly over so much of her private life. Sexton’s poetry was well received by many readers, in particular women readers who were able to empathise so deeply with the female element in her poetry. Kumin sums up her total allegiance and positive criticism of Sexton’s poetry when she says:

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton; who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which twenty years later, seems far less daring. She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for society … her very frankness succored many who clung to her poems as to the Holy Grail. (p. xxiv)

Related justifications of the biographical aspect of Sexton’s poetry are advanced by Suzanne Juhasz (1989) and Linda Wagner-Martin (1989). Wagner-Martin claims that readers reacted so positively to Sexton’s poetry because she was dauntless enough to reveal openly such private events of her life, which so many other women experience, but choose not to discuss. Sexton was the voice for the hitherto shrouded and private domain of all wretchedness. She continues by equating the suffering in Sexton’s life to the ambivalence in her poetry:

It is a paradigmatic expression of centuries of inherent conflict, divided loyalty, the ambivalence of pride and disdain, love and hate. As an
expression of such ambivalence, “The Double Image” (1960) becomes every reader’s poem. Almost immediately upon her becoming a poet, Sexton was tapping into archetypal conflicts – human concerns that were meaningful to most human lives. (p.2)

Wagner-Martin also addresses the emotional component of Sexton’s poems. Rather than the emotion in Sexton’s “The Double Image” being an unrestrained howl Wagner-Martin argues that in this poem Sexton is, through the imagery of guilt, demonstrating the shaping spirit in the poem and manifesting the cognition in the poetry.

In discussing the emotion in Sexton’s poetry, Juhasz and Diane Middlebrook (1992) concur with Wagner-Martin and Thomas McDonell (1989) that the emotion is an authentic attempt to reach readers who have had similar emotional experiences. Middlebrook echoes the views of McDonell when she says, “Anne Sexton was one of those rare poets whose work was cherished by a wide audience because her voice gave such powerful expression to the anger and pain of women at a time when anger and pain were sparking modern feminism” (p.79).

A quality that Juhasz believes is revealed in Sexton’s poems is the actual awareness of the poet herself as a person who is in touch with her readers and who engages with her poetry. For Sexton her poems are a vehicle by which she communicates with people. If Sexton was able to be “in touch with her readers” and to “engage with her poetry,” through the emotional issues of her life, to do so effectively implies a high degree of cognition and intuition. If her poetry was nothing more than an unstructured howl the impact upon her readers would not have been so powerful.

Critics such as Anne Marie Seward (1997) have attested to the combination of emotion and control, structure and an absence of structure in Sexton’s poetry. Throughout her poems Sexton integrated the madness of the times with structure and creative control in much the same way as did Sylvia Plath. Sexton combined the structure in her poems with the emotional events in her life, dealing with such issues as madness and related personal dramas, without losing sight of the artistry and form within her poetry. In “Flee on Your Donkey” (1962) she employs
dreams and analysis to scrutinise her background and actually talks about her “eyes circling into my childhood, / eyes newly cut.” Sexton is implying that she is using the structure of analysis to see again, but in some respects for the very first time to see her early life. Sexton’s poetry is in this sense structured. She is analysing her past in order to make sense of her present.

In summary, then, the scholarship on Sexton has been quite divided. For some critics the confrontational aspect of her poetry did not detract from the structure in her poetry. Other critics, however, judge her poetry negatively, arguing that the high levels of emotion in her poems detract from the content of the poems. They also claim that her poetry was written without due regard to structure and form.

A comparable divide is discernible in the scholarship on Rich. The rationale for the debate is however, dissimilar. Much of Rich’s poetry emphasises change in the world and is much less concerned with self than the poetry of Plath and Sexton. For the past fifty years Adrienne Rich has been – and she remains today – a major social and political commentator on the American way of life. In the words of Deborah Pope: “Over the years hers has become one of the most eloquent, provocative voices on the politics of, sexuality, race, language, power and women’s culture” (p.1).

Rich’s early poetry was fashioned on the male authoritative poets at that time. As her career progressed, however there was a dramatic change in Rich’s poems. Pope comments that in 1951 when Auden chose Rich’s initial poem, “A Change of World” (1951), for insertion in the Yale Younger Poets Series, the preface he wrote in Rich’s book gained infamy for its glaring suggestions of the male patronising manner towards women (p.iv). Wendy Martin (1984) commenting on the structure in Rich’s early poems, claims that they are “artfully crafted poems about her experience and preoccupation as an undergraduate [demonstrating] command of technique of a young poet” (p.174). Martin implies however, that even in her earlier poetry Rich demonstrated the way in which her poetry would develop in the next decade. Martin continues, alleging that “praise for meeting traditional standards gave her the courage to be innovative and to break social and poetic convention in her later works” (p.175).
In Rich’s later poems the form of her poetry began to change. As so many critics have said of her poetry, and Rich has said too, poetry is largely about change. According to Rich the change in her writing was brought about by a statement of James Baldwin’s (1961): “any real change implies the break up of the world as one has already known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety” (p.117). This change has been influenced in part by shifts in ground of the perceptions of her era. Throughout the 1960s Rich’s poetry was influenced by political and social issues of the time. She broke free of the formal structure of her original verse. The vast majority of critics focus on the structure in the early poems of Adrienne Rich and her move away to a less structured, more emotional and impassioned poetry in her later poems.

Reviews of her poems have traced a diverse course. On the one hand, in the opinion of Carol Muske (1997), promoters of Rich’s original poems bemoan the disappearance of her “comfortable poetry.” For other (and on the whole well-disposed) critics, she has become a guiding light for the influence and impact of women poets.

Claims of disproportionate instructiveness pursued Rich’s middle and to some extent her later career. It has been claimed by some critics that this didacticism undermined the extent of her accomplishments. When writing “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” (1979) Rich speaks of the structure and formalism in her early poetry – in particular in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (1951):

I know that my style was formed first by male poets: by the men I was reading as an undergraduate – Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNiece, Stevens and Yeats. What I chiefly learned from this was craft. But poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don’t know you know. Looking back at poems I wrote before I was twenty-one, I’m startled because beneath the conscious craft are glimpses of the split I even then experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men. “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” written while I was a student, looks with deliberate detachment at this split. (pp.39-40)

Even in a structured poem such as “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” Rich demonstrates emotional concerns for marginalised members of society. Alice Templeton (1995)
highlights similar concerns. Whilst readily acknowledging the structure and traditional craft in the poem, Templeton believes “Planetarium” (1968) lays the foundations for an escalating interconnection between political affairs and lyrics in Rich’s poetry. This demonstrates the way in which Rich was able to attempt alternative forms, for the collection of private topics in her poems which permitted the thematic to develop into societal issues.

With the appearance of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1960) Rich begins to move away from formal and structured poetry with its attention to form and craft, to more personal observations. “Snapshots …” is a radical departure from her earlier structure and this particular poem posed problems for many critics. Margaret Atwood (1979) recognises in this poem Rich’s use of a highly personal voice and unrestrained verse to articulate and call for upheaval. Atwood believes that Rich does so by combining social circumstances with the private aspects of her existence that were also encountered by her readers. She continues, with references to “Diving into the Wreck”. In this poem the reader is obliged to make up their minds, not just with regard to an opinion about the poem, but at a personal level about their own life. The poem accepts risks and compels the reader to do the same.

These later poems represented a fundamental – and for many critics a questionable – deviation from Rich’s original formalism. Deborah Pope (1995) is in total agreement with Atwood when she describes “Snapshots” as a “watershed in Rich’s poetic development” (p.81). The poem has a relaxed more confidential structure in which Rich positions her data and emotions in opposition to concepts of language, and instances of life. Pope continues, however, that for some critics “Snapshots” was regarded as too caustic and scathing towards men, and the move away from her previous adherence to form and the lack of emotional restraint was not well received. On making her comments on “Snapshots” in “When We Dead Awaken” Rich herself says:

Over two years I wrote a ten-part poem called “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” in a longer looser mode than I’ve ever trusted myself with before. It was an extraordinary relief to write that poem. It strikes me now as too literary, too dependent on allusion. I have not found the courage yet to do
without authorities or even to use the pronoun “I.” The woman in the poem is always she. (pp. 44-45)

For Rich to abandon well-received formal poetry took, in the opinion of the poet Carol Muske (1997), a great deal of courage. Rich’s literary future as it stood was assured, yet she had the courage to take on an entire innovative form of writing in her verse.

This idea of innovation in her writing is substantiated in her discussion with Wendy Martin (1984), where Rich outlines her idea that form ought to come from the intervention of the dynamics between language and the unconscious:

> A poem can’t exist without form, but it should be the results of dynamics or dialogue between what is coming out of the unconscious and what is coming out of language, and everything that means rhythm and sound and tone and repetition and the way words can ring off each other. (p.7)

Although a number of critics viewed Rich’s poems as lacking in structure, they argued that the emotion in them was nonetheless authentic. Cynthia Hogue (1995) and Liz Yorke (1997) were amongst those critics who believed that the use of emotion in “Snapshots …” was a legitimate attempt by Rich not only to inform readers of history’s gallant women through the ages, but to involve them and to enable them to be affected by these women. Yorke commenting on Rich’s break from form and tradition in her writing states:

> Rich believes in and indeed, depends on the active participant reader who will hear her words, for a significant transformation of awareness to happen. Always a provocative voice, her words have challenged, warned, wrestled with and reflected on the major cultural and political issues of our times. (p.132)

By the 1960s Rich was, by her use of language, trying to reach her readers and encourage them to liberate their passions in the same way she herself was doing. Hogue is in full agreement with Yorke when she suggests that “imaginary interaction between reader and poetic text generates a potential for ‘revolutionary’ action, or marginal transformation” (p.198).
The acknowledgment by critics of the authenticity in the poetry of Plath and Sexton is also extended to Rich. Alice Templeton (1995) in commenting on the authenticity of the unstructured aspect of Rich’s poetry suggests Rich’s rationale is to involve and draw in her readers. In *The Dream and the Dialogue*, Templeton states:

Rich’s poetics depend on a reader’s experience of her poetry. It is an event of cultural engagement in which the poems, resonating with and against each other, urge the reader to test various hermeneutics and ideological stances and it requires the dialogue interaction among poet, poem, reader and ultimate content. For those reasons the reader is indispensable to Rich’s feminist poetic. (p.33)

There were a number of critics who regarded Rich’s poetry as being neither structured nor authentically unstructured. For those critics her poetry was merely an emotional cry of pain. When commenting on *Of Woman Born* (1981) Yorke claims that:

>[f]emale biology … has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for those reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, and the corporeal ground of our intelligence. (p. 13-14)

Rich’s attitude invited an abundance of negative criticism, from critics such as Elaine Showalter (1985) and Janet Sayers (1986). Sayers claims that Rich committed the crime of “essentialism” in her poetry. She also condemns Rich for “affirming a particular cultural representation and imagery of femininity … of woman as a plenitude of sexuality” (p.66).

Wendy Martin (1984), Alicia Ostriker (1986), Mathew Rothschild (1994), and Liz Yorke (1997) have all commented that Rich’s poems are concerned about change in the world. And it would seem that both the positive and negative criticisms of Rich have already centred on this passion. Martin discusses Rich’s attitude towards changes in relationships between men and women, as well as women and
women. Ostriker describes Rich as a poet who cannot reconcile herself to lives that do not wish to change themselves, others and the world. In an interview with Rich, Rothschild puts his views quite succinctly when he comments on “Sources” that “[s]he is a woman with a mission … to change the laws of history.” Yorke too has claimed that Rich wanted to encourage women to listen to their own voices and those of other women and to abandon their traditional silences. Rich not only exhorts women to listen to each other but to listen to men. It would appear that Rich is emphasising the importance of the content and the subject matter of poetry and the practical and beneficial purpose it can serve in our lives and relationships over the form and structure of poetry.

Hogue agrees that Rich’s poetry has been largely about change. She likens Rich’s poetic journey to that of H.D., beginning in a self-effacing manner with attention to diplomatic execution. This aspect of Rich’s poetry too was commented on by Auden, but then in a similar fashion it develops, like H.D., vehemently and tenaciously. Rich wrote in “Diving into the Wreck” (1972): “We are, I am, you are / by cowardice or courage / the ones who find our way / back to this scene / carrying a knife, a camera / a book of myths / in which our names do not appear. To write “our names … into the book of myths which until now they do not appear.”

Rodrigo Cabral (2001) believes that Rich championed the cause of change for herself and her readers by means of her poetry. He states that in keeping with their title, the poems in The Will to Change Poems (1951) espouse change as a consequence of her poetry. “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” (1968) is the first poem in which Rich introduces prose into a poem. Cabral suggests that by so doing Rich sets up a mode of closeness with her readers, in which she implies a kind of female rapport – of an intimate, neighbourly kind (p.64).

Rich utilises language as an avenue for change. The emotion is there, but it is authentic emotion arising from genuine concern over events and happenings in the world or in personal relationships. Paul Lauter (1973) discusses the emphasis on change and power in Rich’s poetry. In Lies, Secrets and Silence (1979) Rich deliberates over the power of language as a medium for change and for power.
which ultimately affects all our associations and relationships. Martin sums up Rich’s writings most concisely when she says:

Adrienne Rich is a poet whose work has influenced the lives of many of her readers. She acknowledges that it is a profound responsibility and privilege to be a poet whose work is read by so many. As a radical feminist Rich has written poetry that is politically charged, refusing to accept the criticism that art and activism are antithetical, her poems combine lyricism and tightly constructed lines characterised by elegant assonance, conscience, slant rhyme, and onomatopoeia, with quotations and slogans from anti-war and feminist statements. (p.49)

Perhaps Rich herself sums up the component of change in her writing best of all when she says in “Tear Gas:”

The will to change begins in the body not in the mind.
My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding with every act of resistance and each of my failures.
Locked in the closet at 4 years old I beat the wall with my body that act is in me still.

Critics then have judged the early poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich positively, and have regarded this early poetry as both well-structured and perceptive in employing the categories used by the critics: structured, authentically emotional, or an emotional howl. It is only when these poets move away from their strict adherence to craft and form and their poetry becomes emotional — either in an authentic emotional way or as a hysterical wail — that their poetry is judged negatively by some critics.

By contrast this thesis will argue that their later poetry is substantial not simply because it exhibits simply authentic experience but because it is profoundly structured. This thesis teases out the structure of this supposedly unstructured poetry and the cognitive dimension in the poetry. I am not saying these three women poets feel angry, and that therefore their emotion is authentic; I want to show that the anger is of itself inherently structured. Anger is one of the cognitive dimensions of dealing with the world. The argument that I advance shows the patterns or the structures in these supposedly unstructured and emotional poems. The emotion in their poetry needs, then, to be thought of differently, as a
dimension of cognition. The grounds for this approach are addressed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO: EMOTIONS, COGNITION AND POETRY

This chapter examines the cognitive dimension of the emotions and the views of a number of theorists of the emotions in relation to these cognitive dimensions, in order to establish the way this might affect our understanding of emotion in poetry. In this thesis the use of the emotions to shed light on the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich offers a new standpoint. To date there has been a frequently held preconception that the way in which Plath, Sexton and Rich use emotions in their poetry is neither structured nor intelligent. In this thesis I argue that this is not the case in all instances. Martha Nussbaum (2001) challenges theorists of emotion who perceive emotion to be irrational states attached to a rational thought process. In her opinion emotions are not mere energies that push us around, attempting to overthrow reason. They are themselves forms of conscious and unconscious judgements of things we regard as important in our lives. Ralph Adolphs and Antonio Damasio (2000) contend that “our understanding of emotion has lagged behind our knowledge of most other domains of cognition, both theoretically and empirically” (p.194). They continue that research into the neurobiology of emotions, previously much ignored, is now gaining more notice. Robert Solomon (1993) expresses his concern about the view that emotions are bereft of intelligent thought. It is his aim “to shift the emotions, from their traditional demeaning role as unintelligent distractions and intrusions into the life of reason, to essential features of reason itself” (p.vii). They attribute this in great measure to the reality that emotion has only in the past few decades been deemed part of cognition.

This chapter looks at recent theories in the literature to clarify characteristics of emotional processing and cognition. Amongst those theorists who argue that emotion and logic are not isolated aspects of human function are Alexander Savitsky (1989), Mohan Mallen (1998), Scott McLemee and Michael Gilbert (2004). Savitsky puts forward the case that feelings become psychologically relevant when combined with cognitive processes and that the combination of the emotional and the cognitive measurement is essential for one’s consciousness of events. Mallen also believes emotions to be cognitive: “Human emotions are
cognitive in the following sense; they are triggered by a cognitive assessment of a situation, typically an interactive, or even a social situation and lead to a cognitive state with regard to action” (p.28). McLemee supports this stance and claims that current scholarship calls into doubt the premise that it is possible to sever feelings from thought, and that emotion is a purely isolated substance detached from past events and background. He believes the recent work in cognitive science has demonstrated that reason and emotion are inseparably connected to the brain. Gilbert argues that “… there has arisen a consensus in the field that emotions are integral to human activity and that the separation of emotion from reason is at best tenuous and at worst spurious” (p.1). The crux of the debate here is whether emotions are a driving force bereft of rationality, or whether they contain a degree of cognition.

In recent years, there has been something of an explosion of scholarly works on the cognitive dimensions of the emotions. Work by Martha Nussbaum, Robert Solomon, Antonio Damasio, Peter Goldie, Jesse Prinz, Michael Lacewing, York Gunther, Matthew Ratcliffe and Mohan Mallen, to mention but a few, has made a significant difference to how we understand the emotions. Whilst these scholars agree that emotions have a cognitive dimension, they do, however, stress different aspects: emotions are judgements; emotions possess intentionality; emotions are conscious; and emotions are rational and purposive. Each of these distinct characteristics of the cognitive dimensions of emotions will be examined in turn.

Perhaps the theorist most closely associated with the argument that emotions are judgments is Martha Nussbaum. In Morality and Emotions (1998) Nussbaum, an avowed Aristotelian, states that Aristotle associated emotion with judgement, that is, the judgements involved in emotions are true and appropriate, for example, grief at the death of a loved one. In the early part of Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (2001) Nussbaum advances and supports a cognitive theory of the emotions. In the tradition of the Stoics, she argues that emotions are not merely feelings, but cognitive judgements. We use our emotions to make judgements concerning the value that people or possessions have to us. Using a personal example of her mother’s death, Nussbaum explains that her grief for her
loss was best understood by her as a judgement of the position her mother had held in her life, her welfare and her past. Nussbaum is in disagreement with the conventional notion that categorises emotions as thoughtless and irrational. She constructs a forceful case for viewing emotions as cognitive “value judgments” that attribute to people and objects, enormous consequence. Nussbaum goes on to state that emotions embody a component of judgment and a perception of the world. She explicates: say a person is angry at X for committing Y, her anger exhibits an implied judgment – for example, X could have behaved in another way and the behaviour of X had adversarial outcomes for her state of contentment.

On a similar tack, Michael Lacewing (2005) observes that there is currently much debate concerning the emotions and their ability to affect sound ethical decisions. Accepting that emotions are evaluative responses, in what way can we differentiate what are “appropriate” emotional reactions that lead us to morally accepted views and “inappropriate” emotional responses that display our intolerance? It is usually supposed that reason, when viewed as separate from emotion, will be able to discriminate. Lacewing, however, believes this view to be totally erroneous. He contends that rational thought is perilously deficient in the absence of emotional input.

A second body of scholarship argues that emotions have intentionality. In the view of York Gunther (2002), for example, the simple manner of differentiating feelings from emotions is to concede that emotions have intentionality and are distinct from desires; emotions possess cognitive preconditions. He shores up his claim by giving examples of the way we discuss emotions. For example, Mary fears she will be late for work. In Gunther’s opinion, if emotions did not have intentionality they would not be able to have a convincing place in intentional interpretations. In *Emotion Is Essential to All Intentional Behaviours* (2000), Lewis and Granic define emotion as a characteristic of intentional behaviour. They examine the neuro-dynamics of intentional behaviour, giving prominence to the limbic system, which steers the autonomic and the neuro-endocrine systems in the brain and the body. Lewis and Granic emphasise that a fundamental
component of intentionality is to comprehend the sensory consequences of our own actions. They stress the nature of intentional behaviour is that all of our actions are emotional and simultaneously they have reasons and explanations.

These views are substantiated by Jesse Prinz. In *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (2004) he claims that emotions are intentional in two respects. Emotions have both formal and particular objects. In Prinz’s view all fears involve danger which is the formal object. Many researchers have interpreted this theory by concluding that emotions of necessity assume judgments concerning a person’s association with their background. Intentionality causes emotions to be responsive to reasoned measurement. If we were to presume that emotions were purely perceptions of the body, then they would only illustrate the body being in a particular state.

A third group of scholars considers that emotions are conscious. Neurologist Antonio Damasio is renowned for his scholarly work on the emotions. In *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (1995), he reasons that emotions exercise a significant role in rational decision-making. In his experiments on emotion Damasio has documented the way in which patients who have sustained injuries to the brain centres that produce emotions develop significant impairment in their ability to make decisions. In *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (2003) Damasio is particularly concerned with the theory that emotions are conscious. In his view the physiological processes, which are an element of an emotional reaction, are, in evolutionary language, prior to the conscious elements of the emotion – that is, emotions are linked to conditions of the body and are an essential element of the biological system of homeostasis.

Damasio draws on the work of William James (1890) who maintains that consciousness is indispensable in animals evolved to a higher degree to enable them to deal with the largest variety of data they obtain from their surroundings and the range of feasible actions they need to select from. Damasio believes consciousness evolves from feelings, bringing emotions into conscious awareness, thereby demonstrating the feasibility of the brain directing emotional activities.
He further claims that, as human beings are capable of decision-making and abstract feelings, this enables them to take emotion into the rational decision-making system. All of this persuades Damasio that emotions – and, more especially, their conscious part, that is “feelings” – perform a key function in conveying recollections from former events to influence decision-making.

In the view of Aldo Mosca (2000) the focal point of Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error* is his “somatic marker hypothesis” in which he claims that rational decision-making would be determined by discernible somatic reactions a person employs. Mosca also examines Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (1999) and the way in which Damasio grapples with the Gordian knot of consciousness. Damasio locates his debate against the neurobiological theory of emotion and feelings established in the body. Mosca believes that Damasio identifies two questions of consciousness. The first is to make clear how neural patterns create mental “images.” Secondly, the problem of consciousness is to explicate the way in which “we have a sense of self in the act of knowing” (p.9). According to Damasio “[t]here is no consciousness that is not self-consciousness” (p.20). In Damasio’s wording “self-consciousness” or “core-consciousness” is a second-order form of the mind. Moreover, Damasio differentiates core-consciousness, which incorporates autobiographical memory, from the consciousness of time.

Bruce Charlton (1999), in a review of Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens*, argues that Damasio’s views are grounded in the neuro-scientific conceptualization of brain activity. This basic system was gleaned initially from research on the visual network – that is, that designs in the exterior world match with designs of nerve cell function in the brain. These brain designs are labelled cognitive representation. It follows, then, that the process of thinking is carried out by models of nerve cell actuation. Emotions are cognitive manifestations of body conditions, which are an element of homeostatic action through which the inner milieu is scanned and directed. In *Looking for Spinoza* (2003) Damasio claims that the inner milieu affects behaviour of the entire organism. Chandra Sripada and Stephen Stich (2002) believe that Damasio makes a compelling claim that the
emotions exercise a central place in rational decisiveness. If the organization behind the emotions fails to perform, Damasio contends that rational decisiveness fails.

A related but slightly different understanding of the cognitive dimension in emotions is put forward by a number of theorists who argue that emotions are rational and purposive. In his review of Robert Solomon’s *Not Passion’s Slave: Emotions and Choice*, Matthew Ratcliffe (2003) delineates Solomon’s argument in opposition to the time-honoured belief that emotions are simply affects or feelings. Solomon concedes that emotions are usually accompanied by feeling. He maintains however, that these feelings are not an indispensable component of the emotions. In comparison to the affect theories, Solomon reasons that emotions are “rational and purposive, more like actions than occurrences that happens to us” (p.3). Solomon further argues that a person’s emotions are tightly linked to that person’s evaluation of a set of circumstances. He gives the following example: if X wrongly assumes Y has calumniated her, X will get angry with Y, but only until she grasps that her opinions with respect to Y were misinformed. Subsequent to this comprehension the feelings connected with the emotion could remain, but the actual emotion will evaporate, implying that the emotion is either swayed or made up from a person’s logical estimation of a state of affairs (p.12). Solomon continues that the irrationality frequently attributed to emotions is indicative of the circumstances to which they are a response: “Emotions are, we are told, urgent responses to desperate situations” (p.12). Thus, no doubt emotions sometimes seem irrational and thoughtless, but in fact they are purposive and frequently deliberate.

In light of these recent scholarly interests in the emotions, now would seem an appropriate time to reassess the poetry, in particular the later poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich in order to arrive at a new understanding of the role of emotion in that poetry. The recognition of cognitive elements in emotional states is critical in this respect, because it impacts directly on the traditional theories of poetry. We might come to this by asking, with Moore and Arnold (2004): “Can poetry, given its inherently structured nature, adequately
express the rawness of an emotion such as anger?” (p.5). The remainder of this chapter analyses three poems, one each by Plath, Sexton and Rich, in the light of these various approaches to the cognitive dimensions in the emotions, in order to reveal the cerebral component in their poems.

**Sylvia Plath, “Daddy” (1962)**

In “Daddy” (1962) Plath is making a judgement concerning the place her father Otto had in her life. I would argue that the emotions Plath depicts in “Daddy” are cognitive value judgments that had enormous consequences in her life. This is in keeping with the views of Nussbaum that emotions are not just feelings, but cognitive judgments. As stated earlier, Nussbaum (2001) claims that we make judgments about the value people have in our lives. In “Daddy” Plath was assessing the value her father had in her life. In this poem Plath equates emotion and reason. She openly acknowledges “Daddy” was written in response to her emotional experiences. These emotional experiences are not, according to Uroff (1977), “uninformed ones from the heart” (p.112), but an example of Plath using her considerable and intricate control to focus on the rhymes and rhythms of the tempo and the speaker’s words in order to reveal the truth behind the speaker’s words.

We are able to witness the link between the emotions and cognition in “Daddy”. Initially Plath gives the reader a detailed description of her father, taking pains to explain the reasons she is scared of him. Her emotions take the form of evaluative judgments. What we witness here is the way in which emotion and cognition are articulated in this poem. “Daddy” expresses certain states that will also be of importance in Nussbaum’s work on emotion as judgment. Plath informs the reader of the type of father she perceived him to be and the way she would have preferred him to be:

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue. Panzer-man, panzer-man, O you
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You.
Plath manifests, by the use of numerous metaphors, her understanding that her father was a Nazi Panzer man. Although the construction of these lines is very controlled, Plath is using these images to justify her anger towards her father. She does so by getting across to the reader the idea that her perception of her father as a Nazi caused her to be afraid of him. Plath is experiencing the emotion of anger as a cognitive judgment in the way Nussbaum claims emotions are cognitive judgments which attribute to other persons great consequences. Plath was angry with her father for certain actions when he could have behaved otherwise, and she judged him accordingly.

Plath continues by comparing her father, the teacher, to that of a black devil of a man:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who
Bit my pretty red heart in two.

Plath describes her father as a reasonable man, a teacher, even an attractive man. She goes on to describe how the aesthetically acceptable cleft in the chin is actually a façade for the evil man Otto really is. In using the colours black and red — “black man,” “red heart” — Plath is once again implying the fear and danger she associates with her father. In “Daddy” Plath uses images of various colours to give overall coherence to the poem. The colours associated with Plath suggest goodness, whereas the ones describing Otto imply a degree of evil. Much of this judgement of the father by Plath reflects the views espoused by Nussbaum (2001) that, because to a great extent a child’s life is formed in infancy and childhood, these judgements will appear more like feelings than judgements. Nussbaum reasons, however, that childhood happenings are, in reality, experiences of judgment and these judgments will remain with a person through to maturity. To Plath her father was initially her teacher, the one who taught her the Latin names for biological specimens and all about bees and their habits. Now she judges him
to have been a hypocrite who initially had appeared to be normal: “A cleft in your chin instead of your foot.” (“Daddy”) But ultimately he betrayed her.

In stanza one, Plath is the white foot living in the black shoe of Otto. The black shoe has restricted her movement and emotional growth for the whole of her life: “For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.” The images used in stanza two manifest Plath’s anger at her father’s death. Plath says “[y]ou died before I had time.” But then she stops abruptly and goes on to give the reader a description of Otto. Was Plath intimating that her father died before she had had the time to get to know him and love him? Now her memories are tinged with anger and hate.

The images and metaphors Plath uses to describe her father’s physical appearance demonstrate an intelligible connection between famous landmarks and the place Otto occupied in Plath’s emotions:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one, gray toe

By indicating the enormity of her father’s physical size the poet is also emphasising the dimensions of his role in her emotional life. He was a god-like statue, perhaps God Himself to Plath, because she uses the capital “G” for “God.” There was however, one major flaw in this Divine father: he had “feet of clay.” The poem indicates that this physical flaw of Otto’s was the gangrenous toe he had developed as a result of his neglected diabetes. Plath is comparing the decomposing necrotic body tissue to her decaying love for her father. The size and weight of the statue all attest to the scale of her emotions of anger and hate for her father: “Marble-heavy” and “Big as a Frisco seal.”

Plath uses the images of figurative illustrations of her father — for example, she refers to “[a] cleft in your chin instead of your foot” (“Daddy”) — and speaks metaphorically about him being the devil when she says “[b]ut no less a devil for that.” These images and metaphors also validate Plath’s growing realization that her father was not the man she had initially believed him to be when she was a child. Plath refers to her father as God but he is described as “a bag full of God.”
This phrase is somewhat lacking in the normal reverence accorded a deity. Stanza eight too implies deception: “The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna / Are not very pure or true.” Once again Plath is comparing her father to phenomena that are not what they appear to be on the surface.

At a later stage in “Daddy” Plath demonstrates how her emotion of love for her father has become one of fear which ultimately leads to hatred of him. This comparative imagery emerges clearly in stanza ten. Her father is no longer God but a swastika. He has gone from being the ultimate symbol of the love of God and His death on the Cross to the symbol of the swastika, the emblem of Nazi Germany. The swastika is an ancient symbol formed by an equal-armed cross with each arm continued at right angles. Both Christ on the Cross and the swastika depict arms outstretched at right angles but with very different interpretations. Plath makes a very intelligible linkage and at the same time a contrast between the symbol of good – the Christian Cross – and the symbol of evil – the Nazi swastika. It is in this comparison and the coherence of the imagery used here that Plath shows the shaping spirit and demonstrates the way in which her writing has a cognitive dimension. The emotions expressed by Plath in these verses are actually performing the shaping of the poem. What gives “Daddy” its own special quality is the imagery Plath uses to differentiate between good and evil. In an earlier stanza Plath was the white “foot” and Otto the “black” shoe.

In the last four stanzas of “Daddy” Plath has made a judgement. Nussbaum’s claim that our emotions are judgements about happenings or events helps us to read Plath’s poetry better. This then, is what Plath is attempting to do in “Daddy” – to judge the role her father had played in her life thus far. After trying un成功fully to get back to her father through her attempts at suicide, she was even prepared to settle for his earthly remains: “I thought even the bones would do.” Now, however, she has made a decision: “And then I knew what to do.”

Plath’s love for her father had failed as had his love for her. She now re-creates this “God” father as an abhorrent monster. In describing the new father-figure the colour black is mentioned on three separate occasions in the last four stanzas. Otto became the man in black. He had metamorphosed from a teacher at the
blackboard to “a man in black with a Meinkampf look.” Otto’s struggle was over too – he had been assigned the role of the Nazi oppressor. Plath attempted communication with her father even after his death: “The black telephone’s off at the root, / The voices just can’t worm through.” These lines are reminiscent of the imagery of the cable link between Plath and her mother Aurelia in “Medusa.”

In stanzas fifteen and sixteen there is the introduction of an additional character, Ted Hughes, Plath’s estranged husband. Plath has a total commitment to her undertaking to rid herself of the two men in her life whom she initially loved so intensely, but by whom she now feels betrayed and abandoned:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.

The vampire represents Hughes, to whom Plath was married for seven years. Once more Plath is using images and metaphors to suggest blood ties, as in “Medusa.” Plath is tied to Otto, as she is to Aurelia, by “blood.” Although Plath goes to great lengths to show through her images and metaphors that she wants nothing more to do with her dead father, the last line is palpably poignant: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” Even though she is disassociating herself from her father she is ever aware of the immutable biological connection.

In “Daddy” Plath is looking back on earlier life experiences and recalling the way in which she was affected by her emotions. She was in fact recalling specific events in her past life, not merely irrational occurrences. In Love’s Knowledge, Martha Nussbaum (1990) stresses that emotions are cognitive, rather than being merely “blind happenings.” I understand Nussbaum to mean by this that our emotions are forms of understanding. If we are able to understand previous happenings in our life, and our emotions help us to do this then we are better able to judge the impact that the events of our lives have had upon us. She sums it up quite succinctly when she says emotions “are themselves modes of responsive intelligence that express our conscious and our unconscious judgments of things we value, and what we believe will promote the flourishing of our lives” (p.47). In
the absence of these emotions, Plath would not have had the necessary judgment to comprehend her relationships. In writing “Daddy” Plath was able to take possession of her experiences and make a judgment concerning them.

Nussbaum believes that particular aspects of human existence are most meritoriously articulated through poetry, because it is able to inspire our compassionate imagination, and so allows us to broaden our knowledge by “making us reflect and feel about what otherwise would be too distant for feeling …. All living is interpreting: all action involves seeing the world as something … throughout our lives we are in a sense makers of fiction” (p.47). Nussbaum even goes so far as to state that from the philosophical point of view imagination is indispensable to ethical rationality. Again Nussbaum helps us read “Daddy” better through her account of emotion as judgment. Nussbaum claims that the judgments we are able to make by seeing the cognitive dimension in poetry represent the current counterpart to Shelley’s declaration that “poets are the universal legislators of the world.”

It is not difficult to comprehend the way in which events in the childhood and early adulthood of Plath affected her emotional wellbeing, in particular the emotions she experienced with her mother and her father. Prinz (2004) draws an analogy between visual perception and emotional perception, claiming that emotions are a form of understanding; they are in fact understandings of body states. Just as vision unveils the uniqueness of a material thing so too emotions display how a set of circumstances can affect our wellbeing. This theory aids in the reading of Plath’s “Daddy.” Plath’s visual awareness of her childhood helped her emotional frame of mind. Prinz is supported in this viewpoint by Antonio Damasio (1999), who argues that emotions act as inputs to the brain from our extrinsic surroundings. If, as Damasio argues, the brain is principally an organism having a special and vital function for homeostasis, a focal point for receiving and analysis of responses to body states, then emotions too are indispensable to the advanced stages of distinguishable human intelligence. Damasio has come up with empirical data explaining the way in which the brain processes emotions, and
facts from brain imagery concerning what occurs in the brain when emotions are precipitated.

In recalling events in her life as emotional consciousness, Plath both perceived and analysed her emotions. Plath experienced the emotion of anger toward her father. She experienced the emotion of anger, the brain processed the emotion via its brain imagery technique, and as a result Plath was able both to analyse and express her emotion through her poem “Daddy.” In her poetry she wrote of the way in which her emotions affected her wellbeing. It is possible to see how Plath’s emotions are shaped and structured by her experiences and by her environment, and how in turn Plath’s emotions shaped her poetry. Her anger was recalled, analysed and articulated in her writing. Plath’s poetry is poetry of emotion – in this particular poem the emotion of anger. But the emotion is inherently cognitive, so it is not a case of Plath recollecting her poetry from a distance but is, rather, her re-emotionalising herself in order to write this poem, and that emotionalising is in itself judgmental. So although there is a sense of distancing there is the immediacy also. And the immediacy is the organising principle of the poem itself.

Bliss Perry (2003) claims that readers of poetry assume that poets feel their poetry. If their feelings are factual they in turn enkindle feelings in the reader. Perry also states that these feelings are communicated by the imagination. Both are theories that can be associated with “Daddy.” Many of Plath’s feelings in “Daddy” are factual – she was afraid of her father in some respects and some of the feelings in “Daddy” are communicated by her imagination. Writing on feelings, A.H.R. Fairchild (1912) states: “The only effective way of arousing any particular feeling that is more than mere bodily feelings is to call up the images that are naturally connected with that feeling” (pp. 24-25).

How is “the mental image” that is associated with an emotional state put forward in the poet’s mind and how in turn is this disclosed to the reader? The poet’s solitary mode of delivery is by means of articulated representations. It is however, difficult to go beyond these verbal representations into the thinking mind of the poet where she is transforming her poetic material into poetic speech. It is the
mental images used by the poet that guide the shaping spirit of the poetry. Once again Damasio’s theory concerning the way in which the brain processes emotions via imagery is useful, suggesting that the emotions Plath experienced provide the shaping spirit of the poem.

**Anne Sexton, “The Division of Parts” (1960)**

In Anne Sexton’s “The Division of Parts” (1960), we are acutely aware of the ambivalence of Sexton’s emotions towards her mother, Mary Gray. On the one hand Sexton demonstrates her deep filial love for her mother; on the other she communicates her strong yearning to exorcise all memories of her dead mother, thus demonstrating that it is possible to both love and hate someone at the same time. Just as Plath uses comparative imagery to express her emotion, so Sexton emphasises the ambivalence of her emotions of love and hate.

Stanza one of “The Division of Parts” portrays the poet coming to terms with the reality of her mother’s death. Sexton begins in a very formal, impersonal and official manner. She merely lists her mother’s name, place of domicile and the copy of her last will and testament which had arrived in the mail:

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Mother, my Mary Gray,
    once resident of Gloucester
    and Essex County,
    a photostat of your will
    arrived in the mail today.
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The next section of the first stanza refers to the items that Sexton has inherited as a result of her mother’s death and the emotions this generates. “The Division of Parts” is more about the inability to grieve than grieving.

Sexton tells of the division of her mother’s assets in a somewhat calculating and mercenary way:

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This is the division of money.
I am one third
    of your daughters counting my bounty
    or I am a queen alone
    in the parlor still,
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eating the bread and honey.

“Counting my bounty” implies that Sexton has been paid for some valiant act. Her status in the family has altered too. Sexton is no longer the princess/daughter, but has assumed the role of queen/mother. She is now in possession of the treasure trove and entrenched in the parlour which was once the home of her mother.

There are strong emotions expressed in these lines, but these emotions are articulated in a very controlled and coherent manner. Sexton has now assumed added power in the hierarchical structure of her family. The imagery and metaphors used – “money,” “bounty,” “queen” and “parlor” – depict her newfound status and demonstrate the cognition in the poem. Sexton is in the above lines using her strong emotions to make a judgment about her relationship with her mother. Much of the emotional judgment Sexton is making fits the analysis made by Nussbaum (2001).

Sexton saw a new kind of relationship emerge between herself and her mother, an actual reversal of roles. Nussbaum (2001) claims we can change our relationship with someone because we can alter our cognitive judgment of them and thus we are able to change our emotions towards them. It can be argued that Sexton was in fact doing this in her relationship with her mother. Sexton now perceived she had ascendancy over her mother. She was attempting to change her cognitive judgment of her mother in order to experience emotional grief at her mother’s death. Sexton was however, unsuccessful in this endeavour.

“The Division of Parts” can be viewed as a song of lament, grief or elegy, even though Sexton goes to considerable lengths to point out that she is not able to grieve for the death of her mother. Philip Fisher (2002) claims that elegy makes it apparent that we too will die one day: “A kind of grieving in advance for ourselves takes place in any grieving for another” (p. 8). Sexton does not appear to be able to share her grief, but takes it all upon herself. Sexton tells us that she did not go through her mother’s belongings alone – “we sorted your things” – and yet the emotion is felt alone on a personal level:
I am a queen alone
in the parlor still,
eating the bread and honey.

Nussbaum argues that emotions are cerebral evaluations of a society which we are unable to exercise power over in relation to our own most meaningful objectives. Sexton was, by means of her emotions, able to assess her present situation in the world.

Sexton reigned supreme and in isolation, “queen alone,” such was the intensity of her emotions which are in keeping with the views of Fisher when he says: “Impassioned states seem to drive out every other form of attention or state of being…. The passions are what we call monarchical states of being” (pp. 43-44). Could Fisher’s words suggest an explanation for Sexton’s using the term “queen alone?” She now reigned supreme in a monarchical state.

The next two lines appear somewhat out of place:
It is Good Friday.
Black birds pick at my window sill.

Why is the poet suddenly telling the reader that it is Good Friday? Does it in some way seem appropriate for her to connect the death of Christ on the Cross to the death of her mother? Why is there a further reference to the nursery rhyme “Sing a Song of Sixpence”? Is this imagery intended to demonstrate the emergence of the emotion of guilt in Sexton’s mind? Are the black birds pecking at her window sill metaphorically pecking at her conscience, and are we witnessing here the first dawning of guilt in her mind? Sexton then goes on to describe a number of the items she has inherited. They are all chronicled in a very matter of fact way, more like an inventory than precious keepsakes of a deceased close family member. The rings are too bright, the fur coat too gaudy.

There is also an interesting use of the possessive pronouns “my” and “your.” Mary Gray’s earthly possessions have now transferred to her daughter:

Your coat in my closet,
Your bright stones on my hand,
A week ago, while the hard March gales
Beat on your house,
We sorted your things:

There is transference of ownership from “yours” to “mine” and the continuation of the emergence of the emotion of guilt. Sexton says that all these newly acquired possessions “settle on me like a debt.” There is, too, the emergence of an ever-increasing consciousness of what is happening. It is most apparent that Sexton’s emotions are coherent. If we accept Lacewing’s (2005) proposition that emotions are evaluative responses, it is clear that in this instance in her poetry Sexton is evaluating her new-found status and deciding that it is a cause of guilt. Sexton is quite obviously in coherent command of her emotions. The emotions are apparent, but so is the mental calculative system; she had thought about these issues in advance. Sexton is clearly assessing what is “mine” and “yours” and what was once “yours” but is now “mine.” Damasio at a recent conference has defined such emotion as:

\[ \text{[t]he combination of a mental evaluative process, simple or complex, with dispositions of choice to that process, mostly towards the body proper, resulting in an emotional body state, but also towards the brain itself resulting from additional mental charges. (Conference 2004)} \]

In “The Division of Parts” Sexton is differentiating between the “categories of objects” – that is, the possessions which Sexton now has – and the circumstances in which she has inherited them. Both contribute to the emotions she experiences. However, the fact that she has itemised quite categorically the objects that caused her emotional disquiet illustrates the cognition at work in her poetry. Damasio, too, differentiates between “primary emotions,” which he regards as originating in the mind and “secondary emotions” which he views as feelings that permit people to structure: “connections between categories and objects and situations on the one hand and primary emotions on the other. The imagery of the material possessions and the actual transference of these from her mother to herself – from “yours” to “mine” – are the contours and the shaping spirit in Sexton’s poetry. The emotions, however, become the means by which the poem is actually shaped.
The rest of stanza one is filled with religious metaphors, in particular ones that relate to Easter and the Crucifixion. Sexton makes numerous comparisons between the death of Christ and the death of her mother. She describes how in local churches throughout the county Christians will relive the sacrifice Christ made for mankind for their ultimate salvation:

    In Boston, the devout
    work their cold knees
    toward that sweet martyrdom
    that Christ planned.

Sexton is contrasting their faith and devotion to the Christ they have never met and their ability to grieve over His death some 2000 years ago, to her inability, to grieve not only for Christ, but for her recently dead mother. Sexton acknowledges her incapability to express grief and at the same time indicates the wish that she could. She also articulates her realisation that her personal loss in no way equates with the loss of Christ to the world:

    My timely loss
    is too customary to note; and yet
    I planned to suffer
    and I cannot.

And then we witness the guilt tripping in again, in the form of the birds pecking at the window:

    Black birds peck
    At my window glass.

Jung (1967) claims that birds are usually thought to be sources of good fortune, with the exception of black birds which have negative connotations. Symbolism however, links black birds to everlasting life and the tussle between the body and the soul. Perhaps this is what Sexton is covertly alluding to. Just as she would like to be able to grieve fully for her mother, so too she wishes she could believe in Christ and thus enjoy everlasting life, but is unable to do so:

    Easter will take its ragged son.
    The clutter of worship
that you taught me, Mary Gray,
is old. I imitate
a memory of belief
that I do not own. I trip
on your death and jesus, my stranger
floats up over
my Christian home, wearing his straight
thorn tree. I have cast my lot
and am one third thief
of you. Time, that rearranger
of estates, equips
me with your garments, but not with grief.

There is in the above lines an insinuation of blame towards Sexton’s mother for Sexton’s lack of faith. The metaphors and images she uses to describe the way in which her mother taught her about Christianity suggest an excess of antiquated orthodoxy. Expressions such as “clutter of worship,” “imitate / a memory of belief / that I do not own,” all imply that Sexton’s learning about Christianity at her mother’s hands was meaningless. It is the references to pretence, insincerity and hypocrisy that are together binding the images that Sexton uses. If God in His omnipotence can rearrange estates, making the dependent become the owner, why then can He not equip Sexton with grief? Sexton articulates the difficulty she experiences in coming to terms with both the death of her mother and the death of Jesus on whom the belief of Christianity is based. Even though Sexton is familiar with the teachings of the Christian Church she is unable to acknowledge Him as her Saviour. It is worth mentioning that in these lines she uses a lower case “j” for “jesus;” she does this nowhere else in her work. Sexton has also italicised my stranger, possibly for emphasis that Christ is her stranger rather than her saviour.

Sexton closes the first stanza by reiterating the belief that the death of her mother has served the purpose of furnishing her with the inherited possessions but still not with grief. Inheriting one third of her mother’s possessions has heightened her belief that she is part thief. It can be argued that in these lines she is delineating an inference that she is unable to acknowledge belief or grief. But in so doing she is demonstrating the logic behind her train of emotional thought. She acknowledges her disbelief and lack of grief and gives an explanation of the reason behind her frame of mind. In *Descartes’ Error* (1995) Damasio says something similar when
he claims that the emotions are comparable to the reasoning faculties. He claims that experiencing an emotion is altogether an additional method of cogitation in the same way as an inference is a method of thought. He argues that emotions have a critical position in rational decision-making. Damasio is still on the same tack when, in *Looking for Spinoza* (2003), he argues that emotions have an evaluative function – that is, they are able to assess a situation and respond accordingly:

Emotions provide a natural means for the brain and mind to evaluate the environment within and around the organism, and respond accordingly and adaptively. Indeed, in many circumstances, we actually evaluate consciously the objects that cause emotions, in the proper sense of the term “evaluate.” We process not only the presence of an object but its relation to others and its connection to the past. (p.54)

This then is what Sexton is doing in her poem “The Division of Parts” when she evaluates the events of her past which have precipitated her guilt and made her unable to experience the emotion of grief.

In the second stanza Sexton analyses the three months of her mother’s hospitalisation and ultimate demise. In the third line Sexton says: “I grieved with you each day.” This is somewhat different from saying; “I grieved for you each day.” Again we are made aware of Sexton’s inability to grieve in the way she would like to. In stanza three the poet describes the period immediately after her mother has died. The images and metaphors Sexton uses are prolific. She initially tells us how she has feigned serenity and peace:

Since then I have pretended ease, loved with the trickeries of need, but not enough to shed my daughterhood.

It is the contrasting of deception and falsehood, in place of the genuine emotion of love that structures the images and imparts to them their defining consciousness. The poet professed well-being, and affected love, but not sufficiently to cast off the burden of daughterhood. Initially it might seem to be more logical had the poet said “to assume my daughterhood” rather than “to shed my daughterhood,” as if the pretence of love would give the appearance of filial love. The explanation that
comes to mind is that Sexton is seeing her mother-daughter bond as having had
negative connotations throughout her life and the only way she can embrace her
mother in a loving way is not to view her in this light. The fact that Sexton was
able to use such insightful images makes it clear that she was fully in command of
her emotions, and that the emotion in this poetry is cognitive.

Sexton then returns to thoughts of Christ:

And Christ still waits. I have tried
to exorcise the memory of each event
and remain still, a mixed child,
heavy with cloths of you.

It is as if Sexton believes she cannot embrace Christ, and that He will not accept
her until she is able to reconcile her differences with her mother. She was no
doubt sufficiently versed in the Scriptures to be aware of the New Testament
teaching:

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your
brother has something against you, “leave your gift there before the altar,
and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and
offer your gift.”(King James Version. Matthew 5:23-24)

There is too the recurring gift of conversion in stanza three. Sexton has made
reference to her conversion on other occasions. The fact that Sexton uses Latin
would imply a conversion to the Roman Catholic Church. It is only by doing this
that she can regain her state of emotional equanimity?

Instead, I must convert
to love as reasonable
as Latin, as solid as earthenware:
an equilibrium
I never knew.

It would seem from the imagery used in the above lines that Sexton gained no
solace or comfort from the visits of her mother’s spirit. To Sexton her mother’s
opinion of her daughter had not changed. Mary Gray was not offering praise to
her daughter nor was she making any heavenly promises. It is the comparing and
contrasting of, on the one hand, Mary Gray’s newly acquired spiritual existence,
and, on the other hand, Sexton’s earthly existence, that structures the images in these lines and shows the contours of the imagery and gives them their shaping spirit.

For Sexton to write “The Division of Parts” with all its imagery and metaphors implies that these events had a very profound effect upon her life. For the majority of her life she had lived with the guilt that she did not love her mother. Her guilt was further aggravated by her perceived inability to experience grief for her mother’s sickness and death. I believe it was Sexton’s overriding guilt that got in the way of her grief; she had got everything else wrong with regard to loving her mother, so how could she do the appropriate thing when it came to expressing grief for her mother? In the view of Nussbaum emotions are judgments about the value that possessions and people have for us. Nussbaum best understood her loss and grief as a judgment of the role her mother had played in her life. Sexton did this too. In “The Division of Parts” the emotion-judgment link is manifested: Sexton’s judgment of her life with her mother had negative connotations and so, unlike Nussbaum, Sexton was unable to experience the emotion of grief at her mother’s death. This does, however, demonstrate how coherent her emotions are and how in fact Sexton’s emotions shape the poetry.

By using metaphors, for example, “I am queen alone / in the parlor still,” Sexton demonstrates the way in which her newly acquired inheritance emphasized her perceived unworthiness of it, Sexton highlights her guilt in accepting it. These items were “a debt” – presumably something she fully expected she would have to pay back at a later date because she had not earned them and was undeserving of them. With the acquisition of these possessions Sexton becomes: “heavy with cloths of you.” Just as she is weighed down with family clothing, jewellery and silver, etc., so too she is equally burdened with the weight of guilt. But for Sexton to experience the emotion of guilt she had to accept responsibility for her actions and in order to do that she had to assess her conscience rationally. In order to do so she must evaluate her emotional responses and make ethical decisions. She must also, as Lacewing (2005) points out, differentiate between what are appropriate emotional reactions and what are inappropriate emotional reactions.
Sexton does, then, make a very intelligent connection between her actions and her emotions. What makes her poems unique is the abundance of imagery attesting to her guilt through what she perceives to be her unworthiness to inherit her mother’s possessions.

All of this appertains precisely to what Nussbaum called the “individual’s own self-flourishings.” Furthermore Nussbaum has claimed that, if the emotions of love and jealousy can exist together, but not jealousy and friendship, equally so an argument can be made that it is possible for the emotions of love and guilt to co-exist, as was the case with Sexton in her ambivalent relationship with her mother.

It would seem Sexton genuinely believed that she had arrived at a true and accurate assessment of her emotions towards her mother. This too fits in with Nussbaum’s claim that in reality a genuinely reasoned person will be affected by particular emotions as a result of accurate understanding. Sexton realised that she had never really loved her mother in the way she believed she should have, and the fact that she was having such a hard time expressing grief for her mother only compounded this belief and caused her guilt. As Nussbaum argues, through experiencing certain emotions (for example love) particular types of consciousness are understandable to us. She goes on to state that there is a complementary relationship between knowledge and love: “We love because of what we know about them, to be sure, but we also come to know them more fully because we love them” (p.62).

I believe a similar argument can be made for the emotion of guilt. Here too there is a reciprocal relationship between guilt and knowledge. We are aware of our lack of love and this understanding causes guilt because we realise it is inappropriate not to love our mothers. This is what Sexton is trying to express in “The Division of Parts” and it is this strong cognitive emotion that is shaping her poetry. At no stage in her poetry does Sexton actually set out to analyse her emotions and manifest them as such in her writings. Rather, she allows the reader to witness her emotion as a judgment concerning her relationship with her mother.
It is also possible to examine Sexton’s emotions towards her mother from the view of theorist, Robert Solomon (2003) who maintains that emotions are rational and purposive. Solomon reinforces this belief with his statement that a person’s emotions are tightly linked to their appraisal of their circumstances. Sexton was making a value judgment once more about the circumstances of her life. A person’s emotion is “influenced or constituted by one’s reasoned assessment of a situation and that it is not to be identified with an associated effect” (p. 5). Sexton was not merely feeling angry at her mother; she was consciously assessing her treatment of her in a rational and purposive manner. As such, her emotions of hate towards her mother are not mere feelings but are judgments. Although the emotions in Sexton’s poetry can at times appear irrational, they are merely symbolic of the circumstances to which they react. In Solomon’s view “emotions are, we are told, urgent responses to desperate situations” (p.12).


Much of Rich’s life and writings are a conscious act that challenges a great deal of what she perceived to be wrong in the world. Rich’s “will to change the world” is both at the personal and global level. Her poetry has a profound psychological and societal purport which resounds with both emotion and rationality. In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (1951) we are able to witness the intentionality in Rich’s emotions. She is angry about something in particular – the way in which marriage has treated this woman. The emotion of anger is expressed both articulately and intelligibly with frequent use of metaphors and imagery. Peter Goldie (2000) claims that emotions are intentional in that they are concerned with particular events. The emotion is, without exception, aimed at a specific person or thing. In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Rich makes use of imagery in a unique way, in order to depict a woman’s role within marriage, in a male-dominated society.

Rich’s “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1960) examines the role of women within the institution of marriage. Again the persona Rich uses in the poem is someone else. In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” it was an aunt and in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” the poet depicts the mother-in-law as the main character in the
poem. In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” however, we sense that the topic of women within marriage is getting much closer to home. It may well be that Rich is engaging in making a rational decision about her own role within marriage, the way in which marriage has limited her life and is causing her to resent the restrictions imposed upon her. There is even a suggestion of the legally binding aspect of marriage with the “in-law” reference. Rich has drawn a logical conclusion that her anger and resentment towards her married status is going to become progressively heightened. As Damasio expresses it, it is the “somatic marker hypothesis” in which a person makes use of emotional somatic reactions to judge the “good” or the “bad” of a particular situation (p.15).

The first stanza of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” depicts the mother-in-law living in the past in what appears to be a desperate attempt to arrest the physical ageing process. No concern is accorded, however, to the deterioration of the mind through lack of use. The daughter-in-law is angry at the attrition of the woman’s mental potential. The poet is unable to express her anger openly, but alludes to it through domestic imagery:

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.

It is clear that Rich is designing the imagery in her poetry triggered by her emotions to “design an intelligible world.” Fisher (2002) tells us that it is only as a result of our most powerful passions that we are conscious of the contours of oppression, bereavement and consciousness. Only through our own private world can we know the world at large. In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”, it is the domestic drudgery that is angering Rich and so she uses the imagery of the pots and pans and the orderly gardens as the underlying structure to give overall coherence to the poem. She uses the images of the instruments of her drudgery to express her emotions of anger. There is too a growing logic and sequencing of her emotions. The poet is conscious that the situation is getting worse and she must
make a decision based on an appraisal of the situation. Damasio (2003) is particularly concerned with his theory that emotions are conscious. He believes the physiological processes, which are a component of an emotional response, take place prior to the conscious component of the emotions. She must “get out” before she begins to harm herself:

Only a week since They said: Have no patience.  
The next time it was: Be insatiable. 
Then: Save yourself; others you cannot save.  
Sometimes she’s let the tapstream scald her arm, 
a match burn to her thumbnail, 
or held her hand above the kettle’s snout 
right in the woolly steam.

Rich has dealt with the variety of data from her surroundings and the selection of feasible action to choose from. In stanza three Rich appears to be trying to rationalise just why an intelligent “thinking” woman could allow herself to sleep “with monsters.” It is as if once having been lured into marriage she is caught within the trappings and becomes one and the same with the husband: “The beak that grips her, she becomes.” The woman is in the grips of, or is dominated by the husband, and consequently loses all sense of self. Women frequently get caught up in the security which marriage offers and are reluctant to relinquish it:

… And Nature, 
that sprung-lidded, still commodious 
steamer-trunk of tempora and mores 
gets stuffed with it all:

By using upper case “N” for “Nature,” Rich is possibly referring to the physical power governing all the phenomena of the physical world. And the “still commodious / steamer-trunk of tempora and mores / gets stuffed with it all:” could refer to the customs and conditions of marriage a woman is expected to abide by.

Halfway through the third stanza and the first lines of stanza four Rich begins to talk about two women. Initially however, she spoke of the mother-in-law and then the daughter-in-law:
Two handsome women, gripped in argument,
each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
across the cut glass and majolica
like Furies cornered from their prey:
The argument *ad feminam*, all the old knives
That have rusted in my back, I drive in yours
*ma semblable, ma soeur!*

Knowing themselves too well in one another:
	heir gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn,
the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn.

In these lines Rich outlines how marriage can destroy the relationship between
two “handsome” or good women. The women, previously so alike, even as sisters
(*“ma semblable, ma soeur”*) are now stabbing each other in the back. They have
become too close. Their aims and aspirations have not been realised and are now
thorns in their sides. Rich argues it is not the women themselves who have caused
this animosity between them, but the institution of marriage. These women are the
“Furies,” normally associated with the ones who punish those who have taken
insincere oaths – perhaps a reference to the marriage vows. In these lines, rather
than cornering their prey, the Furies are being “cornered from their prey.”

In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” we witness Rich’s change to diligent
feminist; she is no longer hesitant to voice her opinion and anger over political
and societal issues. The poem becomes an instrument by which she could change
the community’s opinion concerning themselves and society, in particular the
community’s attitude towards women in marriage. In this poem we witness Rich’s
anger at the way in which women are treated within this institution, but there is
always a reasoned argument put forward for her emotion. This is in keeping with
the views of Savitsky (1989) that emotions become psychologically pertinent
when related to cognitive processes. Mallen (1998) also argues that emotions are
cognitive when he claims that “they are triggered by a cognitive situation” (p.28).
This is what Rich was doing in writing “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” her
emotions were triggered by the situations of women within the state of marriage.
Her assessment and evaluation of the situation were cognitive. Nussbaum (2001)
also maintains a cognitive theory of the emotions. She believes we are able to make judgments regarding the value people have to us. In this poem Rich was arguing that as a result of marriage our value of people changes. Michael Lacewing (2005) claims that without emotional input rational thought is seriously defective and Damasio (1999) lends his support to this when he states that emotions actually possess a key position in rational decision-making. Rich maintains that, as a result of marriage, women change and it is this change which concerns her. It is the negative effect of the increased intimacy – as a result of marriage – of the two women that angers her. This emotion triggers her rational decision-making regarding the adverse effects of marriage on a woman.

In stanza nine Rich appears to show a degree of resignation regarding the reasons that women remain within marriage with all of its problems. It is possible that here Rich is writing “tongue in cheek,” for there is a fair degree of irony in the writing:

> would we, darlings, resign if we could?  
> Our blight has been our sinecure:  
> mere talent was enough for us –  
> glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

It is our affliction as women that has made us accept the easy option, our sinecure – a position requiring precious little effort but which normally delivers profit and honour. In the last stanza Rich expresses a degree of sorrow for the way in which women have been treated in history, a theme developed more fully in “Planetarium” (1968).

The three poems briefly analysed here are all examples of the later poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. The analysis has revealed how in light of recent theories of the emotions, we might be able to understand the cognitive dimension of the emotions that drive the poems. Chapters three, four and five will take up this general approach in more detail through analyses of specific emotions in a wide range of their later poetry.
CHAPTER THREE:
ANGER

The liberation of the repressed passion of anger became one of the most acknowledged indicators of the mid-twentieth century American women’s poetry movement. Linda Grasso argues that “the emotion which accompanies the first steps towards liberation is, for most women anger…. Through the exercise of your anger … you gain strength” (Linda Grasso 2002 p.38). Audre Lorde (1986) makes a similar claim when she argues that “every woman has a well stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy, serving progress and change” (p.61). This energy has also been used as a trigger for art; women have throughout history, employed their anger as a means of producing art. As Patricia Meyer Spacks (1978) puts it, “anger must have been a source of creative energy for … women writers; anger provided the impetus, the subject, and the inventiveness of their work … the fact remains that many women have written marvellously out of anger” (p.73). Alicia Ostriker (1986) likens this anger in a woman’s poetry to that of a volcanic eruption:

For many readers and for many writers the overwhelming sensation to be gotten from contemporary women’s poetry is the smell of camouflage burning, the crackle of anger free at last, the whirl and rush of flame-like rage that has so often swept the soul, and as often been damped down, so that we never thought there could be words for it. A moment arrives when the volcano erupts, the simmering blood boils over, and the fire breaks out. The imperative of this moment has become almost an axiom in feminist poetry and criticism. (p.186)

Jane Marcus (1978) believes that “self-preservation is the source of anger necessary for the artist” (p.165). Alicia Ostriker, however, views the chronicle of women’s anger as a literary occurrence and far more intricate than the emotional authentic process intimated from the above quotations. She maintains that although anger is indispensable to a female poet, it is insufficient as an answer to all her difficulties. This is certainly true in the case of Plath, Sexton and Rich.
They used anger in their poetry to voice both their personal and societal concerns. As Philip Legler (1989) puts it, Plath, Sexton and Rich are all exceedingly traditional poets, not in the sense that they capitulate to an abiding force, but from the stance that they visualise traditional poetry as an animate and developing energy that ought to be continually advanced in order to be maintained. Their poetry which reflected the anger in their lives inspired and aroused the reader. This chapter shows how the anger in the poetry of these three women relates to the way they are in the world and the way anger structures their consciousness and is enacted in their poetry.

In her study of the emotions Stephanie Shields (2002) discusses how anger is frequently viewed as a fundamental component of affective life, and a principal human emotion. Anger is essential for human existence: physiologically it lays the groundwork for the body to set in motion and maintain elevated positions of defined energy; psychologically it is related to self-protective and hostile inclinations; socially, anger communicates singular information to people, evoking emotional behaviour in others. For Plath, Sexton and Rich anger was a part of their lives and was expressed in their later poetry. These poems exemplify the way Shields interprets poetry. They too, used their anger to initiate and support positions of strength to express aggressive attitudes and to transmit unique knowledge to others and arouse emotion in them.

It has been argued that anger is an expression of power. In *Anger the Misunderstood Emotion* (1992) Carol Tavris argues that anger is profoundly embroiled in the practice of power. If power is the ability to secure something, then anger is the instrument with which to exert power when confronted with the deprivation or the intimidation of losing something one possesses. Tavris further claims that emotions do not develop in the absence of reason. In most cases when the notion of anger is present what becomes apparent is the infringement of what the person understands as his or her rights. We experience anger when we perceive we are in danger of being denied something we assume to be legitimately ours. For example in “Burning the Letters” Plath believed she was losing her husband Ted Hughes to another woman. Sexton and Rich also expressed their
anger over broken relationships. In “For My Lover returning to His Wife” Sexton was angry that Dr Zweizung had chosen to remain with his wife. Rich too experienced anger over the loss of her husband Conrad as shown in “Tear Gas;” unlike Plath, who is angry that she has been spurned for another woman, and Sexton because she felt she was not good enough for Dr Zweizung, Rich is angry at her husband for his inability to cope after the failure of their marriage and ending his life in suicide. Again we witness that Rich’s anger is not so much a self-centred anger as is the case with Plath and to a lesser extent with Sexton. Exactly what directs the anger in the poetry of these three women is different and because it works in a different way it structures the poems differently. This notion of “loss” fits in with Robert Solomon’s (2003) concept about romantic anger, which, he argues, is not about loving excessively, but more about defending our belongings from being misappropriated. He holds the somewhat cynical view that love is usually about the desire for possessing another, and that anger manifests itself when this possession is in danger of being taken away.

The opinions of these critics make evident the urgency and importance of the emotion of anger in the poetry of these American women in the second half of the twentieth century. This chapter examines the nature and function of anger in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich in order to demonstrate how it functions in a sense-making capacity, acting as a cognitive “shaping” agent through which the poems derive their coherence and meaning.

**Sylvia Plath**

In the last few years of Sylvia Plath’s life her poetry changed dramatically. Her earlier poems had been fastidiously crafted, had emphasized meticulous syntax and demonstrated a careful use of metaphor. This type of poetry simply vaporised and a new style of poetry replaced it. Critics such as Marjorie Perloff (1986) believe that with the advent of “The Colossus” (1959) Plath’s poetry changed and took on a brutal and powerful – even demonic – identity, prefigured in poems such as “The Thin People” (1957) and “The Stones” (1959). The poems that followed demonstrate the escalating anger in her work. Subsequent to the

In the Foreword to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Ted Hughes sums up this change in Plath’s writings most succinctly when he says:

> She showed something violent…, something very primitive, perhaps very female, a readiness, even a need, to sacrifice everything to the new birth …. And this is what she finally did achieve, after a long and painful labour.

*Ariel* and the associated later poems give us the voice of that self. They are proof that it arrived. All her other writings, except these journals, are the waste products of its gestation.

When a real self finds language, and manages to speak, it is surely a dazzling event – as *Ariel* was. (p.xiv-xv)

The poems may be savage, angry and disturbing but they are also highly ordered. These later poems demonstrate, in a structured way, the anger in Plath’s writing. I am using her anger as a tool to “unlock” her later poetry. In “Lesbos” for example Plath’s imagery and metaphors are structured by her insistent reference to the insincerity and the frivolousness of life which are attempts to offset the disillusionment of married women with their existence. Thus in the lines, the “[v]iciousness in the kitchen! / [t]he potato hiss,” the sounds of the cooking potatoes are likened to something as venomous as a snake. The falsity of the décor is an attempt to “trim-up” a woman’s monotonous day: “Coy paper strips for doors / Stage curtains, and window’s frizz.” These trappings are all pretentious and theatrical. The shaping spirit and the coherence in these images highlight the drabness of a married woman’s life and the boredom she experiences which is in complete antithesis to the title of the poem “Lesbos.” In these poems there is evidence of Plath’s progressive anger, acerbity and desperation concerning her
life. These later poems of Plath’s are filled with emotion, many with the emotion of anger; but the anger is not there at the expense of logic. Even though the final poems of “Ariel” were written in a short time, the speed of their despatch in no way detracts from the craft and form of her poetry. Indeed, this chapter argues that the degree of emotion Plath was experiencing helped her to structure her poems.

In “Edge” Plath uses the imagery of the heightened odours of flowers at night to make death more alluring. In “Edge” Plath uses metaphors to emphasise and justify her own death and that of her two children. In death Plath reaches the satisfaction denied her in life:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity
Flows into the scroll of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far it is over.

Plath is likening her death to the satisfaction of having achieved a major accomplishment. Her funereal robe is compared to both Greek and classical dress giving a formality and finality to her death. The children are also described as being perfected in death in a way they had never been in life:

She has folded
Them back into her body as petals,
Of a rose close when the garden
Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The children’s deaths are likened to the fragrance of a garden at night-time. Plath structures the poem in such a way as to imply that the perfume of a garden by moonlight is so much sweeter and more fragrant than it is during the daytime; the implication being that death is more aromatic than life. Life is perfected by death, death, as the title of the poem suggests, has the edge. For centuries there has been an association in literature between the sweet fragrance of flowers and the
fragrance of death. In Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, when the chest containing the body of Thaisa is opened, Cerimon is surprised by the fragrance: “Soft! It smells most sweetly in my sense” (Act III scene 2, line 78). When Plath wrote “Edge” it was not uncommon for a body to be returned to the family home after preparation at the funeral parlour. This was to enable family and friends to view and grieve their loved one. Of necessity the body was treated and this resulted in a very sweet, almost cloying, perfume.

Susan Gubar (2003) has pointed out that during this period of Plath’s poetry it is frequently the emotion that is structuring the poem. Gubar claims: “She uses the form of the poem to shape the experience she wants to convey, not for her the notion that freedom of expression is somehow linked to the idea of free-verse” (p.51). This is what Plath is doing in “Edge.” The poem is structured in such a way in order to convey the sweet fulfilment the poet experiences now that her life and that of her children is over.

In an interview with Peter Orr (1962), Plath spurns what she determines as feigned and unconstrained writing:

> I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except, you know, a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and to manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness or being tortured and should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed mind. I think that personal experience is very important but certainly it should not be kind of shut-box and mirror looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau. (p.36)

During the course of the interview Orr suggested to Plath, “and so, behind the primitive, emotional reaction there must be an intellectual discipline.” She replied, “I feel that very strongly” (p.38).

Plath had a very strong belief that the emotion in her poetry did not express itself at the cost of cerebral thought and attention to form. She claims that her poetry is more than merely a spontaneous outpouring of raw emotion; rather, it is controlled writing, adhering to both form and logic. In “Tulips” (1961) it is the purity and the sterility of the colour white that structures the images, metaphors and similes in
the early stanzas: “Look how white everything is and how snowed-in,” “these white walls,” “pillow and sheet-cuff,” “Like an eye between two white lids that / will not shut,” “They pass the way gulls pass inland in / their white caps.” These images are all related to each other. The contrasting redness of the tulips disturbs the poet’s tranquillity, and may refer to the occasion Plath’s mother took tulips to her when she was in hospital recovering from her first suicide attempt. The red tulips are at variance with the whiteness of the hospital: “[t]he tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.”

In the Ariel poems (1965) Plath really began to find her voice and express her emotions. Suzanne Juhasz (1976) remarks that in these later poems the words used are real and the symbolic activity now reflects real events in Plath’s life. The effect of sound and rhythm, so painstakingly fashioned, in her initial poetry, are still there, but without the intentional effort. In Plath’s early poetry she was finding her style and experimenting with form. In her later poetry Plath declares herself to be free of all restrictions.

This change between Path’s earlier poems and her final ones is described by Anne Sexton in an interview with Barbara Kevles (1968). Sexton likens the change in Plath’s poetry to a release from imprisonment: “Those early poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that.) I felt she hadn’t found a voice of her own, was not in truth, free to be herself … at the end Sylvia burst from her cage and came riding straight out” (p.12). Sexton continued to be influenced by Plath’s poetry, especially the later works for their angry and audacious quality. Sexton said of Plath’s poetry, “She had dared to write hate poems, the one thing I had never dared to write. I’d always been afraid, even in my life, to express anger” (p.13).

Martha Nussbaum (2001) points out that a truly rational person will experience particular emotions as a result of an accurate comprehension of an event. It can be argued that this explanation of an emotional reaction to occurrences contributes to our understanding of the anger Plath experienced when, as a result of an intercepted phone call, she realised that her husband was having an affair with Assia Wevill. Her realisation of Hughes’ infidelity caused Plath’s anger.
Nussbaum further reasons that there are particular types of understanding that are only accessible to us when we live through a particular emotion; love is a perfect example of this. Yet even the emotion of love, strong though it is, can be overpowered by the emotion of anger. As Medea in Euripides’ drama points out, love is always put to flight by anger, and anger is so difficult to overcome once aroused.

In “Lady Lazarus” (1962) Plath expresses anger and bitterness that certain events have taken place. The pattern of imagery makes evident Plath’s perceived control over death. Allan Alvarez (1966) is anxious to point out that although there is very obvious vehement anger towards the principal players in “Lady Lazarus” (Plath’s father Otto, her husband Hughes and herself), this is still a highly cerebral poem, rather than a mere outpouring of raw anger. These are chronological references to the occasions of her previous death attempts. To date there had been three attempts, but there is a promise of more to come:

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.

Plath is convinced that she will continue to rise successfully from her suicide attempts. From this conviction springs the particular set of images she uses. Overall, what is most striking in Plath’s comparison of her “death” and “resurrection” to that of Christ’s is that her features are impregnated on the linen napkin covering her face in the tomb, just as Christ’s face left an imprint on the towel given to Him by Veronica whilst He was carrying the Cross for His Crucifixion. The following lines express Plath’s arrogance towards her own death and resurrection. She, like Jesus, is able to raise herself from the dead. There is also a degree of irony in Plath’s description of her raising herself from the dead; she says she is able to preside over her own death even though this is nothing short of miraculous.

I manage it –
A sort of walking miracle,

Christ’s body, after having been in the tomb for three days, should have been affected by decay, but was not. Plath uses images to imply a confidence that the deterioration in her body will be miraculously restored. There is too an inference that Plath’s language is ironic. She is using language with a particular meaning for her larger audience, “[t]he peanut crunching crowd” and the privileged audience she is trying to target, that is her reader, to show her anger. She is structuring “Lady Lazarus” to make known the development of her anger:

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

There is an assurance that the poet’s facial features will be fully restored in the space of twenty-four hours. The imagery comparing the poet to Christ continues in the ensuing stanzas – the reference to the embalming procedure and even the way Christ showed His wounds to His disciples:

Them unwrap me hand and foot
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies.

These are my hands
My knees.

The anger intensifies as the poem progresses, but so too does the imagery depicting and the ironical portrayal of this anger.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else,
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call.

It is the process of anger in the poetry that organises the imagery and makes it coherent. The anger that Plath demonstrates in these lines is an extremely savage anger which is deeply infused with the ironic juxtaposition of Plath and Christ.
The pattern of images she uses in this poem manifests the way in which she is intensely angry at herself as much as at the world.

The following few stanzas refer to the risen persona in the poem and the financial charges associated with the right to view her risen body — and even higher charges to touch or to obtain a relic:

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor
So, Herr Enemy.

The above lines are an angry criticism of the ancient practice in Christian churches of selling off relics of “Christ’s blood,” or “wood from the true Cross.” Plath is alleging that God’s church is no different and no better than the Nazis’ Herr Doktor, God. She is also warning Herr God and Herr Lucifer to beware because she is angry and is out for revenge:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

In addition to the myriad images structured by anger, there is a further shaping spirit in the images used by Plath in “Lady Lazarus.” The title of the poem is “borrowed” from the account of the raising of Jesus’ friend Lazarus from the tomb after he had been dead for three days. We are told in Saint John’s account of the raising of Lazarus that Jesus went into the tomb and called forth Lazarus: “Lazarus come forth!” (John11:43). The dead man came out with his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said: “Loose him, and let him go” (John 11:44).

It is obvious how much Plath has borrowed from the biblical account of the Raising of Lazarus. She talks about the “grave cave” in stanza six. In Saint John’s account of Lazarus we are told: “It was a cave and a stone laid against it” (John 11:38). Plath also describes how, when she came forward from her under-house
tomb-like cave, she was unwrapped by “The peanut-crunching crowd:” for whom this is some kind of circus freak show and who clamour to see what further horrors will be revealed when they “Peel off the napkin.” The theme of the resurrection juxtaposed to what Plath is angrily attacking shapes and is shaped by the imagery. Plath was not questioning the Christian tenet of the resurrection, but was claiming that she too would rise by her own means and with an angry vengeance: “Beware / Beware.”

This viewpoint is substantiated by Eileen Aird (1973), who regards “Lady Lazarus” as a poem demonstrating Plath’s unsurpassed talent. She claims that by using highly distressful and private data, Plath moulds and directs the poem with considerable harshness into an intensely wrought poem that owes its essence partly to the antithetical opposition between the grisly cheeriness of its form and the fiercely unyielding earnestness of its theme. Jon Rosenblatt (1979) argues that “Lady Lazarus” delineates the key aesthetic principle of Plath’s later poetry. According to Rosenblatt the speaker in “Lady Lazarus” is a woman expressing her hurt, and, as the poem progresses, she assembles her strength for a Blitzkrieg on her enemies as the intensity of anger escalates. He points out that although there is intense emotion expressed in the poem, at no stage does the poem abandon its rhythmical exactness and adherence to traditional forms.

Even though it is not difficult to justify the level of anger in “Lady Lazarus,” the same cannot be said for the pretentiousness in the poem, for example the poet says, “I have done it again.” “A sort of walking miracle.” One possible explanation is in keeping with the views of Robert Solomon (1993). He argues that emotions can be types of accomplishments and “expression.” That is to say, emotions can enable us to position and to control ourselves in connection to the world. This was what Plath was doing when she was getting angry – attempting to save the situation for herself and the people she knew. Her pride had taken a severe blow, but rather than permit “the peanut crunching crowd” to witness her indignity she chose to brazen out her loss by expressing her anger in “Lady Lazarus” and by so doing restore her sense of self. In “For My Lover Returning to His Wife” Sexton too has attempted to save face when Dr Zweizung decided to
return to his wife. She does so by describing his wife as nothing more valuable
than a “saucepan,” a mere housewife to take care of him. We are not made aware
of this in Rich’s poems. It would seem her self-esteem was not in need of
bolstering up.

“Daddy” (1962) also articulates Plath’s anger. The poem makes clear the way in
which the imagery of the “telephone off at the root” and “Bit my pretty red heart
in two” are developed to provide a coherent structure that suggests the emotion of
anger in the poem. Plath has said that “Daddy” came out of her own emotional
experiences, these experiences are not, as Uroff (1977) claims, “uninformed ones
from the heart” (p.112). Rather, Plath uses her extensive and complex diction to
control the tone, the rhyme, the rhythm and the pace of the speaker’s words so that
she can reveal truths concerning the spokesperson. For Helen Vendler (1980)
“Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” are at the same time both demonically intelligent in
their licentious use of language, concepts and myths and yet totally unintelligent
in so far as they obstinately reject the centripetal significance of thought. For
Vendler it seems as if these poems spin further and further out of control in rage
and anger.

An explanation suggested by Paul Breslin (1988) to account for the intensely
vehement expression of rage and anger in “Daddy” is that Plath may have
subconsciously questioned her justification for her anger towards her father and
her husband. She therefore had to prove them guilty of infamous war crimes, with
the intention of rationalising her intense anger. A somewhat similar stance is taken
by Anne Stevenson (1989), who interprets “Daddy” as a savage renunciation of
the father by Plath. For all the intense rage and anger in this poem, however,
Stevenson regards “Daddy” as a poem that possesses an emotional underside, of a
heartrendingly hurt child eager for revenge, and who in reality is raging against an
adored father. To some extent these views are shared by Helen McNeil (1987),
who also believes that Plath regarded herself as an abandoned child. Plath
transfers her anger onto her father: if “Daddy” hurt me by dying he must be a son
of a bitch. Everybody else hated him: “the villagers never liked you …..” Hughes
is also depicted as a duplicate of Plath’s dead father. Now Hughes has left her and her anger has intensified:

And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I’m finally through.
The black telephone’s off at the root,
The voices just can’t worm through.

There is extreme anger in these lines: Plath is angry that the man to whom she pledged herself in marriage has betrayed her. She may have had her suspicions concerning Hughes’ unfaithfulness, but now the intercepted phone call has confirmed it. The telephone is black, as is Otto’s shoe in the first stanza of “Daddy.” The fact that the phone is “off at the root,” rather than merely ripped from the wall, is another way of alluding to death; the phone no longer has its life-sustaining supply of electricity. The worming movement too suggests death – the general process of decomposition – but perhaps also harking back to Plath’s earlier suicide attempt when she was found under the house and the maggots had to be picked off her like “sticky pearls.”

In the next stanza Plath’s anger intensifies. She has now “killed” both Otto and Hughes. Hughes is depicted as a blood-sucking vampire, whom she had mistaken for a father figure. Plath now regards him as the vampire who used her for the seven years of their marriage. In considering the underlying structure in the images Plath uses in “Daddy,” the frequent references to “blood” and its many functions has a significant role in her poetry. In stanzas eleven and twelve Plath refers to her father Otto:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.

The heart is the major organ for the maintenance of the circulation of the blood throughout the body. The heart too is frequently regarded as the focal point of
feelings and emotions. This man to whom Plath gave her heart unconditionally was the same man who broke her heart and changed her emotion of love to that of anger.

At a later stage in the poem Plath turns her attention and her anger to her estranged husband Ted Hughes:

    If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –
    The vampire who said he was you
    And drank my blood for a year,
    Seven years, if you want to know.

Once again we witness the imagery of blood in Plath’s poetry; she depicts her blood being used yet again in a negative way. The seven years Plath was married to Hughes are likened to living with a vampire who drained the life-blood from her. Just as no one can survive their heart having been bitten in two, neither can a person continue to live if their blood has been drained for seven years. We witness too the anger and the revenge demonstrated in the final stanza. Plath puts a stake in the life-sustaining and blood-supplying organ:

    There’s a stake in your fat black heart
    And the villagers never liked you.
    They are dancing and stamping on you.
    They always knew it was you.
    Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.

In “Daddy” Plath was assessing her situation and her relationships with both her father and her husband. Robert Solomon (2003) argues that our emotions are closely and individually linked to our appraisal of a particular happening. If, for example, Plath believed she was being abused, even though this belief may have been erroneous, she would understandably become angry with her father and her husband. As Solomon claims, when a person realises she is mistaken the anger is dissipated. Not for Plath, however. She continued to find reasons why Otto and Hughes were evil, highlighting their connections to the Nazis. For example in “Daddy” Plath emphasises the way in which her anger is self-directed. The basis for her anger may appear flimsy to others, but nevertheless she held her ground in order to justify her anger.
After the death of her husband, Plath’s mother Aurelia lived her life through her children. Consequently she had no real life of her own. Marjorie Perloff (1986) regards Aurelia’s obsession with her children’s lives as a contributory factor to the anger expressed in Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1966). In view of their symbiotic relationship, Plath must have found it doubly distressing to find in 1962 that she was in the same position Aurelia had been in when Otto Plath died. Plath was now a single parent with two small children and very limited financial means. In Perloff’s opinion Plath had become her mother and Plath had to annihilate the “Aurelia” in herself. In “Medusa” (1962) Plath articulates her vehemence towards her mother. The image cluster in “Medusa” of the gorgon with snakes for hair and the umbrella-shaped jellyfish with their restraining tentacles show the reader Plath’s anger at her mother’s controlling influence. The anger is organised in “Medusa” so that it affords a logical framework that affirms the emotion of anger. “Medusa” was written only four days after “Daddy.” Some of the things written in this poem are amongst the angriest Plath has ever composed. The mother figure becomes Medusa, the gorgon with snakes for hair. Once again the snake imagery suggests betrayal. The mother is likened to the umbrella-shaped jellyfish whose tentacles have the power to paralyse its victim. In stanza six Plath talks about “paralysing the kicking lovers.” Is Plath blaming her mother for breaking up her marriage? Other lines in the poem would appear to substantiate this idea. In stanza five Plath refers to her mother crossing the water to visit them – a visit that according to the poem was uninvited:

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I didn’t call you.
I didn’t call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta.
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Whilst in utero the embryo requires the placenta to sustain life, but after birth the placenta is discarded, as of no further use. Aurelia has served her purpose. Plath is expressing her anger at her mother for not allowing the apron strings to be cut, and not permitting her to live her life, mistakes and all. In “Medusa” Plath expresses her anger that her bereft and impoverished state has been exposed. Nor will her pride allow her to accept pity or support – financial, spiritual or physical.
The refusal of financial help is expressed very clearly by Plath: “I want no monthly dole, especially not from you.” Plath further resents any spiritual comfort:

Who do you think you are?
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live …

Plath is criticising the “mother” for setting herself up as the Eucharistic food to sustain her life by offering her own flesh and blood for Plath’s sustenance. Plath is drawing on the Roman Catholic background of her maternal grandmother when she alludes to the Roman Catholic belief that at a particular stage in the service of the Mass, known as transubstantiation, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. Plath for her part, however, wants none of it: no more physical support from her mother, or sympathy as depicted by the oily tears of “Blubbery Mary”. Nor does she want forgiveness for her sins from “The Ghastly Vatican” by way of the Sacraments of Confession or Extreme Unction.

I am sick to death of hot salt.
Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins.

The last line of “Medusa” is the final severing of the maternal ties: “There is nothing between us.” It is definitive and so similar to the final line in “Daddy:” “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.”

The very next day after completing “Medusa” Plath wrote “The Jailer” (1962), which Steven Axelrod (1991) has called the final poem in Plath’s domestic trilogy. The pattern of imagery used in “Jailer” shows how, because of her marriage, Plath has lost her sense of security. This pattern provides meaning to the poem and advances the overall argument of the chapter that the emotion of anger is structured in Plath’s poetry. In “The Jailer” the guard is depicted by the speaker as one who has encroached upon her body and soul; the speaker in the poem has been abused both physically and mentally:

I have been drugged and raped.
Seven hours knocked out of my right mind.

The seven hours may refer yet again to the seven years, the time spent married to Hughes. “Drugged and raped” represent the anger Plath experienced whilst under Hughes’ influence during which time her independence was curtailed. The third stanza demonstrates the speaker’s anger most effectively; she no longer feels secure, and her shell has been shattered. The zeppelin that kept her airborne has been dropped and her turtle-like protective crustacean shell has been smashed. She is now vulnerable and food for the birds:

Something is gone.
My sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin
Drops me from a terrible altitude.
Carapace smashed,
I spread to the beaks of birds.

In the earlier stanza of “The Jailer” the poet makes use of metaphors to imply she was not in her normal state of mind for much of her seven year-marriage, if not all of the seven years. Plath was angry, but her anger was expressed through the formal coherence of metaphors and it is this that gives her poetry its cognitive dimension. “The Jailer” although a highly emotional poem is also exceptionally formal. It is as if Plath is implying that for much of her marriage she was both deluded and intimidated.

The persona in “The Jailer” was to be the speaker’s knight in shining armour, armour that would protect; but it turned out to be a sham. He serves only to undermine her more:

And he, for his subversion,
Hurts me, he
With his armor of fakery,

As with the other two poems in Axelrod’s trilogy the last line is a final letting go of the jailer: “Do, do, do without me?” The final line is posed as a question, but is in effect a statement. On the one hand, Plath is claiming that Hughes will have to manage without her when she is no longer there; on the other hand she expresses her incredulity that Hughes will be able to manage without having her to torment.
Plath likens the pain she has been subjected to by Hughes as the pain that light can inflict on the eyes: “[w]hat would the light / Do without eyes to knife …”

In “Burning the Letters,” written on 13 August 1962, Plath’s despair and anger are heightened: she vacillates between being the persecutor and the persecuted. The cluster of images used by Plath in this poem, images such as; “white fists”, “their death rattle” and “My veins glow like trees” depict her anger at the pain inflicted upon her. This gives purport to the poem and provides a well-ordered structure intimating the emotion of anger. Perloff (1986) claims that “Burning the Letters” could very easily have become an emotionally mawkish poem about an unwanted wife burning the letters of the man who has deserted her for another woman, but that was not the case. “Burning the Letters,” however, has none of the usual characteristics of a maudlin theme. The overall theme of the poem is that of an angry woman who has been scorned and is out for vengeance. The actual letters in the poem take on lives of their own, with their “white fists” and “their death rattle.” Plath’s anger knows no bounds: she intends to inflict pain on the writer of the letters and is prepared to show no mercy. She is particularly venomous when making her somewhat obvious references to Hughes’ mistress Assia Wevill, alluding to Wevill’s German ancestry: “Between the yellow lettuces and the German cabbage.” In the last line of this same stanza the speaker says: “And a name with black edges.” Plath is possibly referring to a death notice, often sent on paper edged with black; if so, whose death is the speaker specifying – Plath’s or Wevill’s? Or is it the death of Plath’s marriage as a result of this adulterous relationship? Even the mention of the yellow lettuces suggests decay. Strangely, however, amongst these many allusions to death there is a suggestion of new life:

Involved in its weird blue dreams
Involved in a foetus.

Is the possibility that Wevill may be having a child by Hughes what is making Plath angriest of all? This would go a long way to explaining Plath’s anger.
Lynda Banotzen (1998) believes “Burning the Letters” is an undertaking of “poetic arson,” intended to deride Ted Hughes’ writing on every level, for its poetic affectation and its actual appearance:

And here is an end to the writing,
The spry hooks that bend and cringe and the smiles, the smiles

The last ten lines of “Burning the Letters” indicate the pain the speaker is experiencing from the husband’s betrayal and suggest that this pain will be ongoing. The rain does nothing to dampen down the searing pain; nor does the fact that the fox has been ripped apart make his pain abate. Dead though he is, the pain is still obvious in his dead eyes. These lines imply how long Plath anticipates her pain and associated anger will last:

    Warm rain greases my hair, extinguishes nothing.
    My veins glow like trees.
    The dogs are tearing a fox. This is what it is like
    A red burst and a cry
    That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop
    With that dead eye
    And the stuffed expression, but goes on.

The imagery and metaphors used in “Burning the Letters” refer to the destruction of the written word; but the particular set of images used by Plath organises and gives coherence to her poetry. One way of interpreting this poem to view it as simply burning letters, but the poem is more about Hughes’ actual writing of letters to compose his poetry. We know that Plath regarded Hughes’ writing as having characteristic hooks in its appearance, which is what she is referring to in the line “[t]he spry hooks that bend and cringe and the smiles, the smiles.” So Plath is burning Hughes’ written manuscripts, not his love letters. Towards the end of the poem, in the final stanza, Plath writes:

    The dogs are tearing a fox. This is what it is like
    A red burst and a cry
    That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop

Here Plath is likening the dogs ripping open the fox to her destroying Hughes’ manuscripts. All this attests to a very strong structuring of her imagery and the
manifestation of the cognitive dimension in the poem. Here the emotion of anger is working in a structured way.

A number of critics have viewed Plath’s poetry as ultimately leading to her suicide. The cerebral and rational component of her writings frequently went unnoticed. Not all critics, however, have failed to notice the highly cerebral component of her writings. Alicia Ostriker (1989) argued that over the space of a few years Plath’s poetry developed from that of a poet using academic form in her writings to that of one with a scintillating, unprecedented finesse. She claims that in the Ariel poems Plath gave readers examples of unparalleled and unregretted anger in her poetry. It is Plath’s anger that (through its verbalisation in extended imagery and patterns of metaphors) imparts intelligibility to her poems – anger in Plath’s poems is her strategy of comprehending and interpreting the happenings of her life. In doing so the cognitive dimension in her poetry is made known through the intricate shaping of the imagery. In “Lady Lazarus” for example Plath manifests anger as a shaping emotion. By using the extended metaphors of a risen Christ, a risen Lazarus and finally a risen “Lady Lazarus” Plath manipulates her vengeful anger in a sense-making way.

The characteristic sense-making in the poetry of Sylvia Plath is underwritten by the way in which she uses her poetry to convey blame for what other people have done to her throughout her life to cause her anger. Plath believes that her mother, father and husband have all contributed to her anger. She in turn is angry at them and intends to seek her revenge. She justifies her anger with these people because they have let her down and so she believes she has every right to be angry and unforgiving. In this respect the sense-making of the anger in the poetry of Plath is distinct from the anger in the poetry of Sexton and Rich. Sexton, although angry at other people in her life, namely her mother and father, frequently redirects the blame for her anger onto herself, for what she has done and failed to do. Rich too accepted a degree of the blame for her anger towards her father. She eventually came to believe that she had misconstrued her father’s loving concern for her welfare as overbearing interference. Sexton and Rich were, in the final analysis, more willing to forgive their parents.
Anne Sexton

Anne Sexton is also an angry poet. Many critics and readers of her poetry remember her as the poet who cried loudly and frequently about her private emotions. For such critics, Sexton’s poems were little more than a stream of vitriolic wailing, with negligible attention to any cerebral or intellectual thought. However, the fact that Sexton shaped her poetry by metaphors and similes and also by rhythms attests to her poetry being cerebral, literary writing. If a metaphor is a figurative way to express meaning, with often deep-rooted purport, then this can only be done with cerebral contemplation.

Sexton’s later poetry began to dwell on the negative aspects of human life, facets of human emotion such as anger and pain. As she said, “Pain engraves a deeper memory” (quoted in McClatchy 1978 p.27). Sexton possibly understood the above words to imply that our consciousness is heightened when we are in pain. Happiness we take for granted but when things go wrong however, the pain alerts us to the fact that something is wrong.

Diana Hume-George (1988) believes Anne Sexton’s poetry chronicles issues that are highly relevant to the social crises of American life in the mid-1950s and 1960s. Because of her own personal problems, Sexton was better able to empathise with the broader cultural ailments. She experienced a dysfunctional childhood, separation from her daughter, the deaths of her parents and adored great-aunt, divorce and her own suicide attempts. We are made privy to all of these crises in her life through her poems. “Cripples and Other Stories” (1966) documents Sexton’s perception that her mother did not love her and “Daddy Warbucks” (1966) emphasises her growing disillusionment with her father’s alleged wartime racketeering. This exemplifies Nussbaum’s (2001) argument that we make evaluative judgments about events and people important in our lives through our emotions. Sexton believed she had never been truly loved by her parents. She was sensitive to this perceived loss of love, which in turn gave way to feelings of vulnerability and anger. At no stage however, could these poems depicting her personal problems be dismissed as merely mindless ramblings.
According to Hume George, Sexton made use of her technical expertise to “deploy metaphorical structure at once synthetic and analytic. In other words, Sexton assimilated the superficially opposing, but deeply similar ways of thinking represented by poetry and psychoanalysis” (p.53).

Much of Sexton’s poetry highlighted the immense anger in women’s lives and in her own life especially. The female anger in her poems contributed to the power of the poetry. Sexton was a poet who not only permitted herself to portray anger in her poetry, but who actually celebrated the vehement emotion of anger in her writings. It is the belief of Diane Wood Middlebrook (1992) that Anne Sexton was an atypical poet whose writing was highly regarded by an extensive sector of the community, to some extent because her words provided extraordinary compelling verbalisation of the suffering and anger of women, anger that was igniting contemporary feminism. This section examines some of Sexton’s poems with special reference to those poems that delineate the emotion of anger which other women could empathise with, the emotional conflict within families. Suzanne Juhasz (1989) comments that Sexton frequently overburdens her poetry with figurative language when she writes about members of her family. Juhasz calls these formulations “epithet metaphors” (p.119). Drawing attention to the emphasis on the metaphoric function in Sexton’s work, Juhasz believes that “The Division of Parts” (1960) offers one of the most persuasive examples of this when Sexton refers to her mother as:

    old love,
    old circus knitting, god-in-her-moon,
    all fairest in my lang syne verse,
    the gauzy bride among the children,
    the fancy amid the absurd
    and awkward, that horn for hounds
    that skipper homeward, that museum
    keeper of stiff starfish …

A further example is the occasion in “All My Pretty Ones” (1962) when Sexton says:

    Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator,
    my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.
In these lines of Sexton’s poetry there is anger, but it is a very structured anger recalling actual events in the lives of Sexton’s parents. In her reference to her father, Sexton quite categorically refers to her disappointment in her father as a role model. He should have been there to navigate her through life. Instead he was frequently drunk. He should have been his daughter’s keeper, but he himself was lost. Although Sexton is most assuredly expressing anger, she is nonetheless referring to particular incidents and events, which indicates a shaping consciousness at work. Sexton is using words with totally opposite meanings to describe her father. He is a drunkard yet a navigator, a caretaker albeit a defeated one. Although the emotion in this poem is clearly in evidence so too is the structure. Sexton can consider the emotion of anger now or can leave it for another time. She can simply fold away considerations of her father as if he were a collapsible table or a laptop computer and reconsider at a time she deems more appropriate. Here Sexton is using metaphors that depict her ambivalent relationship with him. We also are able to witness the effect these metaphors have on us as readers. Sexton is keeping her reader at a distance. She is angry at her father but tells us so in a very indirect manner.

Diana Hume-George (1988) gives credence to the theory that the use of metaphorical structures in the poetry of Anne Sexton makes her work analytical:

Sexton explored the myths by and through which our culture lives and dies: the archetypal relationships among mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters…. She perceived and consistently patterned in the images of her art, the paradoxes deeply rooted in human behaviour and motivation. Her poetry presents multiplicity and simplicity, duality and unity, the sacred and the profane, in ways that insist on their similarities … even at times their identity. In less abstract terms, Sexton made explicit the intimacy of forces persistently treated as opposites by the society she lived in. (p. 15)

Anne Sexton experienced happenings in her life that caused her to be angry. Many of these issues stemmed from her childhood and her poor relationship with her parents, followed by their deaths, her own attempted suicides and unhappy marriage. The events in her life not only sustained her poetry but stoked the blaze of her anger. Robert Solomon (2003) informs us that our emotions are compelling
responses to special circumstances; as a result they can at times seem illogical, or thoughtless, whereas in fact they are frequently determined and deliberate.

This is the case regarding the anger that Sexton experienced. Her childhood memories had left her with concerns about her worth to her family. “Baby Picture” (1972) for example, reflects the unhappiness of her childhood; even the smile in the photograph of her seventh year is not genuine, but “painted.” For her the photograph seems to be only for the sake of appearance. When she examines particular features of the picture Sexton finds:

I open the mouth  
and my teeth are an angry army.  
I open the eyes  
and they go sick like dogs

It would be easy to dismiss this poem as a mere effusion of crude emotion. However, by using metaphors and similes to describe her childhood facial features Sexton is doing much more than expressing her anger at the treatment she received as a child. She likens normal facial orifices to having totally different functions. The open mouth and the teeth become “an angry army” and her eyes have witnessed such negative things that “they go sick like dogs.” Her childhood was not as Sexton perceived it should have been; therefore she is angry that she has been deprived of a normal childhood. It can also be argued that this poem demonstrates, as claimed by Satir and Baldwin (1983), that if something very important to us is being threatened, we feel compelled to do something.

It would appear that Sexton believes her identity is fading as the photograph ages:

I am aging without sound  
into darkness, darkness.

Anne,  
who are you?

An examination of the underlying structure in the images used by Sexton in “Baby Picture” and how they relate to the overall coherence suggests much of the imagery implies decay and disintegration in her life. She likens her peeling
photograph to that of a “vegetable from the refrigerator pocked with mold.” There is anger too in these lines. Sexton attributes the blame for the decay in her life to the things she has seen and the events she has lived through.

In her writing of “Baby Picture” Sexton has undiminished command of her emotions, demonstrating the consciousness in her poetry. Through its development of teeth as an “angry army”, “sick like dogs” and “I am aging without sound” the poem manifests an intellectual and well organised structure that imparts Sexton’s anger. The distancing in the poetry – not only from the reader but from the poet too is quite obvious. Sexton uses the pronoun “I” in such a way that it lacks any personalisation. Rather than saying: “I open my mouth,” she says “I open the mouth” and again, two lines on, “I open the eyes.”

In “Cripples and Other Stories,” (1966) Sexton’s anger towards her parents is apparent once more. The imagery of the withered arm and cripple show how Sexton’s anger is organised. She is angry at her father for his excessive drinking:

My father was fat on scotch.
It leaked from every orifice.

Sexton also manifests anger at her father for the emotional damage he has caused her. In the lines, “My father took the crowbar / and broke the wringer’s heart.” Sexton is referring to herself as the wringer and the one who was damaged by her father.

Sexton is angry at both parents for their hypocrisy:

My father was a perfect man,
clean and rich and fat.
My mother was a brilliant thing.
She was good at that.

The above lines might well be mere effusion, but both of the claims made by Sexton about her parents can be substantiated. Sexton maintained that to the outside world her parents were both successful and respectable, but this was part of their act. It is possible too that Sexton was engaging in a speech act in writing “Cripples and Other Stories.” She is cognitively processing the anger she is
feeling towards her parents. The above lines have some surprising connections. The second and fourth lines of the above stanza contradict those of the first and third lines. Initially Sexton’s father is described as a perfect man, but when she elaborates on his perfection (“clean and rich and fat”) we are given the image of someone who is grotesque. Sexton’s mother was described as “brilliant” yet the next line implies this was something that was contrived, something she worked to achieve. In this way Sexton makes sense of her unhappy childhood, allocating some of the blame for her anger onto her parents.

Sexton was however; most angry with herself whereas Plath believed her anger was brought about by others. She views herself as a damaged human being. Referring to her withered arm she writes:

I know I was a cripple.
Of course, I’d known it from the start.

Sexton regarded herself as an emotional cripple. Her anger is some kind of self-protective mechanism. By verbalising her anger she is protecting herself from destructive and hostile inclinations, which is one of the points made by Stephanie Shields (2002) when describing how anger makes people react. There is still, however, very strong anger levelled by Sexton at her parents. To the world her mother and father were outwardly perfect, but Sexton perceived that she was not and that her parents were acutely aware of her shortcomings. Sexton’s mother lacked support for, or confidence in, her poetic ability, on one occasion accusing her of plagiarism and refusing to allow her to return to school. This possibly is what Sexton is referring to when she writes:

As for the arm,
unfortunately it grew.
Though mother said a withered arm
Would put me in Who’s Who.

Sexton’s expression of anger on account of her mother’s attitude would have been very therapeutic, which would support the theory advanced by Jane Marcus (1978) who claims that “self-preservation” can be a source of anger and necessary for the artist.
The same argument can be put forward concerning “Daddy Warbucks” (1966). Again Sexton is angry with her father, this time over the way he has made an idol of money. This poem shows how the imagery of “the bucks, the bucks” and “diamonds in your coke” are advanced in such a manner that they offer a well-ordered structure that indicates Sexton’s emotion of anger at her father’s greed. She says: “[y]ou’ve got the bucks, the bucks, the bucks.” The title of the poem refers to the profits made from the war. Sexton goes on to recount how the money was made at the expense of his credibility, although whether or not this was black market profiteering we are not informed. Events and happenings are called to mind and highlighted. Once again the use of metaphors suggests acute sensitivity on Sexton’s part to the social issues of the times – America has won the war but at what cost? There is also much reference to power in “Daddy Warbucks.” Sexton is perceptibly very angry with her father for his misuse of money to gain power. Her anger in turn gives her the power to ridicule him. The money Sexton’s father has accumulated as a result of his wartime exploits has equipped him with a considerable material possessions and power:

because you’ve got the bucks, the bucks, the bucks.

and I knew you drove a pure gold car
and put diamonds in your coke
for the crunchy sound, the adorable sound
and the moon too was in your portfolio
as well as the ocean with its sleepy dead.

Sexton’s father has gained a great deal materially – even the moon was in his sights – but he has paid an even higher price: the loss of his daughter’s respect and esteem. As is made explicit in the New Testament; of what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world but in so doing loses his integrity and his soul? Sexton uses the imagery of vision and loss of vision to impart to her reader her anger over her father’s “short-sightedness.” In the first lines of the first stanza the poet writes:

What’s missing is the eyeballs
in each of us, but it doesn’t matter
Sexton was angry with her father for his avarice and his short-sighted views on money and power. This did not, however, “blind” her in her cerebral control over her emotions. She expresses her anger with intelligence and by using the imagery of eyeballs to describe vision and lack of vision. Sexton gives coherence to her writing when she suggests that not only does her father suffer from lack of vision but that her sight is impaired also, although angry she is able to see both sides of the picture. Plath on the other hand was unable or unwilling to see the other person’s point of view. It was all black and white for her, her father was a villain and she was the victim. In these lines Sexton is showing how her anger works in a way that finds the meaning of her life by way of a cognitive moulding mediator, from which the poems acquire their logic and purport.

In “The Firebombers” (1972) and “After Auschwitz” (1976) Sexton verbalises her anger at America, which has become a warmongering nation. The imagery of “the coffin fillers” and “the grocer’s of death” help Sexton “make sense” of her anger at war and provide a well organised structure that imparts the emotion of anger to the reader. Sexton claims all Americans are responsible for the atrocities being perpetrated. In “The Firebombers,” she writes:

We are America.
We are the coffin fillers.
We are the grocers of death.
We pack them in crates like cauliflowers.

In this poem Sexton expresses her passionate emotion with vehemence. Nevertheless her work exhibits form and demonstrates a political awareness. Again there is an abundance of metaphors used in “The Firebombers” – bodies being likened to cauliflowers, bombs to shoeboxes, and all at the death market. This poem is a prime example of Shields’ contention that anger communicates singular information to some people and evokes emotional behaviour in others. Sexton was angry and this anger was employed in her writings quite resourcefully, to make people aware of what was going on and to try to arouse some reaction in them. In this poem Sexton’s voice is very close to her emotion and she wants to engage the reader in this emotion. She does this by using her particular metaphors to draw the reader into the poem and become involved with
the political issues. Sexton draws similarities between matters of great magnitude and everyday events, all the time likening death to mundane events in life. Americans are responsible for putting people in their coffins in exactly the same way as they are packing cauliflowers into cartons. By structuring the metaphors in a progressive way (for example the metaphors comparing the committing of wartime atrocities to packing vegetables in an extended metaphor developed over three lines), Sexton uses her anger to “make sense” of the war.

“After Auschwitz” actually begins with the word “anger.” Sexton is angry at the Nazis and writes a poem accusing them of some of the most abominable atrocities that mankind could commit. Images such as “Let man never again raise his teacup”, “Let man never again write a book” and “Let man never again put on his shoe” combine to suggest the “civilisation” whose loss is the root cause of Sexton’s anger. Sexton was a teenager when America became involved in World War Two, and her husband Kayo had served in the Korean War, so her anger was logical. The events of the times no doubt influenced her political and social conscience. The anger that Sexton is exploring here is a different type of anger from that of the anger directed at her parents. There are different triggers, resulting in anger at a highly personal level and anger at a more political level. Rich also makes evident her anger in her poetry at a personal and a political level in a very real way, whereas Plath’s concern for the world is not quite so convincing. Plath’s anger is highly personal: politics provide a metaphor for her inner anger rather than a source of anger in them. Rather than Sexton’s emotion of anger causing her to be less connected to her thoughts, it actually enhances the intelligent control over her language. Whilst angry, she was able to see the other side of the issue. She is angry at her father for his wartime racketeering, but she is still able to itemise exactly what he had done and to articulate her anger very logically. Her anger actually helped her to see the whole picture of the events of her life, which fits in with the view of Philip Fisher (2002) that strong feelings can heighten our interpretation of events in our lives:

Without contact to strong feelings we lose a sense of wholeness to our lives. When I write the words they are recorded for whenever you need them, but emotions are rooted in time (p.72).
The anger is palpable in “After Auschwitz,” through the way the metaphors are worked. The religious images in this poem are both strong and profound. Instead of humankind being a temple within which God dwells, “man” is described as something very far removed from a Temple of the Holy Ghost:

Man with his small pink toes,
   with his miraculous fingers
is not a temple
but an outhouse,
I say aloud.

All of these things Sexton wants to say aloud, so that unlike the happenings of Auschwitz all the facts are known.

“After Auschwitz” likens man to all kinds of abominations. Man is nothing more than sludge and silt and he should be destroyed. There is also a strong suggestion that Sexton is angry at God for having allowed man to become so sophisticated and in so doing allowed him to become cruel and unfeeling. Rather than being a “temple” of the Holy Ghost, Christianity has made him nothing more than an “outhouse.” Sexton is implying that primitive man never committed such atrocities against his fellow man. If this is what has become of modern sophisticated man when he fights with God on his side, it is an argument for reverting to things as they were before: “Let man never again raise his teacup.” The niceties of society do not compensate for wartime atrocities. “Let man never again write a book.” Modern education has made man ignorant. “Let man never again put on his shoe.” When man was primitive and walked around bare-foot, he never used weapons of mass destruction. “Let man never again raise his eye, on a soft July night.” This last line is the most telling and the most poignant of all. We associate raising our eyes, as if to Heaven in prayer, as possibly many Americans would do on 4th July. Whilst acknowledging that progress and education are commendable Sexton is so angry at God and man that she is suggesting if this is what Christianity and progress has done for humanity it were better it were not done:

I say those things aloud.
Patricia Meyer-Spacks (1978) believes Anne Sexton’s poetry is far too emotional. Meyer-Spacks even claims that the emotion is contrived and that the sentimentalism mars most of the lyrics in “Live or Die”. Furthermore, the conscious effort to induce emotion for its own sake and the failure to evaluate it by any rational standard all help to convince Spacks of the lack of authentic emotion in Sexton’s poetry. Spacks cautions: “Art requires more than emotional indulgence, it requires a saving respect for discipline and realities beyond the crying needs, the unrelenting appetites of the self” (p.189). I would argue however, that in “Live or Die” the emotion is genuine. Initially in the poem Sexton sees very little purpose to living, but as the poem progresses her images of the sun and her daily purification are glimpses of the hope in her poetry.

“For My Lover Returning to His Wife” (1969) characterises the anger that Sexton felt, not only at the end of her affair with her psychiatrist, Dr Zweizung, but anger at herself for allowing herself to be used in this way. Zweizung’s wife had found out about the affair and he was forced to choose. The comparative imagery used by Sexton in this poem, images such as saying that Dr Zweizung’s wife “was melted carefully down for you” and “cast up from your childhood”, whereas Sexton was a “A Luxury, A bright sloop in the harbour” delineates her anger. Sexton was angry at the lack of permanence of his love for her and that she came second to his wife. For Joyce Carol Oates (1989) however, the anger has been rigorously curtailed. She describes the tone in this poem as elegiac rather than one of pure anger. Plath’s anger at the loss of her husband to Assia Wevill was a destructive vengeful anger, with no blame attached to herself. It could be too that Sexton’s emotion, when writing “For My Lover Returning to His Wife” was simply anger, anger because she had been cheated and used and was never going to be a permanent fixture in Zweizung’s life, as is very cleverly described in the paint metaphor:

As for me I am a watercolor.
I wash off.

Stephanie Shields (2002) claims that anger is pivotal for humans’ existence physiologically because it enables the body to place in motion and sustain exalted
stances of specific and inconspicuous energy. Sexton needed to express her emotions in order to work through her anger. In this sense, the poem imparts both self-protective and aggressive dispositions. In “For My Lover Returning to His Wife” Sexton is using her anger as a means of self-preservation as suggested by Jane Marcus (1978). Sexton was both painfully and acutely aware of the events taking place at the time of writing the poem. In this poem Sexton goes to considerable lengths to curtail and restrain her anger. We are, however, made aware of the intensity of her anger by the use of imagery in the poem. She is angry because she has been used as nothing more than a passing fancy, whereas the wife is the real love of Dr Zweizung’s life. This is made very obvious by the use of Sexton’s comparative imagery. The wife was “made for” Dr Zweizung:

She was melted carefully down for you
and cast up from your childhood,
cast up from your one hundred favorite aggies.

and as real as a cast-iron pot.

Sexton, on the other hand was merely a temporary distraction for Dr Zweizung:

Let’s face it, I have been momentary.
A luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbor.

Littleneck clams out of season.

Contrasting the steadfastness of his wife to the frivolity of his affair with Sexton, the images used to do this – the expensive out-of-season clams and the one-masted vessel contribute to the structure and the shaping spirit in her poetry. On the one hand Dr Zweizung’s wife was pre-destined for him. She was everything he wanted and was as unfeigned and authentic as a reliable saucepan. Yet the fact that the wife is referred to as a “saucepan” is both a put-down and a judgment on Dr Zweizung’s wife. To him she was a mere “housewife/cook.” This was therefore also a put-down of the doctor. Sexton on the other hand was nothing more than a temporary distraction. Again we are made aware of the sense-making working as a cognitive moulding through which the poetry derives its meaning and coherence. Sexton has been passed over in favour of Dr Zweizung’s wife.
Sexton justifies this by rationalising that she could not compete with a wife who was “made for him.”

Many of the angriest images in Sexton’s writings are to be found in her spiritual poetry. In “The Division of Parts,” (1960) Sexton describes the apportionment of her dead mother’s belongings among herself and her two sisters. Sexton refers to her mother as “the gauzy bride among the children” and “the fancy amid the absurd”. The repetitive nature of these images creates a structure to her anger. She describes her anger for the pain her mother had to suffer before the cancer took its toll. Sexton also verbalises anger because she is unable to feel the way she believes she ought to feel:

My timely loss
is too customary to note; and yet
I planned to suffer
and I cannot.

She is also piqued that she is now burdened with angry dreams of her dead mother:

Divided, you climbed into my head.
There in my jabbering dream
I heard my own angry cries
and I cursed you, Dame
keep out of my slumber.
My good Dame, you are dead.

In these lines Sexton is exercising the power of the living over the dead. She quite openly admits to her anger: “I heard my own angry cries.” Even though Sexton’s mother is dead Sexton’s anger has not abated.

Sexton now has the power to tell her mother to leave her dreams. This fits in with the view of Carol Tavris (1992) that anger is profoundly embroiled in the practice of power. There is a plethora of pain and anger in “The Division of Parts” and at the same time there are so many structured references to incidents of Sexton’s past life. She refers to the photocopy of her mother’s will that arrived in the post that day, and her mother’s former domicile in Essex. Sexton then goes on to recall events in the hospital prior to Mary Gray’s death:
I read to you
from *The New Yorker,* ate suppers
You wouldn’t eat, fussed
with your flowers,
Joked with your nurses.

All these citations are evidence of a forming awareness at work. Drawing on incidents in the past and using metaphors so aptly indicates the rational and cerebral manifestation of the emotion of anger in the poetry. It may well be worth considering whether poetry should be a practice of power and if this is the case in this particular poem. Sexton makes reference to her newly found power, coinciding with the death of her mother:

This is the division of money.
I am one third
of your daughters counting my bounty
or I am queen alone
in the parlor still,

and again she writes:

Your coat is in my closet,
your bright stones on my hand,
the gaudy fur animals
I do not know how to use,
settle on me like a debt.

For Sexton this empowerment was something she had never experienced when her mother was alive. We are made aware however, that it was not something that sat well with her. As she said, she was unable to use this new-found power. Sexton however, is exploring her options by the use of her imagery and metaphors and coming to an intelligent decision as to what was best for her. The metaphors are carefully developed. The associated affluence is implied, through use of the imagery of luxurious items of clothing and jewellery.

Through the progression of images such as “the dolls falling out of the sky”, “The leaves, holding them like green dishes” and “The ponds open as whine glasses to drink them down” suggests anger that so many children are dying needlessly. In discussing Sexton’s later poem, “The Falling Dolls,” (1976) Frances Bixler (1988)
emphasise Sexton’s anger that so many “dolls”, depicting the children in the world are allowed to perish so unnecessarily and why does God allow so much suffering in the world? Does God also treat adults in the same way?

are we the dolls themselves,
born but never fed?

For Bixler it is the questions asked in quick succession, towards the end of the poem which capture Sexton’s anger.

Why is there no mother?
Why are all these dolls falling out of the sky?
Was there a father?

In the next two lines Sexton has very cleverly “misspelt” wine glasses to emphasise her angry complaining over the treatment of children:

The leaves, holding them like green dishes?
The ponds, open as whine glasses to drink them down?

This is not the poetry of a woman ranting and raving, giving no attention to structure, or consciousness in her writing. Furthermore, in “The Falling Dolls,” Sexton is, as Shields (2002) suggests, trying to get across the idea that anger can impart unique advice to society, thereby positioning and arousing an emotional response within the community of her readers.

The final two lines of “The Falling Dolls” pose a moral dilemma for Sexton’s readers. Are we the dolls “born but never fed?” Sexton may well be implying that society has never come to a full realisation of the preciousness of life. Nor has society matured responsibly or emotionally. The safety nets of life have lost their effectiveness and so there is no longer anyone who knows right from wrong. Plath too, makes reference to her lost of security in “The Jailer,” where her sleeping capsule no longer affords her any protection. But if society can be made aware of this, and for Sexton it is by means of her poetry – perhaps society can change and collectively save the world. In the following lines Sexton illustrates the way in which one person can help change the world. If everyone does the same a difference can be made.
I hold my arms open
and catch
one,
two,
three … ten in all
running back and forth like a badminton player,
catching dolls, the babies I practice upon,

In “I’m Dreaming the My Lai Soldier Again,” (1969) Sexton depicts actual political and historical events in America in March of 1968, which escalated into an event broadcast in world media coverage. This pattern of imagery in this poem provides an ordered structure which advances the emotion of anger and gives meaning to the poem. Images such as; “I am lying in this belly of dead babies. Each are belching up the yellow gasses of death”. The poem details Sexton’s anger at the atrocities of war and what happens to its innocent victims. Sexton’s anger is similar to her anger in “The Firebombers.” She is particularly concerned at the permanence of the damage done:

and I look at my hand and it is green with intestines.
And they won’t come off,

They won’t …

It would be hard to come across a better example of cerebral and logical recollection in a poem than that in “I’m Dreaming the My Lai Soldier Again.” She says:

he gives me a bullet to swallow
like a sleeping tablet.
I am lying in this belly of dead babies.
Each are belching up the yellow gasses of death.

The events evoked in the poem refer to the actual historical events that happened at My Lai and its aftermath. Through the anger in her poems and by means of extended imagery Sexton gives sense to her poetry. The person in the poem, rather than being shot in the normal way is “shot” in a passive way. She actually swallows the bullet compliantly. Her death consequently causes the death of her unborn babies: they are poisoned by her death. I am showing how that pattern of
imagery is in actual fact a development and manifestation of anger. The anger in
her poems is the way in which she finds meaning to the events of her life.

The anger recalled by Sexton in her poetry is frequently anger at her perception
that she was not loved by her parents. She is both disillusioned and disappointed
that they failed to love her which is demonstrated in “Cripples and Other Stories.”
Unlike Plath and Rich, Sexton was angry at herself for not being the daughter her
parents wished for. She was also angry at herself for her failed marriage and her
inability to look after her daughter. In “For My Lover Returning to his Wife”
Sexton continues her anger at herself for the end of her affair with Dr Zweizung.
She does however make a number of references to make sense of the reason he
chose to return to his wife and in this way allow her some face-saving way of
making sense of his leaving her.

**Adrienne Rich**

The poetry of Adrienne Rich also manifests anger, much of which centres on her
aversion to anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, political interference and exploitation
of marginalised groups. Rich alludes to the positive aspects of anger in her
writings in *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1986). She is likening poetry to the food
necessary for life just as bread and blood are necessary to sustain life.

In her essay *Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson* (1979) Adrienne
Rich claims; “It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure
of concealment … that explodes in poetry” (p.162). Rich is using the imagery of
emotion under pressure, and emotions being concealed and how, when they are
restrained in this way, they can finally erupt. It is by her use of this set of images
that we are able to witness just what it is that is structuring them. Rich is likening
women’s lives to that of active volcanoes: at times dormant, but nonetheless still
capable of activity. When anger becomes too much women erupt in the same way
as volcanoes. The volcano “Vesuvius” is probably referred to because it is
currently active, erupts frequently and has erupted recently.
Although there is to some extent a rhythm to the emotions Rich, however, claims that poetry is far more than rhythmical sounds to appease our senses, but something which affects our cognitive mind:

I had grown up hearing and reading poems from a very young age, first as sounds, repeated, musical, rhythmically satisfying in themselves and the power of concrete, sensuously compelling images:

But poetry soon became more than music and images; it was also revelation, information, a kind of teaching. I believed I could learn from it. The fact that poets contradicted themselves and each other didn’t baffle or alarm me. I was avid for everything I could get; my child’s mind did not shut down for the sake of consistency. (Blood Bread and Poetry. pp.168-169)

Rich claims that she was regarded as an angry child and often told to contain her anger. But in Rich’s opinion the expression of anger can have positive consequences; she draws on the lines of William Blake “A Poison Tree” (1789) in Songs of Innocence to substantiate her opinion:

I was angry with my friend,
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe,
I told it not my wrath did grow.

Liz Yorke (1997) believes that throughout the 1960s Rich strove to produce, through her prose and poetry, a means of liberating her passion and extending to her readers a desire for fundamental revolution in her writing. In “Tear Gas” (1969) Rich writes:

The will to change begins in the body not in the mind
My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding with every act of resistance and each of my failures
Locked in the closet at 4 years old I beat the wall with my body.
that act is in me still.

This poem illustrates the way in which the unfolding of the imagery expressing anger. Rich believes this to be true not only for herself, but for all women. She maintains that it is only in the last fifty years that women’s anger and their enraged consciousness, as a result of their restricted language, has emerged in their writings. When re-reading Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929),
Rich empathised with, not only her own and Woolf’s suppressed anger, but that of so many other women:

It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity. (‘When We Dead Awaken.’ p. 37)

“Almost” is the key word in the above passage. Although Rich believes women have come a long way in expressing their anger through their poetry, she still maintains they have a long way to go. Women are on the brink of articulating their anger and their anger being heard, but in order for it to be complete women must not become complacent. Rich herself, took a long time before she was able to express her anger openly. She, like Woolf, had spent much of her time trying to please her father and her husband in her writings.

Rich attributes much of the anger in the poetry of women today to their awakening of consciousness, which is reflected in their writing. There must of necessity be a degree of interaction between the poet and her reader. Rich describes this interaction as “a kind of alchemy” (“On Lies Secrets and Silence” p.193). It was not until the second half of her career that the political rage and anger began to appear in her poetry. Rich was only one of many Americans who objected to America’s involvement in the war in Vietnam. In “The Phenomenology of Anger” Rich makes clear how the pattern of imagery, for example “white acetylene/ripples from my body” and “the true enemy”, creates sense and meaning to her anger by expressing her anger and her strong desire for change. In “The Phenomenology of Anger” (1972) Rich dreams that she metamorphoses into an acetylene torch. She doesn’t just turn the acetylene torch on the enemy; she becomes the torch, possibly to emphasise her personal commitment to the cause:

white acetylene
ripples from my body
effortlessly released
perfectly trained
on the true enemy.
It would seem this very close involvement with the destruction of the “true enemy” suggests Rich wants to draw the reader into the very personal commitment she has made to destroy the antagonist and to purge him of his lies. Rich is angry, not so much at the individual soldier, but what he has become as a result of the controlling bureaucratic powers. Much intelligent thought has been used when writing “The Phenomenology of Anger.” In considering the underlying structures Rich uses in this poem and the way in which they are related to each other in the overall coherence of the poem, a strong case can be made that Rich is in intelligent control of her emotions. The anger in her later poetry is being used in a structured way and offers a unique way of valuing her poetry. She is decrying what the modern-day soldier has become as a result of his conditioning by his superior officers. By using the theme of “fakery” to structure the above images Rich organises the images and gives them coherence.

I hate the mask you wear …
I hate your words
they make me think of fake
revolutionary bills
crisp imitation parchment
they sell at battlefields.

Not only has the man been desensitised in the war zone, but also in the bedroom:

Last night, in this room, weeping
I asked you: “what are you feeling?
do you feel anything?”

Rich’s anger at the desensitising of man as a result of war is absolute, both at the political and the private levels. Fisher (2002) remarks on this absolute anger. In keeping with Fisher’s argument we are able to witness how so thoroughly each of their characters enact their passion that whatever else there is, the self is liquidated. To use a term from the philosophy of Stanley Cavell (1988): “we could say that it is in the moment of repudiating the hold of the ordinary and the everyday that an impassioned state begins” (p.44). The writer of the poem is angry at herself for her inability to break free of the enemy’s control and she further loathes her consciousness which makes her aware of his control over her.
“The Phenomenology of Anger” also refers to specific historical events – acetylene weapons were used at My Lai in the Vietnam War. Rich’s poem caused considerable turbulence in America because of the graphic imagery she used. It was frequently interpreted as a poem emphasising Rich’s hatred of men. This hatred was, however, directed at government bodies who exercise power and control over society, and who are in the final analysis accountable for wartime atrocities. In “The Firebombers” and “After Auschwitz” Sexton likewise articulates her anger at America’s involvement in warmongering activities, highlighting her strong political awareness. Plath’s anger is less politically triggered; it’s more about her being angry with her mother, her father, and her husband for what they had done to her, rather than what had been done to others. Nor should Rich be accused of merely venting her spleen on the horrors of war without giving considerable intelligent thought to alternatives. She actually expresses hope for the future and ways in which things could have been otherwise – not the response of someone consumed with blind rage:

I would have loved to live in world
of women and men gaily
in collusion with green leaves, stalks,
building mineral cities, transparent domes,
little huts of woven grass
each with its own pattern.

In “The Phenomenology of Anger” Rich’s anger has been provoked by her concern for peace, and her political solicitude for an optimistic outcome to the war in Vietnam. Whilst commenting on anger to the critics Barbara and Charles Gelpi, Rich claims “anger can be a kind of genius if it’s acted upon” (p.8). It is as if Rich is drawing attention to the positive benefits of anger in order to bring people to an awareness and provoke a response from them. This is not dissimilar to the view that bad things happen because good men do nothing. If people are aroused at what is going on their anger could bring about political change. There is a similarity here to the feminist movement “consciousness raising.” The aim of women in such groups is to support themselves and other women to become politically conscious. They argue that frequently women’s feelings are about political issues. In this and other poems Rich is allowing her anger caused by her
political awareness, to serve the purpose of making society aware of the horrors of war and in some way bring about change in the world. As Rich on one occasion claimed, poetry can make a huge difference for change. In such instances the emotion of anger is far removed from an illogical state. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* states that phenomenology is the examination of structures of consciousness as encountered from the first person stance. The principal framework of an experience is its intentionality, its being guided in the direction of something. If phenomenology demonstrates the significance that events have in our lives, then the phenomenology of anger in Rich’s poem demonstrates the importance of anger in understanding aspects of her life. She was angry and expressed this anger through imagery. There is a description of forgery and fakery in her examination of the sham of war – “the masks you wear,” “fake revolutionary bills” and “crisp imitation parchment.” This is then compared to the way Rich believes the way the world should be, a place where men and women can live in harmony, a place “with green leaves.” The text of Rich’s poetry puts forward a strong case for judging her emotion of anger as intelligent. She has assessed the situation of the Vietnam War and exposed the fakery she believes it demonstrates. These views are in keeping with the philosophy of Nussbaum (2001) when she claims that emotions, rather than being merely blind forces that shove us around, are in fact cognitive value judgments we make. In “Daddy Warbucks” Sexton did much the same, by decrying her father’s wartime exploits from which he acquires “bucks.”

In “Tear Gas” (1969) Rich maintains:

> The will to change begins in the body not in the mind  
> My politics is in my body,

As in “The Phenomenology of Anger,” “Tear Gas” highlights where a decisive change is taking place in Rich’s poetry. She articulates her concern that the power of patriarchy is pervading so many aspects of life: “Even the language in which we describe it.” The poem focuses on a protest against the treatment of prisoners who were private soldiers in the American army, when tear gas was used on the demonstrators. Liz Yorke (1997) believes “Tear Gas” emphasises Rich’s growing
disenchantment with the New Left’s radical assurances: “Their vision is too narrow – their political promises are too theoretical, too abstracted from experience” (p.45).

Rich desires change not in the terms outlined in the Marxist revolution, but in the way outlined in “Tear Gas:”

It wasn’t completeness I wanted  
(the old ideas of revolution that could be foretold, and once arrived at would give us ourselves and each other).  
I stopped listening long ago to their descriptions of the good society.

“Tear Gas” falls into two distinct sections. In the first two stanzas Rich is discussing the patriarchal role which is endemic in politics and war, and her growing disenchantment with governmental control. The speaker’s voice however, is distant from the emotion in the poem, the words used are those of a politician rather than someone affected personally by the effects of war. In the rest of the poem we are brought much closer to the writer and the metaphors serve to draw us in. Rich is speaking much more intimately, and could be describing the end of her relationship with her husband. She goes, then, from making a political statement about her need to examine her anger over the inadequacies of political bodies, to her need to express herself personally to an individual: “I needed to touch you / with a hand, a body.” Here too Rich is expressing her emotions as evaluative thoughts and value judgments. Nussbaum (2001) argues that we are vulnerable to the loss of people whom we consider important in our lives. The loss of Rich’s husband was inevitable, and for a number of reasons beyond Rich’s control.

There is, too, something of a turnabout in the third stanza. In stanza two it appears Rich is emphasising that change needs to come about in a physical way: “The will to change begins in the body not in the mind.” In stanza three, however, Rich once again appears to acknowledge the need for words:

but also with words  
I need a language to hear myself with
Rich obviously wants to see the effect of her words “dyed in the wool” as it were, even if these words are frequently “veiled with contradictions:”

that I love you, that we are in danger
that she wants to have your child, that I want us to have mercy on each other
that I see you changing
that it was change I loved in you
when I thought I loved completeness.

This last line reiterates the idea in the very first line of the poem: “No, not completeness.” Here Rich is saying that she does not want completeness in the sense that two people should be one if this means they lose their individual identity, rather that two people should be able to change and grow as individuals.

“Tear Gas” was written in October 1969. Rich left her husband Conrad in 1970.

The distancing of the anger in the initial part of the poem is replaced by a more intimate and personalized anger in the latter part of “Tear Gas.” The emotions that Rich experienced when writing “Tear Gas” are not merely blind irrational feelings. Damasio states in *Descartes’ Error* (1995):

internal guides and they help us communicate to others signals that can also guide them. Feelings are neither intangible nor elusive. Contrary to the traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as cognitive as other percepts. (p.xv)

The cognition in “Tear Gas” is most apparent. Rich is stating quite precisely her feelings for her husband. Her love for him still exists, but no longer as a sexual partner. In the above lines the “I” and “we” are prevalent – “I love you,” “I want us to have mercy on each other,” “I see you changing,” – but when the begetting of a child is referred to, the “I” and “we” are replaced by “she wants to have your child.” By the skilful use of these pronouns, that is, by replacing “I” for “we” Rich is emphasizing that although she still loves her husband and wishes they remain on amicable terms she prefers that they are no longer together. Nor did Sexton attribute any blame to her husband Kayo over the breakup of their marriage. In
“Divorce” she says, “I have killed all the good things.” This is so different from the emotion expressed by Plath. She is angry that Hughes has caused their marital breakdown. In “Jailer” she says “I wish him dead or away.” The “we” in their relationship must revert to “I.” Rich makes obvious her intentions and feelings which are, in Damasio’s terms “neither intangible nor elusive” (p.15).

“Nightbreak” written in 1968 when the Vietnam War was at its most horrific, is an angry exploration of bureaucratic imposition. The imagery of “sleep cracked and flaking” and “the rifts” make apparent the progression of anger in Rich’s poem. “The speaker in the poem expresses anger at the atrocities perpetrated against innocent Asian villagers. Rich draws the reader in to the suffering of the people in Vietnam. Such is her empathy with them that Rich suffers too: “My body is a list of wounds.” Even her sleep is affected:

Sleep cracked and flaking
sifts over the shaken target.

It would not be too hard to justify Rich’s anger in “Nightbreak” as both reasonable and logical. Ronald De Sousa (2004) maintains that the emotions are fundamentally rational, and Oatley and Johnson Laird (1993) claim that basic emotions support activities in a cerebral way. In “Nightbreak” there is a consciousness to the structure in the emotion expressed by Rich. Here too, as in “Tear Gas,” she is drawing a comparison between the Vietnam War and her marriage to Conrad, she writes:

In the bed the pieces fly together
and the rifts fill or else

On the one hand, the interpretation of these lines could well be her dreams about the war. On the other hand however, the lines may suggest the disharmony in the poet’s marriage. Rifts, in addition to meaning physical rifts or cracks in a material surface, can also imply emotional disagreement or schism between people. The theme of splintering and fragmenting used by Rich give a shaping spirit to her imagery.
Rich recounts her life in America in the 1940s and the 1950s in her essay, “When We Dead Awaken” (1979), in which she describes growing up under the tutelage of male teachers. Her poems were as a result “universal” – that is non-female. Rich states: “In those years formalism was a part of the strategy – like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle material I couldn’t pick up bare-handed” (pp. 40-41).

In “Nightbreak” and “When We Dead Awaken” Rich is distancing herself from her emotions and exercising extreme caution regarding her comments on both public and political events. The particular metaphors used not only emphasise Rich’s anger and the limitation which formalism imposed on her poetry, but also the distancing in the speaker’s voice and the lack of feeling. This lack of feeling is accentuated by the paucity of tactile sensation whilst wearing protective asbestos gloves. In the present day the reference to asbestos and the resulting disease asbestosis, would be even more disquieting, as a reference to the damage done by male power.

Martha Nussbaum (2001) has argued that emotions are not simply asinine impulses, but rather consist of rational thoughts, concerning issues of consequence. Nussbaum maintains anger is composed of a thought affecting injury or hurt; the only way the particular emotion can be distinguished from other negative emotions is by alluding to those thoughts. Rich gives numerous examples of how her poetry is influenced by her thoughts through her use of metaphors. In “For the Record” (2004) Rich’s reflections are those of anger, as distinct from something else. She is alluding to her particular emotion of anger and distinguishes the anger from other negative thoughts by using metaphors which imply the emotion of anger – metaphors such as “depths of vomit” and “slow-soaking blood.” Previous poems, such as: “Hunger,” “Tear Gas,” “Nightbreak” and “The Phenomenology of Anger” all attest to the anger in her thoughts. In discussing “The Phenomenology of Anger” Rich claims that anger can actually be a sort of genius if we act upon it.

Rich’s poem “Frame” (1980) centres on America’s cultural politics. This poem shows the way in which images of “Just outside the frame”, “there is no
soundtrack” and “in silence that she cries out”, are brought out so that they present an intelligible and ordered framework that imparts the emotion of anger in “Frame”. The speaker in the poem is a white female who witnesses an incident, when she is “not supposed to be there.” The speaker observes two males, a white policeman and a white security officer, badgering and tyrannically apprehending a black female student. The student’s only crime is to seek refuge from the inclement winter’s night inside an empty university building, whilst waiting for the bus. The witness to the incident, who is also the speaker in the poem, can see, but is unable to hear what is being said; perhaps as an additional indignity the student/victim “is to be seen and not heard.” The speaker in the poem is:

Just outside the frame
of the action.

Rich is angry at what she sees as the victimisation of a marginalised person, who is given no voice, so no one is able to hear her. For Rich this is a further example of: “the history of the dispossessed.” The fact that the policeman and the security officer are unable to see the witness suggests their “blindness” both literally and metaphorically, although they do not appear to suffer from colour blindness. Of further concern and an additional cause of anger to the speaker is the future fate of the student, when no one is there to speak on her behalf. The speaker’s consciousness of the event is secured unequivocally from her vantage point. She is conscious of what is going on because:

\[
\text{I can see from this position there is no sound track}
\text{to go with this and I understand at once}
\text{it is meant to be in silence that this happens}
\text{in silence that he pushes her into the car}
\text{banging her head in silence that she cries out.}
\]

The silence structures the images in “Frame.” The above lines make numerous references to “sound” and “non-sound”: “there is no sound track,” “in silence that this happens,” “in silence that he pushes her into the car” and “banging her head in silence that she cries out.” We are made to visualise a sort of silent movie in which we “see” and are made aware of what is happening even though we cannot hear the “sound track.” This silence is a silence of suppression, a stifling, rather
than a noiseless silence. It is this set of images with their theme of silence that Rich uses to bind together the poem making it coherent.

In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (1951), Rich once more verbalises anger on behalf of someone else who she believes is repressed. The imagery of “uncle’s wedding band” and the archaic ivory needle suggest restraint and control Aunt Jennifer is trapped in a marriage which renders her powerless. It is only through her needlework, depicting fearless wild tigers, that she is able to express her frustrations and her aspirations. Rich expresses her anger and her disquiet at Aunt Jennifer’s passive role. She is no longer able to experience the excitements and challenges of life because of the “massive weight” of “Uncle’s wedding band.” “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” brings to mind past roles of women in society when their needlework has acted as a substitute for the real activity. William the Conqueror fought and won the Battle of Hastings and afterwards the needle women of France depicted the events of the battle in the famous Bayeaux Tapestry. In Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” the tragic figure of the woman at the loom must weave by night and day. That is the only way she may experience life by depicting what she sees through her mirror image, as expressed in her tapestry.

In “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich says of “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers:”

In writing this poem, composed and apparently cool as it is, I thought I was creating a portrait of an imaginary woman. But this woman suffers from the opposition of her imagination, worked out in tapestry, and her life-style, “ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.” It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from me as possible – distanced by the formalism of the poem, by the objective, observant tone – even by putting the woman in a different generation. (p.40)

In the early lines of the poem Rich distances herself from the emotion of anger; she is merely describing the sewing process and the parallel images used. Towards the end of the poem however, Rich’s voice comes closer to the emotion in the poem. It is as if she becomes increasingly aware that Aunt Jennifer’s rebellion is of no consequence, and quite possibly this will one day be true for Rich and other women, who have tried to rebel against the patriarchal restraints. “Uncle” controls what “Aunt Jennifer” is allowed to do, making life more difficult for her. We
glimpse examples of this control by the poet’s terms such as the ivory needle which is much more archaic and harder to pull off than “uncle’s heavy wedding ring.” Rich has once more used contrasting imagery to get across her message that “Aunt Jennifer” has been repressed as a result of her marrying. The tigers are fearless and confident they “prance” and they “pace”, whereas the metaphoric allusions to “Aunt Jennifer’s” movements suggest hesitancy and apprehension: “Aunt Jennifer’s fingers fluttering through her wool” and “find even the ivory needle hard to pull.” The reason for the difficulty Aunt Jennifer experiences in pulling the needle is attributed to “uncle’s wedding band.” Rather than an adornment on her finger the wedding ring serves as a constraint.

When aunt is dead, her terrified hands will still be ringed with the restraints she was subdued by. The tigers in the panel however, will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. Thomas Byars (1990) maintains that Rich regards poetry as a means of immortalising a person *ars longa, vita brevis*:

> And a recurrent theme in much poetry I read was … the indestructibility of poetry, the poem as vehicle for personal immortality. (*Blood Bread and Poetry* p.168)

Byars also believes that Rich was intensely involved in “Aunt Jennifer’s” predicament and despite the “asbestos gloves” does not distance herself from her anger. The emotion expressed by Rich in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” is compatible with Nussbaum’s (2001) theory that emotions are not just thinking impulses, but contain reasoning about significant incidents.

Rich’s “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1960) communicates the anger and concern she experienced during her early years as a wife and mother. Rich makes apparent the way in which the images are put forward in such a way that they yield a logical structure and advance the emotion of anger in the poem. This poem received a great deal of negative criticism, mainly for its acerbic tone and radical move away from her previous characteristically formal writing, which showed emotional restraint. In her anxiety the daughter-in-law redirects her anger onto herself:
Sometimes she’s let the tap stream scold her arm
a match burn to her thumbnail
or held her hand above the kettle snout
right in the woolly steam – a
desperate self-mutilating act.

The metaphors suggest the anger and the frustration which can result from a conventional marriage in America in the mid-1960s. Such is the frustration and boredom within many conventional marriages at this time that some women, either through boredom or absent-mindedness, will begin to physically harm themselves.

The woman in the poem is convinced she is losing her mind, particularly when she starts to hear voices:

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.

The speaker wants to escape from the orderly and tidy life of the man-made “raked gardens” which have been imposed upon her, to the natural, uncontrolled and disorderly “sloppy sky.” She wants freedom from this imposed order.

The emotion of anger in “Snapshots …” is not beyond the realm of most people’s comprehension; who of us has not experienced similar emotions at some time in our lives? Rich was able, in this poem, to transfer the external scene of the kitchen, and garden and translocate it into her mind and use metaphorical speech to describe it – a process which necessitates cognitive abstraction. Frequently poets will use metaphors to attract the reader’s attention in order to make their point. Metaphors can also draw the reader into the poem and aid their comprehension and interpretation of the poetry. In this poem Rich makes use of metaphors to emphasise that marriage can be a heavy burden:

Your mind now, moldering like wedding cake,
heavy with useless experience …

The weight of marriage is much the same as that implied in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers:”
The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand.

“After Dark” (1964) deals with the speaker reconciling herself with her ambiguous emotions concerning the event of her father’s death, four years before the actual death took place. The image cluster in this poem, images such as “sashcords of the world fly loose” and “A window crashes/suddenly down” provide structure to the articulation of her anger. In an interview with David Montenegro (1993) Rich describes her relationship with her father as an “extremely adversarial relationship” (p.263). Rich reflects:

You are falling asleep and I sit looking at you
old tree of life
old man whose death I wanted
I can’t stir you up now.

“After Dark” describes the anger Rich felt for all the years of tyrannical control her father exercised over her. Now that his health and control are waning, Rich finds this equally difficult to cope with:

When your memory fails –
no more to scourge my inconsistencies –
the sashcords of the world fly loose.
A window crashes

suddenly down.

The metaphors that Rich uses to emphasize her father’s deteriorating health and failing control over her make it appear as if her world is crashing down around her. Rich emphasises his age “old tree of life” and “old man.” The man she realises she irritated with her inconsistencies can no longer oppress her. Her father’s control over her has come to an end and Rich expresses mixed emotions over him. Sexton too articulated ambivalent emotions after the death of her mother. One of Rich’s main sources of anger at her father was his claim that he knew her better than she knew herself. Likewise his fatherly concern over her intellectual progress was only a stake for his own ego and benefit, “[h]is investment in my intellect and talent was egotistical, tyrannical, opinionated, and terribly wearing.” (Blood Bread and Poetry p.113)
Rich does however reflect on the things that she was grateful to her father for. He taught her:

- to write and rewrite;
- to feel that I was a person of the book, even though a woman;
- to take ideas seriously. (Blood Bread and Poetry p.113)

Liz Yorke has suggested that it could well have been this adversarial relationship with her father which fuelled Rich’s anger and feminism in her writings:

Maybe the sometimes rage-filled urgency fuelling Rich’s engagement with feminism finds its own deep source in this primary encounter with a man utterly determined to control and shape his daughter. (p.122-123)

“After Dark” perhaps more than any other of her poems emphasises the closeness Rich has to the emotion in this poem. In certain respects the emotion of anger in “After Dark” is not unlike that described by Philip Fisher (2002) in The Vehement Passions. In her anger Rich identifies with the temporary state of her anger so completely that she forgets she has not always felt this way about her father and that some time in the future she will not feel so vehemently towards him. This was quite different from the anger expressed by Plath in “Daddy.” The last line of the poem ended on a very final note: “[d]addy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” In “Electra on Azalea Path” however, in the final line Plath acknowledges that she was in some way responsible for her father’s death; she says, “[i]t was my love that did us both to death.” Perhaps, too, “After Dark” manifests the emotional truth of the writer, and by her use of imagery and metaphors, her writing expresses her awareness of her love for her father.

In “Sources” (1983) Rich has to come to terms with another death: that of her husband Conrad. After a number of years of silence Rich tells of his death:

Ended isolate, who tried to move in the floating world of the assimilated who know and deny they will always be aliens. Who drove to Vermont in a rented car at dawn and shot himself.

Rich is angry at what has happened, yet at the same time there is still love, anger – “threatened with love.” Perhaps Rich is claiming that she did not want her anger
to be “threatened with love” which may detract from her anger, because this may cause her anger to be lessened.

The emotion of anger, mixed with a sense of loss and anguish are all present in “Sources.” In Descartes’ Error Antonio Damasio (1995) argues that emotions such as these are not drastically dissimilar from the reasoning faculties; both are modes of thought, in the same way that drawing an inference is a mode of thought. Rich describes her husband’s death and the waste of his life by suicide is. It is reminiscent of the anger she voiced at the deaths of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. This too points to the rationality and consistency of her anger at death as a result of suicide.

In much of Rich’s poetry we are made aware of the positive aspects of the emotion of anger. She implies that poetry can make an enormous difference for change in the world. Poems such as “Sources and “Nightbreak” demonstrate how the emotion of anger plays a role in making sense of the events of Rich’s life. By means of metaphors and extended imagery she gives coherence to these events.

One of the differentiating characteristics in the sense-making of the anger in the poetry of Adrienne Rich is that her anger is frequently on behalf of marginalised members of society. In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” and “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Rich expresses her anger about those who are repressed within the institution of marriage and consequently fail to reach their full potential in life. In “The Phenomenology of Anger” Rich is making use of her anger – brought about by her acute political awareness – to make society aware of the horrors of war and by so doing bring about a change in the world. “Nightbreak” and “Tear Gas” are angry explorations of bureaucratic imposition and the suffering imposed on innocent people. The anger in Rich’s poetry is a much less personalized anger than that depicted in the poems of Plath and Sexton. Rich does however – like Plath and Sexton – use her poems to make sense of the atrocities being perpetrated.

**Conclusion**
In summary, this chapter has argued that the anger of these three female American poets is highly cerebral. Moulded through extended patterns of images the anger has made sense of happenings in their lives. In effect anger in its different manifestations was for Plath, Sexton and Rich a means of finding meaning to their lives. This chapter has in addition demonstrated the distinct ways in which Plath, Sexton and Rich are roused to anger, and the dissimilar manner in which they account for and show the meaning of their anger. The anger in the poetry of Plath is to some degree about herself. It is largely about the people who have made her angry; whereas much of the anger in the poetry of Sexton is levelled at herself for the way she has caused people to be angry at her. Rich on the other hand is repeatedly angry on behalf of others. Because the anger in the poetry of these three women works in different ways, it structures the poetry differently. For Plath her anger was largely personal. Rather than being political in the true sense, she was using political anger to provide metaphors for her inner anger. Sexton’s anger was much more justified. She admitted that she had caused others to be angry at her. Perhaps Rich’s anger is the most political of all three poets. Very little of her anger was on behalf of what had happened to her, but rather anger at what had befallen others.
CHAPTER FOUR: LOVE, HATE AND JEALOUSY

Love, hate and jealousy in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich are examined as a related group in this chapter. Although these three emotions are quite distinct, they are in many instances related. Martha Nussbaum (2001), for example, argues jealousy lives in mutual tolerance with love, even though it is not possible for jealousy to exist alongside amicable feelings. The same argument can be put forward for the co-existence of love and hate which are apparent at a very early stage in the lives of human beings. In *The Upheavals of Thought* (2001) Nussbaum argues that even as infants we exhibit ambivalent relationships with the same people – that is, we love and hate the identical source (p. 53). Philip Fisher (2002) also argues that emotions can be multifaceted: it is possible to be at the same time “in love but disgusted with love; committed to vengeance, but unable to believe completely in what it is about to do” (p.42). This chapter will show how Plath, Sexton and Rich demonstrate love, hate and jealousy in their poems, sometimes as distinct emotions and sometimes in interaction with each other.

**Sylvia Plath**

Sylvia Plath has been portrayed as a woman deserted by her philandering husband, Ted Hughes, suffocated by her mother Aurelia, who became a martyr for her two fatherless children and forsaken by her father Otto through his premature death. For such a woman it is hardly surprising that the emotions of love, hate and jealousy played a significant role in her poetry, influenced in no small degree by the events of her life. There is a danger, however, of presuming that Plath’s poetry is purely autobiographical. As Margaret Dickie (1979) has pointed out, assessing Plath’s emotional association to the persona in her poetry is fraught with problems. Dickie maintains that the most troublesome question is estimating the connection between the poet and her orator. For example in “Daddy” (1962) we are presented with the poet dealing with her own anguish and attempting to restrain what she believes dominates it. “Daddy” draws on precise occurrences in
Plath’s life: the traumatic long-term illness and death of her father, her mental breakdowns and attempted suicides and her tempestuous marriage with Ted Hughes. Plath does, however, engage numerous modes of pasquinade, parody and hyperbole, all of which tend to dissociate the orator from the poet.

In her relationship with Hughes, Plath’s jealousy was not limited to her concerns over his infidelity. Long before his unfaithfulness became an issue, Plath was jealous of her husband’s literary success, and the fact that his poetry was receiving more accolades than hers, and being published far more frequently. Steven Gould Axelrod (1990) confirms this aspect of Plath’s jealousy. He believes that “acts of textual violence or abuse … were habitual in the Plath-Hughes marriage; although Plath was customarily the perpetrator” (p.108). A number of biographies of Plath’s life refer to occasions when she vandalised Hughes’ writings. “Burning the Letters” (1962) depicts the time when Plath plundered and set fire to a number of the writings in Hughes’ workroom. The treatment of a manuscript of Plath’s in Smith’s College Mortimer Rare Book Room highlights a further example of Plath’s destruction of Hughes’ written words. The College purchased a collection of writings of Plath’s texts, but inadvertently acquired the threadbare vestiges of another corpus of Ted Hughes’ writings. Axelrod made the somewhat cynical comment that:

Many of the poems are written on the backside, so to speak: Plath recycles old manuscripts and typescripts by Hughes, and often she seems to be back-talking, having the last word in an argument. The friction between these two is palpable at times, as text clashes with text, and one intuits Plath’s purposeful coercion and filleting of Hughes’ poems and plays as she composes. (p.12)

Such is her jealousy of Hughes’ work that she thinks that writing on top of his work will give her some form of ascendancy over him. There are a number of references to hooks and barbs in Plath’s poetry, frequently interpreted by critics as denigrating allusions to Hughes’ often illegible handwriting. For example in “Mystic” (1963) Plath writes: “The air is a mill of hooks,” and in “Daddy:” “The tongue stuck in my jaw. / It stuck in a barb wire jaw.
In “Burning the Letters” the pattern of imagery used by Plath provides purport and a logical and well structured form that advocates the emotions of love, hate and jealousy. Images such as; “I flake up papers that breathe like people”, “the dogs are tearing a fox” and “A red burst and a cry” all create meaning to the poem. In “Burning the Letters” Plath writes:

And here is an end to the writing,
The spry hooks that bend and cringe and the smiles, the smiles.

Plath is supplanting Hughes’ actual body for the text of his writing and her jealous retaliation is imposed on her unfaithful husband.

Perhaps one of the most graphic commentaries on Plath’s jealousy comes to us from Clarissa Roche (1997):

When the moon was at a certain stage, she had skimmed from his desk, Ted’s scum, microscopic bits of fingernail parings, dandruff, dead skin, hair and then with a handful of papers collected from the desk and wastebasket, she had made a sort of pyre in the garden and around this she drew a circle. She stepped back to a prescribed point, lit the fire with a long stick of a torch and paced around, incanting some hocus pocus or another. Flames shot up towards the moon and smoke sketched weird shapes in the mist. The fragments of letters and manuscripts fluttered like moths, hovered and, after the heat, abated, floated to the ground. One charred piece settled at Sylvia’s feet. It had been reduced to ash save for a corner. She picked it up and by the light of the moon read, “A …” the name of a friend. Sylvia now knew the name with whom Ted was having an affair. (p.85)

The above passage depicts the emotions of a woman scorned. By collecting the waste products from Hughes’ body and setting fire to them Plath was symbolically setting fire to him. She even used his written manuscripts as fuel for the fire. Plath then constructed a pyre; at no time however was she considering the Indian custom of self immolation by adopting the practice of suttee. Plath very purposely drew a circle around the fire and with the aid of a long stick lit the fire. In so doing she was distancing herself from Hughes.

The most apparent examples of intense emotions in Plath’s poetry are in her “Ariel” (1963) poems, but of equal profundity is the cerebral aspect of the use of language in her writing. In her essay, “Bless Me Sisters,” Pamela Gemin (2001)
reports the reaction of the poet, Betsy Sholl, on her first reading of Plath’s “Ariel” poems, Sholl says, “I was afraid I’d be electrocuted…. There was all this current. I had never heard metaphors, similes, language buzzing like that” (p.5).

The guileful way in which Plath utilises similes and chronological references serves as a means of distancing herself from her subconscious. During the time when Plath was at her all-time emotional low the intellectual quality of her poetry was still apparent. Indeed, the more emotionally challenged Plath was, the more cerebral was her poetry. For instance “Daddy” (1962) “Medusa” (1962) and “Lady Lazarus” (1962) were all written after her separation from Ted Hughes.

Although her jealousy is highly palpable at this time, Plath still exercises great control in her writing. In the preliminary version of “Burning the Letters” (1962) for example, Plath uses lines from the earlier poem “Stings” (1962). In the final line of “Stings” Plath describes how the bees are assailing Hughes, “zinging” him. She also admonishes her love and alerts him to the fact that he is caught in a bee’s aerial or a “cat’s cradle,” completely ensnared in the strings. Her jealousy is being expressed through her poetic revenge on her adulterous husband. Plath is verbalising her jealousy of Hughes’ sophism in her poetry. She maintains that once separated from Hughes her jealousy over his unfaithfulness and her rivalry of his professional superiority will have less prominence in her life:

This fire may lick and fawn, but it is merciless;
A glass case
My fingers would enter although
They melt and say, they are told
*Do not touch*
And here is an end to the writing

The spry hooks that bend and cringe, and the smiles, the smiles
And at least it will be a good place now, the attic.
At least I won’t be strung just under the surface,
Dumb fish
With one tin eye,
Watching for glints,
Riding my Arctic
Between this wish and that wish.

So, I poke at the carbon birds in my housedress.
At least now Plath can accept the situation for what it is. She is no longer struggling against Hughes’ literary success. For now there will be less stress, and she will no longer be competing with his brilliance. There is however, an indication that Plath is not totally subservient to her perception of Hughes’ literary superiority. The metaphors and imagery she uses to express her emotion of hate for her estranged husband are very vehement. Initially Plath is relatively obsequious when she likens herself to the fire: “The fire may lick and fawn…. On the other hand, when likened to the fire her hate is powerful: “but it is merciless….” Later in the stanza it is Hughes’ turn to exhibit servility, when Plath likens his writing to spry hooks.

Plath uses the self-deprecating metaphor of likening herself to a dumb fish that will no longer have to constantly be keeping an eye out for competitors for Hughes’ affections. Although the jealousy is so manifest in these lines the perfectly controlled artistic form is still apparent. The Arctic metaphor no doubt refers not only to the severe cold of the British winter at this time, but also to Hughes’ cold detachment in his treatment of her. Is Hughes being likened to the unfeeling, impenetrable shoe? This line is also reminiscent of Plath’s reference to footwear in the opening lines of the first stanza of “Daddy:”

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

With her use of the “shoe” metaphors, in both “Burning the Letters’ and “Daddy,” the implication is that Plath is ready to “kick off” the subservience of living underfoot, in a state of restriction and submission.

Plath’s jealousy reaches its zenith in the last two stanzas of “Burning the Letters.” She likens the burning papers to people, and makes very sure they do not escape, or that the fire is extinguished through lack of oxygen. Plath is using a particular set of images to give coherence to these lines, reiterating the views voiced by Allan Alvarez (1966) that there is always reason behind Plath’s imagery even
though it may not be glaringly obvious. The images in “Burning the Letters” are related to sea-life and fish. After referring to herself as a “[d]umb fish” she continues to use words such as “butt,” a flat fish like a sole and “flake,” a type of fish or an appliance used in drying fish. Initially the poet was the poor “[d]umb fish,” but now she has her revenge and is destroying her enemies. The fish motif undoubtedly structures the imagery in these lines of poetry. Furthermore, in this poem the names of the fish are ambiguous, the butt of a rake, butt and rake are both types of fish and “… flake up papers.” Just as the word “rake” has two distinct meanings so Hughes had double standards in his life and marriage

With the butt of a rake
I flake up papers that breathe like people,
I fan them out
Between the yellow lettuces and the German cabbage
Involved in its weird blue dreams.
Involved in a foetus.
And a name with black edges.

It is difficult to imagine how the emotion of jealousy could be verbalised more explicitly; even though the hate is seething the emotion is still contained. Plath, at no point in her poetry loses track of her train of thought. There is sequencing and a logical presentation of her emotion. She sees her situation very logically for what it is, decides she has had more than enough and then berates the people who have brought on this jealousy. Plath is likening the burning of paper to burning people, in particular to burning Assia Wevill. At no stage does her poetry however suggest that she is out of control.

In stanza one Plath tells us that she “… made a fire;” but immediately she justifies it by reasoning why she acted in this angry and hurt way. Plath says she was “tired,” again in stanza one she tells us once more “I was tired” which gives a reason for her anger. In stanza two Plath further justifies her actions – because having burnt the letters and the texts of Hughes’ writing and gained a certain amount of revenge the attic will be a less painful place for her to be:

“Burning the Letters” continues:
Sinuous orchis  
   In a nest of root-hairs and boredom –  
   Pale eyes, patent-leather gutturals!

Plath uses the word orchis rather than orchid. In her poem, “Fever 103,” she uses the more commonly used word, orchid. Orchis denotes any orchid with an erect flesh stem, having a spike of purple or red flower. The sexual connotation is quite explicit. Furthermore in previous drafts of “Burning the Letters,” Plath misspells gutturals as “gutterals” implying where she believes is Wevill’s true place of origin. For Plath, Hughes’ treatment of her is unbearable and her jealousy is insconsolable. Even the rain cannot dampen down her pain and jealousy. Plath believes that such is her emotion that she is about to self-combust. She compares her pain to that of a dog ripping at a fox, whose pain does not cease, even when for all appearances the fox is dead. Plath’s emotion of jealousy still goes on:

   Warm rain greases my hair, extinguishes nothing.  
    My veins glow like trees.  
    The dogs are tearing a fox. This is what it is like  
    A red burst and a cry.  
    That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop  
    With that dead eye  
    And the stuffed expression, but goes on  
    Dyeing the air,  
    Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water  
    What immortality is. That it is immortal.

Plath’s frequent use of metaphors throughout this poem and her reference to past events highlights the scholarly element of her poetry. The type of metaphors Plath uses and the particular set of images organise the lines and gives the poetry its shaping spirit. The metaphors seem to imply the futility of life and the attractions of immortality. In the fifth line of stanza four, the usually considered benefits of warm rain, are in this instance totally ineffective. They neither quench her searing pain, nor cleanse her hair. In this particular event, the rain is having reverse effect from what would normally be the case. Plath’s pain is the same; it can never be dampened down or cleansed: “Warm rain greases my hair, extinguishes nothing.” The poet continues: “My veins glow like trees.”
Once again we observe a negative connotation in the purpose of veins. Veins are normally associated with the life saving purpose of conveying blood around the body, but in this line the poet’s veins have become obstructed. Plath likens the horrific imagery of a fox being torn apart by the hounds to that of burst blood vessels associated with a heart attack or an aneurysm. In both cases the volume of blood is sufficient to dye the air. However, this will lead the way to immortality. Once again Plath talks about life from death as in the Resurrection in “Lady Lazarus” when she says:

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

In her poem “Burning the Letters” Plath is drawing the reader in more closely than in any of her other poems. Plath’s references to past events are initiated by cognitive recall of previous happenings in her life. Mohan Mallen (1998) argues emotions are cognitive: “Human emotions are cognitive, in the following sense; they are triggered by a cognitive assessment of a situation, typically, an interactive or even a social situation and lead to a cognitive state with regard to action” (p.28). Plath was making a cognitive assessment of the state of her marriage. She had been betrayed and was manifesting her hatred and jealousy in a very active way. In Upheavals of Thought (2001) Martha Nussbaum maintains that emotions are connected to our childhood. We make judgments concerning the value persons or things have for us. In “Burning the Letters” Plath exemplifies the way Nussbaum deals with emotions: Plath’s hatred and jealousy was connected to her earlier life, if things went wrong she frequently looked for someone to blame. In this instance when her marriage was breaking up she blamed Hughes. When as a child her father died Plath blamed her mother; she believed her mother had not loved Otto enough. Plath fails to consider however, the possibility that her lack of love for Hughes could have contributed to the demise of their marriage. In this respect Plath’s blame and consequent hatred is very one-sided whereas Sexton and Rich attributed no blame to their husbands for the end of their marriages. All of Plath’s barriers are down and she is confiding her pain to her reader in a very
personal way. She has finally realised that she must let go of Hughes, painful though it is. The love has evaporated and she must get rid of the excess weight:

   Love, love, and well, I was tired
   Of cardboard cartons the color of cement or a dog pack
   Holding in its hate

Plath too is coming to terms with her jealousy of Assia Wevill and the pain Wevill has caused her. Plath realises that she has been replaced and must bow to the inevitability of her situation. There is such pathos in her writing, but still a scholarly control of what she says. Nor has Plath forsaken her references to previous literary works, in what I believe to be a most poignant reference of all:

   And at least it will be a good place now, the attic.
   At least I won't be strung just under the surface.

Hughes’ cherished edition of Shakespeare, all of his ongoing work, his notebooks, poetry and plays had all been shredded into tiny fragments, several “reduced to fluff” (p.206). Once more Plath’s jealousy is on account of Hughes’ literary talent. Again the textual bodies are substituted for the actual person. It would seem that the peaceful years of the Plath Hughes marriage, when both writers strove individually, but at the same time inspired each other, deteriorated over the years. Martha Nussbaum (2001) states that emotions, as types of evaluative thoughts, include value judgments of objects and people that we look on as consequential in our existence. Nussbaum continues that because these outside people and things are beyond the scope of our authority, we are powerless if someone takes them away from us. Plath realised she was losing Hughes, and she was jealous of the other woman in his life, but she was incapable of preventing him from leaving her and so directed her jealousy towards his work. On this she could exact revenge and in some way settle the score. The mutual admiration gave way to a jealousy of her husband’s literary success, which Plath believed eclipsed hers.

Even prior to her meeting and marriage with Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath had written in her Journals:
I am jealous of men – a dangerous and subtle enemy which can corrode, I am suspicious of any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life – his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, and latent. (p.98)

Nor was Plath’s jealousy restricted to men. Peter Davison (1994) discusses the intense jealousy between women poets during the mid 1950s. Davison believed that one of Plath’s main challengers was Adrienne Rich, of whom Plath was acrimoniously jealous. Rich too was jealous of Anne Sexton. Davison also claimed that Rich believed if the overnight fame of Anne Sexton “was going to take up space, she was not going to have that space” (p.18). In her Journals Plath also makes reference to her jealousy of other female poets:

Jealous one I am green-eyed, spite-seething. Read the six women poets on the “new poets of England and America.” Dull turgid. Except for Swanson and Adrienne Rich, but not one better or more published than me: I have the quite righteous malice of one with better poems that other women’s reputations have been made by. (p315)

And:

Who rivals? Well in history – Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent and Marianne Moore, the ageing giantesses and poetic grandmothers …. May Swenson, Isabella Gardnett and most close Adrienne Cecile Rich who will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems: I am eager, chafing, sure of my gift. (p.360)

Plath’s jealousy of Adrienne Rich has also been cited by Ronald Hayman (1992):

At times tingling with vitality, she felt solidly confident about having the power to eclipse Adrienne Rich, or any other rival poetess. Always competitive, she felt insecure when she measured her achievements against those poets. (p.76)

Plath was jealous of just about anyone who could do anything better than she could. She wrote in her Journals:
I am jealous of those who think more deeply, who write better, who draw better, who ski better, who look better, who love better, who live better than I. (p.20)

Obviously jealousy pervaded Plath’s life, but this fact far from categorized her as an irrational woman. In many areas of the creative arts jealousy can be very closely linked with ambition and be an absolute necessity for success. Even in the business world, competitiveness very often goes “hand in glove” with jealousy and may well be regarded as a prerequisite for achievement. Why then, when her poetry displays the emotion of jealousy should it be construed as merely emotional writing? Nussbaum maintains her belief that emotions are cognitive, by demonstrating the way in which emotions have logic and follow on from, and are unreservedly open to, outside occurrences. Plath was jealous of Hughes’ success as a writer, just as she was jealous of his other women, but the emotion of love was still apparent.

Even Plath’s relationships with her blood relatives (mother, father and brother) were a combination of love, hate and jealousy. In her early letters home to her mother Aurelia, Plath’s love was most apparent; her habit of slipping a few lines of poetry under her mother’s serviette at the dinner table attests to this love. Many of her letters home begin with the loving salutations “Dearest darling mother.” Plath was assured that her mother would be unceasingly available for her. In “Medusa” she writes:

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Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.
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This strong reliance on Aurelia however, became in the very next stanza one of jealousy and resentment:

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I didn’t call you.
I didn’t call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta.
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Here the references to the “eely tentacle” and “your wishes / Hiss at my sins”, contribute to a sense of metaphoric associations (tentacles / snakes) that develop the meaning inherent in the felt connection between Plath and her mother: the mother is not merely someone who has her emotionally trapped (the tentacle), but that emotional entrapment is figured in terms of Plath’s sense of guilt (her sins). On the one hand Plath depicts her mother as wonderful and supportive of herself and her brother by working as a secretarial teacher after the death of her husband. This is most apparent by the use of positive superlatives to describe Aurelia in her letters home and in her journals. On the other hand Plath’s writings and referrals to Aurelia take on very different characteristics. This idealized perfect woman and mother becomes a clutching strangulating tentacle. In her *Journals* Plath wrote:

I do not love; I do not love anybody except myself. That is rather a shocking thing to admit. I have none of the selfless love of my mother…. My greatest trouble arising from my basic and egoistic self-love is jealousy. (p.98)

Perhaps Plath was jealous of the way her mother had coped in adversity. Aurelia was widowed – at the young age of thirty four – and she too was left with two young children and limited financial means; but she coped. Aurelia struggled to make ends meet and provide Sylvia and her brother Warren with a secure life and a good education. When Plath found herself in a very similar situation, she fell to pieces. Plath regarded her mother as some kind of sainted martyr, but not without the hint of a self-satisfied martyr, as is suggested in “Medusa:”

Who do you think you are?
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live.

Ghastly Vatican.
I am sick to death of hot salt.
Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins,
Off, off, eely tentacle!

Is Aurelia the life-giving Eucharistic bread of heaven, as is implied by, “[a] Communion wafer?” Or is she Mary the mother of God? Plath persists with the religious metaphors. The “hot salt” could well refer to tears, or salt used as a
symbol of purification in certain religious Sacraments and ceremonies. Plath does not want pity from her mother, and she regards Aurelia’s wishes as naïve, “green as eunuchs.” The colour green might refer yet again to Plath’s envy for Aurelia’s apparent perfection, in comparison with her own inability to cope. Plath’s jealousy over what she perceives as Aurelia’s control over her is still most apparent. As the title of the poem suggests, Medusa is the Gorgon in Greek mythology who transforms all who gaze upon it to stone. There was also a family joke in which she referred to the fact that Aurelia meant both golden and jellyfish. None of these allusions would have been lost on Aurelia. There appears to be less drawing in of the reader in “Medusa,” and more distancing. This is a personal, vehemently jealous attack by Plath, directed solely at her mother.

Emotionally charged though the lines in “Medusa” are, the reader cannot question the reasoned and logical train of thought in this poem. Plath is not merely saying that she is jealous of her mother; she is stating quite categorically why she is jealous, giving her reasons, and showing how. This is yet a further example of the way in which Plath’s emotions act in a sense-making fashion, giving the poem its structured coherence.

Even years prior to the writing of “Medusa,” Plath had expressed her concerns over her perception that Aurelia was making a martyr of herself. David Shapiro (1994) comments on the occasion when Sylvia had written to her brother Warren, imploring him to safeguard them both from their mother and the “stigmata” of her cloying motherly devotion:

You know as I do, and it is a frightening thing, that mother would actually kill herself for us if we calmly accepted all she wanted to do for us. She is an abnormally altruistic person, and I have realized lately that we have to fight against a deadly disease. (p.48)

In *The Bell Jar*, (1966) Plath portrays her mother as “one sweet ulcerous ball … scraped, wore the same old coat. But the children had new clothes” (p.266). Aurelia is presented as sickly sweet, yet at the same time suppurating. Plath is jealous of her mother’s influence and control and wants to expel her from her life. In *The Bell Jar* she says: “Mother keep out of my barnyard, I am becoming
another” (p.260). These lines are evocative of Anne Sexton when in “The Division of Parts” she orders her mother out of her dreams; “Dame/ keep out of my slumber. / My good Dame, you are dead.”

Plath believed her love for her father exceeded Aurelia’s love for her husband. She herself agrees that “Electra on Azalea Path,” is about a girl with an Electra complex. The anger and irony in Plath’s account in her Journals of the circumstances under which Aurelia told Sylvia of her father’s death is obvious:

She came home crying like an angel one night and woke me up and told me Daddy was gone, he was what they called dead, and we would never see him again, but the three of us would stick together and have a jolly life anyway, to spite his face. (p.330)

Plath continued:

Me I never knew the love of a father, the love of a steady blood-related man after the age of eight. My mother killed the only man who’d loved me steady through life. Came in one morning with tears of nobility in her eyes and told me he was gone for good. I hate her for that. (p.331)

In Plath’s eyes Aurelia did not love Otto as much as she should have done; the implication is that Aurelia did not love him as much as she loved him: “I hate her because he wasn’t loved by her” (p.331). Fisher (2002) argues that emotions, such as one experiences at the death of a loved one, make known to us the contours of their life for us. This too would be true for Plath. It was only through the strong emotion of love for her father that she was able to experience the contours of her loss for him, and the hatred she felt towards Aurelia. The same was true for Rich. In “After Dark” she finally realised, after having a very adversarial relationship with her father that the reason he had shaped her life in the way he had was out of fatherly concern. In this way Rich was able to make sense of her relationship with her father after he was dead.

The love of men was something Plath would jealously guard. Writing in her Journals she says:
I fight all women for my men. I am a woman, and there is no loyalty even between mother and daughter. Both fight for the father, for the son, for the bed of mind and body. (p.199)

Plath manifests profound linguistic intricacy and remains faithful to form and structure in these poems. As Axelrod (1985) points out, “Electra on Azalea Path” rotates eight and ten line stanzas of iambic pentameter, and each stanza’s asymmetrical start rhymes are contrived by rhyming first and last lines. “Medusa” (1962) also pays obeisance to form and style. Arguably these poems depict the writings of a woman in full possession of her cerebral train of thought. In The Vehement Passions, Fisher (2002) poses the question of whether any two sets of words appear as naturally together as the words “dispassionate knowledge.” The implication is presumably that knowledge is only a field of the mind, and the emotions are some sort of distraction. In her writings Plath demonstrates her emotions as passionate knowledge. Plath’s poems have a high emotional content but they are also highly intelligent. The emotions, rather than distracting from the poems actually enhance and structure the poetry.

Perhaps the most obvious examples of Plath’s emotion of jealousy depicted in her poetry are in those poems referring to her relationship with Hughes. Prior to meeting Hughes, Plath had a dread that she may become a jealous wife. In her Journals she wrote:

I want as all women do; to be loved devotedly, without fear of jealousy as I grow old and the young pretty women continue to parade by. (p.144)

The estrangement of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes was, according to Marjorie Perloff (1986), the catalyst that ultimately fractured Plath’s carefully constructed persona. Still Plath contrived to keep up appearances. Whilst in hospital recovering from an appendectomy, she continued to write cheery letters home, in which she describes Hughes as “an absolute angel” and “his handsome, kind smiling face is the most beautiful sight in the world to me.” “Tulips” (1961) however, written at the same time, reveals a very different state of affairs:

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage.
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo,
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

This is not an isolated instance showing how Plath’s letters home tell a very different tale from aspects of her life. Here in “Tulips” the kind smiling face of Hughes becomes a smile which catches onto Plath’s skin. Plath has on previous occasions made references to Hughes’ “spry hooks” and “barbs.” It would seem she is referring to Hughes rather than her child when she talks about “smiling hooks.”

As had been the case of her relationship with her mother, Plath’s relationship with Hughes was subjected to a type of metamorphosis, from the fertile god she had loved and idolized to the cheating fiend who betrayed her and caused her such passionate jealousy. Mary Broe (1987) draws attention to Plath’s increasing jealousy towards Hughes. On one occasion Plath wrote to her mother how Hughes “[w]ill work with me and make me a woman poet like the world will gape at” (p.118). Plath’s idolisation of Hughes knew no limits – at first. She consistently typed and retyped his manuscripts, searched for jobs on his behalf, all whilst studying for her Newnham honours exams, and at the same time teaching at Smith. Nor did the fact that she perceived Hughes to be both creatively and intellectually her superior seem to bother her:

I am using every fiber of my being to love him … he is always just that many steps ahead of me intellectually and creatively, so that I feel very feminine and admiring. (p.212)

I believe that even whilst writing this the halcyon days were coming to an end – a little like the lull before the storm. The very fact that Plath employs the expression, “using every fiber of my being,” betrays the fact that a degree of effort is required to sustain the hero worship, before it is superseded by jealousy. One cannot help but harbour concerns that this sort of loyalty and veneration would be nigh on impossible to maintain; and once it was seen not to be reciprocated the devotion very quickly became resentful jealousy.
In her *Journals* when describing her first year of marriage at Cambridge Plath declares:

My whole being has grown and interwound so completely with Ted’s that if anything were to happen to him, I do not see how I could live. I would either go mad, or kill myself. I cannot conceive of life without him. (p.174)

Less than a year later, whilst at Cape Cod, Plath continues her idealization:

Living with him is like being told a perpetual story: his mind is the biggest, most imaginative, I have ever met. I could live in its growing countries forever. (p.249)

Plath’s love for Hughes is so unconditional and so needy, it would be almost impossible to maintain this para disaical level of exalted devotion. In addition Plath’s lack of success with the publication of her poems had caused her to write in her *Journals*:

I am so glad Ted is first. All my pat theories against marrying a writer dissolve with Ted: his rejections more than double my sorrow and his acceptances rejoice me more than mine … it is as if he were the male counterpart to my own self: each of us giving the other an extension to the life we believe in living: (p.271)

Plath’s love was as unsustainable as her jealousy was uncontrollable. As her relationship with Hughes continued her need for Hughes’ love and acceptance took on deific proportions: “I need Ted … as I need bread and wine” (p.243).

Hughes has now assumed not only the physical, life-giving support role for Plath, but also he has assumed the role of the spiritual food of the Eucharist. She continues:

I am superstitious about separation from Ted, even for an hour. I think I must live in his heat and his presence, for his smells and words – as if all my senses fed involuntarily on him and deprived for more than a few hours, I languish, wither, die to the world. (p.278)

Plath uses the “as if” form of metaphor in her *Journals*. She says “as if I have conjured, at last a God from the slack tides.” Then she says “I need Ted as I need bread and wine,” and yet again she continues: “almost as if he were keeping the
field open keeping a foot in the door to the golden world.” In the first instance Plath describes her worldly, needy love of Hughes using her nautical metaphors. Hughes calms Plath’s troubled sea for her, flooding it with his love and brilliance. Plath has created a god from the “slack tides.” The tides are turning in her favour and it is all on account of Hughes. Secondly, Plath goes on to assume a deified role for Hughes. He is not only “a god” but really God in the form of bread and wine: “I need Ted … as I need bread and wine.” Thirdly, she regards Hughes as her means of attaining eternal salvation. He is the one who will help her achieve all she wants, not only in this life, but in the everlasting life: “as if he were holding the field open keeping a foot open in the door to the golden world, and thus keeping a place for me.” The underlying structure in the imagery Plath uses, refers to Hughes as godlike.

Ronald Hayman (1992) tells us how Plath enthusiastically rated Hughes’ poetry above that of Hopkins and Yeats. And Plath derived support from Hughes’ confidence in her poetry. He had told her that he knew of no other woman who had written poetry like hers. This was the ultimate accolade for Plath, but when this attention and support was withdrawn and his affection was being directed towards another woman Plath’s love evaporated and was replaced by a jealousy of equal proportions. She only seems capable of living through Hughes, rather than with him. It is only through Hughes’ acceptance into the “golden” world that she has any chance of gaining admission herself. Gradually however, there is a hint that the intensity of Plath’s adulation of Hughes is abating. It is now that possessive jealousy becomes more apparent. Plath is concerned that other women may be attracted to her husband: “This is the man the unsatisfied ladies scan the stories in The Ladies Home Journal for” (p.276).

It is only towards the end of 1959 that Plath is realistic enough to suggest that the “honeymoon” is over and that her subservient role, in which she was happy to bask in Hughes’ reflected glory, is finished:

Dangerous to be so close to Ted, day in and day out. I have no life separate from him, am likely to become a mere accessory … I am inclined to go passive, let Ted be my social self. (p.314)
On May 20 1959 Plath wrote:

And now my essay, on “Withins,” will come back from PJHH, [American poet Peter J. Henniker-Heaton] and my green-eyed fury prevent me from working…. Tell Ted nothing. He generalized about the article on water voles he hadn’t read, expatiating from PJHH’s notes: “Oh all your stuff, the trouble with it it’s too general.” So I won’t bother showing him the story on Sweetie Pie I’ve done, keep the viper out of the household and send it out on my own. (p.384)

This attitude of subservience to Hughes must have been apparent to others. Alvarez has commented on the fact that on first meeting Plath, he had no idea who she was, and how in literary discussions she was happy to allow Hughes to do the talking for her. Her new-found need for independence and a realization that her obsession with Hughes was stifling her creativity, made Plath begin to withdraw from Ted’s “domination.” Plath’s desire for freedom, combined with her jealousy of his affair with Assia Wevill, led not only to a greater freedom in her physical existence, but also in her poetry. This “gag in the mouth” (as Plath once referred to domesticity) having been removed led to the writing of some of her best poetry. Not only did the emotion of jealousy do nothing to restrict the cerebral component of her poetry, it actually enhanced it. Damasio (2003, 2004) has presented empirical data to show how the actual techniques examining the inner body’s condition by the brain and the method of emotions are approximately linked and include the identical brain zones. This suggests that both assessing the state of the body and expressing the emotions are performed by the same sectors of the brain.

Just as in “Medusa,” (1962) Plath had railed against her mother, so too in “The Jailer,” (1962) she reviled her husband Hughes. Written one day after “Medusa,” when her emotions, as well as her temperature, were running high, “The Jailer” was the third poem in the familial trilogy. The imagery used in this poem does not simply express her hatred of Hughes, but explores the meaning of the betrayal for her. The marriage Plath had always spoken of in positive superlatives was now proven to be a sham. She had been supplanted by another in Hughes’ affections. Now scorned, her fury and jealousy were equal to the love she had previously had for him. This was not just hatred, it was hatred fuelled by jealousy. Still Plath is able to justify her jealousy; she asks why she is jealous, who and what has caused
it and what she now intends to do. Plath utilises her jealousy to make sense of what has happened to her and this making use of her emotions in a cognitive fashion gives her poem their logic and intention. She has been used and abused for seven years:

I have been drugged and raped.
Seven hours knocked out of my right mind
Into a black sack
Where I relax, foetus or cat,
Lever of his wet dreams.

Whilst Hughes loved her, she could cope with life; but when that love went her protective crustacean shell was gone:

Something is gone.
My sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin
Drops me from a terrible altitude.
Carapace smashed,
I spread to the beaks of birds.

The poem continues:

O little gimlets –
What holes this papery day is already full of!
He has been burning me with cigarettes,

These lines imply the lack of permanence in the Plath/Hughes relationship as is suggested by the words “papery day.” The cigarette holes in the paper indicate a sadistic but non life-threatening form of torture. Just as the gimlet can only produce small holes, the cigarette can only cause minor damage. She has been hurt not only by the small tools, but also burned sadistically by the jailer. Plath is now so frail and vulnerable, with no more power to resist than if she were made of paper. Plath makes three references to death in “The Jailer.” Firstly, she refers to the types of her own death: hung, starved, burned and hooked. Secondly, she expresses the desire for Hughes’ death:

I wish him dead or away.
That, it seems, is the impossibility.
Finally, she makes more concrete references to her own death:

What would he  
Do, do, do without me?

Plath here traces the events of her seven year marriage to Hughes, viewing it as a life-to-death process. Initially the marriage was in the foetus stage and she was in the amniotic sac. At a later stage – in early infancy – in “my sleeping capsule” she is evicted from the marriage. Further on the poet alludes to being tortured whilst in the marriage. At this stage she wishes her jailer dead and visualises her own death; in the early lines the poet is using imagery structured in such a way as to suggest protection to the foetus and the infant, but after her protective shell is shattered she is at the mercy of wild prey and her jailer.

A.R. Jones (1965) maintains that the ambivalence of love and hate which Plath has for her father is at the core of her emotional existence. In the “Colossus” (1959) Plath puts forward the perception of her father as someone who she both loves and hates; but it is in “Daddy,” that the unrestricted magnitude of the emotion of hatred is set free upon her father.

This section has argued that these emotions do have a cognitive dimension. The manner with which she makes use of imagery in poems such as “Daddy”, “Medusa” and “Lady Lazarus” shows Plath giving a cognitive dimension to her writing. In “Burning the Letters” it is the imagery of fire and revenge which structures the poem. Plath’s poems express her vengeance on those people who have caused her pain and suffering. In “Burning the Letters” she manifests her revenge on Hughes by destroying his written work. This vengeful hate and jealousy in the poetry of Plath is very different from that depicted in the poetry of Sexton and Rich in relating to their husbands. Rather, their poetry depicts sadness at the breakdown of their marriages.

**Anne Sexton**

Much of the poetry of Anne Sexton presents the reader with a personal picture of the emotional angst which delineated much of her life. She attempted to transform
her emotional turmoil into poetry. Jesse Prinz (2004) continues along this same line of thought when he sees a parallel between visual consciousness and emotional consciousness. Prinz demonstrates that emotion is a mode of consciousness in the most comprehensive sense. Just as vision enables us to see objects in their setting, so emotions disclose how circumstances affect our welfare. In the poetry of Sexton there is something much more interesting going on than what is immediately obvious. Although much of Sexton’s poetry originated from her private life she nevertheless had the ability to relate conscious emotions from her subconscious emotions and express them in her poetry with the use of metaphors.

In “The Double Image” the image cluster used by Sexton, images such as; “why I would rather / die than love”, “I am one third / of your daughter counting my bounty” and “settle on me like a debt”, are expanded so that they offer a well-ordered structure which suggest the emotions of love, hate and jealousy in the poem. “The Double Image” (1960) highlights aspects of the emotional turmoil in the life of Anne Sexton. In it she describes the occasion when her youngest daughter Joyce was sick. Such was the intensity of her emotional love for her child that she postponed her planned suicide until the child was out of danger. Obvious though Sexton’s love for her daughter is, she does not believe in the adequacy of her love, and so admonishes the child to love herself: “Today my small child, Joyce love yourself’s self where it lives.” Sexton makes references to Christmas time and mistletoe, such special events when she, as a mother, should have been there for her daughter, but was not. Sexton was acutely and painfully aware of her shortcomings as a mother, but was unable to do anything about them. She wanted to offer love to her daughter, just as Joyce wanted to receive love; but it is as if Sexton is aware that this conscious desire to give love is not adequate without an actual commitment to love and to care for her daughter: “You held my glove.” By saying, “you held my glove” rather than “my hand” Sexton is making an analogy between her love of her child and the handless glove, just as the glove was without substance, so too was her love for Joyce. The glove was a substitute for the mother’s hand in much the same way that a portrait of Sexton served as a substitute for a meaningful relationship with her own mother. Even whilst Sexton
acknowledges that her mother did her best in many ways for Sexton, still the relationship failed to flourish: “I didn’t seem to care.”

Sexton is implying that mere expressions of emotion without the physical presence are meaningless. Sexton then goes on to describe her memories of the church she attended whilst growing up:

There was a church where I grew up
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,
row by row, like puritans or shipmates
singing together. My father passed the plate.

The description of the church and the church service hardly fits in with that of a place for devotional worship, but a place where she and others were forced to go, and once there, had to be physically restrained to stop them from leaving. The white cupboard brings to mind once again the description and comparison of the Pharisees to whitened sepulchres in the New Testament, outwardly clean and white but decomposing within. And there amongst all this hypocrisy Sexton places her father. He was part and parcel of the corruption: “My father passed the plate.” The role of Sexton’s father passing the plate suggests that Sexton perceived that her father “passed the buck” with regard to his responsibilities towards his daughter.

In the last section of stanza three Sexton is still concerned that she is unable to experience love for her mother. Even when Mary Gray is diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoes a mastectomy, Sexton is still unable to articulate the words of love:

On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn’t answer.

In the above lines we witness Sexton’s inability to connect emotionally with her mother via speech or caring. In the next few lines the same situation exists between Sexton and her youngest daughter:
And I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love.

In the last section of stanza five Sexton goes to her parents’ house: “and two portraits hung on opposite walls.” Even whilst living in the same house Sexton and her mother were physically and metaphorically opposed to each other. The whole of stanza six examines the reasons for Sexton’s lack of love. The fox’s snare is the way Sexton describes the fur coat of her mother’s which she used to hide inside, when locked in the closet as a child. Sexton was using the coat as a substitute for her mother in the same way as Sexton’s daughter uses Sexton’s glove as a substitute for her mother’s hand:

The artist caught us at the turning;
we smiled in our canvas home
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.
The dry red fur coat was made for burning.

There is an underlying structuring in the images Sexton uses in these lines. They are related by the suggestion of finality in them. The artist “caught” Sexton and her mother, suggesting they were leaving and going their “separate ways.” Such was the lack of love between Sexton and her mother that Sexton likens their shared domicile to a canvas; that is, they lived together in greater harmony when they were depicted on canvas rather than when they actually shared a home together. The use of the word “foreknown” implies Sexton’s prescience that they would go their separate ways. Even the mother’s fur coat was ready for burning. It is the finality of the images which organises them.

This reference of Sexton to past events exemplifies her cerebral recall of previous happenings in her childhood and lucid accounts of the emotions stirred by these events. In the same vein the reference to Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) exemplifies the unequivocal cerebral consciousness in her writing of “The Double Image.” Dorian Gray had to live with the effects of his Faustian bargaining; so, too, Sexton was always going to be adversely affected by her ambivalent relationship with her mother:
I rot on the wall, my own
Dorian Gray.

A major part of “The Double Image” is filled with images of the daughter for whom the poet had difficulty loving or even caring for. The poet also expresses an inability to express the emotion of love for her own mother. This poem is filled with substitution: portraits for people, and a picture of a rabbit for a mother’s love. The theme of substitution recurs throughout “The Double Image.” In stanza one the poet says “you held my glove,” not my hand. In stanza two she says

But, I didn’t leave
I had my portrait
done instead.

Sexton is saying that by having her portrait painted it was as if she was still physically present with her mother and has to live with the consequences. And again in the same stanza; “She had my portrait / done instead.” This portrait painting was on the occasion when, as Sexton tells us, her mother was unable to forgive her for her attempted suicide. Mary Gray was then, replacing her daughter with a substitute, a portrait. Yet again, in stanza four, the poet says:

she had her
own portrait painted.
A cave of mirror
placed on the south wall;
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all.

Sexton has already been substituted by a portrait. So too has her mother. In Sexton’s opinion however, this is acceptable, in some ways this substitution of a portrait makes her mother more hers than when she is physically with her. The family resemblance between Sexton and her mother was apparently obvious; the two portraits were mirror images. And yet Sexton is implying that her mother was unaware of this family resemblance “unacquainted / with my face, you wore it.” In stanza seven the poet tells how the weekend visits acted as a surrogate for a normal family existence:
it wasn’t the same  
as love, letting weekends contain  
us.

The final and most poignant suggestion of substitution appears at the end of stanza seven. Sexton is implying that her reason for giving birth to Joyce was solely to justify her own existence:

we named you Joy.  
I, who was never quite sure  
about being a girl, needed another  
life, another image to remind me.  
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure  
or soothe it. I made you to find me.

Possibly Sexton in remembering the perceived lack of maternal love she received as a child, believes she is now incapable of expressing her emotion of love for either her mother or her daughter. In all of this we see how Sexton is using the theme of substitution to structure the imagery in “The Double Image.” These images of substitution give an overall coherence to the poem. In writing “The Double Image” Sexton was very consciously shaping and driving the poem. The title implies the picture is not the real thing, it is a reflection, a portrayal, a likeness and a replica; just as the love between mother and daughter was only a copy of the real thing.

It has been claimed by Linda Wagner-Martin (1989) that “The Double Image” enunciates Sexton’s private turmoil of what her love, hate and jealousy were in her relationship with her family, and what they meant:

It is a paradigmatic expression of centuries of inherent conflict, divided loyalty, the ambivalence of pride and disdain, love and hate. As an expression of such ambivalences “The Double Image” becomes every reader’s poem. Almost immediately upon her becoming a poet, Sexton was trapped into archetypal conflict – human concerns – that were meaningful to most human lives. (p.2)

Wagner-Martin is claiming that the emotions which Sexton expresses in this poem are the very ones that families have been experiencing for hundreds of years, mixed feelings of love and hate, delight and scorn. Because of the empathy the
readers have with the emotions expressed in this poem and the way the reader is
drawn into the poem by Sexton, it does in fact become “every reader’s” poem.

It is largely for this reason that Sexton draws the reader into “The Double Image.”
Many readers will no doubt have experienced concern over their perceived
inability to love a particular family member and the often ensuing hostility and
emotion of hate which replaces that love. For Anne Sexton a major concern in
“The Double Image” was her inability to love her mother, even when her mother’s
death was imminent, and also her added fear that history would be repeated with
her daughter Joyce. Sexton had said:

A woman is her mother,
that’s the main thing.

Not until Sexton can love her mother will she be able to discover her own
individuality. In Poetic Justice Martha Nussbaum (1996) reasons that there are
some types of cognition which are only attainable by us when we experience
emotion – an example she gives is the emotion of love. Nussbaum continues by
stating there exists an interdependence between love and cognition: we love
someone because of our knowledge of them, nevertheless we come to know them
more fully because of our love for them. I believe that for Sexton the antithesis of
this holds true. She was unable to experience the emotion of love for her mother
because of the negative knowledge she had of her mother. This premise also holds
true for Plath. She had difficulty experiencing love for her mother because she
held her responsible for events that had caused unhappiness in her life. For
example she wrote in her Journals, “My mother killed the only man who’d loved
me steady through life…. I hate her for that” (p.331). Rich too expressed the
difficulties she experienced loving her father because of what she perceived to be
his patriarchal control over her: “… old man whose death I wanted / I can’t stir
you up now.” Nussbaum also claims our emotions are linked to our childhood and
as such relate to people in our past. She continues to state that when we recollect
our childhood we make ethical choices regarding the emotions we have expressed.
This is in fact what Sexton was doing in “The Double Image.” The emotion in her
poetry is in fact both discerning and intelligent. We are conscious of the lack of love between Sexton and her mother:

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 strong head of death I had outgrown.

Equally fraught with difficult relationships is “The Division of Parts” (1960). Sexton has difficulty with the mother-daughter relationship even after her mother is dead. The ambivalence of Sexton’s feelings for her mother is most poignant. We sense the lack of love, but the desire to experience love and the sense of loss at the death of the mother. In the first part of stanza one there is very little emotion expressed by the poet other than to call her mother “[m]y Mary Gray.” There is however a detachment from the death, an almost lawyer’s account of the estate of her mother:

a photostat of your will arrived in the mail today.
This is the division of money I am one third of your daughters counting my bounty.

We also witness once again the idea of substitution. It was a facsimile of the will rather than the original document that came in the post. It is also apparent that these lines are bereft of any emotion. They make use of mathematical terms – division and one third – suggesting both a monetary and mercenary effect the death of her mother had upon Sexton. The above lines suggest Sexton’s concern that her lack of love for her mother caused her mother’s death; why else would she use the expression “counting my bounty,” rather than say, for example, my inheritance? Sexton had previously been told by her mother that she had in fact caused her death.

Your coat in my closet, your bright stones on my hand, like gaudy fur animals
I do not know how to use,  
settle on me like a debt.

These lines which have been discussed in chapter three to show the anger Sexton had towards her mother, hardly suggest that the items Sexton has inherited from her mother will be treasured as precious mementos. The description of the fur coat and diamond rings implies they are viewed by Sexton as showy ostentatious possessions, “bright” and “gaudy.” This is the same fur coat, referred to in “The Double Image,” “The dry red coat is made for burning.” The memories of that coat must have stirred up emotions of hate. The effect of inheriting these items of value has become for Sexton a debt. She believes she owes love to her mother, but is incapable of feeling it. We are left with the inescapable feeling that Sexton neither wanted nor appreciated any of her mother’s belongings. To Sexton the acquisition of these possessions are a poor replacement for the loss of her mother. Even her mother’s letters which would normally be regarded as possessing great sentimental value are “obstacles of letters.” And Sexton’s manner of leaving her mother’s house suggests she left with unnatural haste taking with her things she neither wanted nor chose: “I bundled out with gifts I did not choose.”

Throughout these lines, Sexton uses numerous metaphors, but they are structured and related through the theme of substitution. The rings were “bright stones,” rather than diamonds or other precious gems. The fur coat was “gaudy fur animals.” And because these commodities were substitutes they were of no use to Sexton: “I do not know how to use.” She was not prepared to settle for second best. Sexton’s love for her mother and the love she received from her had been ambivalent and so she did not see how she could inherit these items sincerely. They “settle on me like a debt.”

Although these early stanzas of “The Division of Parts” contain numerous references to her emotions, Sexton does not permit the emotion in her poetry to override the structured consciousness in her writing. She is actually making a very contemplative reference to the nursery rhyme, “Sing a Song of Sixpence.” Sexton’s poem makes very matter of fact references to the division of money and assets, likening the counting out of the money to the nursery rhyme in which the
king is in the counting house counting out his money and the queen is in the parlour eating bread and honey. There appears to be a degree of confusion with Sexton’s perceived role. Initially she describes herself as one of the three daughters of Mary Gray (“I am one third of your daughters …”) but then she says “or I am queen alone in the parlor still.” Could Sexton be implying that she has now assumed the role of the mother? This is substantiated in the next few lines when she says “your coat is in my closet / your bright stones on my hand.” The last two lines in this stanza are I believe particularly indicative of Sexton’s cerebral control of her thoughts. In the nursery rhyme the lines after those referring to the king and queen are “Down came a blackbird and pecked off her nose.” Sexton however converted these lines to “It is Good Friday. / Black birds pick at my window sill.”

Sexton is implying that like Christ her mother too has now died. Even after likening her mother’s death to that of Christ’s death, she is still unable to experience any emotion for her mother, either living or dead. Sexton is aware that a sense of loss is the conventional emotion she should be experiencing at this time but cannot. Much of her emotional poetry is concerned with her inability to either feel or express emotion. That Sexton has insight into her lack of normal emotional expression, affirms how much thought she is giving to these events and her emotional responses to them:

My timely loss
is too customary to note; and yet
I planned to suffer
and I cannot.

Sexton has no doubt paid lip service to loving her mother throughout her life. In much the same way she believed that her mother never truly loved her. Sexton likens this faked love to the way in which she pretended to accept the Christian principles her mother taught her. Once again we witness the way in which Sexton’s poetry expresses a lack of emotion – or rather an inability to verbalise emotion:

The clutter of worship
that you taught me, Mary Gray, is old. I imitate a memory of belief that I do not own.

The fact that Sexton can reject the religion that she has been taught throughout her childhood suggests that she has given it considerable thought. In her later religious poems, when she is searching for belief and desperately wants to believe, she is still not willing to sacrifice her integrity and embrace religion until her belief is for the right reasons. As she said: “need is not belief.” Even though Sexton expresses her desire to rid herself of her mother’s Christian teachings, she continues to make very intellectual and scholarly use of the New Testament. In the last five lines of stanza one Sexton makes reference to the manner in which the soldiers at the foot of the cross cast lots for Christ’s garments after His crucifixion. The tradition was for the soldiers to split the garments at the seams and share the cloth. Christ’s garments however, had been woven without a seam, rendering them too valuable to be cut up in the usual manner; consequently the soldiers cast lots for His garments. In much the same way Sexton says of inheriting her mother’s belongings:

I have cast my lot and am one third thief of you.

In an earlier stanza Sexton was, as one of three sisters, “one third of your daughters;” now she describes herself as “one third thief / of you.” In both of these lines, there is still the sense that because Sexton perceives she did not love her mother, she regards inheriting her possessions as somewhat hypocritical. This aspect of Sexton is in keeping with Nussbaum’s (1994) theory that a duly rational individual will sense emotions as a result of a genuine cognisance of a situation. Nussbaum argues that emotions possess cognitive value and are a requisite for essential judgment in order to comprehend relationships and ourselves. Sexton assesses her relationship with her mother. She judged herself to be lacking in love for her mother and expressed this in her poetry. It is then these negative metaphors that shape her poetry. For Sexton much of her troubled life stemmed from an over
active sense of sincerity. She would not pay lip service to an emotion she believed was insincere. Plath on the other hand could on occasion be somewhat insincere in her relationship with her mother. Plath frequently told her mother one thing in her letters home, whilst saying quite the opposite in her poetry. She also thought perhaps too deeply about her emotions. Nor does Sexton believe that the future would bring her any solace, or endow her with the emotion of love for her mother:

Time, that rearranger
of estates, equips
me with your garments, but not with grief.

There is however, in the second stanza an indication that Sexton may be beginning to experience some degree of love prior to her mother’s death. Sexton is describing the winter when her mother’s cancer began. For three months Sexton spent each day, with her mother at the hospital. The last two lines of this stanza however, seem to negate the earlier positive emotional feelings:

and never once
forgot how long it took.

Sexton seems to be suggesting here that she found the time spent with her mother, during those last three months arduous – and perhaps spent with her out of duty rather than love. Even so, for Sexton to express the emotion and then to question the sincerity of the emotion is indicative of her reasoned and logical thought pattern. Mikko Salmela (2002) proffers a two tier emotional affectivity. On the one hand, first order feelings are non-intentional. On the other hand, second order feelings are apparent when a raw feeling is deciphered in expression of the calculative theme of a person’s current emotion. These then are intentional feelings. It is this level of second order feelings which I believed Sexton experienced over her emotion of love for her mother, and expressed in her poetry.

Sexton then goes on to relate how, during the time spent in hospital with her mother, she did all she could to make her mother’s last three months comfortable:

I read to you
from The New Yorker, ate suppers
you wouldn’t eat, fussed
with your flowers,  
joked with your nurse, as if I  
were the balm among lepers,  
as if I could undo  
a life in hours  
if I never said goodbye.

It is in the last three lines that Sexton indicates that even though she is doing all she can for her mother, she is still very conscious of the fact that her past relationship with her mother has been far from idyllic. Once again we are made aware that Sexton is trying very hard to experience love for her mother, but is unable to do so. After her mother’s death Sexton makes a feigned attempt at contentment. She does however still want to rid herself of being a daughter, or rather her desire to forget her belief that she was not a loving and dutiful daughter:

Since then I have pretended ease,  
loved with the trickeries of need, but not enough  
to shed my daughterhood.

The stumbling block for Sexton appears to be her inability to get over the fact that she believed she was not loved as a child by her mother. Now she for her part is incapable of experiencing the emotion of love for her mother:

Fool! I fumble my lost childhood  
for a mother and lounge in sad stuff  
with love to catch and catch as catch can.

Sexton appears incapable of recovering from the alleged abuse by her mother during her childhood:

I have tried  
to exorcise the memory of each event  
and remain still, a mixed child,  
heavy with cloths of you.

The fact that Sexton is incapable of forgetting her memories only serves to suggest emotion, or lack of the emotion of love, depicted here is a very cerebral emotion. It is in Sexton’s mind and her consciousness of events passed, which prevent her from experiencing love for her mother. Nussbaum (2001) supports
this stance of Sexton’s inability to experience love for her mother when she states that all the evaluative judgments in our emotions make a connection between specific past events in our lives. Nussbaum (2004) continues that emotions are difficult to cogitate and because they reconnect us to our initial childhood occurrences of rage, disgust and shame, and the fact that they make us aware of our dependence (p.25). There could well be a link between Sexton’s inability to experience love for her mother and the fact that her mother never forgave Sexton for her attempted suicide. In “The Double Image” Sexton writes “I cannot forgive your suicide my mother said. / And she never could.” Plath also had attempted suicide and she too may have harboured a concern that her mother viewed this negatively. Furthermore Nussbaum claims emotions are logical evaluations of a world beyond our command.

Stanza four is perhaps one of the most emotional sections of “The Division of Parts.” The ambivalence of the love/hate relationship between mother and daughter is heightened. The fact that Sexton still desires closeness with her dead mother is manifested by the fact that she wears her mother’s “Bonwit Teller nightgown.” Even so Sexton wants freedom from her mother’s invasion of her mind whilst she is sleeping. She wants closure. Her mother is dead and she resents her mother coming to her during her sleep:

Divided, you climbed into my head.  
There in my jabbering dream  
I heard my own angry cries  
and I cursed you, Dame  
keep out of my slumber.  
My good Dame, you are dead.

The next two lines of “The Division of Parts” are perhaps the most poignant of all:

And Mother, three stones  
slipped from your glittering eyes.

Is Sexton implying that these are motherly tears which are being shed, because Sexton is banishing her mother from her dreams? Or is the poet indicating that her
mother’s tears are false, salt tears, which have petrified and turned to stone? We can see here that emotion itself is actually becoming the subject of the poem, and actually shaping the poem. It is in the final section of “The Division of Parts” that Sexton alludes to a further reason why love for her mother was tinged with hate. When Sexton wished to return to tertiary study to pursue her poetry writing, her mother refused to provide any financial support, making it impossible for her to continue her studies. Mary Gray had at one time aspired to become a poet herself. Sexton may well have viewed this as jealousy on the mother’s part. Mrs Gray was possibly jealous that her daughter would be successful in a way that she never was. An additional example of Mary Gray’s lack of support for her daughter’s literary aspirations was the occasion when she accused Sexton of plagiarising the poetry of Sarah Teasdale, an accusation which proved to be without substance. Again this incident could have been instigated by the mother’s jealousy, and would have been a further cause for hatred by Sexton for her mother. I believe it is to this incident that Sexton is alluding in the following lines, “I would still curse / you with my rhyming words.” These lines are, in the opinion of Sexton, a reference to the fact that her mother viewed her poetry as a malediction.

Now it’s Friday’s noon
and I would still curse
you with my rhyming words.

These “rhyming words” which are the means by which Sexton’s poetry is created become the subject of the poem. She is indicating that one of the reasons for hatred between mother and daughter was intellectual rivalry. As such the poetry becomes the subject of the poem and the emotion of hatred demonstrated actually shapes the poem. Just a few hours before her mother’s death Sexton is still incapable of ridding herself of the hatred she feels towards her mother for what has gone before. In the final stanza of “The Division of Parts” it is as if Sexton is outlining her mother’s many qualities:

old circus knitting, god-in-her-moon,
all fairest in my lang syne verse,
the gauzy bride among the children,
the fancy amid the absurd
and awkward, that horn for hounds
that skipper homeward, that museum
keeper of stiff starfish, that blaze
within the pilgrim woman,
a clown mender …

It is likely that these lines refer to the time of Mary Gray’s death, or very soon afterwards. The “gauzy bride” suggests an ethereal ghost like quality which the mother has now assumed. Mary Gray who has been the one in command, the one who summoned and people came, who directed everyone in life, has now steered herself home. She who was a child consoler in hard times, and a teacher of speech:

a dove’s
cheek among the stones,
my Lady of first words …

The capitalization of “Lady” suggests that Sexton is likening her mother Mary to Mary the mother of God. This idea is further reinforced by the dove allegory representing Christ. Mary Gray is dead, but still Sexton implies she is still not going to be free of her mother’s control, nor will she have her mother’s support now she has died. It is Sexton’s allusion to her mother’s lack of support which further highlights the lack of the emotion of love in the mother / daughter relationship. It is however, an inversion of her religious beliefs. The roles are reversed – normally we would expect a mother to support her child’s first words – but when Sexton actually began to write words in the form of poetry, her mother was “without praise:”

this is the division of ways.
you come, a brave ghost, to fix
in my mind without praise
or paradise
to make me your inheritor.

Undoubtedly there is a high content of emotion in the poem, but it could not be claimed that it is merely an unrestrained effusion of uncontrolled feeling. There are some striking similarities between Sexton’s “The Division of Parts” and Wordsworth’s “The Drowned Man.” Joel Pace (1996) describes how the extrinsic events of real life enter Wordsworth’s mind and are reproduced by imagination. It
is here that we can comprehend the association between cognition and emotion. The drowned man in Wordsworth’s poem becomes a “spectre,” just as Sexton’s dead mother becomes “a brave ghost.” Pace is on the same tack as Nussbaum (2001), for both maintain that literature has a very important function in life. Nussbaum argues that the reader can gain emotional experiences and engage in emotional judgement and as such benefit from ethical learning.

In “All My Pretty Ones” (1962) Sexton discusses the death of her father, which occurred just three months after her mother’s death. The image of “my drunkard, my navigator, my first lost keeper” immediately confronts the reader with the ambiguity of her feelings for her father that is played out in the development of the poem. For Paul Lacey (1989) “All My Pretty Ones” is a reflection on birthright and how to set about to “disencumber” the living child and the deceased father from erstwhile imperfections. By going through her father’s effects Sexton is effectively sorting out her feelings for him. The reference to his twenty expensive suits implies a criticism by Sexton of his excessive lifestyle, which in fact pervaded all aspects of his existence. Sexton is compiling an inventory of her father’s possessions: his twenty suits, a gold key, half owner of a woollen mill. His photographs have little meaning for Sexton, probably because as she said, she did not recognise many of the people in them. Her father had obviously never gone through these photographs with her when she was a child. Consequently they stirred no nostalgia or emotion for her:

I’ll never know what these faces are all about.
I lock them into their book and throw them out.

It is as if Sexton is reviewing the photographs as the past events of her family life to discover what emotions they stir in her. In “All My Pretty Ones” Sexton depicts ambivalent emotions of love and hate for her father:

my drunkard, my navigator,
my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.

Sexton readily acknowledges that her father drank to excess; but still he was her helmsman through the sea of life, and her custodian, albeit a lost one. It is
interesting that Sexton ascribes the possessive pronoun “my” to each definition of what her father is to her; whether she loved or hated him she acknowledges he was her father. The very last line of stanza four only serves to illustrate Sexton’s confusion over her emotions for her father. She put down the photographs: “to love or look at later.”

In the last stanza of “All My Pretty Ones” Sexton’s dilemma regarding her emotions of love and hate for her father are still unresolved. She will drink to him each Christmas but this will only serve to remind her of his immoderate drinking. Sexton tells us that frequently her father overslept on Christmas morning, because of his excessive drinking the night before. Her ambivalence towards her father is still apparent. She is aware of his faults, nevertheless, she acknowledges that he is still her father. It is as if she has to postpone judgment. She assesses her emotions towards her father. Her father’s love may be found wanting but if she postpones judgment she may yet be able to love him. This is made apparent in the lines:

The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to shelf to wait.
For the age to pass.

This view of not always feeling the same way about a person is described by Philip Fisher when he states:

[t]he angry man forgets that he has not always been angry with this person, that he will someday be beyond anger, and that there are aspects of himself forgotten by him in the vehemence of anger. (p.44)

The poem ends with Sexton’s declaration that she will forgive her father, warts and all; although in many ways she is still a stranger to him:

Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

In Oedipus Anne Diana Hume-George (1987) points out that although in the last line of “All My Pretty Ones” Sexton forgives her father, in later poems she seems to default on her absolution for him. Sexton is making a judgment here regarding her emotions for her father. Nussbaum (2001) claims that emotions are judgments;
she also claims that we can make new judgments: if we change our relationship to someone, then we can change our judgment of them. As such we change our emotions towards them, which is just what Sexton was doing with her love / hate relationship for her father. For Sexton the emotion of love finally wins out in the emotional stakes for the love / hate of her father. Even though she is aware of his shortcomings and problems she still has a strong sense of the emotion of love for him. Sexton uses her poetry to experience again the death of her father and to offer an emotional response to his life and death.

When Sexton was composing poems such as “All My Pretty Ones,” she was appraising the records of her life with her father via photographs and diaries and relating these events to memories of the past. There is no doubt that a great deal of thought processing, recall and judgement was going on in Sexton’s mind. It is not possible to recall events in such detail without utilising a reasoned and logical thought process. When writing her poetry, Sexton responded cognitively to her past and present environment. Nussbaum (2001) argues that an adult will have made judgments during childhood, and these judgments will remain with her into maturity. In “All My Pretty Ones” Sexton is recalling past events of her life with her father, processing them, evaluating them consciously and then making a judgment based on the events of her childhood.

Petra Bagley (1980) believes that a daughter is considerably affected by the death of her father, and this can provide a “textual structure” if the daughter chooses to write about the event (p.68). The prevalence of writings in Germany, during the 1970s and 1980s, that characterised dead fathers has culminated in the appellation Vaterliteratur. Keith Bullivant (1987) refers to this term as being “a new sub-genre within the orbit of the social novel” (p.222). Bullivant claims in the greater part of these writings the authors exhibit a necessity to uncover their own selfhood in addition to gaining insight into their dead fathers. Often these children are well educated and from middle class backgrounds where the fathers’ professions give them a position and status in the community. Frequently these children claim they never fully felt they had really got to know their fathers, and received little demonstrative love from them.
When writing about her father there is a tendency for Sexton to display an unfeeling and ruthless attitude. This could possibly be as an attempt to distance herself from the topic and in so doing offer a dispassionate representation of the father. Frequently in her state of mourning Sexton has a heightened awareness of her own inadequacies. She feels inadequate particularly for her perceived lack of love for her parents and their alleged lack of love for her. Her enhanced consciousness of her perceived inadequacies is no doubt brought about by the fact that she gave so much time and thought to these issues. Damasio (1995) has stated that decision making is determined by discernible somatic reactions a person makes use of. In her state of mourning Sexton was very sensitive to her bodily states which in turn would make her acutely aware of her perceived lack of the emotion of love for her father. Bullivant states, “It is evident that hate is an emotion never far from love, and it is death in the family which brings about this recognition” (p.223). Both Plath and Rich exemplified this proximity between love and hate in their relationships with their fathers and for both women it was the deaths of their fathers which prompted them to recognize their love/hate relationship.

In “Baby Picture” (1972) Sexton gives us a shocking reminiscence of her early childhood. Images such as “merely a kid keeping alive” and “I open the hair / and it falls apart like dust balls” are piled on top of each other to create an effect that supports her allegation that she was not well treated. As a young child Sexton alleges she was treated harshly, particularly by her mother. For misbehaviour she was banished to her bedroom where she would conceal herself in her cupboard. Sexton has always maintained that her conception and birth were her mother’s security plan to discourage her husband from leaving her. In “Baby Picture” Sexton assesses her childhood and how long it has been since there was any love in her life. She is smiling in the photograph, but this was taken in her seventh year and is probably nothing more than a smile of childhood innocence and ignorance. Sexton suggests the smile is determined from the external trappings – the “good-bye bow in the hair,” “the heart of the grape,” “the clerical collar of the dress” – but not from an internal happiness. This point is affirmed when Sexton writes that she is “caught here in the painted photograph.” Her picture is an artist’s painted
portrait rather than a true photographic image, or the representation of her emotional state. Again we witness substitution for the real thing. The images used in the poem imply a normalcy and happiness that was not really there. Sexton continues by describing the way in which this picture deteriorated, as did love in her life. All Sexton’s features are festering and disintegrating and “pocked with mold.” The final stanza is a grisly query about Sexton:

Anne
Who are you?
Merely a kid keeping alive.

It is as if Sexton regards her childhood as dead because there was no love and nothing keeping it alive. The description Sexton gives us of herself is nauseating, somewhat akin to when a body is exhumed for forensic purposes, or archaeologists remove the bandages from a mummy:

I open the mouth
and my teeth are an angry army.
I open the eyes
and they go sick like dogs
with what they have seen.
I open the hair
and it falls apart like dust balls.

The body has obviously aged prematurely, far beyond its chronological years. The suggestion here is that because her childhood was so unhappy and filled more with the emotion of hate than love, her features become unnaturally and untimely aged, as is implied by the description of her teeth as “an angry army” and the eyes “sick like dogs with what they have seen.” It is rather the experience of her life which has made her decay rather than the ravages of time. By using the metaphors to describe the decay of the body orifices Sexton is indicating that her childhood was rotten from the inside. The picture in the poem portrays a perfectly normal seven year old child, but in actual fact her childhood was a mockery. Yet again we witness the fakery and the substitution in Sexton’s life. She does not imply that the features in the photograph were actually hers, so detached is she from them as her own. She does not even use the possessive pronoun, when describing her features, but says rather: “the mouth,” “the eyes,” and “the hair.” Sexton may well
be doing that to distance herself from a childhood which was unhappy. For Sexton the emotion she was expressing here could well be imperative reactions to urgent prior events in her childhood. Sexton’s emotions could, on the surface, appear irrational and thoughtless, when they are in reality purposeful and often deliberate.

Undeniably “Baby Picture” is a poem filled with the vehement emotion of hate. However, the hate in the poem is perceived by the senses and this is aided by the impressive use of metaphors such as “teeth are an angry army” and similes including eyes being likened to sick dogs, and hair to dust balls. Once again Sexton is assessing and evaluating her past life and describing it with great emotion but with great accuracy showing cognition and reasoned and structured thought. And rather than these emotions simply gushing out of nowhere and seeming unintelligible, they do have cognitive content, but, the content may not be readily available and is being sought from an archaic and infantile source. In considering the underlying structure in the images Sexton uses in “Baby Picture” and how they are related to the overall coherence of the poem, it would appear that much of the imagery suggests decay and disintegration in Sexton’s life. She likens her peeling photograph to that of a vegetable pocked with mould. There is obvious anger too in this poem. Sexton identifies herself in the poem. She attributes the blame for the decay in her life to events she has witnessed and lived through. In “Baby Picture,” Sexton is in full control of her emotions and demonstrates the consciousness in her writing.

To sum up I suggest that love, hate and jealousy (through their communication via prolonged imagery) give consciousness to Sexton’s poetry. The pattern of metaphors in “The Double Image” and “The Division of Parts” shows an overall structuring in her poems. Much of the love / hate and jealousy in the poetry of Anne Sexton stemmed from her perception that she was unable to articulate these emotions. She made sense of her inability to express her emotions by reasoning that as a child she had received very little emotion from her parents and she now was incapable of enunciating her emotions. A distinctive characteristic of the sense-making in Sexton’s poetry is her unwillingness to fake these emotions.
Adrienne Rich

In much of her prose and poetry Adrienne Rich explored the ambivalent relationship between mother and daughter. In *Of Woman Born* (1976) Rich examines her changing relationship towards her mother over the years. In the foreword of Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, she writes:

All human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman’s body. Because young humans remain dependant on nurture for a much longer period than other mammals, and because of the division of labor long established in human groups, where women not only bear and suckle but are assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman. We carry the imprint of this experience for life, even into our dying. (p.11)

Rich continues this theme throughout the work:

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other — beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival — a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other. (p.220)

This “flow” between mothers and daughters is not without problems. Rich readily acknowledges that she has a strong emotional love for her mother. There are however, memories of the past which make Rich hate, not so much her mother, but what marriage and motherhood have done to her mother:

It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my own story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed. But in my landscape of hers, there would be old, smoldering patches of deep burning anger. Before her marriage, she had trained seriously for years both as a concert pianist and a composer…. Once married, she gave up the possibility of a concert career, though for some years she went on composing, and she is still a skilled and dedicated pianist. (p.221)

Rich said of her relationship with her mother, “the woman I needed to call mother was silenced long before I was born” (p.223). From the comments Rich makes
about her mother, we are made aware that this is much more than merely a silencing of her mother’s musical talents.

In discussing Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Rich claims that Woolf presents an emotional consciousness of the mother-daughter split in contemporary writing. *To the Lighthouse* is a scarce literary record in which a female writer has depicted her mother as a main character:

> Psychic osmosis desperate defense. The powers of the bond often denied because it cracks consciousness, threatens at times to lead the daughter back into those secret chambers … becoming, like water poured into one jar, inextricably the same one with the object one adored…. (p.79)

In *Of Woman Born* (1976) Rich examines Sukenick’s (1970) expression for the renunciation of our mother. She uses the term “matrophobia,” which is the fear of becoming one’s mother. Rich believes “matrophobia” to be a phenomenon of recent decades. For many daughters it is easier “to hate and reject the mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her” (p.235). And this is the case even though the mother has no power because she too is suppressed. But mothers of the past have been complacent and encouraged their daughters to be equally complacent. For Rich, the mother-daughter relationship, “the great unwritten story,” (p.225) has pivotal personal and political consequences. Rich argues that the inability to work out this Gordian knot of mother-daughter relationship has caused much disaccord amongst generations of women:

> When we can confront and unravel this paradox, this contradiction, (of having mothers but feeling unmothered) … we can begin to transmute it, and the blind anger and bitterness that have repetitiously erupted among women trying to build a movement together can be alchemized. (p. 225)

In “Sibling Mysteries” (1976) Rich examines the relationship between mothers and daughters. The women discussed are protective and caring towards each other, perhaps in the way Rich would like it to be for mothers and daughters:

> Remind me how we walked
> trying the planetary rock
> for foothold.
In these lines we are conscious that Rich is describing a change in the normal love relationship. It is the love of a woman for another woman. Luce Irigaray (1993) describes this love as being “[l]ove of same is love of differentiation from the earth-mother, the first living, dwelling place” (p.85).

Adrienne Rich ranks as one of America’s most extensively read lesbian poets. In the course of an interview with Michael Klein (1990) Rich discusses her coming out as a lesbian poet. Her reasons for her coming out were much the same as her reasons for coming out as a political poet, to stand up against the American prohibition of homosexuality. Rich’s openness about her love for women became apparent when she wrote “Twenty One Love Poems” (1976):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The rules break like a thermometer} \\
\text{Quicksilver splits across the chartered systems} \\
\text{We’re not in a country that has no language.}
\end{align*}
\]

In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1993) Rich discusses “how and why women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding” (p.23).

Alicia Ostriker (1989) argues that the above declaration by Adrienne Rich throws light on the undetermined generational tension described in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1960). The poet’s mother-in-law continues to adorn herself as the “belle in Shreveport,” whom she had at one time been, and she continues to “still have … dresses copied from that time.” No such care was being taken of her mind:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,} \\
\text{heavy with useless experience, rich} \\
\text{with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,} \\
\text{crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge} \\
\text{of mere fact. In the prime of your life.}
\end{align*}
\]

The thing which drives Rich’s poetry and structures it, is her apparent hatred of the way she has been controlled by her parents and later by her husband. There is also a hatred of herself, for allowing it to happen. Rich is aware that she is an
intelligent woman who is able to see what happens to women in the institution of marriage. Why then did she allow it to happen to her?

The speaker is expressing her hatred for the things that a woman will do to preserve her youth and beauty. She is conditioned to trying to make time stand still in order to prevent herself from changing physically. But for Rich, what arouses the passion of hate even more is that women, whilst being so attentive to holding back the physical aging process, appear to pay no heed to the deterioration of their minds. Rich attributes the mental attrition to the institution of marriage. She implies that no sooner is a woman married than her mind begins to decay; there is now only room for trivia and memories of useless experience. Rich’s vehement hatred of the effects of marriage are so intense that she uses the term “knife-edge” to describe what marriage does to a woman’s mental faculties – and all of this in the prime of her life when she should still be fulfilling herself in so many areas.

In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Rich clusters images such as; “Your mind now moldering like wedding-cake”, “the mildewed orange flowers” and “Sometimes she’s let the tapstream scald her arm” in a way that develops not only the domesticity she finds so irritating but the decayed “fruitlessness” of that domesticity. I believe one of the reasons that Rich calls the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” is to make the reader aware that she has experienced the state of being married. She could have called it merely “Snapshots of a Daughter,” but that would not have shown conclusively that the poet had in fact been married and that is the emphasis in the poem – the plight of married women and how Rich hates the way in which married women are treated. She continues her litany of the harm done to women through marriage. In the second section of the poem Rich enumerates the frustrations of the housewife and the voices which tell her to escape before it is too late and how she begins to harm herself:

*Save yourself; others you cannot save.*

Sometimes she’s let the tapstream scald her arm
a match burn to her thumbnail,

or held her hand over the kettle’s snout
right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels, since nothing hurts her anymore, except each morning’s grit blowing into her eyes.

It would seem that Rich is talking to herself in these lines. Once more the structuring behind these images of self-harm is that Rich is allowing it to occur to herself in the same way as the housewife depicted in the poem. She too permits the grit to blow into her eyes so that she is blind to the damage being done to her. Grit clogs and damages machinery in just the same way as it gets into the eyes and impairs vision. Metaphors such as the “kettle’s snout” and “the woolly steam” are the way in which Rich is structures the imagery. Is Rich perhaps, comparing women to dumb animals, who know no better, perhaps suggesting that women just like sheep follow other women blindly and inflict harm upon themselves? In her imagery Rich demonstrates the ways in which women abuse themselves within marriage because their lives are not fulfilled. Rich believes that many housewives have immense potential, but must realise it, and assert themselves before it is too late. One of the best ways Rich can approach these women is through her poetry, in which she draws the reader, especially the female reader, into her writing in a very intimate way. Nussbaum (2001) is equally aware of the power of poetry. She maintains that some areas of existence are best articulated through poetry because it can awaken our empathy, which is exactly what Rich is doing in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.” “The Applicant” alerts women to the pitfalls of marriage and the way women are expected to provide all manner of remedies for their husbands. In this poem Plath may well have drawn from the nursery rhyme “Soldier, Soldier Won’t You Marry Me?” in which a young girl was deceived. There too, in the nursery rhyme the woman provided the husband-to-be with all he needed for the wedding ceremony. He then confessed to having a wife and child already.

Rich’s concern is not only for abuse of a woman’s mind but also for the physical abuse of her body:

the mildewed orange flowers,
the female pills, the terrible breasts
of Boadicea beneath flat foxes’ heads and orchids.
In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Rich manifests a series of perceptions demonstrating the adverse effects marriage has on women. She does this by the imagery she uses, for example: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her she becomes.” If a woman chooses to live in the state of marriage then she will become what she has married, that is, an otherwise intelligent woman will become a lesser being. A married woman gives up her independence in favour of her husband’s wishes. She is no longer an autonomous woman but metamorphoses into an appendage of her husband. “Reading while waiting / for the iron to heat,” A married woman finds herself with precious little time to do all the things she was previously able to do and has to snatch time between her daily mundane chores; her life and time are no longer her own:

…And Nature,
that sprung-lidded, still commodious
steamer-trunk of *tempora* and *mores*
gets stuffed with it all:

For many women this is the expectation of marriage. The capitalisation of “Nature” suggests that marriage is the physical power causing the events in a married woman’s life. Rich is suggesting how quickly this process of deterioration happens to a woman, both physically and mentally, within marriage. No sooner have the wedding blossoms faded than the woman’s body begins to lose its bloom, as a result of marriage and childbirth. Rich is putting forward a reasoned and conscious argument to support her position that women, on the whole, do not fare too well in the state of matrimony. Rich, via the use of her images, reveals a number of realisations of the physical effects that marriage has on a woman’s body. The body fades in much the same way as do the flowers. Undoubtedly time would do this to a woman married or otherwise, but Rich is emphasising that there is a heightened decay in a woman’s body if she is married, due in no small degree to the rigours of childbirth. This is the way that Rich perceives the state of marriage for women, her body and her mind are no longer her own and they both deteriorate exponentially.

Prinz (2004) too, claims that emotion is a type of perception which makes known the way in which particular conditions affect our welfare. The hatred for what
men and marriage have done to women does not preclude Rich from using intelligent and scholarly references. However the chances of women retaining their intellectual pursuits once married are considerably lessened. She refers to a particular prelude by Chopin and mentions the historical character Boadicea, a woman who went into battle over the loss of her daughters’ honour and the loss of her land at the hands of Nero. Liz Yorke believes that Rich is considering the many “silenced” women in history and mythology, who because of their gender were never given full recognition – women such as Boadicea, de Beauvoir, Dickinson and Wollstonecraft – and invoking “The Furies.”

Silence is a word frequently used by Rich. In Lies Secrets and Silence (1979) Rich argues: “The entire history of women’s struggle for self determination has been muffled in silence over and over” (p.11). Rich also claims that over the past forty years women have been talking together much more; discussing secrets and have broken down taboos and shattered silences. In The Fact of a Doorframe (1984) Rich further expresses her concern for women who have been silenced:

In writing poetry I have known both keen happiness and the worst fear – that the walls cannot be broken down, that these words will fail to enter another soul. Over the years it has seemed to me just that – the desire to be heard, to resound in another’s soul – that is the impulse behind writing poems, for me. Increasingly this has meant hearing and listening to others, taking into myself the language of experience different from my own – whether in written words, or the rush and ebb of broken but stubborn conversations. I have been changed, my poems have changed, through this process, and it continues. (pp.xv-xvi)

Rich’s desire to “resound in another’s soul that is the impulse behind writing poems, for me” expresses her wish to show her empathy for those people in society who are marginalised because of their colour, gender, sexual preference, socio-economic status or whatever. She wants her poems to be heard and to have an effect on people, particularly on women, in order to encourage them to change. This is an emotional empathy for others. She is advocating change for disadvantaged groups in society, and as such her empathy is a power which fully comprehends the plight of others. It can be argued that her empathy has a cognitive element. As Yorke claims, Rich encourages women to forsake their
silence and to listen – not only to the voices of other women but also to their own voices. Rich also uses the word “impulses” – they are what impel her to write poetry. On the whole much of Rich’s motivation is to bring about change in the lives of her readers. This is similar to what Rich expresses in “Planetarium” (1968) when she talks about “pulsations.” She says:

I have been standing all my life in the
direct path of a battery of signals
the most accurately transmitted most
untranslatable language in the universe

I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” addresses the concern Rich has about the daughter-in-law agreeing with the mother “completely,” making it impossible for the daughter to become her own person. Rich writes:

I struggle to describe what it felt like to be her daughter, but I find myself divided, slipping under her skin; a part of me identifies too much with her. (Of Woman Born p.223-4)

Alicia Ostriker (1989) believes that “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” tackles this concern in the initial stages of the poem. Even though trying to differentiate herself from her mother, Rich is in truth her mother’s mirror image (p.38). Again Rich is expressing self-hatred for allowing herself to be controlled by her mother and the realisation that to some extent she is powerless, she is under her mother’s skin and is too close for her own good. A similar figure of speech was used by Anne Sexton when describing her relationship with her mother. The following lines from “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” characterises the mother-daughter relationship as being mutually detrimental:

Two handsome women, gripped in argument,
each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
across the cut glass and majolica
like Furies cornered from their prey:
The argument *ad feminam*, all the old knives
that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,
*ma semblable, ma soeur!*

Once more Rich is expressing her hatred for what marriage has done to the two
generations of women. Rich even itemizes some of the trappings which ensnare
women into marriage and makes it an attractive proposition: the “cut glass and
majolica.” Rich has structured the poem to demonstrate women’s treacherous
tendencies and the fact that they can be procured with material gain. Such is the
state women are reduced to once married.

In stanza four Rich portrays how the two generations of married women view
marriage as a life in which their future aspirations had to be fitted around their
domestic chores:

> Reading while waiting
> for the iron to heat,
> writing, *My life had stood – a Loaded Gun* –
> in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum.

Rich uses imagery here to make a comparison between her domestic duties and
the more intellectual activities she would rather be pursuing. It is the fact that her
love of reading and writing has to take second place to her domestic chores that is
structuring the images. The performance of these duties when she would rather be
doing other things makes her become resentful and do things in an automatic way:

> iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
> dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.

It is in the structuring of these images that we are able to see the shaping spirit of
the poem. The wife’s duties are performed relentlessly and thoroughly, but
without feeling or emotion, which is in stark contrast to the strong emotion of hate
demonstrated in these lines. Rich is also highly critical of the lengths that women
are prepared to go to keep their bodies in an acceptable state of beauty in order to
please men:

> *Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,*
> she shaves her legs until they gleam
Rich refers to the tusk of a mammoth rather than that, say, of an elephant to suggest that the beautification of women by shaving their legs, rather than being a modern beauty treatment, is, on the contrary, a return to prehistoric times, and a time of heightened female subservience to males. The use of the word “petrified” if used in the colloquial sense also implies women’s fear of men. Stanza six continues this theme:

When to her lute Corinna sings
neither words or music are her own;
only the long hair dipping
over her cheek, only the song
of silk against her knees
and these
adjusted in reflections of an eye.

Yorke (1997) comments that Rich highlights the fact that even a woman of famed genius such as Corinna does not sing her own song, nor does she speak or dress to please herself, but to please men. She adjusts her entire way of life to make him happy. The only sound that is her own is the brushing of the silk against her knees, but even this, if it deemed to be inappropriate, in the eye of the male, is quickly rearranged. It is love which has ensnared so many women and it is this controlling love which Rich hates so vehemently:

Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before
an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
tell us, you bird, you tragical machine –
in this fertilisante douleur? Pinned down
by love, for you the only natural action,
are you edged more keen
to prise the secrets of the vault?

It is not the most conventional place which imprisons women in marriage, with the obvious locks and keys, but the ultimate prison with an unlocked door. From this unlocked door, the woman is unable to leave, because of love. The strong emotion is most evident, but Rich verbalises this emotion with scholarly and cerebral writing. She makes her point quite clearly, never sacrificing reasoned logic and sound use of metaphor and analogy. Just as love is what keeps women
in the unlocked cages, so it is the same love which keeps her “pinned down,” with a weight as heavy as any physical object. It is a weight similar to “[t]he massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band,” in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Rich is using love to express the emotion of hate as it is depicted in the marital state. Imagery in opposition is being used in the above lines. The speaker in the poem is both free and yet at the same time confined. She is physically as free as a bird, yet restrained, because she is a woman she is privy to the “secrets of the vault,” yet it is these very secrets of domesticity which restrict her freedom and have entrapped her.

As if to add insult to injury, the last line of stanza six refers to the household books – cookery books and the like – reserved only for the daughter-in-law. Rich expresses her abhorrence that this should be seen as a privilege for women:

    has Nature shown
    her household tools to you, daughter-in-law,
    that her sons never saw?

The next stanza portrays the fate of a woman who is not content with the conventional lot of women. She is seen by men as an abomination of womanhood:

    a woman, partly brave and partly good,
    who fought with what she partly understood.
    Few men about her would or could do more,
    Hence she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore

The above lines refer to Wollstonecraft, a woman of renowned genius. If a woman such as her was jeered at, how will the rest of women fare who chose to make a stand?

    “You all die at fifteen,” said Diderot,
    and turn part legend, part convention.
    Still, eyes inaccurately dream
    behind closed windows blankening with steam.
    Deliciously, all that we might have been,
    all that we were – fire, tears,
    wit taste, martyred ambition –
    stirs like the memory of refused adultery
    the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.
It is the inconsistency in the set of images that binds them together, and makes the point regarding the self-contradictory status of a woman within marriage. Rich quotes the French philosopher Denis Diderot to support a woman’s newly-found status, or lack of status in the case of a woman married prematurely. She is part heroine and part conformist. The poet continues: “Still, eyes inaccurately dream / behind closed windows blankening with steam. The word “still” probably implies that even after marriage women still dream. Rich is emphasising the glaring discrepancy between the vital lifestyle of women before they marry and the languishing of middle age within marriage. There is also an emphasis on the glaring comparison of a woman who, before marriage is vibrant and has so much potential, this vibrancy and potential, all dies once she is married. She becomes depleted with only the memories of what could have been.

Even though the possibilities for, and aspirations of women, are seriously curtailed within many conventional marriages, women still dream of what could have been. Rich expresses her vehement hate of this appalling waste of female potential, but by articulating it in logical sequence she is showing a deductive train of thought. Rich itemizes all the things which befall women after their emotional death at fifteen.

On becoming a married woman, a woman dies to all that she could have become in her life and the possibility of becoming a heroine is lost and the legend has to conform, “and turn part legend, part convention.” All that is left are the mundane wifely duties. All the natural attributes of woman – her passions, anger, humour – are still there. “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” could well contain certain personal reminiscences and expressions of Rich’s own emotions in her marriage. These emotions link particular historical events in Rich’s life. Much the same claim is made by Nussbaum (2001) when she says that the evaluative judgments inferable in emotions actually link to societal, verifiable and personal life occurrences (p.67). Damasio (2004) too claims that emotions allow us the mind and the brain to evaluate our surroundings and behave appropriately. Frequently we evaluate consciously the things which give rise to the emotion (p.14). And so
Rich’s emotion actually helped her to evaluate the events of her life and express herself intelligently.

Rich does not allow her hate to rage rampantly. The opening words of the lines “Sigh no more ladies,” are quite controlled and reasoned. She could have continued: “men were deceivers ever” etcetera. What Rich is doing in a very collected way is describing the ways in which marriage has, to a large extent, duped women and Rich too is a deceived woman. Again Rich is not targeting her hatred at men at but how their accepted role in marriage has made them treat women:

Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mold straight off.

“Time is male.” These words could possibly refer to Father Time, which would fit in with the maleness theme. It could also imply that it is men who control destiny and as such have time on their side. There is a real sense of hate expressed in these lines by Rich – a hatred for the patriarchy in the guise of love, expressed by men towards women. The examples of the way in which men do this are: over-praising women’s slightest achievements and readily forgiving their laziness and slovenliness and other shortcomings. However in order to show her disdain of the male Rich uses the phrase “[b]emused by gallantry” to imply that she and other women have allowed men to beguile them. All of these things are said while he is “in his cups”. The implication is that women will be loved, accepted and cared for just so long as they do not step outside the framework of their allotted role. Women must not “cast too bold a shadow.” Rich may well be suggesting that by doing so it could be perceived that women are actually “overshadowing” men and thus “putting them in the shade.” For such serious infractions the gallant knight can be very brutal:
For that, solitary confinement,
tear gas, attrition shelling.
Few applicants for that honor.

It is in these three lines that Rich’s hate is heightened. She is suggesting that in a man’s eyes a woman getting above her station – what he perceives as trying to “outdo him” – is deserving of punishments usually associated with wartime outrages. Rich is totally at a loss as to why women would choose to subject themselves to such treatment. The choice of the word applicant is reminiscent of Sylvia Plath’s poem “The Applicant.” Plath too was describing the requirements needed by a woman for the “position” of marriage.

The final stanza of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” expresses frustrations with the long overdue awakening of women seeking their rightful place in society:

Well,
she’s long about her coming, who must be more merciful to herself than history.
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge breasted and glancing through the currents, taking the light upon her at least as beautiful as any boy or helicopter,
    poised, still coming,
her fine blades making the air wince

but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered palpable ours.

Rich is advocating that women must treat themselves better. History has been less than kind, even to women of genius and note, but women must go forward and claim what is rightfully theirs. She is likening women’s progress and awakening in society to ships and helicopters, possibly because transport of all kinds has always taken the female pronoun. There is even a reference to the figurehead of a ship, which often, in days gone by, was adorned by the head and upper body of a woman. The images used in these lines structure Rich’s belief of what women can achieve by forcibly imposing themselves on society. Many of the images in these
lines are female related. Lines one, two, three, five, nine and ten all contain the pronoun “her.” It is these particular sorts of female related images which structure this poem and emphasise the importance of women in history. We can see the coherence between the lines which Rich has written. She is making a very clear and coherent point that women still have a long way to go to claim their rightful place in history. It is here we witness the way in which Rich is likening women to modes of transport with strength and dexterity; for example a helicopter can fly vertically and horizontally. Women too have this flexibility, but their recognition of this is noticeably absent throughout history. The first-class minds of women could astound the world if they would but realise their true potential.

There is a further similarity between the poetry of Adrienne Rich and that of Sylvia Plath. As with Plath, many of Rich’s poems rail against women’s domestic servitude, but there is much referencing of their adversarial paternal relationships. For Rich the only way she can survive her father’s tyranny is that she must eventually question his controlling and restrictive authority: “What happens when survival seems to mean closing off one emotional artery after another?” (Blood Bread and Poetry p.114) Here Rich is equating the necessity of closing off an artery in order to stem the flow of excessive bleeding to prevent someone from dying, to that of closing off the emotions which she feels for her father. The poet believes this has to be done to stem the flow of her love. If she continues to accept what she perceives as her father’s tyranny, there will in time be no love left and so she must close off one emotional artery after the other – which may well have the same effect. The strategic thinking is so intense that Rich has no option but to “[o]verthrow the father, take what he taught her and use it against him” (Your Native Land, Your Life p.9).

Yorke is of the opinion that Rich recognises her father as the source of her long-standing emotional attachment to her notion of patriarchy. In doing so Rich revises her political stance:

After your death I met you again as the face of patriarchy, could name at last the principles you embodied, there was an ideology at last which let me dispose of you, identify the suffering you caused, hate you righteously as part of a system, the kingdom of the father. I saw the power and the
arrogance of the male as your true watermark; I did not see beneath it the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore, because you had deliberately arranged that it should be invisible to me. (Your Native Land, Your Life p.9)

There is ambivalence in these lines. Initially Rich is quite self-righteously identifying, as with a watermark, a trait her father was born with, all the reasons why she hated her father, and justifying the reasons she believed she had a right to do so. In the last line of this paragraph however, we witness the chink in her armour; her doubts are verbalised. Her father, on account of his Jewishness, has suffered deprivation. On one occasion he was passed over for a promotion at his university because of his religion. But he had never burdened his daughter with this, deliberately preferring to protect her from his suffering. It is in this we witness her empathy with and her love for her father.

In “After Dark,” published in 1964, Rich is attempting to resolve her equivocal relationship with her father – his affectionate authoritarianism and her obstinate love. The imagery Rich uses in “After Dark” of the phonograph needle which consistently played “I know you better / than you know yourself” and “Alive now root to crown, I’d give / oh — something — not to know / our struggles now are ended” present, through their development an organised structure which implies the emotions of love, hate and jealousy.

You are falling asleep and I sit looking at you
old tree of life
old man whose death I wanted
I can’t stir you up now.

“After Dark” delineates one of the main issues which gave rise to Rich’s emotion of hatred for her father – his perception that he knew her better than she knew herself. This issue continued even after Rich had had her poetry published. A further source of Rich’s exasperation with her father was the number of times he repeated his view:

Faintly a phonograph needle
whirs round in the last groove
eating my heart to dust.
That terrible record! how it played
down years, wherever I was
in foreign languages even
over and over, *I know you better*
*than you know yourself*  
*I know you better than you know yourself*
*f I know you*
until, self-maimed,
I limped off, torn at the roots.

This was a veritable thorn in the side for Rich. Not only was the phrase said by her father frequently but continuously “down years.” Rich likens her father’s repeated comments on her abilities to that of the annoyance of a phonograph needle which has become stuck in the last groove. This process of attrition finally wears Rich out. She staggers off, pulled apart. The effect on Rich was profound; so deep did the hurt go that she was incapacitated and rendered lame. Why does Rich say self-maimed? Up until now she is blaming her father for the hurt done to her by his constant and continuous criticism. Is she implying that eventually his persistence won and she began to doubt herself and her self-efficacy? The effect was long lasting and perhaps even final, as is suggested by her having been “torn at the roots,” perhaps never to recover:

stopped singing a whole year,
got a new body, new breath,
got children, croaked for words,
forgot to listen

Even years later, Rich’s hatred of her father’s paternal control was still with her. The next verse is painfully sharp to the emotions. Strong though the emotion of hatred is for Rich because of her father’s controlling authoritarianism, she is even now acutely aware that she is still his daughter, and blood is thicker than water, whether this be a curse or a blessing:

woke up one morning
and knew myself your daughter.
Blood is a sacred poison.
Rich is describing the life-giving force of blood, but also how familial blood can be toxic. She has written in *Blood Bread and Poetry* (1986) of what she regards as the necessities of life we need to sustain us. Even here there is ambivalence: on the one hand Rich admits to the sanctity of the father / daughter relationship. On the other hand she regards it as a relationship that is envenomated. Blood relatives can be both a benediction and a curse.

The emotion of hate has given way to the emotion of love, and this is even more discernible in the next stanza. Here the poignancy is explicit:

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Now, unasked, you give ground.
We only want to stifle
what’s stifling us already.
Alive now, root to crown, I’d give

−oh, − something − not to know
our struggles now are ended.
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Rich’s father is now only too ready to concede defeat, and that in itself makes Rich acutely aware that his strength and life are drawing to a close. He is no longer capable or desirous of holding back his daughter and so she has nothing left to fight him over. Rich realises the struggle is over and she is victorious, but she derives no pleasure from this hollow victory. There is nothing she would not give to be able to reverse this realisation that it is over. Her father’s frailty is becoming increasingly more apparent:

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I seem to hold you, cupped
in my hands, and disappearing.
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His time is running out as the sands of time run through cupped hands.

The images of the emotions of love and hate in these lines are most eloquent, quite the antithesis of an unrefined outburst of illogical rage. The use of intellectual verse and metaphors: “sacred poison,” “cupped in my hands” is verification of the clear, coherent and cerebral thought involved in the emotional writings of the poetry. In the above lines Rich makes use of metaphors as blood as a sacred poison and wanting to hold onto her father’s ebbing life, “cupped / in my
hands and disappearing.” It is the contrasting of these blessings and curses that structures the images of consanguinity, makes them coherent and shapes them. Nussbaum has claimed that it is possible for the emotions of love and jealousy to co-exist. I believe it is equally feasible for the emotions of love and hate to co-exist, as portrayed in “After Dark.”

The next section of the poem brings Rich’s world tumbling down:

When your memory fails –
no more to scourge my inconsistencies –
the sashcords of the world fly loose.
A window crashes

suddenly down. I go to the woodbox
and take a stick of kindling
to prop the sash again.
I grow protective toward the world.

Although Rich hated her father’s insistence that he had superior knowledge of her ability and his constant criticism of her, she is completely at a loss, when the fault-finding comes to an end. She wishes she could prop up the father’s flagging health, just as one would brace up the sash weights of a window. Rich’s use of metaphors in these lines is structured by the familiarities of her life to date. Her father’s criticisms have been the domestic routine of her life hitherto: the type of window frames they had and where the wood box is stored. Rich’s father has been part of this so far, but he is no longer able to sustain his presence. Now she must take on the role:

to prop the sash again.
I grow protective toward the world.

In observing the structure in Rich’s thought pattern we are able to observe clearly her perception of these recalled events, thus distinguishing them from raw emotion.

In the second section of “After Dark,” the co-existence of the opposing emotions of love and hate is continued:
I used to huddle in the grave
I’d dig for you and bite
my tongue for fear it would babble
--------Darling--------

Having actually dug the grave suggests an eagerness to have the father dead, but if
so, why did Rich need to bite her tongue to prevent her from incoherently
murmuring “Darling?” On the one hand Rich wishes her father dead, but on the
other hand she longs to tell him just how much she loves him.

The next few lines are complex. Rich is saying that when her father dies she too
will die in some sense:

I thought they’d find me there
someday, sitting upright, shrunken,

my hair like roots and in my lap
a mess of broken pottery −
wasted libation −
and you embalmed beside me.

There is such a wealth of meaning in these lines. Rich uses a number of similes
and metaphors. In the simile she likens her hair to “roots and in my lap,”
suggesting a serious and permanent hair-loss. This is not the first occasion in
which Rich has used the word roots. Earlier in this poem she described the effect
her father’s continued criticism had on her (“I limped off torn at the roots”) and
when her father is dying and has conceded defeat, she wishes to reverse the
situation. Now in her most astute state of mind she says: “Alive now, root to
crown.”

The line, “and you embalmed beside me,” is thought-provoking. Why is Rich a
disintegrating shrunken corpse, whereas her father is perfectly preserved −
“embalmed beside me,” and a god on top of everything? Do these lines in actual
fact indicate a reversal of what Rich has said and thought before? Perhaps he was
right all along. The constant chiding was perhaps in her best interest. The
consideration Rich is giving to these is almost tangible. The thoughts are
organised and sequential and the lines in the poem suggest that after all this
thought Rich came to a decision. It is she herself who is fragmented; her hair is actually falling out. By using the images to suggest something that is broken or a person who is reduced to despair Rich shows a structuring in her poetry and makes evident the intelligent perception. The emotion in the poetry of Rich is working in a structured way. She is using the imagery of love, hate and jealousy as a shaping emotion in her poetry. Here I am using this structuring to open up a different way of reading her later poetry and offer an original method of assessing her poetry.

The phrase “wasted libation” suggests that the pouring out of a drink offering to a god is wasted because it has been offered too late now that her father is so close to death. But there is also an indication of just how high in her esteem she holds her father, and how much she loves him—so much that she even compares him to a god. It is almost as if now that her father is dying and no longer a “scourge to my inconsistencies,” she is able to accept his advice and sagacity:

I’ll sit with you there and tease you for wisdom, if you like, waiting till the blunt barge

bumps along the shore.

Rich is no doubt referring to the ceremonial death barge which will soon come along to transport her father to the “other side.”

The last two stanzas imply a calming effect now that Arnold Rich’s death is so close:

Poppies burn in the twilight like smudge pots.
I think you hardly see me

but – this is the dream now –
your fears blow out,
off, over the water.
At the last, your hand feels steady.

Perhaps the poppies with their narcotic properties, inducing calmness, indicate the healing of the rift between the father and daughter. All fears appear dissipated and
now at last Rich can accept her father’s guiding hand for what it is rather than a controlling one. Rich is implying that she is no longer the focal point of her father’s life, he is about to leave her. He is becoming vague and disoriented as his new dream of dying and preparing for the next journey takes over and preoccupies his mind. I think it is worth noting that Rich does not say “At last, your hands feel steady” but rather, “At the last,” which implies she might well be using the word last to refer to a shoemaker’s model for shaping or repairing footwear. In this case Rich knows she will still be influenced and shaped by her father and she is content with this. The rebelliousness is laid to rest along with her father. The shaping and influencing enables us to see Rich’s structured train of thought. She has analysed her father’s control during her formative years and has come to the decision that it was a loving control rather than a hateful dominating one. It is also possible to interpret the “smudge pots,” the containers holding burning material which produces a smudge, as a cure for her rebelliousness. Smudge pots are frequently used to cure herrings. The imagery used by Rich in the above lines are related in that they all refer to the calming effect the death of her father has had upon him, but also the effect it has had upon Rich. The narcotic properties of the poppies have had a tranquillising effect. The fear is now blown out and across the water. The elements of fire, wind and water serve to organise the images and bind them together. Through the expression of love, hate and jealousy in her poetry Rich is able to make sense of the events of her life.

Although there is a degree of love, hate and jealousy in evidence at the personal level in her poetry, much of Rich’s expression of these emotions is on behalf of other women. A great deal of her hatred of patriarchy stems from the controlling influence that men have exercised over women throughout history. At a personal level Rich believed her father controlled much of her early writing career prior to his death. More especially however Rich’s hatred centres on the controlling “love” of men which has ensnared so many women, particularly once married. Rich attempts to make sense of this patriarchal control which is articulated by her in poems for example: “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” and “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.” Rich’s concern is the patriarchal control under the guise of love. Rich’s
emotions were expressed largely on behalf of others, which differentiates much of her poetry from the poetry of Plath and Sexton.

**Conclusion**

This chapter, through its examination of the emotions of love, hate and jealousy in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich, has argued that the emotions displayed in their poems manifest cognitive dimension and are inherently perceptive and frequently evaluative. Plath, Sexton and Rich experience love, hate and jealousy in different ways and try to resolve these emotions using distinct approaches and techniques. When Plath’s love for Hughes turned to hate and jealousy she blamed the people who had brought this about, namely her husband and Assia Wevill. Sexton on the other hand assigned much of the blame for her mother’s death to herself. Rich neither ascribed blame to herself nor to her husband, Conrad, when their marriage ended, but regarded it rather as a case where two people had changed and their love was no longer alive. For Rich this was not replaced by hatred. There are similarities however, in the love/hate relationship Plath, Sexton and Rich experienced with their parents. Plath had difficulty experiencing love for her mother because she believed Aurelia did not love the father enough. The negative perception Sexton had of her mother also rendered her unable to love her mother in the way she believed she should. As for Rich, she had an ambivalent relationship with her father because she believed he exercised an excessive patriarchal control over her life and work. However for all three poets the cerebral component of their emotions is of paramount importance.
CHAPTER FIVE: GRIEF AND GUILT

This chapter will examine grief and guilt in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. It will further demonstrate the way in which these emotions make sense of happenings in the poets’ lives and how they act as a cognitive moulding agent from which the poems obtain their intelligence and meaning. In *The Vehement Passions* Fisher (2002) examines grief and guilt based on feelings of culpability and argues that these emotions are effective reactions to the loss or death of a loved one. According to Fisher:

A feeling of responsibility for the death or at least a guilt at not having prevented it, hovers over every loss almost as a misunderstanding of death itself, or as a refusal of the passivity built into losses that happen to us, a refusal so urgent that it would prefer to imagine the self responsible if that would make it seem less passive. (p.209)

Plath, Sexton and Rich all experienced the emotions of grief and guilt over the deaths of members of their families and as a result of difficult relationships with loved ones. These three women articulated their grief and guilt differently. Plath wanted to move on from her emotions caused by the death of her father and expedite her guilt, but as “Electra on Azalea Path” makes clear this did not eventuate. Sexton on the other hand readily accepts blame for her inability to experience, or to express grief over the deaths of her parents. Rich however, not only expresses her grief and guilt owing to the ambivalent relationship with her father, but also expressed her grief and guilt on a political level for the suffering of innocent people as a result of America’s wartime involvement and her grief and guilt by association as an American citizen.

**Sylvia Plath**

A claim can be made that Sylvia Plath had a long-lasting affair with the emotions of grief and guilt over the death of her father, Otto Plath. Steven Gould Axelrod (1991) tells us that in the course of her studies Plath had familiarized herself with the works of James Frazer (1922) and Sigmund Freud (1964), enabling her to
write poetry which incorporated mythic and psychoanalytic dimensions. Plath made sense of all the emotions of grief and guilt in her poetry by drawing on her knowledge of studies of the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements. In “The Colossus” (1959) and “Daddy” (1962) we witness the way Plath analysed her ambivalent filial love-hatred of her father. To reiterate the words of Axelrod, “these poems enacted grief in such a devastating fashion that one wonders how the reader, much less the author, can survive them” (p.257).

Axelrod further claims that the effect of the father’s death on Plath was both far-reaching and long-lasting. Her poetry reiterates her grief and guilt throughout her life and career. In *The Colossus* (1962), the title poem expands on Plath’s emotions over her father’s death by using the metaphor of a decaying statue. He controls an island on which the daughter is abandoned. For Axelrod, “The Colossus” is reminiscent of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, the tragic trilogy about the effects of the murder of the father by the mother. The poem is set on an island where the daughter deals with her ambivalent memories of her departed father. It is infused with a sense of consuming loss. There is, too, a sense of guilt pervading the poem. The writer is concerned she will never be able to “put together entirely” the statue. In much the same way she will never be able to prevail over her guilt or overcome her grief. The impossibility of her task is given emphasis by Plath making a vague reference to the nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty” where all the king’s horses and all the king’s men were unable to put Humpty together again.

Anyone who has read Plath’s poetry will attest to her principal preoccupation with her father, his life, and in particular his death, which would emerge as the critical centre of her life. Edward Butscher (1996) describes Plath’s obsession as “Freud’s pivotal father figure, an icon and divinity as Totem and demon, and as ultimate modern monster, Nazi panzer man” (p.85).

Guilt is not an uncommon emotion associated with the death of a family member. Petra Bagley (1980) claims that during the time that a person is grieving, both negative and positive aspects of a relationship are magnified and if the relationship was ambivalent to start with, the person grieving will home in on the negative aspects of the relationship. Plath, Sexton and Rich all had ambivalent
relationships with their fathers which no doubt heightened the negative aspects of these relationships. To compound these emotions of guilt and grief, if the bereaved was not present at the time of death, the emotions are accentuated. Plath’s predicament in coming to terms with the death of her father was heightened by her not having been allowed to view the body of her father or attend his funeral. The fact that Plath was a child at the time of her father’s death and her mother did not permit Plath to attend the funeral may have contributed to her difficulty coming to terms with her grief and guilt. Both Sexton and Rich on the other hand, as adults, would have attended the funerals of their fathers. “Daddy” (1962) is, amongst other things, a poem about Plath’s grief for her father and an attempt to resurrect him in her emotions, and then kill him a second time. Perhaps she thought that by being involved – figuratively – in his death, through her poetry she could achieve closure for his death and by so doing move on from her grief and guilt and in this way use her poetry in a sense-making way. If Plath was suffering from melancholia, moving on was never going to be an easy option for her. Freud has described melancholia as a result of never having grieved sufficiently for a major loss.

The images of the “panzer-man” and “no less a devil” set up a kind of extreme condition of evil authoritarianism in “Daddy”. Although it is not hard to empathise with Plath’s grief and guilt, it is extremely difficult to imagine that anyone could compare filial grief with the enormity of the outrages of the Holocaust, but that is what Plath did in “Daddy.” It is the extent of the comparison that caused concern amongst critics. Charles Molesworth (1979) contends that it would take a consummate egoist to equate their personal suffering to that of the atrocities of the Holocaust: “so great is the pain borne by the poet’s exacerbated sensibility that only the approbation of the greatest crimes against humanity will serve as adequate counters for it” (p.115). Molesworth also contends that the constant rhyming and repetition of the “ou” sound in “Daddy” tend to imitate the daughter’s emotions of grief and guilt:

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledydygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You.

The childlike insistence on simple rhyme is further heightened by the last two words in this stanza: “O You.” Once again Plath uses the expression of childlike frustration, when the words to express an emotion are not available. And yet the construction of these lines is very controlled. At no stage does Plath state outright that her father was the devil incarnate, but she does make several subtle references suggesting just that. She likens him to Hitler, with the moustache and the Aryan colouring, without explicitly stating he was like Hitler. In the next lines Plath makes the comparison between her father, the teacher and the black devil of a man:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.

Taking the same tack Peter Sacks (1985) argues that poems such as “Daddy” are concerned largely with grief, and reiterate Freud’s theory of the “fort da” preoccupation. Plath uses comparative imagery to liken her father the teacher, to the devil. Outwardly he is a respectable man of pleasant appearance, but nevertheless an evil man.

When Plath introduced “Daddy” on the BBC’s Third Programme, she claimed the persona in “Daddy” was a girl with an Electra complex, who had regarded her father as a god. Ronald Hayman (1992) suggests this godlike father was also a Nazi and his wife in some degree Jewish. The daughter, the result of this marriage, is unable to disentangle herself from this symbolism, other than by acting it out. For Hayman the smokescreen is not convincing. He believes “Daddy,” written just two weeks before Plath’s thirtieth birthday, is an attempt to control her grief and guilt in her relationship with her father and continue on with her life. She has assessed her relationship with her father and, having itemised her
areas of concern, she hopes to bring her emotions under control: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.”

Such structured consciousness in “Daddy” is most obvious. In the opinion of Allan Alvarez (1966) Plath has analytical control of her emotions:

> It seems to me that it was only by her determination to both face her most inward and terrifying experiences and to use her intelligence in doing so – so as not to be overwhelmed by them, that she managed to write these extraordinary last poems, which are at once deeply autobiographical and yet detached, generally relevant. (p.68)

It is here that we see the structure emerging in demonstrating Plath’s emotions of grief and guilt in “Daddy.” She assesses her emotions logically – her love, her sense of betrayal and finally, her hatred for her father – and also the reasons behind these emotions. There was a logical itemising and sequencing of Plath’s desire to be free of her grief and guilt over the death of her father. She had, throughout her life been scared of him: “I have always been scared of you.” Yet he was the one whom she had, as a child, loved, respected and even adored, as the parent who taught her the Latin names of plants: “[y]ou stand at the blackboard, daddy.” Yet all of this was to no avail, because he was really the devil in disguise, deceiving and finally destroying her. It was he who “[b]it my pretty red heart in two.” It is this structuring of her emotions and the itemising of the images of betrayal and deceit that gives a shaping spirit to these images and permits us to see the cognition at work in this poem. This viewpoint is shared by Marjorie Perloff (1986). She believes poems such as “Daddy” are “not uninformed cries from the heart” (p.105). Plath dealt with her experiences by inventing characters to deal with their own experiences. Perloff continues by arguing that “Daddy” is an exceptionally restrained poem, largely because Plath utilises:

> her immense technical control to manipulate the tone, the rhythm, the rhymes, the pace of the speaker’s language in order to reveal truths about the speaker that their obsessive assertions deny. (p.105)
Damasio (2003) too maintains that our experiences are built from “[f]eelings of myriad emotional and related states, the continual musical line of our minds, the unstoppable humming of the most universal of melodies” (p.35). All of these emotional states were currently active in Plath’s mind; she simply expressed them in her poetry. “Daddy” can in many ways be interpreted not just as a representation of events by the poet, but as a moment of living in itself, as a kind of locutionary speech act. In this poem Plath is cognitively processing her emotions and finally arriving at a resolution. This was true also for Sexton and Rich; their poems exemplified the emotions functioning in their consciousness.

In “Electra on Azalea Path”, Plath uses imagery to suggest a grief and guilt stricken daughter. Images such as; “O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at your gate”, “It was my love that did us both to death” and “With the O-gape of complete despair I live here”. Plath makes clear the way in which the images are developed so as to give a sequential, logical and well developed structure to the emotions of grief and guilt in this poem. “Electra on Azalea Path” (1959) is a further endeavour by Plath to come to terms with her emotions for her father and the effect of his death upon her life. It is as if Plath has finally awoken to the reality of her father’s death after some twenty years. He was lost to her both physically and metaphorically. Now however she has found the place where his corporal remains lie. The word “[enlisted]” suggests he is secured in this place. This is further emphasised by the fact that the grave is even more fortified by “an iron fence.”

The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill.
I found your name; I found your bones and all
Enlisted in a cramped stone askew by an iron fence.

In the earlier lines of this poem Plath describes her life as innocent:

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence
I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.
Nobody died or withered on that stage.
Everything took place in a durable whiteness.
Until she woke on Churchyard Hill thoughts of her father were always positive and life was blissfully happy, with no thoughts of sickness or death. She describes how for twenty years she was protected from the guilt of her father’s death. This protection from grief and guilt was achieved because Plath visualized her father’s existence as of heroic proportions. This was only a fantasy from which awakening was a reality and an inevitability. The fact that this was a contrived state of affairs is made clear by Plath stating that it all took place in a state of long-lasting whiteness. Plath likens this state of innocence, or blissful ignorance, to that of bees in hibernation, sleeping out the blizzard; in just the same way she was totally oblivious to the storm of realisation. But just as the bees must go back into the world so Plath has to enter into the reality of her father’s death. When she did awake she was faced with all the factual evidence of his death: his grave, his name and the dates of his birth and death and the indisputable knowledge that he was actually buried there, “bones and all,” and her emotions were overwhelming. When Plath awoke she was no longer in the Garden of Eden, but was thrust into the world of reality. In *The Bell Jar* (1966) there is yet a further depiction of Plath visiting her father’s graveside. Both the descriptions of the event and the emotions expressed are almost identical to those in “Electra on Azalea Path” in which Plath writes:

> In this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower Breaks the soil. This is Azalea path. A field of burdock opens to the south. Six feet of yellow gravel cover you. The artificial red sage does not stir In the basket of plastic evergreens they put At the headstone next to yours, nor does it rot, Although the rains dissolve a bloody dye: The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red.

And in *The Bell Jar*:

> Then I saw my father’s gravestone. It was crowded right up by another gravestone, head to head, the way people are crowded in a charity ward when there isn’t enough space. The stone was of a mottled pink marble like canned salmon, and all there was on it was my father’s name and under it two dates separated by a little dash.
At the foot of the stone I arranged the rainy armful of azaleas I had picked from a bush at the gateway of the graveyard. Then my legs folded under me, and I sat down in the sopping grass. I couldn’t understand why I was crying so hard. (p.188)

In the poem’s version of the graveyard scene where Otto is buried, there are many references to colours. The imagery used to describe the plant life, or rather, lack of plant life, demonstrates the artificiality of the scene: plants are not growing through the soil. Otto is not even buried under real soil, but six feet of “yellow gravel.” The red sage does not grow because it is artificial, and sage is normally a greenish grey in colour, an even further suggestion of its fake properties. The basket of evergreens is plastic which is why the plants do not rot and are always green. In the line “the ersatz petals drip, and they drip red,” there is a degree of confusion: if the petals are fake, why do they drip? In the previous line we realise it is the dye from these fake flowers that drips in the rain. It is then the artificiality which is binding these images together and giving them their coherence. It is as if the surrealistic, dreamlike qualities of what Plath is describing are aimed at expressing her subconscious mind. Plath is, however, giving a great deal of cerebral thought to these lines and we are able to witness the cognitive dimension in her writing, even though it may well be at an unconscious level. She goes to great lengths to describe the artificiality at the gravesite. It could be that she is, even without realizing it, alluding to the artificial relationship she had with her father. In “Electra on Azalea Path” grief and guilt are operating in an organised way.

The grief and guilt in “Electra on Azalea Path” are overwhelming. There was grief, which she was finally able to express openly, and guilt that it had taken her until the age of twenty six to actually visit her father’s graveside. There is also grief and guilt at what Plath perceives as something akin to a pauper’s grave for the final resting place of her father. The Bell Jar describes the grave’s headstone as mottled marble the colour of pink salmon, “tinned salmon” at that. Here too in The Bell Jar as in “Electra on Azalea Path” we witness how the reality of Otto’s death finally hits home. In the poem Plath eventually awakens to the reality of her father’s death; similarly in the book her legs collapse under her and the emotion of
grief overwhelms her. Plath cannot erase the belief that it was her love which caused her father’s death. “It was my love that did us both to death.” Stanza four is a further delineation of the guilt Plath assumes for his death. She uses nautical metaphors to describe her guilt: “your slack sail drank my sister’s breath.” Was this implying that Otto needed support to keep his life going? Otto was no longer capable of sustaining his life independently. His inadequate lungs were not functioning fully, in the same way as the slack sails needed the wind to keep them propelled. Plath continues:

The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth
My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.

Plath could well have been referring to a funereal cloth used to cover Otto, or even the purple cloths which the statues are shrouded with in Roman Catholic churches during the season of Lent to denote a time of mourning. Plath uses the colour purple frequently, a colour associated with funerals and mourning. Plath then talks about “one late October.” (Plath was born on 27th October) “A scorpion stung its head, an ill starred thing.” Was Plath implying that this was an ominous sign and suggesting the scorpion killed itself? She would state later in the poem that her father’s death was a suicide by omission since he had refused treatment: “I am the ghost of an infamous suicide.” The final line of this stanza is a prophetic dream of Otto’s death: “My mother dreamed your face down in the sea.” In the first line of the next stanza there is a further reference to a shortage of breath affecting the main players in the tragedy; namely Plath, Otto and Aurelia: “The stony actors poise and pause for breath.” The final lines continue with the idea of guilt that she too is posed ever ready to be an infamous suicide: “My own blue razor rusting at my throat.” The final three lines of the poem allude once more to Plath’s assumed guilt over her responsibility for Otto’s death:

O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father – your hound-bitch, daughter friend.
It was my love that did us both to death.

Why would Plath say it was her love that did them both to death? Could it be that she is suggesting that her obsessive love for her father could have aroused Aurelia
Plath’s jealousy and this is the reason she says: “My mother dreamed you face
down in the sea?” Aurelia’s jealousy was such that she either wished Otto dead or
drove her daughter to suicide. And this was the reason why both she and her
father “suicided.” “I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,” and “My own blue
razor rusting at my throat.” Is this why Plath has referred to herself as a girl with
an Electra complex, just as Clytemnestra had murdered Agamemnon? Plath
believed that Aurelia was in some way responsible for Otto’s death. Once again
the dead father has taken on a god-like quality. The fact that Plath is knocking at
the gate for pardon is suggestive of someone knocking on the door of heaven
hoping to be forgiven and then admitted.

In “Electra on Azalea Path” Plath’s emotions of grief and guilt have increased
significantly. When faced with the reality of Otto’s grave her emotions were
significantly heightened. But that is not to say this emotional heightening lessened
her intelligent assessment of the situation. In fact Fisher (2002) claims that
“[s]omething new is disclosed to us in states of vehemence” (p.1) and that “[e]ach
of the strong emotions or passions designs for us an intelligible world and does so
by means of horizon lines that we come to know only in experiences that begin
with impassioned or vehement states within ourselves” (p.1). These statements by
Fisher imply that vehemence and other strong emotions delineate for us a more
comprehensible world. And so, rather than our passions confusing our
understanding, they actually heighten and intensify it. They expand our horizons.
According to Fisher what we eventually come to understand as knowledge
actually starts out as a state of vehemence inside our normal state of mind. And so
during the time we experience this state of enhanced awareness, as a result of our
vehement emotion, something unmatched is revealed to us. This surely is the case
with Plath’s poetry. She designs her poetry as it is triggered by her emotion and
this generates an intelligible world. Her emotion is enhanced and consequently her
poetry is more perceptive. Rich experienced this enhanced awareness prior to, and
at the time of her father’s death. During the time in which she was analysing her
perception of her father’s extreme patriarchal control she realises that it was out of
a loving concern rather than from a lack of love. In “All My Pretty Ones” Sexton
was able to differentiate between her concern that she was ill-treated by her father and her grief that he was dying.

Having visited the graveside of her father Plath has accepted his death, finally grieved openly for him, and accepted her guilt for whatever her part in his death was; but even now she cannot let go fully of her emotions of grief and guilt. It is here that we see the structure and the organized analysis she is working through and here too that we witness the perception at work in her thought processing. Overcome by emotions Plath is still thinking coherently and so is able to reject what should have been a therapeutic healing process, which had in fact done nothing to erase her grief and guilt. Susan Bassnett (1993) calls it “the guilt that cannot be expiated”:

The death of the father has killed off a part of the daughter too, and in the final lines of the poem the “I” speaker takes onto her own shoulders the burden for her father’s death, the guilt that cannot be expiated. Electra has come full circle and admits to responsibility for having repressed and killed off the father whose idealised image she has tried to nurture. (p.87)

Plath has in fact gained nothing from her visit to her father’s graveside. There are similarities in “Electra on Azalea Path” and “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (1961). In the latter Plath talks about unresolved grief. The emotion of grief is displayed quite obviously, but still does not appear to be taking Plath to where she wishes to be:

The grasses unload their grief on my feet as if I were God
Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility.
Fumey, spiritous mists inhabit this place
Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

With the O-gape of complete despair I live here.

Plath is in the graveyard surrounded by the spectral atmosphere. She believes she has nowhere to go from here and can make no progress in her grief and despondency. The speaker in “Electra on Azalea Path” does not believe she is ever going to move on from her grief and guilt. The blame is still hers, as her father’s death was caused by her love for him: “I brought my love to bear, and
then you died.” Even though Aurelia justified Otto’s death as within the normal course of events for any man, Plath cannot absorb, accept or absolve herself from her part in his death: “How shall I age into that state of mind?” It can be argued that the above lines are an enacting of actual moments in her life as a speech act – a speech act displaying grief and guilt, perhaps one aimed at providing some sort of therapy. Even though the result of the therapy was unsuccessful, Plath is nonetheless cognitively processing these emotions and so we are able to witness the cerebral perception in her writing.

The images in “Medusa” of the “Red stigmata at the very center”, “you are always there” and “Green as eunuchs, your wishes / Hiss at my sins” are brought out in order to present a coherent structure which suggest the emotions of grief and guilt. In “Medusa” (1962) the poet is speaking to someone on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. At the time of writing “Medusa,” Plath was living in England married to Ted Hughes and her mother was in America. Edward Butscher (1996) claims that although Plath was domiciled in England and married, her relationship with Aurelia had changed very little since the time of her breakdown in 1953. Butscher writes that Plath behaved disrespectfully towards Aurelia and that Plath:

[Sylvia Plath] still knew how to treat [Aurelia] with coy difference and affected compatibility. But Sylvia also occasionally belittled her mother behind her back only to pay a heavy price in feelings of guilt and regret afterwards. (p.339)

Aurelia returned to America almost immediately after Plath’s break up with Hughes. Shortly afterwards Plath wrote “Medusa” and permitted herself to voice things about her mother hitherto left unsaid. In this poem Plath is depicting the various stages of her life with her mother, from her birth and total dependence, to her marriage. It was as if Plath was itemizing the various stages in her life with her mother and analysing them and then making a decision on her emotional stance on these issues. It is in this structural consciousness that the cerebral component of her emotions and the cognition are most apparent. In the opening lines of stanza one Plath talks about the “stony mouth plugs.” She is suggesting that the Medusa has the power to suppress the speaker. Here Plath is referring to
the look of Medusa which could turn a person to stone. The next two lines are somewhat complex:

Eyes rolled by white sticks,
Ears cupping the sea’s incoherences …

Yet again Plath is referring to a further lack of sense – the loss of sight and hearing after having been turned to stone. Is Plath alluding to Aurelia’s insensitivity to her situation? The “eyes rolled by white sticks” could be suggesting some sort of blindness on Aurelia’s part and the “ears cupping the sea’s incoherencies,” an inability to hear what Plath is telling her. Even though she is cupping her ears the words are still unintelligible. This is substantiated in the later lines where Plath says:

I didn’t call you
I didn’t call you at all.

Nevertheless, nevertheless you steamed to me over the sea.

In distancing herself from her mother Plath is in effect distancing herself from her reader. Plath wants to retain the physical mileage and the emotional remoteness from her mother. By so doing she has little time to consider her reader. This poem primarily concerns Plath and her Aurelia and apart from two stanzas everything is addressed to Aurelia, the pronoun “you” is invariably used. For Plath “Medusa” is about personal grief between herself and her mother. The ocean only serves to emphasise the extent of this distancing and the vastness of the grief and guilt. Plath and Aurelia are oceans apart both geographically and metaphorically, and it would seem that the chasm cannot be bridged.

There are obvious religious metaphors: hearts with red stigmata, stooges with their Jesus hair. Plath is suggesting that Aurelia is making use of some sort of religious blackmail to allow her to be in constant contact with her daughter. The heart with red stigmata is suggestive of a bleeding heart to evoke Plath’s pity for her mother, along with the ensuing guilt. It also refers ironically to the physical condition known as “the stigmata,” in which exceptionally devout people claim to experience a spontaneous periodic bleeding from the points corresponding to
those left on the body of Christ after he had been nailed to the cross. This is not
the first time Plath has referred to her mother as a saintly person and not in a
positive way either.

These metaphors lead Plath back to her mother, who is ever ready to steam across
the ocean to England:

My mind winds to you
Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.

In considering the underlying structure in the images used by Plath in “Medusa,”
and how they are related to the overall coherence of the poem it would appear that
blood is the prominent theme in the imagery. When Medusa was killed by
Perseus, Pegasus the winged horse emerged from her decapitated corpse and
venomous snakes sprang up from the blood that trickled from her head.

In stanza two Plath writes:

Your stooges plying their wild cells in my keel’s shadow
Pushing by like hearts,
Red stigmata at the very center.

Once again the imagery is of the life blood circulating in the arteries and veins and
transporting oxygen to, and carbon dioxide from the body tissue. There is also a
religious connection with the “stigmata.” In stanza five she writes, “[y]ou steamed
to me over the sea, / Fat and red, a placenta. Plath is also still connected to the
“Old barnacled umbilicus,” and in the very next stanza Plath again uses blood
imagery of flowers: “Squeezing the breath from blood bells / Of the fuchsia. I
could draw no breath.” Here too Plath describes the fuchsia as bells containing
blood. In flowers the placenta is part of the ovary wall carrying the ovules. It does
appear that the theme of blood is what is structuring the imagery. There is a real
binding of Plath’s life to her mother through consanguinity, and all the various
roles which blood plays in family relationships. Plath realised she was connected
by blood to Aurelia and there was nothing she could do to change that. In her
poem “Kindness,” Plath actually uses the expression: “The blood jet is poetry, /
There is no stopping it.” Such an analysis sits well with the view of Allan Alvarez (1971) who claims that “The reasons for Sylvia Plath’s images are always there, although sometimes you have to work hard to find them. She is in short, always in intelligent control of her feelings” (p.68). The reference “[m]y mind winds to you / Old barnacled umbilicus” is perhaps indicative of the thirty years since Plath was born and that the connection between them should no longer be so tight. We can only imagine the guilt and grief that Plath would experience at a later date for writing these lines in “Medusa.” Robert Phillips (1972) supports the idea that there is a great deal of the emotion of guilt developed in “Medusa.” Plath continues:

In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.

Plath and Aurelia were still connected via the Atlantic cable telephone. The images expressing the proximity between Plath and her mother are organising and structuring the poetry. Plath talks about the Atlantic cable which makes it possible for her and her mother to be connected to each other via the telephone. But these connecting links can be viewed as chains, and can be a curse as well as a blessing. They are chains to connect but also chains to restrain. Plath’s perception that her mother is constantly about to call her is likened to a type of dowsing-rod. We are able to witness the cognition in these lines as Plath analyses her resistance to her perception that she is constantly so easily available to Aurelia because of these chains of association and interconnection. These lines can also be interpreted as Plath the poet with a water divining rod and Aurelia waits with bated breath, happy, grateful and ingratiating. Phillips on the other hand has a somewhat different interpretation of the above lines. For him there is an indication that Plath has come to the end of her tether and she continues to blame her mother for this state of affairs. Even though Plath hurls a great deal of abuse at her mother, these insults are tinged with guilt. In stanza five she goes to great length to emphasize her mother’s unwanted presence in England. The last lines, perhaps out of guilt, acknowledge that in spite of everything Aurelia is still her mother.
The religious metaphors continue in stanza seven. Here the Medusa is portrayed as a religious organism. Plath is questioning the Medusa’s origin. Medusa and Christ as a Communion wafer are from two very diverse cultural traditions. Why is Plath coupling them together? And can this linking together work as something coherent? In Greek mythology we are told that some of the blood from Medusa’s body was kept by Athena and given to Asclepius, the god of healing. The blood taken from the left side of Medusa’s body was lethal, whereas the blood from the right side was empowered to raise the dead to life. The final death blow delivered to the dying Christ on the Cross was when the soldier lanced His right side, from which the last drops of blood came forth. This blood is, in the belief of Christians, life-saving. Christ shed His blood to redeem man from original sin and restore him to life everlasting. Plath is acknowledging the ambivalent role her mother has in her life. On the one hand her mother’s blood gave her life initially and sustained that life. The blood however, also had a detrimental effect on Plath’s life.

Is Medusa posing as Christ in the Communion wafer? That Plath has chosen to use a capital letter for Communion is indicative of this. Plath is making an analogy between the life support offered by her mother, and the everlasting life offered by partaking of Christ’s body:

This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die.

I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. (John 6:50-51)

Still Plath is determined to have no part of it: “I shall take no bite of your body.”

Furthermore the reference to “[b]lubbery Mary” could well be referring to Mary, the mother of Christ, or even Mary Magdalene who washed the feet of Christ with her tears at the Last Supper, hence the use of the word “[b]lubbery.” Throughout “Medusa” Plath is making an argument for and against her love for her mother and posing questions:
Did I escape, I wonder?
My mind winds to you.

The fact that Plath’s poetry is organised into both arguments and questions structures the “working out” taking place in her consciousness. Plath is in fact putting forward an argument in “Medusa.” Nussbaum (1996) makes the claim that poetry has a philosophical role. She continues that the expression of emotions, rather than deleting rational thought, is indicative of an accurate comprehension of a given situation (p.81). Plath was expressing her ambivalent relationship with her mother. On the one hand, Aurelia is an ever supporting mother, but on the other hand she is poisonous and destructive.

In the very last line of stanza seven, “Bottle in which I live,” is a further reference to and an expression of Plath’s resentment of her ongoing dependence on her mother and possibly the realisation that now she is separated from Hughes, this dependence may well have to be reinstated. This is a sentiment not unlike that expressed in *The Bell Jar* where the tragedies and losses of Esther are clear for all to see, in much the same way as things are viewed through a bottle or a jar. The first line of stanza seven reinforces this stance: “[o]verexposed, like an X-ray.” Even so the grief and guilt are still apparent. Although reluctant to continue her dependence on her mother the writer is acutely aware that without the gift of life and the ongoing support of her mother Plath would not be here. It is the body of Aurelia that gave life to Plath and sustained that life for over twenty years. Plath is questioning why she is incapable of love and gratitude towards her mother, and this causes grief and guilt.

The last stanza is a final indictment of Plath’s resentment about her mother’s control. Once again the metaphors used are all references to the Church. “Ghastly Vatican” leaves us in no doubt that Plath is specifically referring to the Catholic Church: “I am sick to death of hot salt.” Again the analogy between the Church and Aurelia is clear. Salt is frequently used in a number of Catholic religious ceremonies − Baptism, Confirmation and Extreme Unction − to imply purification. The hot salt could well suggest the hot salty tears wept by Aurelia as a form of emotional blackmail over Plath. She continues:
Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins.

On the one hand Plath is stating that her mother’s wishes, presumably for her are green as eunuchs” – that is, in some respect immature and ineffectual. On the other hand Aurelia’s wishes, and Plath’s subsequent disregard for them, cause Plath to experience even more guilt. Why else would she use the word “sins” if she felt no emotion of guilt? However the final lines of this stanza indicate no remorse for Plath’s desire to relinquish her connection with her mother:

Off, off eely tentacle!
There is nothing between us.

In these lines the imagery traces out associated forms of connections between Plath and her mother. They are connected via their telephone communications. Plath was, prior to her birth, connected to Aurelia by the umbilical cord. They are further connected by the ties of love that bind them together. The lines of the poem tell us they are in Plath’s opinion connected by the “eely tentacle!” – a feeler designed to elicit some form of response. Aurelia was putting out feelers to assess her daughter’s response and Plath in turn was expressing her rejection of this controlling hold. It is the theme of the sea creature images which binds together the imagery and gives the poem its structure.

Again Plath is making use of metaphors of the sea, just as she had done in stanza three when she refers to her mother as: “[o]ld barnacled umbilicus.” Both the words “barnacled” and “tentacled,” suggest something that would be better if it were removed. Plath could also be using barnacled to imply a tenacious follower whose attendance it is difficult to discourage. She continues:

Atlantic cable,
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.

The international cable link-up is, according to Plath, in a state of extraordinarily good repair, so there is never any difficulty keeping them connected across the two continents. Aurelia too, is in very good health even though she is no longer a young woman. The words “Off, off, eely tentacle!” could also be indicative of
guilt, caused by Plath’s lack of desire for Aurelia’s support. However, Plath still wants to be rid of her presence.

What emerges in “Medusa” is Plath’s consciousness of her lack of love for her mother and her inability to do anything to experience this emotion even whilst acknowledging that Aurelia is her mother and as such is deserving of this love. Plath actually justifies her inability to experience the emotion by the use of extended metaphors likening her mother’s love to a controlling blackmailing love, or the controlling influences of the Church. Plath manipulates her hatred for her mother:
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live,

Ghastly Vatican.
I am sick to death of hot salt.
Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins.

In these lines Plath is suggesting that because Aurelia is her mother, she has power over her – the power of life giving spirituality as in the Communion wafer of Christ’s Body and Blood and the love of the mother of God. Aurelia like Christ provides sustenance. In the same way the Church offers her support, but she too demands things in return. Plath has had enough of the controlling demands and the trappings of her mother’s love and the love of the Mother Church. From both maternal figures Plath is saying that conditions apply – that their love is conditional. In Plath’s opinion both Aurelia and the Church criticise and condemn with very little of their own personal experience. Their right exists because they have both provided life and ongoing sustenance to that life, which causes both grief and guilt when Plath is unable to respond emotionally. This is not dissimilar to much of the poetry of Anne Sexton, who also was concerned with her inability to experience emotion for her parents, even though she realised that she ought to. For both Plath and Sexton this lack of the emotion of love caused grief and guilt. Plath itemises the things which prevented her wanting her mother to be with her: things she perceived as Aurelia’s controlling influence, her interference and Plath’s dread of her mother seeing her at her most vulnerable.

In making these final decisions both “Daddy” and “Medusa” act as a type of example of this. She is not just writing about her emotions but is actually enacting them. It is an act of resignation for the inevitability of her loss of love for both her parents and the resulting grief and guilt this will cause her. By showing the logical train of thought and her analysis Plath is demonstrating the intelligent command and the depth of perception in her poetry. However, it can be claimed that the shaping spirit in much of Plath’s poetry does not always come to a conclusion. To some extent her poetry manifests her inability, or her unwillingness, to resolve her conflicting emotions. Plath’s filial grief was in the view of David Yezzi (1998) an
ongoing problem from the time of her father’s death to the time of her own death more than twenty years on:

   It would seem that the most logical explanation for Plath’s enigmatic relationship with her parents is not that one or other was her demon but that due to circumstances she remained psychologically dependent on and victimized by both of them. Her father’s death left her with not only a hoard of unresolved grief, but it also left her defenceless against her mother’s unintended vampirish harm. She had only her mother to rely on until she began a second symbiotic relationship with Ted Hughes. (p.69)

It is quite reasonable to argue that a great deal of Plath’s emotional development has its origin in her childhood. Nussbaum (2001) argues that emotions have a narrative history and one interlinked with a person’s insecurity and neediness, but they also attach us to others. She continues:

   If emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment, and if they contain in themselves an awareness of value or importance they cannot for example, easily be sidelined on account of ethical judgment as so often they have been in the history of philosophy. (p.151)

Sexton also expressed her insecurity in her poetry. In “Cripples and Other Stories” she enunciated the way in which her unhappy childhood affected her life.

Despite the accelerated speed with which Plath wrote these later poems, they are nevertheless cognitively constructed. This order is apparent in her writings in her Journals of Sylvia Plath (1983). These letters, normally positive and buoyed with superlatives of the happenings in her life began, as with her poetry, to take on a more sinister tone. After Aurelia’s visit in the summer of 1962 Plath wrote home, “don’t talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff” (p.280). Plath is now displaying her emotions in a more honest way. For Plath emotions were a very significant part of her life, and she expressed them as she experienced them at a particular time in her life. Fisher (2002) argues that the emotions are the most undiminished characterisation of oneself at a particular moment:

   Grief and anger are alternative, active responses to death or to any loss. The most important split between the strategy of anger and that of grief occurs around the component of guilt and self-reproach within all mourning. (p.209)
This is exactly what Plath did. For over two decades she had misunderstood her father’s death, hardly even accepting it until the reality of Churchyard Hill. She did not prevent her father’s death, therefore she must in some way assume the responsibility and subsequent guilt. This misunderstanding at the deaths of their fathers was also experienced by Sexton and Rich.

In summary it can be seen that grief and guilt in the poetry of Sylvia Plath do have a cognitive dimension which is demonstrated by way of the shaping spirit of imagery. In “Daddy” Plath likens her emotions over the death of her father to the events of the European Holocaust. Although Plath articulates her grief and guilt in “Electra on Azalea Path” she is nevertheless aware of the lack of therapeutical benefit derived from her visit to her father’s graveside. She says “It was my love that did us both to death.” After some twenty years of not acknowledging her grief and guilt over her father’s death, Plath finally attempted to make sense of these emotions in “Electra on Azalea Path.” She says: “I couldn’t understand why I was crying so hard.”

**Anne Sexton**

Much of the poetry of Anne Sexton attests to her guilt-ridden life and her concern over her inability to experience grief for the things which caused her guilt. For Sexton it was only by acknowledging her guilt through her poetry that she was able, eventually, to experience a degree of grief. Robert Phillips (1973) comments that Sexton conveys to her reader her troubled emotional mind by means of her poetry, “[d]escribing her grief for her mother and her great-aunt, her guilt towards her daughter, and her feelings of her own lost self” (p.76).

Even whilst Sexton watched her mother dying over a period of months, she recognises and states that this does not “equip” her with grief. The death of her mother, however, did equip her with guilt. “The Double Image” makes plain how the imagery of the doom flooding her belly and “the debt I must assume” are expanded so that they present a comprehensible and systemised structure suggesting the emotions of grief and guilt. The poem is concerned with the death
of Sexton’s mother, Mary Gray, and her distress that she was the cause of her mother’s death and the ensuing emotion of guilt which she experienced:

… 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.

The theme structuring the imagery in the above lines is one of guilt and doom. The “[u]gly angels” gossipped, causing condemnation to fall upon Sexton. Initially the witches tell the speaker the guilt is all hers, but gradually – and Sexton likens it to a leaking tap – the guilt begins to seep through and so she begins to assume guilt for her daughter. Sexton must now take on the additional accountability: “as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet, / an old debt I must assume.” Sexton is assuming that the blame that she took upon herself for her mother’s death is now affecting the welfare of her child. The amniotic fluid surrounding the baby whilst in the uterus has now broken forth and has filled the child’s bassinet. In Sexton’s view this is all happening because she was incapable of loving her mother.

The concept of blame features frequently in the emotions of grief and guilt in Sexton’s poetry. She blamed herself for her mother’s death. This blame was no doubt affected by Sexton’s perception that her mother held her responsible for causing her cancer. She accepted both the blame and the resulting grief and guilt:

I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

And:

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.
That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.
On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn’t answer.

The above lines could be interpreted as saying that Mary Gray turned from her daughter so as not to transmit the disease, but in these lines it was the poet herself who was dying metaphorically and the mother didn’t want the contamination of Sexton’s “death.” The persona in the poem also informs us that her daughter Joyce turned two that August, but mother and daughter were still apart and Sexton was still not sure if she was ready to take on her mothering role. And in September the mother accuses Sexton of actually giving her cancer. This stanza highlights what Sexton has to cope with. Firstly, the mother regards Sexton as contagious and able to transmit a disease to her. Secondly, her daughter Joyce is still not with her and she is unsure when she can again assume a mother’s role. Thirdly, Sexton’s mother actually accuses her daughter of being the cause of her cancer. It is hardly surprising Sexton was unable to answer. The blame was overwhelming. The reason that the answer was not forthcoming was because the poet was still having difficulty experiencing grief, for which she blamed herself unreservedly and allowed the full weight of the guilt to burden her.

The series of images, metaphors and similes used in “The Double Image” are structured in such a way that they emphasise the blame Sexton assumes. There is an obvious relationship between the images used in “The Double Image.” It is the blame and the debt which binds together the images and the metaphors and make them coherent. Even the angels – normally associated with beauty and goodness – were ugly and evil, and they were the ones who blamed Sexton for her mother’s death. We are given the impression that the dawning of blame and guilt on Sexton was gradual. Eventually, however, the guilt and blame assumed the effect of a deluge “as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet.” It is also possible that Sexton’s guilt has shifted from her self-blame for her mother’s death to blame and guilt for her treatment of her daughter Joyce, when she was an unborn baby in the uterus surrounded by the amniotic fluid, and as a baby in her bassinet.
Sexton is unable, it would seem, to get beyond the idea that her relationship, or lack of an adequate relationship with her daughter Joyce was her fault entirely. She blames herself for the lack of time spent with her daughter, and for the fact that on her first visit Joyce needed to ask her mother’s name. There is also the idea of substitution. Sexton had sent her daughter a picture of a rabbit. The child brought with her the picture of the rabbit on every visit as if it were some sort of calling card connecting her to her mother. That Sexton’s emotion of guilt arose from a sense of self-blame is most palpable here. The poet describes the strangeness between the mother and daughter when they are in close proximity to each other. They “bumped away from each other like marionettes on strings.” This describes so fittingly the way in which a person will quickly disengage themselves after bumping into a stranger on a crowded train or bus, but hardly that of a mother and daughter coming into physical contact with each other:

Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit
and a postcard of Motif number one,
as if it were normal
to be a mother and be gone.

I could not get you back
except for weekends. You came
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit
that I had sent you.

The first visit you asked my name.
Now you will stay for good. I will forget
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes
on strings. It wasn’t the same
as love, letting weekends contain
us.

Sexton’s discomfort at the situation is apparent. Throughout these events however, Sexton sees the situation clearly for what it is, and in so doing makes it possible for the reader to see how this pattern of images and similes is structured. The simile of the marionettes implies a forced closeness causing acute discomfort at this close physical contact, because they were together as mother and daughter so infrequently. The unnatural contact is also made manifest by the mother mailing a picture of a rabbit and a postcard of “a Motif number one” – not an
incident associated with a normal mother/daughter relationship. Sexton makes use of these images to organise and give a shaping spirit to them expressing her grief and guilt over her inability to care for her daughter in the usual manner. It is then possible to see that Sexton was aware that her love for her daughter was not as it should be in this long-distance relationship way. “It wasn’t the same / as love, letting weekends contain / us.”

The final stanza of “The Double Image” refers to the return of the daughter to her home and mother: “Now you will stay for good.” But even this resurrects memories and subsequent blame and guilt in Sexton for the death of her mother. It is as if no sooner has one area of guilt resolved itself, then Sexton must blame herself for something else:

You can call me mother and I remember my mother again, somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

The memory seems to prompt the poet to proffer some sort of vindication for her reasons for having a daughter:

I, who was never quite sure about being a girl, needed another life, another image to remind me. And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure or soothe it. I made you to find me.

The concept of guilt as blame is most discernible here. Sexton is implying that she gave life to her daughter merely to buoy up her own self-esteem about her sexuality. Sexton is, however, agonizingly aware that she regards this as “my worst guilt,” which even the child’s presence did not mollify.

No death or separation in Sexton’s family took place without her attaching a large proportion of the blame to herself. Throughout her early years and even into adulthood Anne Sexton was very close to her great-aunt, Nana Dingley. She wrote a number of poems which attest to her great love for, and subsequent grief and guilt at the death of Nana Dingley. Sexton falsely believed that her great-aunt’s dementia and death were on account of her. Nana had come upon Anne kissing a boy when Anne was thirteen. Even though Nana’s death was some thirteen years
Chapter Five: Grief and Guilt

later, Sexton still assumed the blame and the consequent grief and guilt for her death. Many of the emotional events that Sexton wrote about in her poems were not lacking intellectual perception. Rather they were based on events in her life, which is in keeping with the views of Nussbaum (1996) who claims that emotions do possess cognitive worth and help with our comprehension of ourselves and our relationship.

The image cluster in “The Legend of the One-Eyed Man” suggest not only a sense of her sins, but also a sense that perhaps she is not to be blamed entirely for them. Although “Like Judas I have done wrong” the crimes are “crimes dropped on me”. Sexton feels guilt, but is also grappling with the problem of the extent to which she is responsible for the things about which she feels guilty. In this poem Sexton identifies with Judas Iscariot, and it is quite obvious that she regards her guilt as being of equal proportions to his:

    look into my face
    and you will know that crimes dropped upon me
    as from a high building.

Perhaps Sexton believes if she could only be judged and found guilty and then forgiven, absolution could be granted and the healing process begin. Judas and Oedipus however, have received their punishment, but she is still in limbo awaiting hers. Sexton is convinced of the unconcealed nature of her sins and the glaring magnitude of them. They have left a clearly visible imprint upon her face, as would be the case if something had been dropped on her from a great height, the impact is more discernible; yet her sins are not being judged and punished accordingly. Although Sexton is ready to acknowledge her transgressions and accept full responsibility for them, there is however, a suggestion by Sexton that she is not wholly to blame: if the crimes are dropped from a great height, there is in fact, only a degree of chance that they were her responsibility.

Not content to identify Judas Iscariot as the Apostle who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, Sexton has earmarked him as being responsible for constructing the cross on which Jesus was crucified. This is exactly what she is doing to
herself: attaching blame for both real and imagined wrongs which she has committed, and then assuming the guilt for these actions:

Like Oedipus I am losing my sight.
Like Judas I have done my wrong.
The story of his life
is the story of mine.
I have one glass eye.
My nerves push against the painted surface
but the other one
waiting for judgment
continues to see.

In some respects Sexton is not fully aware of her wrongdoings. On the one hand she is blind to her sins: “I am losing my sight…” “I have one glass eye.” On the other hand, however, Sexton is acutely aware of the wrong-doings and accepts full blame and guilt for them, “but the other one waiting for judgment continues to see….”

In “Pain for a Daughter” the imagery suggesting pain (for example; “she bites on a towel” and “circled against the pain”) makes clear the patterning of imagery provides meaning to the emotions of grief and guilt. The imagery of vision and blindness continues in “Pain for a Daughter” (1962) Linda is afraid that she is in fact “blind with fear.” She is physically unable to see, whereas Sexton chooses to be blind to her daughter’s pain by deliberately averting her eyes to the ceiling (“eyes locked on the ceiling.”) In this poem the poet describes an incident concerning her first daughter, Linda. The daughter sustained an injured foot as a result of a horse treading on her. Once more the concept of the emotion of guilt as self-blame is clearly visible – not for the accident itself but because Sexton was not there to offer solace to her daughter:

Blind with fear she sits on the toilet,
her foot balanced over the washbasin,
her father, hydrogen peroxide in hand,
performing the rites of the cleaning.
She bites on a towel, sucked in breath,
sucked in and arched against the pain,
her eyes glancing off me where
I stand at the door, eyes locked
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,
and then she cries …
Oh my God, help me!
Where a child would have cried Mama!
Where a child would have believed Mama!
She bit the towel and called on God.

The blame was not so much because the father was tending the injured foot instead of the mother, but that Sexton was not “there” for her daughter in any capacity. Instead of holding the child’s hand or comforting her with reassuring words, Sexton is over by the door, ready to make a retreat. And her eyes are firmly fixed on the ceiling, so that she neither has to witness the pain or make eye contact with the child. It is through these continued images that the awful realisation of her emotional and physical neglect of her daughter is apparent, and along with this realisation is the emerging blame and guilt.

Not only did Sexton assume the guilt for her inadequacy in carrying out her designated maternal duties, but she also shouldered much of the blame for the break-up of her marriage. “Divorce” shows the way in which the imagery suggesting the broken marriage, “I have killed our lives together” and “axed off each head” unfolds in such a way that it presents a well-ordered structure. In “Divorce” (1976) she levels no blame at her husband Kayo. Rather she attributes the responsibility to herself for her role in the marriage:

I have killed our lives together,
axed off each head,
with their poor blue eyes stuck in a beach ball
rolling separately down the drive
I have killed all the good things,

“Divorce” assumes the form of a confession, with the first and last lines beginning “I have killed.” Once again Sexton uses the imagery of sight. In the poem both Sexton and Kayo lost their eyes and consequently their sight, as their lives went their separate ways.

Although much of Sexton’s life attests to her considerable and continued blame of herself for many of the tragedies which befell her family, there are occasions
when she does in fact blame someone other than herself. That someone is quite frequently God. When Sexton is reunited with her second daughter Joyce after a period of three years, she makes reference to God turning a blind eye to their situation. So now she is accusing God of deliberate blindness. In “The Double Image” (1960) in answer to a question posed by her daughter as to where the leaves from trees go, Sexton replies, in a manner regarded by Suzanne Juhasz (1989) as somewhat cryptic:

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self’s self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
Why did I let you grow
in another place.

In these lines the poet is saying that her child must love herself because ultimately that is all she believes we have to depend on. If there is a God, why does He not equip Sexton with the necessary skills to look after her daughter? Sexton is also claiming that her bouts of insanity, which prevented her from being with her daughter, were no more unnatural than the yellow leaves falling to the ground. Is Sexton saying then, that this was not sufficient reason to have her child raised by her mother-in-law?

We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I’d never get you back again.
I tell you what you’ll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

Sexton is asserting that eventually everything in nature succumbs to gravity. She is equating the natural phenomenon of leaves falling to the ground to that of her brain and its deterioration, which for Sexton, makes more sense than all the medical jargon which is being given to her by way of an explanation. And just who are they who said Sexton would never get her daughter back? We can only presume it is members of Sexton’s family. To these people, then, Sexton is
attributing some of the blame, which to some extent alleviates her own blame and guilt. For Sexton to express her emotions over the temporary loss of her daughter would be from Martha Nussbaum’s (1996) perspective, a healthy reaction: “a person who will not defend himself, but allow himself to be trampled underfoot and to overlook it is slavish” (p.23). This too is in keeping with the thoughts of Carol Tavris (1992): “Emotions of violated entitlement are involved anytime one believes that a possession has unjustly been taken away or if there is a threat that it will be taken away” (p.34). This idea of the poets exemplifying emotions according to the perspective of the theorists of the emotions is manifested also in the poetry of Plath and Rich. They both articulated their grief and guilt over their losses and the degree to which they felt they were responsible.

Much of Sexton’s writing suggests that to some extent she was a victim who frequently shouldered the blame for things which went wrong in her life. Paul Lacey (1989) believes that Sexton’s poetry chronicles an endeavour to be forgiven and to receive absolution for her offences. The poem “For the Year of the Insane,” (1967) which is subtitled “a prayer,” is addressed to Mary the mother of God. Sexton’s development of images such as; “beads as waves” and “I am locked in the wrong house” provide meaning and structure in this poem. This imagery is developed in such a way that it offers a logical structure suggesting the emotions of grief and guilt in “For the Year of the Insane”. The theme of the poem is concerned with an unbeliever who is making a valiant attempt to say the rosary. She is painfully aware of her unholy state and her past life. The poet is craving acceptance; she is even prepared to prostrate herself on the ground in an attempt to indicate complete subservience and a strong desire for absolution. At the end of the second stanza, the poet does not believe her prayers are being heard. Her voice is merely being carried to the window above:

I count beads as waves,
hammering upon me.
I am ill at their numbers,
sick, sick in the summer heat
and the window above me
is my only listener my awkward being.
The series of images Sexton uses, such as beads being likened to waves, attests to her lack of faith. Instead of each bead representing a prayer − namely the “Hail Mary” − and taking her closer to the mother of God her prayers are like waves hammering upon her. Prayers are supposedly uplifting, but for Sexton they have the opposite effect; they pound her down as waves in the ocean. She makes reference to the numbers of prayers in the rosary (fifty “Hail Marys,” five “Our Fathers” and five “Glory Bes”) and that is just in one mystery of the rosary − all of which suggests that it seems a fruitless and extended exercise, especially when no one is listening to her. The fact that Sexton made the point that she is disillusioned with the effectiveness of prayer is clearly asserted in the way the similes are developed and the reader is able to see the structure and consciousness in her train of thought and hence the perception at work.

Still Sexton persists in her prayer, desperate for the absolution she is so needful of. She participates in the sacrament of Communion, drinking the wine, but in her eyes she has drunk the blood of Christ unworthily and has brought upon herself further guilt and perdition. She has an adequate knowledge of the New Testament and the teachings of St Paul (Corinthians 11:29) who proclaims that anyone who eats and drinks of the body and blood of Christ unworthily eats and drinks damnation to himself.

The final stanza ends with Sexton still believing she is beyond the pale and unable to believe, much as she would like to, but, “need is not belief:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{O little mother,} \\
\text{I am in my own mind.} \\
\text{I am locked in the wrong house}
\end{align*}
\]

Sexton would dearly like to be able to acknowledge the mother of God as her mother too, but cannot and so is unable to be granted the absolution she craves. When Sexton refers to being in her “own mind” and “locked in the wrong house,” she is blaming her stubbornness of mind for not allowing herself to believe and so be accepted into the right house − that is, the house of God. Sexton uses the term “O little mother” for the mother of God probably as a term of endearment rather
than one denoting diminutive stature, in much the same way as she refers to Plath as “O tiny mother” in her poem “Sylvia’s Death.”

“All My Pretty Ones” illustrates the way in which the images of blood, wine and forgiveness are brought out in order to give a well-ordered structure which suggests the emotions of grief and guilt. In this poem Sexton is still in search of forgiveness and absolution. She concedes that only by forgiving others the wrongs they have done to her can she expect forgiveness for herself. Just as in the words of “The Lord’s Prayer:” “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

In the New Testament, Christ says to His disciples:

If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, “I repent,” you shall forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4)

Sexton is very conscious of the fact that in order to be forgiven by God she too must forgive others in her life. Christ has said that before a man can come to the altar of God he must be first reconciled with his brother. To gain absolution we must first forgive those who have sinned against us. I believe this was what Sexton was doing when she forgave her father:

My God, father, each Christmas Day
with your blood, will I drink down your glass
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for my age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

The use of the word “pretty” here is, I think, to distinguish Sexton’s father from the pretty ones in “All My Pretty Ones.” He was obviously not one of her children, but she was still prepared to forgive him and to love him.

Guilt can also be examined as the concept of emotion as debt. Because of her guilt over her parents’ deaths Sexton considered the items she inherited from her
parents as debts. In “The Division of Parts” the images of the mother invading Sexton’s dreams, images such as, “Keep out of my slumber / My good dame, you are dead” create organisation and structure to the poem and suggest the emotions of grief and guilt. In the poem Sexton inherits “gifts I did not choose.” She feels herself to be unworthy to be the recipient of these goods, which she inherited after her mother’s death: letters, jewellery, furs and family silver. In addition she refers to herself as “thief” for the gifts she received. These gifts which she would prefer to have no part of are forced upon her.

In “The Division of Parts” the poet dreams she is wearing her mother’s nightdress. The “divided” mother comes into her daughter’s bed, where she is not welcome:

... Dame  
keep out of my slumber  
My good Dame, you are dead.

The grief Sexton has long wanted to express is still not there, only the guilt. Her desire for memories of her mother is ambivalent. On the one hand she wears her mother’s “Bonwit Teller” nightgown to bed to remind her of her mother, but on the other hand when she dreams of her mother she wishes to banish these reminiscences. Once more “The Division of Parts” attests to Sexton’s confusion over her emotions.

Much of the grief and guilt that is expressed in the poetry of Anne Sexton stemmed from Sexton’s inability to articulate her grief and guilt for the happenings in her life. This inability to express her grief served to accentuate the guilt she felt for these events. Sexton also experienced a heightened degree of guilt for her inability to care for her children. Her grief and guilt are manifested in both “The Double Image” and “Pain for a Daughter.” Sexton also tried to make sense of her divorce. Yet again she is prepared to accept the full weight of the blame and guilt for her failed marriage. Whereas Plath blames Hughes entirely for the end of their marriage, and Rich merely believes that she and Conrad stopped loving each other, Sexton blamed herself unreservedly. In her religious poetry Sexton’s frequent references to Christ’s atonement for the sins of humankind via his suffering and death on the Cross acknowledges that she is willing to suffer for
her wrongdoings in order to gain absolution, once again taking the blame onto herself.

Adrienne Rich

Grief and guilt figure prominently in the poetry of Adrienne Rich, but here they are manifested in different ways. When commenting on Adrienne Rich’s The Will to Change (1971), David Kalstone (1977) said that it was not only a remarkable book of poetry but in addition it was “something else as well” (p.33). For many of us these comments would be appropriate for much of Rich’s writings. Her poetry has always been committed to change and revision. Nor has she been content to accept her heritage at face value, rather preferring to probe her diverse birthright. In “Tear Gas” (1969) she writes:

The will to change begins in the body not in the mind
My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding with every act of resistance and each of my failures…

Rich does not, however, limit her “will to change” to herself, but extends it to her readers in particular and society in general. Liz Yorke (1997) expresses this succinctly when she says:

Rich believes in and, indeed depends on the active participant-reader who will hear the words for a significant transformation of awareness to happen. Always a provocative voice her words have challenged, warned, wrestled with, and reflected on the major cultural and political issues of our times. Her passionate effort to transform the field of social and cultural politics has taken her further and beyond many of her own boundaries. (p.132)

Yorke is remarking on Rich’s desire for change in her life and the necessary adjustments this will make in her relationship to her family. As a consequence of probing and plumbing her heritage Rich emerges with various emotional reactions to her life so far. The very framework of her existence – her sexuality, her motherhood, her astute social and political awareness and her Jewish heritage – has on numerous occasions been a source of concern to Adrienne Rich. This concern has frequently manifested itself in the expression of grief and guilt.
In 1982 Rich wrote *Split at the Roots*. The title implies a crack or separation of the very origin of her being. The child of a Jewish father and a Gentile mother, to whom did Rich owe allegiance? By affirming one and denying the other there must of necessity be a feeling of betrayal. The concept of emotion as betrayal plays a significant role in Rich’s guilt about her “split” religious heritage. Rich tells of the occasion when, as a young girl of sixteen, she went alone to the cinema to watch the newsreels of the Allied liberation of the German concentration camps. She was overwhelmed by her emotional reaction:

> When I try to go back and touch the pulse of that girl of sixteen, growing up in many ways precocious and so ignorant, I am overwhelmed by a memory of despair, a sense of inevitability more enveloping than any I had ever known. Anne Frank’s and many other personal narratives of the Holocaust were still unknown or unwritten. But it came to me that every one of those piles of corpses, mountains of shoes and clothing had contained, simply, individuals, who had believed, as I now believed of myself, that they were intended to live out a life of some kind of meaning, that the world possessed some kind of sense and order; yet this had happened to them. And I, who believed my life was intended to be so interesting and meaningful was connected to those dead by something – not just mortality but a taboo name, a hated identity. Or was I – did I really have to be? (pp.106-107)

Rich’s dilemma was whether or not she should associate with or dissociate herself from these people, again showing the ambivalence in her train of thought. Are these men and women “them” or “us?” And for whom should she feel the emotion of guilt for having betrayed; the Jews depicted in the newsreel or the guilt of having betrayed her parents, who preferred she kept a low profile about her Jewish heritage? In *The Vehement Passions* (2002) Philip Fisher describes the emotions as “thorough” – that is, they consume our minds totally. Fisher also writes: “To use a term taken from the philosophy of Stanley Cavell (1988) we would say that it is in the moment of repudiating the hold of the ordinary and the everyday that an impassioned state begins” (p.44). And this, surely, is also the world of the poem. When Rich watched the newsreel edition of the Allies freeing the Jewish prisoners from the concentration camps she completely lost touch with the commonplace events of life. She was so consumed with emotion and empathy for such people as Anne Frank and all those who had suffered at the hands of the Germans. Rich’s grief and guilt over her acknowledgement of her Jewish heritage
is in stark contrast to Plath’s. Plath assumed a metaphoric adversarial relationship between her father as a supposed Nazi and her mother as a supposed Jew in order to emphasise the antagonism in her relationship with her parents.

On another occasion Rich again experienced the emotion of guilt in the form of betrayal. Whilst at college Rich needed to have the hem of a skirt taken up. The seamstress doing the adjustments was a survivor of the Holocaust. She was an older woman with a strong accent. Quite unexpectedly she asked Rich: “You Jewish?” (p.109) Rich’s reply was to shake her head and mutter, “No,” and by so doing she felt she had betrayed the woman. In much the same way Rich was overwhelmed by her guilt for her betrayal and denial. On reflection she tells just what she had said “no” to. The woman she chose to dissociate herself from was in every sense of the word a heroine who had no doubt saved herself and others from internment by the Nazis. As Rich said in *Split at the Roots*:

> There are betrayals in my life that I have known at the very moment were betrayals: this was one of them. There are other betrayals committed so repeatedly, so mundanely, that they leave no memory trace behind, only a growing residue of misery, of dull, accreted self-hatred. Often these take the form not of words but of silence. (p.109)

Even after her marriage Rich was still ambivalent about her Jewish heritage, still torn between them and us. In “Readings of History” 1960 Rich states:

> Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew
> Yankee nor Rebel
> born in the face of two ancient cultures. I’m a good reader of history.

In Rich’s opinion her husband Conrad favoured assimilation and affirmation. In *Blood Bread and Poetry* (1986) Rich emphasises how it was relatively easy for a person to retain their Jewish identity and yet blend into society. Although Rich is critical of her husband for wanting to be assimilated into American society, she admits that both she and her parents were guilty of doing the same thing. She claimed that in order to identify as Jewish:

> I have to be willing to do two things: I have to claim my father, for I have my Jewishness from him … and I have to break his silence, his taboos; in order to claim him I have in a sense to expose him.
And there is, of course, the third thing: I have to face the sources and the flickering presence of my own ambivalence as a Jew; the daily, mundane anti-Semitism of my entire life. (p.100)

The word silence occurs in the above passage “I have to break his silence” just as it had done in *Split at the Roots* (1982) when she refers to the self-hate of betrayal “Often these take the form not of words but of silence.” Was it the same kind of silence Rich is referring to in both pieces of writing? Was she suggesting her father also betrayed his heritage by his silence? As Rich has said previously: “Lying is done with words and also with silence” (p.81). The word silence is used in three consecutive lines in “Frame” (1980):

> it is meant to be in silence that this happens
in silence that he pushes her into the car
banging her head in silence that she cries out.

The images of silence pervade much of Rich’s writing. These images of silence are the underlying structure in the above writings. Do these images of silence organise the poem, or is it more the suffering of ambivalence and in the sense of a sin of omission and therefore responsibility? Silence can also be a response, or a non-response, to that which is overwhelming or ambivalent. It is something she very much wants to get across to her reader that silence is not always golden. By emphasising silence as a negative concept in her imagery she is showing us the cerebral control she has over her emotions. Rich has considered silence as a positive response to a situation and has ultimately evaluated that in a number of instances as a negative connotation. Notions of silence as betrayal, silence by assimilation and silence as omission structure these images. The Jewishness in these lines implies Rich’s ambivalences, guilt and responsibility for her silences. Rich is to a degree enacting stages of her life in a speech act in the moments of her life recalled above. She is too, recalling the emotions which have prompted grief and guilt for the silences in her life and those of her family members. Whether these silences have been deliberate or unintentional, conscious or unconscious, we witness the cerebral contemplation behind them and the cognition at work in her writing.
In her recent poem “Prospective Immigrants Please Note” (2004) Rich reconsiders and revises her thoughts on the immigrant Jewish seamstress woman who altered the hem of her skirt almost sixty years earlier. In this poem Rich uses the imagery of going through doors to illustrate the grief and guilt which can be experienced by immigrants when leaving their country of origin and seeking domicile in a new country. In doing so Rich is presenting a lucid structure to “Prospective Immigrants Please Note” that indicates the emotions of grief and guilt in the poem. Rich is presenting her reader with a logical argument for and against assimilation of immigrants, in America, and not exclusively Jewish ones:

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name –

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

In the above lines, Rich is presenting an overview of the dilemma facing all immigrants when coming to a new country. On deciding to become a citizen, an immigrant must of necessity go through the “door” of questioning and
investigation. “Things look at you doubly and you must look back.” This possibly refers to necessity of being photographed.

There is in the next lines a hint of guilt as a form of betrayal:

There is always the risk
of remembering your name.

In these lines Rich is implying that once having become assimilated into a new country there is the chance of becoming overwhelmed with the guilt of realising your true identity and the guilt at having renounced it. For full assimilation into the workforce, a change of surname may be required, or even a change of name if a woman marries a man of that country. The immigrant can choose to retain her nationality – that is, to not pass through the door. Perhaps the poet is suggesting that by so doing, the immigrants believe that they are living more honourably. They may retain their “attitudes” and “positions” and even “die bravely,” but there is a price. On the one hand, the immigrants have retained their full identity and nationality; but on the other hand they will miss out on many of the facilities and privileges of their new country. The poem ends with the same dilemma with which it started:

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

In the above poem Rich makes use of images such as a door and a person’s name for a reason. Names and addresses imply domicile and much of “Prospective Immigrants Please Note” deals with the theme of nationality and domicile. Rich is at all times in command of her emotions throughout this poem and there is an underlying structure of her images which makes use of the theme of domicile and opening doors allowing entrance. The door, however, of itself cannot guarantee a secure entrance to a permanent domicile; it is “only a door,” and true domicile necessitates that the prospective immigrant becomes integrated.
This is not the only occasion when Rich has used imagery about “doors” and “doorframes.” In “To Have Written the Truth” (1974) she makes a reference to a doorframe:

When self absolution
Easy going pal of youth
Leans in the doorframe.

In this poem the “doorframe” is used in reference to the conscience. In “Frame” (1980) Rich’s poem relates to the much publicised court case when in 1979 a black female university student laid charges against the police for arresting her while she was sheltering from the inclement weather. The student was within the frame of the poet’s vision, but the writer of the poem was unable to help her.

Rich is also reliving and enacting a moment of her life which has left her affected by profound memories. In writing this poem and putting together the images Rich is engaging in a speech act expiating her guilt, for her betrayals of the past and in this way cognitively processing these acts of betrayal and the emotion of guilt she has because of them. Here Rich puts forward a compelling argument that her emotion of guilt is a cognitive judgment.

An issue less personal, but nevertheless important to Rich’s political conscience is America’s war involvement. In “Bears” (1955) and “Nightbreak” (1968) she evokes the dreams she has experienced. In “Bears” Rich enjoys an unperturbed sleep in which she dreams of bears of many hues who tread noiselessly up the stairs causing neither harm nor trepidation. In the final lines of the poem however, we glimpse these halcyon nights are drawing to a close:

When did I lose you? Whose have you become?
Why do I wait and wait and never hear
Your thick nocturnal pacing in my room?
My bears, who keep you now, in pride and fear?

By the 1960s Rich’s dreams are disrupted by facets of the Vietnam War. Terence Des Pres (1988) regarded “Nightbreak” as:
an angry probe into the experience of political intrusion. The poet’s openness in the world makes her vulnerable to the world’s horror, especially the violence her own nation visits upon helpless children. (p.170)

“Nightbreak” makes clear the way in which the images of “list of wounds / symmetrically placed” and “sleep cracked and flaking” demonstrate Rich’s grief and guilt over the planned and repeated damage done in the Vietnam War. By presenting these images in such a way they offer a well-ordered structure which implies the emotions of grief and guilt. In this poem Rich’s grief and guilt for the atrocities of war, perpetrated by her countrymen can be construed as guilt by association. She speaks as if she were an actual participant in the Vietnam War. Not only does the poet state how her sleep is affected by dreams of war, with pieces of shrapnel flying around over her bed, but she is physically injured by the flying debris:

In the bed the pieces fly together
and the rifts fill or else
my body is a list of wounds
symmetrically placed
a village
blown apart by planes
that did not finish the job
the enemy has withdrawn
between raids become invisible
there are
no agencies
or relief
the darkness becomes utter
Sleep cracked and flaking
sifts over the shaken target.

“Nightbreak” attests to the shocking plight of the Vietnamese people. It is much more however, than a theoretical list of events and occurrences manifested by unrelated metaphors. The imagery speaks of damage rather than total destruction. The planes do not finish the job, and so they will return. The wounds are numerous but they are not life-threatening. Sleep is cracked and flaking, but not totally lost. The target has been shaken rather than totally annihilated. Rich no doubt does this to attest to the ongoing horrors of such wars. It is this lack of finality manifested in the imagery and metaphors which combines the images and
makes them something which is coherent and demonstrates the conscious and perceptive assessment in “Nightbreak.”

Mohan Mallen (1998) claims that emotions can be set in motion by the cognitive evaluation of a state of affairs and can cause a cognitive reaction (p. 116). Rich was aware of the conditions in Vietnam, made an intelligible assessment of the situation and stated her political opinions – that is, her horror at the barbarity of war – in a logical manner. There is also a suggestion that the war is quite structured and organised. She says things such as “my body is a list of wounds symmetrically placed” and “the enemy has withdrawn between raids.” Saying that her “body is a list of wounds” implies an inventory has been taken to assess the damage, thus making the atrocities more calculated. “The enemy has withdrawn between raids” suggests a further calibrated plan for ongoing invasions. This also sustains the stance that Rich’s thoughts were structured and cognitive. She is not merely stating her objections to the inevitability of war, but to the fact that political bureaucrats have spent a great deal of time, effort and money, planning and implementing warmongering strategies which are then put into place quite categorically. In “Firebombers” Sexton also decries America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. America is putting people into their coffins as indifferently and routinely as grocers pack cauliflowers into crates. The way in which Rich processes her emotional responses is in accordance with such theorists as Robert Solomon, (2003) Jesse Prinz (2004) and Michael Lacewing. (2005) Solomon discusses the topic of the politics of emotions – the manner in which we situate ourselves with respect to the world. Rich too, is doing this when she evaluates the wartime situation – and her reactions to it – and then goes on to express her views cognitively. In *Gut Reactions* (2004) Prinz demonstrates the way in which emotion is a kind of perception in the complete sense and the way in which emotions disclose how a situation affects us in just the same way as our sight displays things visibly to us. Rich experienced the emotional effect of wartime horrors and expressed her emotional experiences through her poetry. Lacewing asks how are we to differentiate between appropriate emotional responses which assess events rationally and inappropriate emotional responses which merely reveal our biases. He goes on to argue that this point of view is somewhat ironic,
because in actual fact we vet our emotions by an “emotional” self awareness, resulting in genuine evaluative responses. Rich too, does this when she assesses war and then develops her opinions in a formal poetic structure. Both Rich and Sexton used their poetry to make sense of atrocious actions which were being committed and to articulate their grief and guilt through their poems.

In the following stanzas in “Nightbreak” Rich compares the frail clay oil lamps of Mesopotamia to the infamous incident when napalm was used in incendiary bombs over an Asian village:

Time is quiet doesn’t break things
Or even wound Things are in danger
from people The frail clay lamps
of Mesopotamia
row on row under glass
in the ethnological section
little hollows of dried-up oil The refugees
with their identical tales of escape I don’t
collect what I can’t use I need
what can be broken.

Here Rich has structured the imagery by making it comparative. The people in the villages and the clay lamps (the cultural heritage of Mesopotamia) are all in danger. She is quick to emphasise that their demise or extinction is not due to time and nature, but to deliberate and intentional destruction, from mankind:

Time is quiet doesn’t break things
Or even wound Things are in danger
from people

Rich is likening the fragility of the frail clay lamps of Mesopotamia to what could well be the ultimate fate of the people from these Asian villages. One day they will be no more than a memory preserved as exhibits in the ethnological department of some museum, reduced to “little hollows of dried-up oil.” Rich is implying that the inhabitants of the villages face genocide. She wants to stop this, not for any theoretical purpose, but to save lives:
I don’t
collect what I can’t use
what can be broken
I need

Again we observe the theme of the personal explosive effect of governmental imposition on the individual person and the way in which this makes others experience feelings of grief and guilt for the suffering of the innocent. Throughout history sectors of the community have campaigned and protested against the futility and inhumanity of war and the needless suffering of the innocent, who are frequently women and children. Rich makes mention of this in “Hunger” (1975). Not only does Rich experience grief for the suffering of others, but guilt that she is incapable of doing anything to lessen their suffering. She is very possibly referring to something else as well. Mesopotamia is an ancient civilization where oil lamps were used as the basic source of light, but even in the so-called dark ages of ancient civilisation the human species was wise enough to use oil in a positive way in order to benefit mankind and be of service to all, rather than to destroy other nations. Now people are in danger from other nations using napalm bombs made from oil. Despite scientific advancement, and the ethnological or comparative study of human beings we are in danger of reversing progress.

The “frail clay lamps” in “Nightbreak” have more than simply their words value. In Of Woman Born Rich states:

> It does not seem unlikely that the woman potter molded, not simply vessels, but images of herself, the vessel of life, the transformer of blood into life and milk – And the pot, vessel, urn, pitcher was not an ornament or a casual container; it made possible the transforming of raw food into cooked; it was also sometimes used to store the bones or ashes of the dead. (p. 97)

I believe the lines “I don’t / collect what I can’t use / I need / what can be broken” implies that people who have become displaced refugees, as a result of the Vietnam war, are precious to Rich. The fact that they can be damaged, or “broken,” increases rather than decreases their worth. Here too we witness what is joining together the images which Rich uses. She compares the bodies being blown apart to pottery oil lamps in Mesopotamia – both vessels and both frail and vulnerable. By her use of images and metaphors she demonstrates that the body
and the clay pot are capable of sustaining life and holding food. Rich makes a very intelligible connection between clay pots and human bodies. In *Of Woman Born* Rich states that the woman potter:

> was expressing, celebrating and giving concrete form to her experience as a creative being possessed of indispensable powers. Without her biological endowment the child – the future and the sustainer of the tribe – could not be born; without her invention and skill the pot or vessel – the most sacred of handmade objects – would not exist. (p. 97)

Robert Briffault (1969) makes a similar claim when he says:

> The manufacture of pots, like most operations in primitive societies … partakes of a ritual or a religious character … that the pots identity with the great mother is deeply rooted in ancient belief through the greater part of the world. (p. 473 -74)

Rich emphasises the frailty of the pots: “The frail lamps of Mesopotamia, row on row under glass, in the ethnological section.” Rich is implying that much of what is happening has been determined by modern science, which is in a sense the culprit for what is happening to these people. By using the word “ethnological,” Rich likens the clay lamps to the Asian people. They are both in danger of being deprived of oil – their life support – and of being blown apart and subsequently deprived of life. It is this comparison of forms of life and the means of sustaining life which structures the images and gives them their moulding contours. The pattern of metaphors used by Rich gives an overall structure to “Nightbreak.” The extended metaphors used in the poem, depict her grief and guilt on behalf of these Asian villagers.

In “Nightbreak” Rich is trying to bring to the notice of America and the citizens of the world that men, women and children are dying needlessly. Mathew Rothschild (1994) acclaims Rich for using poetry as a means of informing the public. He claims that *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993) is an “ambitious, sweeping work which contains an elaborate defence of political poetry…. It is also a trenchant indictment of American society today and a turbulent coming-to-grips with her own citizenship” (p.1). William Carlos
Williams in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (1938) says something similar, that poetry should be an agent for conveying political publicity to the community:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day for lack
of what is found there.

Rothschild also describes Rich’s poetry as a caustic accusation of the current way of life in America and a display of Rich confronting her American citizenship. Ten years on, in “For the Record,” (2004) Rich’s stance on America’s involvement or intrusion in political warfare has not changed. The poet maintains it is no longer good enough to claim the responsibility for war lies with politicians and governments. Ordinary citizens share the responsibility and the guilt by association. This is what Rich is driving at when she says:

The clouds and the stars didn’t wage this war
the brooks gave no information
if the mountains spewed stones of fire into the river
it was not taking sides
the raindrop faintly swaying under the leaf
had no political opinions.

Even the miles of barbed-wire
stretched around crouching temporary huts
designed to keep the unwanted
at a safe distance, out of sight
even the boards that had to absorb
year upon year, so many human sounds

so many depths of vomit, tears
slow-soaking blood
had not offered themselves for this.
The trees didn’t volunteer to be cut into boards
nor the thorns for tearing flesh
Look around at all of it

and ask whose signature
is stamped on the orders, traced
in the corner of the building plans
Ask where the illiterate, big bellied
women were, the drunks, and crazies,
the ones you feel most of all: ask where you were.
In combining nature and responsibility in these lines, Rich is not just using the imagery of nature as such, but is showing how nature is innocent of the atrocities committed by humankind, even though the phenomena of nature may seem to cause natural disasters. Everything that nature does is just that, a natural event, not caused by any artificial phenomenon. There was no political pressure or influence on nature. On the other hand, mankind can be corrupted and so too, to a certain extent, can nature be corrupted by man. The trees were unwillingly made into boards. Over time these boards absorbed years of blood, sweat and tears of human suffering. It was not as if the trees volunteered to do these things, rather they were made to do them, just as innocent soldiers are frequently coerced into committing acts contrary to their nature. Rich is not however, prepared to let the average man off the hook altogether. To some extent we all share a responsibility by association, as Rich asks where all of us were when the declaration for war was being signed. We elected the politicians and so they have our support. Even the most humble of citizens is responsible: it is a democracy and everyone can express their opinion. The very last line of the poem is perhaps the most telling of all: “ask where you were.”

The emotions Rich expresses here are very similar to those expressed by Solomon (2003) when he says that our emotions are approximately linked to our evaluation of a particular state of affairs. In Solomon’s opinion they are judgments rather than feelings: “They are stances towards the world for which we can be held responsible” (p.18). Rich exemplifies Solomon’s view in “For the Record.” Here she makes an evaluation about war and then goes on to make the judgment that in war no-one is without either blame or responsibility. Sexton does this too in “I’m Dreaming the My Lai Soldier Again” when she says, “and I look at my hand and it is green with intestines / And they won’t come off, / They won’t.” Here Sexton owns that she too shares the guilt of what is happening. True to Sexton’s type of guilt she does not believe she will ever receive absolution for her part in the wrongdoings.

A further ongoing source of grief and guilt for Adrienne Rich was the coexistence of her contradictory emotions towards her husband Conrad and her three sons. For
Rich the ambivalence of her feelings about her family took the form of resentment for the way in which they intruded on her artistic life rather than an actual lack of love for them. Due to these mixed emotions, Rich experienced substantial and ongoing grief and guilt. She was profoundly aware of the chasm between Rich the woman, wife and mother, and Rich the poet. In *Of Woman Born* (1976) she readily acknowledges the diversity of her emotions of guilt and exasperation, on the one hand, and her love and concern for her family, on the other. Rich’s emotions ranged from:

blissful gratification of tenderness to the emotions of resentfulness and frustration at being caught in a trap …

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. (p.21)

As Rich has said above, she experienced the pain and the guilt associated with both loving and resenting her family in a single context. If she regarded them as “guiltless” then her resentment of them was her imperfection. In the early years of her marriage and motherhood in the late 1950s Rich’s journal entries substantiate the fact that she was experiencing difficulties with her contradictory emotions of guilt over the roles of motherhood and those of artistry. Rich experienced guilt because she resented her family for distracting her from her work. At this time there was no socially accepted acknowledgement of women experiencing these ambivalent emotions about their families. Consequently Rich and like-minded women were left feeling guilty and even “monstrous.” In “When We Dead Awake” (1979) Rich makes reference to her guilt over her dissatisfaction with her life as a wife and mother.

For Rich to admit to her resentment towards her children due to the degree to which they distracted her from her work, took tremendous courage when considering the prevailing attitude towards women in America at this time. Liz Yorke (1997) refers to the “institution of motherhood,” claiming that it took both integrity and courage on Rich’s part to admit to her flaws. No doubt the most
difficult thing for Rich to do was to discuss the occasion when she had felt resentful towards her children. Not unexpectedly, Rich’s writings brought howls of outrage from a number of critics. Alexander Theroux (1976) wrote that “this book is an absolute radical witchery; the bookend to its male chauvinist counterpart” (p.35). He believes Rich wrote the book during some sort of mental breakdown when she was depressed and racked with guilt. He has called it “The Confessions of St Adrienne.” (p.36) No doubt there was a degree of the confessional in her writings. She is acknowledging her frustration at being housebound with three young children and unable to do what she wants to do. Her solution is to work harder, in order to continue as a writer. This in turn no doubt only heightens her sense of guilt; time spent in writing is time spent away from the children. As Rich claims, she felt as if her intellectual mind was disintegrating, much in the way she outlines in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.”

In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” Rich claims that at the time of the publication of her second book, she was already discontented with it. Even though the book was praised for its “gracefulness,” she was despondent. For Rich this could only point to one thing that: “[i]f there were doubts, if there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps even a monster” (p. 42). By the time Rich’s third child was born her resentment had grown:

I was writing very little partly from fatigue that female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children’s constant needs. What I did write was unconvincing to me; my anger and frustration were hard to acknowledge in or out of poems because in fact I cared a great deal about my husband and my children…. Now to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage requires a holding-back and putting aside of that imaginative activity and demands instead a kind of conservatism…. But in those years I always felt the conflict as a failure of love in myself. I had thought I was choosing a full life: the life available to most men, in which sexuality, work and parenthood could exist. But I felt, at twenty nine, guilt towards the people closest to me and guilty towards my own being. (p. 43)
Writing on Joanne Michulski, who killed her two youngest children, Rich (1976) asks how many women have known “the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood, the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt” (p.277).

In summary, then, a great deal of the grief and guilt enunciated in the poetry of Adrienne Rich centres on social and political issues rather than concerns at a personal level, although there is a degree of personal grief and guilt expressed.

Much of the grief and guilt in the poetry of Adrienne Rich emanates from her concern for change, which frequently takes the form of grief and guilt for the atrocities perpetrated against innocent people. We witness this in poems such as “Nightbreak” and “For the Record.” In her less political poems, such as “Frame,” we are made aware of Rich’s grief and guilt over the treatment of marginalised people in society. Rich does however try to make sense of these emotions at a more personal level, for example, her resentment about caring for young children, when she would have preferred to be pursuing more intellectual activities. There is less emphasis on her self in the poetry of Rich. Whereas Plath and Sexton attempt to justify grief and guilt, Rich’s emotions stem from a concern that she is unable to help those who are victimized.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored some of the ways in which grief and guilt have been examined and acted out in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. It has shown how these emotions are shaped in their poems, and how this shaping process is fundamentally cognitive and frequently evaluative. Grief and guilt, that is to say, are not simply emotional states, but ways of making sense of the world. As this chapter has shown, Plath, Sexton and Rich grieve in different ways, feel guilty in different ways and make sense of these feelings in different ways. But in the case of all three poets, the sense-making capacity and function of the emotions is paramount.
Grief was a pivotal emotion in the poetry and in the life of Sylvia Plath. In poems such as “Daddy”, “Electra on Azalea Path”, “Medusa” and “Berck Plage” both grief and guilt are in evidence. However, it is clearly apparent how the emotion in these poems is moulded to give cognition and judgment to her poetry. Plath wanted to move on from her grief and guilt but as these poems demonstrate she was unable to do so and Plath realised this. She derived no therapeutic benefit from these events. This makes clear the fact that she was able to judge and to evaluate her emotions cognitively. Plath (unlike Sexton and Rich) having experienced an inability to come to terms with her emotion of grief and guilt over her parents, disconnects herself from them. For Plath the final line in “Daddy” articulates neither remorse nor forgiveness: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard I’m through”. In “Medusa” she says of her mother “Off, off, eely tentacle! / There is nothing between us.”

Anne Sexton’s inability to articulate the emotion of grief becomes increasingly apparent in her poetry. She readily accepted guilt over her relationship with her family members but is unable to express her grief. There is, however, a consciousness in Sexton’s dealings with guilt which demonstrates the way in which the emotion is formed in her poems manifesting the cognitive and often estimative component of her poetry. Sexton thought very logically about the whole issue of grief and guilt and acknowledged that in order to assuage these emotions she must first of all be able to forgive herself and others their transgressions. In “All My Pretty Ones” Sexton says: “[w]hether you are pretty or not, I outlive you, / bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.”

Grief and guilt in the poetry of Adrienne Rich centre on issues with her family and her astute social and political awareness. In “Nightbreak” Rich expresses her grief and guilt over the atrocities perpetrated by her countrymen on the innocent Asian villagers. Rich also expresses these emotions in “Hunger,” grief for the suffering of the innocent and guilt that she is incapable of easing their pain. In “Frame” Rich directs the reader’s attention to a black female student unfairly treated by two officers of the law. She assesses the situation cognitively and condemns it for its injustice and racism. The poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich showed how grief
and guilt worked for them. It also made clear how their grief and guilt were
dissimilar. These emotions of Plath’s were characterised by her inability to come
to terms with them. Because Plath was unable to reconcile herself with her grief
and guilt towards her parents, she chose in the end, to disassociate herself from
them. Sexton too was incapable of articulating her grief over her ambivalent
association with her parents. Unlike Plath however Sexton still wanted to be
connected to her parents. Although Rich expressed both grief and guilt over her
father’s death most of her grief was on a political level, on account of her being
unable to help the suffering of the citizens in war-torn Asia.
CONCLUSION

The opposing views of critics concerning the later and more emotional poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich gave rise to the argument of this thesis. Chapter One examined the way in which the critics have judged the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich and the benchmarks by which they evaluated it – that is, the binaries between the poem as a structured entity and the poem as an emotional occurrence. In this thesis I have argued that the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich, should be assessed in light of recent theories of the emotions showing that their “emotional” poetry is inherently a poetry of form and that the emotions at work are thereby deeply structured. Chapter Two then examined the cognitive dimension of emotions as developed in recent theories of the emotions.

The substantive chapters, Chapters Three, Four and Five analysed a range of emotions characteristic of their poetry. Chapter Three argued that anger depicted by these poets is both highly cerebral and possesses a perceptible cognitive dimension. In both “Daddy” and “Medusa” for example, Plath articulated, by means of intricate imagery, her strong emotion of anger due to her perceived ill-treatment by her parents. Both of these poems are examples of an angry disowning of the parents by Plath. “Burning the Letters” is also a repudiation of Hughes by his wife. Much of Sexton’s later poetry expressed her vehement anger at the atrocities of war and America’s involvement in it. In “The Firebombers” and “After Auschwitz,” the comparison of mundane vegetables and routine jobs to the magnitude of large-scale warfare emphasizes the bureaucratic organisations lack of perception of the gravity of war. Rich too voiced her anger at the violation of innocent people in Asian villages, and her consciousness that the dominating bureaucratic government has corrupted the individual soldier. The poetry of these three women makes us aware of the differences in the type of anger they each experienced. Much of Plath’s anger was self-directed, whereas for Sexton and Rich it was anger at others, namely the American government, for their warmongering activities.
Chapter Four examined the cerebral dimension of the love, hate and jealousy in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. In “Burning the Letters” Plath, by means of her contrasting images and metaphors, pointed out her previous obsequious servility to Hughes and her desire for future ascendancy over him. It was her hatred and jealousy about what Hughes had done to her which structured the text in “Burning the Letters.” In “The Double Image” Sexton put forward what she considered to be her inability to love her mother. She did however make use of both analytical and evaluative judgment in order to arrive at a considered opinion. In “After Dark” Rich was finally able to resolve her ambivalent love/hate relationship with her father and finally lay to rest her hatred of him. Once again we are aware of the lack of preoccupation with self. For both Sexton and Rich it was concern for a lack of maternal and paternal love on the part of their parents and a desire to overcome it whereas for Plath it was more about the lack of love she had received from her parents.

Chapter Five assessed grief and guilt in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. “Electra on Azalea Path” manifested the grief and guilt Plath endured over the death of her father and her strong desire to gain some therapeutic benefit from her visit to his graveside. Although we are made aware of her overwhelming grief at finally seeing where her father is buried, we are left believing her solace-seeking was somewhat self-centred. In “For the Year of the Insane” Sexton expressed grief and guilt over her lack of religious belief. Her sincerity would not allow her to acknowledge a religious belief she did not genuinely own. In this respect there are similarities in the grief and guilt as expressed by Plath and Sexton; both were in search of peace and absolution, but neither was able to find it. Much of the grief and guilt in the poetry of Rich stems from her Jewish heritage. Should she embrace her heritage and acknowledge her fellow Jews, or keep a low profile on her Jewishness in the way her parents had preferred her to do, yet again this shows how Rich’s emotions frequently encompass the bigger political picture rather than her personal concerns.

Chapters Three, Four and Five revealed the nuances in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich. All three poets made extensive use of metaphors and imagery in their
poetry, which demonstrates a change of association and a mental connection between ideas. Plath structured her metaphors and imagery in order to demonstrate her expectations and disillusionment with marriage, as was depicted in “Lesbos” and “The Applicant.” Rich too in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” expressed her anger through the imagery of mouldy wedding cake; to communicate her anger that women’s mental ability declines very rapidly once married. There are however differences in the anger directed at their fathers. Plath’s anger towards her father was unremitting even after his death, whereas, even after an extremely ambivalent relationship with her father Rich was ultimately sorrowful at his death. Sexton, although having expressed her anger at her father in “All My Pretty Ones” for his lack of fatherly concern is, in the final analysis, willing to forgive him to “[b]end down my strange face to you and forgive you.” Sexton was willing to admit that there was a degree of blame on her side also. Ironically Plath, who had a father she adored and a mother who indulged her, was the one who in her final poems expressed most anger towards her parents, and held them responsible for the happenings of her life. Rich and Sexton on the other hand, who had opposing feelings for their fathers – and in Sexton’s case for her mother also – were ultimately able to let go of their anger towards their parents in a way that Plath was unable or unwilling to do. What becomes increasingly apparent in the study of the intelligence in the emotions in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich is the glaring discrepancy between the emotions in these three poets. Much of the emotion articulated by Plath was self-obsessed, whereas Sexton was frequently examining why she experienced particular emotions and the degree of blame that was attributable to her. Rich’s emotions on the other hand suggest a greater maturity and a genuine concern for humankind rather than an introspective examination of her personal emotions. No doubt the fact that Rich’s poetry has a greater maturity must make a difference. She is now in her eightieth year whereas Plath died at the age of thirty-one and Sexton at forty-six. Nor is it without relevance that both Plath and Sexton committed suicide in comparison with the fact that Rich, on more than one occasion, expressed her concern over such happenings.
The three chapters showed that the emotions in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich in fact shaped the poetry. Their work is not just a shapeless expression or effusion, but the outpouring is essentially structured in one way or another. There is in the poetry of these three women a strong sense of coherence and organisation and the emotions actually do the shaping in the poems. I have shown how the supposedly emotional deluge has in fact quite a complex structure and therefore it should be judged positively. It is not just about what the poems themselves are actually saying but the structuring dimension of the poetry.

Throughout the writing of this thesis the possibility that this type of study could be extended to other poets and their poetry was a consideration. The fact that the emotions in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Rich structure their poetry could well cause speculation on the structuring role of emotions in the poetry of other poets. It may well be time for a re-evaluation of the role of vehement emotion in the work of other poets.


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