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# Reproduction or Replication? Deconstructing the Myth of Maternal Glorification in Sexton's "Those Times" and "The Double Image"

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# REPRODUCTION OR REPLICATION: DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF MATERNAL GLORIFICATION IN SEXTON'S "THOSE TIMES" AND "THE DOUBLE IMAGE"

*by*

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**Introduction**

In her now-famous foreword to Anne Sexton's *Complete Poems*, Maxine Kumin frames Anne Sexton's work as becoming slightly less revelatory and liberatory over the years. Kumin describes Sexton's "flamboyance of subject matter" as "far less daring twenty years later" (Kumin, xxxiv). The "remonstrances became almost quaint" (Kumin, xxxiv). Some topics, such as mental health treatment, access to abortions, and masturbation, might have lost some of their provocative quality, although these themes continue to belabor women to this day. However, Sexton's attendance to questions of motherhood struck me as timelessly daring. The sheer intensity of emotions expressed towards her speakers' mothers, from resentment to rage to unconditional love and hope, still prove intrepid. This is especially salient during the 1950s and continues to be true in our contemporary moment. There are very few dominant critical narratives of motherhood in our current moment. For example, "mommy wars," or the cultural debate between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers dominate the negative discourse around motherhood. However, as this thesis will lay out based on textual analysis of Sexton's poetry, our culture is still reluctant to truly interrogate the emotional power that mothers hold over children, especially daughters. Sexton's pieces on motherhood, particularly "Those Times" and "The Double Image," ask us to question the glorification of mothers and in particular how their toxicity stems from a reproduction of dangerous feminine gender norms.

The idealization of mothers has existed throughout many eras of history; however, the type of motherhood that interests Sexton in her work is the model constructed during the Industrial Revolution. As Sharon Hays writes in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, "rarely is nurturing motherhood completely debunked" (Hays 14). Hays' research provides a historical understanding of conceptions of motherhood throughout various eras in American

history. The gender roles of the 1950s and forward primarily developed during the Industrial Revolution. Hays posits that the Industrial Revolution necessitated men to work in new factories and women to maintain the home. In order to legitimize the "unpaid domestic activities" (Hays 15) of women, the "separate spheres" ideology took root (Coontz 280). This ideology primarily glorified the work of women, their child-rearing and emotional care, in order to ease women's concerns about decreasing economic status. Women were told that they were protectors of our society's values: compassion, tenderness, virtue, and purity that the industrial order lacked (Cherlin 157). Hays aptly summarizes: "In no time at all, this movement culminated in what has variously been called the 'cult of domesticity' and the 'Domestic Code:' women, safely protected within the domestic enclave, would provide moral and emotional sustenance for their husbands and children and thereby participate in creating a more virtuous world [Cott 1977; Sacks 1984; Welter 1966].With this, a mother's role in child rearing began to take on new importance. Mothers, and only mothers, now moral and pure, were the shepherdesses, leading their flocks on the path of righteousness… this was all connected to mothers' superior moral virtue" (Hays 30).

After the The Great Depression and the two World Wars, there was a "new outburst of domestic ideology, a vigorous revival of traditional ideals of woman's place" (Campbell et.al 240). The perceived certainty and comprehensibility of gender roles became particularly compelling again because they were "pre-set compartments into which male and female could be arranged so as to create a sense of normalcy and order that were non-threatening and in keeping with uncomplicated versions of an ideal America" (Campbell et.al 240). As our culture began to re-coagulate into strict gender binaries, men became the economic backbone of the family again while women became a reified version of the Industrial Revolutions domestic keeper. Since women had monopolized the workforce during World War II, American society needed to

provide an equally as fulfilling new role for women. This became the reification of the Industrial Revolution domestic cult. On top of this shift, there was a rampant cultural movement towards consumerism due to the unbridled growth of the American economy after the war. The quality of life in most American households vastly increased and the creation of hundreds of new appliances facilitated an unprecedented cultural excitement about the bounty of the home. Women were told that cultivating the home, both materially and emotionally, was work that only *women* could do, perpetuating the Industrial Revolution's "separate spheres" myth. This model was so pervasive that women who admitted to being unfulfilled by homemaking on television were often stigmatized as having "serious psychological problems" (Coontz 280). As cultural sociologist and historian Stephen Lassonde writes:

> "The average family has two parents, that the father is the family's sole provider, and that the mother devotes herself exclusively to housework and childrearing, which consist of cooking hearty meals, attending PTA meetings, dispensing timely advice to her children and consolation when they meet with disappointment. Soulmate to her husband, she is his personal sanctuary from the daily rat race that affords a new home, a suburban school system, a new car every few years, and all the pleasures of the highest standard of living in the world. For her, marriage offers both sexual intimacy and the companionship of equals, even if she contributes nothing to the family's income" (Lassonde 12).

Lassonde delineates how concretized the "separate spheres" ideology of the Industrial Revolution became in postwar America. The desire for conventionality and a "return to normal" solidified the familial structure of man as breadwinner and woman as housewife.

Sexton's poetry reflects the time period of her life; however, cultural conceptions of motherhood have drastically changed since the 1950s. There is slightly mixed evidence, but

much of sociological data suggests that American culture still largely glorifies the role of mother as the moral nurturer, with little critique of that role. In fact, if anything, statistics demonstrate that average attitudes towards predominantly working mothers still demonize them as neglectful (Douglas & Michaels 3). While there is a dearth of research on attitudes towards mothers in the past decade, research between 2000 and early 2010s demonstrate the persistence of motherhood glorification. For example, Ann Crittenden, one of the most prominent family sociologists in the field wrote in 2001 that, "In the United States, motherhood is as American as apple pie. No institution is more sacrosanct; no figure is praised more fulsomely. Maternal selflessness has endowed mothers with a unique moral authority" (Crittenden). Other prominent scholars of motherhood, such as Susan Douglas and Marilyn Michaels have suggested, "We fear that, today, we have a new common sense about motherhood that may be as bad, or worse, as the one that chained mothers to their Maytags in 1957" (5). Surveys suggest similar conclusions. One national survey conducted by the Institute for American Values in 2005 showed that 78% of women felt more valued by society after becoming a mother. What this statistical and sociological research indicates is that we, as a culture, have put mothers on a moral pedestal and demonize them for the slightest deviances, such as deciding to work. It is important to note here that there is absolutely a subgroup of mothers who have been villainized time and time again in our culture -- black and poor mothers, who have by and large been stigmatized and denigrated as "welfare queens" or "crack mothers" (Douglas & Michaels 4). However, most other groups of American mothers are culturally conceived as possessing a natural unconditional love and ethos that no-one else in society can give.

This concretization of the "domestic cult" of the 1950s made Sexton's provocative writing on motherhood even more impactful. Sexton's poetry is very influenced by the role that

women had to play as the ideal keeper of the domestic space. Sexton, born in 1928, became a renowned Postwar American poet for her deeply intimate poetry, work that helped define the era's Confessional school of poetry. She began writing at a young age, but was stymied by her mother's doubts of her. She wouldn't re-assume her position at the typewriter until she began seeing Dr. Martin Orne, the psychotherapist who treated her during multiple hospitalizations for severe depression. Sexton's first volume of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, was published in 1960, situating this poetry as heavily defined by the postwar consumerist conformity discussed above. Sexton went on to write eight more volumes of poetry, including Live or Die, her Pulitzer Prize-winning volume that features "Those Times." Sexton's earlier work, including the poems highlighted in this thesis, "Those Times" and "The Double Image," explored themes of mental health, gender roles, marriage, sexuality, the suffocation of domesticity, her own childhood, death, and motherhood. As literary critic Philippa Little says, her poetry "explores the socialization into femininity of the little girl self within the family" (Little 123).

The portrayal of motherhood in "Those Times" and "The Double Image" do that unabashedly: demonstrate how socialization into femininity begins and persists through the home. "Those Times" is a poem that describes a young girl's feelings of ostracization and danger in her own home, often at the hands of her mother. In my analysis of "Those Times," I will discuss how these aspects of the home that are dangerous to the speaker, the imagery of dolls and containment, are representations of certain toxic femininity standards such as body perfection, conventional gender expression, and unrealistic maintenance of behavior.

"The Double Image" also deconstructs our normative assumptions of mothers. This poem, widely anthologized as one of Sexton's most popular early poems, has been studied by

many literary critics. The poem is largely an autobiographical and chronological account of the birth of Sexton's daughter, Joyce, her subsequent postpartum hospitalization, and the period of time Sexton lives with her mother after the hospital. The "double image" is an organizing symbol in the poem, a representation of portraits on opposite sides of a hallway, commissioned after the speaker's suicide attempt. There have been many different interpretations of this "double image" throughout the world of literary criticism. Many interpretations of the "double image" have relied on both Freudian and Lacanian theory as the driving force of maternal rejection (McSpadden; Little; Mehta; Lucas). The formation of mother as competition for fatherly love and the abjection of mother after the mirror stage becomes dominant metaphors for the failed relationship between mother and daughter. However, the driving force behind this thesis's understanding of "The Double Image" is the mutual consumption, or sacrifice, between mother and daughter. I will argue that the imagery of portraits and mirrors, in the context of consumption and haunting diction, demonstrates how mothers reproduce the gendered expectation that women must sacrifice their bodies and personal fulfillment for the good of others.

Therefore, this thesis's interpretation of "The Double Image" and "Those Times" explores the reproduction of gender norms between mother and daughter. These poems imagine motherhood as a rather grim replication of body image issues, lack of self-identity, and the internalization of sacrifice. When considering both the context of the 1950s as well as our current moment, the grotesquity of Sexton's description of motherhood is particularly shocking. As discussed above, the renaissance of women in domestic roles troubled Sexton's poetry and Sexton herself. Therefore, in considering these poems' impacts on American culture, it is critical to imagine how shocking such a grotesque portrayal of "domestic bliss" and the "pure

housewife" would have been at the time. The deification of mothers as naturally equipped to emotionally protect both children and husbands is utterly deconstructed by Sexton's bleak depiction of mothers. Sexton's motherhood poetry deconstructs that narrative by demonstrating how psychologically toxic the mother-daughter relationship can be, especially through it's reproduction of femininity standards. But perhaps more importantly, Sexton's work illustrates that this glorification of mothers blocks our society from reckoning with the psychological power that mothers hold and perpetuates unrealistic standards for mothers themselves. Ultimately, Sexton's intensely grotesque portrayal of this reproduction of gender norms deconstructs our glorified idea of mothers, demonstrating how these ideals harm both daughters and mothers alike. The following sections will illustrate both the acculturation of toxic femininity standards, as well discuss how such glorification has an impact on mothers.

**"Those Times:" Reproduction of daughter, replication of mother**

Sexton's work often centers themes of motherhood, gender expression, and the pressures of the domestic sphere. This becomes even more pronounced in Sexton's Pulitzer-Prize winning collection, *Live or Die*. The volume returns often to childhood moments of childhood, both seemingly informed by Sexton's childhood, as well as the early years of her daughters' childhoods, Linda and Joyce. "Those Times" features a speaker revisiting her youth. Much of the poem describes physicalities of the speaker's childhood home, depicting the home as a house of horror. The speaker discusses the ways in which she felt trapped in her house, planning her "womanhood … as one choreographs a dance" (Sexton pg.120). While the poem touches on both her mother and father, the speaker predominantly focuses on the "cruelties" perpetuated by the mother (118). "Those Times" explores a fairly bleak relationship between mother and daughter

because the mother attempts to mold the daughter into toxic body standards, behavioral expectations, and gender norms. Both the motif of dolls and containment illustrates the ways in which the mother seeks to make her daughter something that she simply is not. These motifs clearly demonstrate a grotesque portrayal of the abuse of power that a mother can play out on her daughter. However, the poem also demonstrates how mothers are glorified as inherently caring and nurturing through social narratives like dolls. Therefore, there is a thread of tension that runs throughout the poem: the "ideal" mother is assumed to be protective and loving but can actually create a great deal of destruction on her daughter. By setting these two ideas of motherhood in tension with each other, the poem problematizes our assumptions of motherhood, and also demonstrates how our society can't reckon with the underlying emotional issues that mothers inflict because we have such staunch ideas of how mothers behave. Ultimately, the cultural assumptions of mothers blocks society at large from addressing concerns we may have about mothers, and the general institution of motherhood.

The imagery of the dolls demonstrates how the cultural myths surrounding motherhood make it difficult to problematize the actions and institution of motherhood. I will demonstrate how our society glorifies motherhood and socializes us to see mothers as inherently nurturing. This idealization creates a myth of how mothers naturally are, thereby making a daughter's experience of her mother very different from society's definition of a mother. As we see towards the end, the young girl repeatedly says "I didn't question" the various actions that her mother was doing (121). This sets an important tone for the full poem, in which the girl must accept a great deal of mistreatment from her mother. The motif of the dolls primarily illustrates how society wants to see mothers as inherently nurturing, kind, and naturally built for raising

children; however, in actuality a mother can actually be quite psychologically damaging to her daughter's body image and self-confidence.

One aspect of this mother-daughter reproduction of toxic requirements of women is body insecurity, illustrated by the perfection of the dolls in "Those Times." The speaker reminisces on her own self as a child, comparing herself to her "perfectly put together" dolls. Sexton writes,

"The me who refused to suck on breasts
she couldn't please,
the me whose body grew unsurely,
the me who stepped on the noses of dolls
she couldn't break.
I think of the dolls,
so well made,
so perfectly put together
as I pressed them against me,
kissing their little imaginary mouths.
I remember their smooth skin,
those newly delivered,
the pink skin and the serious China-blue eyes.
They came from a mysterious country
without the pang of birth,
born quietly and well" (120)

There is no direct comparison between the speaker and the dolls, but the language implies that the speaker makes such a comparison. This is clear because the speaker says that the dolls

are “newly delivered,” which means that the dolls are shipped, but also connotes childbirth, like the delivery of a newborn. The doll as a baby is an important image because it contrasts the description of the speaker as a child. The speaker says that her “body grew unsurely,” whereas the dolls were “so well made,/ so perfectly put together.” The speaker “refused to suck on the breast” whereas the dolls were easily pressed against the speaker, a position that connotes the maternal act of breastfeeding. The speaker will not breastfeed, whereas the doll assumes that position of being pressed against a maternal body. In every aspect, the dolls are “born well” and the subject is not. The diction of “born well” is similar to the diction of “perfectly put together.” These phrases describe physical traits of the dolls, but these phrases also connote personality traits as well. Both being “born well” and “perfectly put together” are also descriptions of being appropriate, proper, and well-behaved. Therefore, not only do these descriptions imply physical perfection, but also a type of personality perfection ascribed to young girls.

In the comparison itself, we see how toxic body standards are created through societal narratives like dolls. The very act of a mother giving her daughter a doll and encouraging the mother-daughter relationship that takes place between girl and doll is harmful. This is especially true in the reproduction of body image perfection. For example, the speaker lovingly dotes on the doll’s “smooth skin,” “pink skin,” and “China-blue eyes” (120). The toxicity of this body standard is no more pronounced than when the speaker says that the dolls are “well made.” This phrase sounds as though the human body can be manufactured, as one might say a car or a table is well-made. The language therefore demonstrates how the little girl wants an “ideal” body; however, bodies are neither mechanically produced, nor replicable. The primary importance of the imagery of the dolls is their replicable nature, unlike women and daughters, who are “naturally” reproduced by mothers, and therefore allowing for human differences. The

immediate comparison of speaker to doll therefore makes reproduction and replication seem singular, and normal. The poem points out the maternal instinct of replication is perfection, which will always be unattainable. The passing down of dolls from mother to daughter thus encourages the inculcation of body image ideals at an incredibly formative time in a child's life.

The dolls also demonstrate how our society creates narratives about motherhood that disallow us to critique the institution of motherhood itself. The imagery of the dolls actually reminds us that mothers are struggling under the same patriarchal structures inflicted upon girls. The mother in the poem, like Sexton's mother, probably also played with dolls, was confined to specific gender and domestic roles, and learned that her worth would predominantly come from caretaking and appearances. Therefore, the motif of dolls in "Those Times" demonstrates both the societal reinforcement of perfection for girls and mothers. The OED definition of doll is "a girl's toy-baby" (Doll). Because the dolls are described as babies throughout the poem, the speaker seems to be creating a mother-daughter relationship with her doll. The idea of pretending to be a mother also connotes the way in which we prime young girls into ideals of perfect motherhood. When little girls play with dolls, they are taught to dress, pamper, feed, and love the doll. By passing down a toy, and a narrative, that all little girls should grow up to act the same with their daughters, it is jarring when a mother actually acts quite unloving and harsh towards their daughter. We see this tension rise to the surface in the poem as the daughter is both taught to become a loving mother while being mistreated by her own mother. This tension demonstrates the way in which our societal narrative of mothers doesn't always match up to the lived reality of motherhood. The dolls represent how we glorify and valorize motherhood from such a young age. When we idealize mothers like this, we become unable to address the fact that their actions

actually hold a great deal of power. When we ignore the reality of a mother's vulnerabilities and own internalized insecurities, we can't face the damage that is reproduced for the daughter either.

The imagery of dolls poignantly attends to the pain of body image issues that pass down mother to daughter. However, another critical aspect of gender identity that is reproduced from mother to daughter is a type of personality perfection. The imagery of containment in "Those Times" serves to illustrate the more ambiguous type of judgement from mothers, such as the criticism of behavior, impulses, feelings, thoughts, and sense of self. More specifically, the images of containment represent the way the mother tries to confine the speaker's identity, her early conceptions of gender, and her domestic responsibilities. The images of containment throughout the poem (boxes, rooms, and domestic spaces) particularly raise the idea of the private life of the house versus the outside world. This is not more clear than in the girl's avoidance of the "window / as if it were an ugly eye" (Sexton 121). This very concept of containment demonstrates how the daughter has to hide her body and her personality from her mother. It is not a coincidence that the domestic spaces throughout the poem are presented as scary. Therefore, the imagery of containment also illustrates how the actions of a mother are perhaps more hidden due to the relegation of motherhood to the private sphere.

From the very outset of the poem, the speaker is in a "prison cell," twisted in a "knot," or behind a gate. Throughout the poem, the speaker is placed in many forms of figurative containment: her soul in a box, her body in a small room, sitting behind a gate or in a closet. In the very beginning of the poem the speaker says that it was her mother who locked her in her room everyday. At the very end of the poem, her mother is the only figure who lets her out of the room. Because the mother controls where her daughter is in the poem, it is implied that these feelings of confinement come from the mother. In the context of Sexton's life, this type of

maternal containment is made even more clear. Mary Gray's "constant criticism," high standards for perfection, and desire for maintenance of traditional gender norms are most-likely reflected in the poem itself (Middlebrooke 30). Overall, "Those Times" illustrates a mother who confines her daughter's body, personality, and gender expression, which makes the daughter estranged from herself and her body.

"Those Times" also dramatizes a dynamic in which some mothers might attempt to shape a daughter's personality, emotions, and sense of self. The speaker describes this as "stuffing her heart into a shoe box" (Sexton 120). Heart is a common metonymy for the soul, one's emotions, and one's feelings. Therefore, the heart represents more than a literal organ, but rather her soul and identity. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes herself by saying,

> "The me who refused to suck on breasts
> she couldn't please,
> the me whose body grew unsurely,
> the me who stepped on the noses of dolls" (119).

This description evinces the way that the speaker was an unconventional daughter, bolstered by Sexton's own autobiographical truth. Because the speaker was non-normative, it can be inferred that she feels the need to stuff her soul away as the unrestrained girl she was. The metonymy of stuffing her soul into a shoe box suggests how the speaker was desperate to hide and change her real identity. Furthermore, the diction choice of "stuffing" creates an image of the heart stuffed into the box reshaping over time, as a soft object in a box might mold to the box. This image suggests the speaker's desire to completely reshape her soul, in order to fit better into the square mold desired by her mother. Even though it is not directly her mother who contains her in this particular imagery, the rest of the poem suggests the mother is a source of pressure. The

implication of this imagery is that the speaker hides her soul in fear of her mother seeing it. As a young girl, the speaker's perhaps unusual personality made her afraid to be herself with her mother. Furthermore, a heart taken out of the body connotes an intense vulnerability. When the speaker stuffs it back into a box, it illustrates her deep fear of showing any of that vulnerability to her mother. Ultimately, the image of the box's containment is one that represents the way in which a mother might push her daughter to reshape her personality in order to fit a mold of the different persona.

The natural landscape language in "Those Times" symbolizes the confinement to specific gender roles. Throughout time, especially based on the gender ideology of the Industrial Revolution, gender roles have been described as the "natural order" for men and women. As touched upon in the introduction, the ideology of males and females being naturally fit for certain roles gained a great deal of popularity in the 1950s. This strict gender ideology creates norms that require everyone to follow the "nature" of their assigned gender. For young girls, they learn what is natural ("normal") through cultural signifiers, especially their mothers. These norms traditionally highlight a young girl's docility, sweetness, obedience, self-servitude, responsibility, and propriety. The "nature" of girls evolves then very naturally into the traditional gender roles we ascribe to mothers. The language of nature centers around the room the speaker is trapped within. Sexton writes,

> "I sat all day…
> avoiding the precious window
> as if it were an ugly eye
> through which birds coughed,
> chained to the heaving trees;

avoiding the wallpaper of the room

where tongues bloomed over and over,

bursting from lips like sea flowers" (120).

In this section, the speaker is focused on the avoidance of her surroundings. The speaker says that she avoided the window, "as if it were an ugly eye." Furthermore, she avoided the "wallpaper of the room -- where tongues bloomed over and over" (120). The window is likened to an eye and the wallpaper is likened to tongues. By personifying these inanimate parts of the room as body parts, it reads as though the window is watching her and the walls are talking to her. The nature that comes through the walls of the room are depicted as frightening. For example, outside the window, the speaker can see "birds… chained to heaving trees," a sad, if not terrifying image of entrapment (120). The wallpaper is depicted as a scene from nature as well: the "tongues" on the wall bloomed and "burst" like "sea flowers." Combining the imagery of the room as eyes and lips, alongside the imagery of this frightening nature diction, it sounds as though the speaker is being accosted by the gaze and cacophony of "nature." She is portrayed as avoiding this enveloping reality that the "natural" order of gender is fast encroaching upon her. By considering nature in the context of how we societally enforce gender norms, this imagery illustrates a girl who already feels as though the pressure to assume her "natural role" as a woman is closing in on her. Ultimately, we can see how the outside "nature" in this poem is a symbol of traditional gender roles, and another means of confinement that the mother enforces upon her daughter.

The containment imagery also demonstrates the way that domestic confinement transfers from mother to daughter. Unlike young boys, who are allowed to run around outside and inside, the speaker's forms of containment are all extremely domestic. The fact that the speaker's

mother is a locus of her containment therefore suggests that her mother attempts to confine her daughter domestically. A major pattern in the imagery of containment is the fact that they are all parts of a house. There could be many forms of containment chosen, but all of the containment happens within specifically gendered spaces of the home. These choices of imagery, shoe boxes, closets, wallpaper, and windows, are all parts of a home, and in particular parts of the home that tend to connote femininity, like the boxes and closets (119-20). The choice of domestic imagery therefore also suggests the way that the mother enforces a type of containment that would prime the speaker for containment as a mother.

When the mother finally allows her daughter to come out of containment, the daughter experiences an intense exposure. Sexton writes,

> "I did not question the bedtime ritual
> where, on the cold bathroom tiles,
> I was spread out daily
> and examined for flaws.

Several aspects of the stanza demonstrate a type of compulsivity in her mother's criticism. First, according to the OED, "ritual" can refer to a common psychological term to describe "a compulsive act or routine, the non-performance of which results in tension and anxiety" (Ritual). Furthermore, the words "daily" and "examine" also suggest the compulsivity inherent in the mother's observations because they indicate how consistent and methodical the criticisms are. This description of compulsive criticism represents the way in which the speaker loses emotional control. Oftentimes, compulsive behaviors are either not ones you can control or you might not even be cognizant of when you are performing a compulsion. Therefore, the description of this

daily “examination” as compulsive illustrates the profound lack of agency she had over her own body in the presence of her mother’s criticism.

This type of lack of agency continues through the end of the poem. The speaker’s agency in her actions continues to weaken. She says, “I was spread out daily,” which makes the action sound like it passively happened to her, and with no attribution to who performed the action (Sexton 121). Furthermore, at the end, she says that she did not know that

“Blood would bloom in me
Each month like an exotic flower
Nor that children,
Two monuments
Would break from between my legs” (121)

Again, the subject of the phrase is not the speaker even though the actions are happening within her body. The blood blooms in her, instead of her body menstruating. The children “would break” from her womb, instead of her birthing the children. The language sounds as though these other subjects, the blood and the children, control her body rather than her body performing these actions. Furthermore, in this stanza, the speaker literally becomes a container. The containment imagery takes the form of her stomach and reproductive organs: she holds the blood of her period and the life of her two children.

The lack of agency around the speaker’s body demonstrates the progressive process of women becoming estranged from their bodies. Early in the poem, the speaker says “I lived in a graveyard full of dolls, / avoiding myself / my body, the suspect” (118). The idea of the body as stranger is important to containment because the minimization of women’s bodies and identities

are ways in which one can become disconnected from one's body. The estrangement of women from their bodies is similar to the estrangement of women (or girls) from their identities.

At the same time, one might interpret this stanza to be a glorification of motherhood. The speaker carries her period like an "exotic flower" and two children like "monuments" (121). Both exotic flowers and monuments are often seen with a sense of reverie or awe. Therefore, while some of the language implies a lack of agency, these particular images imply the beauty of what the speaker holds in her reproductive system. However, this "beauty" solely describes the body and creates a sense of estrangement between self and body. Therefore, the idealization of her pregnancy is actually discordant with the emotions she feels towards the experience of childbearing. Therefore, the tension in the language perhaps points to a larger tension within the poem. The toxicity of glorifying mothers does not only impact their daughters, it impacts mothers as well.

Ultimately, the imagery of containment illustrates a mother's physical confinement, gender confinement, and domestic confinement of her daughter. The imagery of containment suggests that the relegation of motherhood to the private sphere allows for the continued discordance between positive idealized assumptions of mothers versus the psychological harm they can perpetuate. In particular, the way in which motherhood is still considered much more in the private sphere of the home than the public sphere creates challenges for daughters. The institution of motherhood becomes even more impervious to critique because it is hidden behind the facades of home.

Both the motifs of dolls and containment imagine a certain psychological power that mothers have over daughters, which results in the replication of strict standards of femininity. From stuffing her heart into a box to comparing herself to mechanically-made dolls, the speaker

attempts to contain herself and replicate her mother's ideals in order to be accepted by her mother. The grotesquity of these images comes at a time when motherhood is so concretized that such language becomes a much harsher repudiation in the context of both the 1950s and now. "Those Times" therefore makes an urgent commentary on a crisis in which mothers replicate their girls to literally and figuratively become a Barbie doll. Furthermore, the intensity of these images asks us to interrogate the conventional tropes associated with motherhood, as unconditionally loving, nurturing, and safe, and reckon with the fact that mothers have immense psychological power over their daughters from a young age. Abusing that power, even unintentionally, engenders a gender trap, one that shapes a daughter's psyche from a young age.

**"The Double Image's" Deconstruction of the motherhood myth**

The imagery of "Those Times" is a chilling understanding of the effects of a mother on the psyche of a young girl. The poem is an exploration of the alarming ways in which young girls are groomed for the "cult of domesticity." Similarly chilling is the grotesque mother-daughter dynamic portrayed through imagery of mirrors and portraits in "The Double Image." The nature of haunting and consumption in "Double Images" produces an unsettling portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship. However, this poem, as the speaker is much older, is interested, if not sympathetic, to the expectations of motherhood. This poem is especially cognizant of the sacrifices that mothers had to, and still have to, make when they are societally pressured to be a certain "ideal" of a mother. When the renaissance of domestic housewives arose again in the 1950s, our society valorized domestic work for women in order to reframe the delegitimization of economic work for women. This was recognized as an expectation, but in order to soften the fact that it was an expectation, mothers were given great praise for taking the

role of housewife. “The Double Image” illustrates how this idealization of mothers dissuades the interrogation of mothers’ behaviors, to the detriment of daughters, and also mothers.

“The Double Image” is widely reported as an autobiographical and chronological journey of the birth of Sexton’s child, her time spent with her mother after a suicide attempt, and the challenges that arose from both of those circumstances. The poem is written to Sexton’s daughter, Joyce. It explores the intergenerational trauma of motherhood, patriarchal expectations, and her own struggle with mental health. The most prominent motif throughout “The Double Image” is, as the title suggests, the imagery of doubles, mirrors, reflections, portraits, and duality. The imagery around portraits illustrates the way in which a woman’s ideal version of herself, as well as her mother’s expectations, constantly permeate the speaker’s psyche. The portraits also connect to imagery of consumption, suggesting that patriarchal family structures have high expectations of sacrifice for mothers and daughters, leading to the emotional consumption of each other. The high price of sacrifice runs throughout this poem in Sexton’s exploration of mirrors as well. The ambiguity of the “double woman” in the mirror represents the tension between mothers and daughters wanting to have their own sense of self, but being inextricably defined by each other. However, the allusions to mythicism within the mirror imagery demonstrate the toxicity of such expectations to sacrifice for a mother’s love. Overall, this textual interpretation of “The Double Image” will delineate how portraits and mirrors images of the mother-daughter relationship dramatize another glorification of motherhood: the idealization of maternal sacrifice.

The dominant organizing principle of “The Double Image” is the metaphor of matching yet oppositional-positioned portraits of the mother and daughter in the poem. The guiding metaphor of the poem has been the subject of extensive literary interpretation. Some critics, such

as Adrian Jones, have suggested that the portrait "functions as a preservation of the self-image in the face of death" (Jones 98). Other critics, such as Rose Lucas and Jessica Mehta, suggest that the portraits demand an Oedipal or Lacanian interpretation. For example, Mehta argues that although the mother might have been the speaker's "first image," it is false ("mocking mirror"). The Lacanian "infantile mirror-gazing realisation is complete" (Mehta 30). Mehta connects the repetition of "my" in "my mocking mirror, my overthrown love, my first image" to trivializing her mother, ultimately finding that only the consumption of the mother allows to succeed in besting her" (Mehta 31). While Mehta's interpretation connects both consumption and portraits, this interpretation imagines an engrossing competition between mother and daughter that leads to the mother's consumption. I will demonstrate the ways in which this consumption is rather the psychological decay of sacrifice between mother and daughter: a form of consumption that both women in the relationship struggle to best.

Portraits are typically commissioned to create a keepsake of the best version of oneself. In fact, the portraits in the poem were commissioned by the mother almost immediately after the speaker's suicide attempt. The mother tells her daughter that she cannot forgive her suicide, but "she had [her] portait done instead" (Sexton 38). The situational context in the poem echoes the truth about portraits: they are the ideal image of oneself, the exterior self that one strives to present to the world. The arrangement of props, choice of pose, style of hair, makeup, choice of clothes, even filters and painting styles and choices of the artist completely construct both your physical appearance and the impression of one's persona. Therefore, commissioning a portrait immortalizes a specific external image of self, both physical and emotional. The symbol of portraits is hence important in this poem because it is a way in which both mother and daughter can project their ideal self-image to the world, even if bears no similarity to their internal truth. If

we imagine these portraits as a depiction of the mother and daughter's ideal versions of themself, the language of haunting also bears more significance.

Throughout the poem, the portraits symbolize the image that the mother and speaker want to see of themselves. Sexton writes,

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

The diction choices make it sound as though the mother is haunting the speaker. The movements of the portrait, like wilting, mocking, eyes me from that face, make it sound like the mother is still alive. Therefore, while the portrait is inanimate, the use of active verbs make it sound like she is still alive through the image of her portrait. Moreover, the speaker repeats "that" in describing her mother's portrait, indicating a tone of exasperation. She says that the mother eyes her from "that" face, from "that" stony head of death, which sounds like that particular face or experience has happened before. The portrait therefore sounds alive, despite the mother being dead and the portrait inanimate. If the portrait represents the mother's ideal self-image, then this means that the mother's conceptions of self are still very much so alive for the speaker, and watching her. Therefore, the portraits, or the mother's desire to portray a very specific, constructed image to the world, haunts her daughter still.

The symbolism of the portraits intersect with the diction of consumption in Sexton's discussion of the speaker's portrait. The speaker's portrait is across from her mother's, placing

them in comparison with each other. If the mother haunts the speaker, then we see a poetic rendition of the speaker haunting and consuming herself. The speaker says, “I rot on the wall, my own / Dorian Gray” (41). Dorian Gray is a fictional character who sells his soul for it to be placed in a portrait of him, allowing him to commit sin and stay young and handsome for the rest of his life. The portrait becomes more and more grotesque because Gray commits sin after sin. In this allusion, we see how, even though his external image is perfect, his soul is narcissistic and self-serving. This stanza directly compares the speaker’s portrait to Gray’s fictional portrait, which means that she sees herself similarly, seduced by the promise of eternal beauty while her soul begins to rot away. This allusion is particularly enriching in the context of the speaker’s guilt. In “The Double Image,” the mother implies that the speaker’s suicide caused the mother’s cancer. Because the story of Dorian Gray so directly connotes narcissism and the guilt of killing someone, the allusion implies the speaker’s guilt towards her mother. The intensity of the speaker’s guilt points towards the way in which women are culturally taught to be cognizant of their emotional impact. The imagery of containment in “Those Times” provides an illustration of how a woman learns to minimize her own emotions, while absorbing the emotions of others, like mothers. While it would be impossible for a cold or death to spread through her womb or through cancer, the speaker feels responsible for those outcomes, so much so that her soul is rotting because of it. In a case like this, the speaker’s sense of care requires blaming oneself for a terminal illness outside the control of any human-being. Therefore ultimately, this stanza critiques the expectation we have of women to sacrifice their own well-being to take on the pain of their family.

While in the previous stanza, rotting symbolized the consumption of the speaker, the poem also recognizes the ways in which her mother is consumed. The portraits in relation to

consumption therefore demonstrate how our glorification of the sacrifices that mothers make cause damage for both their daughters and themselves. We can see this consumption diction throughout the stanza:

> "She turned from me, as if death were catching,
> as if death transferred,
> as if my dying had eaten inside of her…
> 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" (38).

There are several examples of consumption diction here. The speaker suggests that her "dying had *eaten* inside of her." Cancer is a disease that *eats* away at the organs. And breast milk is *consumed* as the child's first source of nutrition. When the speaker says, "They carved her sweet hills out," the word choice of "sweet" also alludes to the sweetness of breast milk. The diction of consumption most highlights the violent word choice of "carve," though. According to the OED, to carve means to "cut into portions, to serve, help at a meal" (Carve). The image therefore sounds as though the doctors sliced the mother's breasts into portions to share. It is a particularly powerful image because the connotation of carve sounds like the doctors are almost serving the mother's breasts as food, which is a reification of the way housewives served everyone at the table first. Therefore, this image becomes a grotesque representation of how a mother is physically and metaphorically available for consumption: her body and soul are shared amongst the members of the family, very often not leaving anything left for the mother. Ultimately, this

language suggests that being a mother is analogous to family literally and metaphorically eating away at you.

Through the symbolism of the consumption of the speaker and the mother, we can see how standards of self-sacrifice deplete both of these women. The depiction of consumption of her breasts reminds us how mothers are physically and emotionally consumed by the needs of children more so than their own. However, the mother also consumes the daughter by the way her judgement will forever haunt the daughter. Therefore, both mother and daughter are forced to sacrifice for each other in this equation. When we consider the context of the 1950s cultural moment, women had to give up their jobs, self-fulfillment, and dreams in order to fit the mold of the perfect housewife. The consumption diction presents the double-edged sword of the glorification of maternal sacrifice. As our culture deeply praises mothers for the sole sacrifice of bearing children, we become paralyzed in devotion, a devotion that ignores the potential gendered traumas inflicted on daughters.

However, “The Double Image” also recognizes the expansive bodily and personal sacrifices in order to provide sustenance and emotional support for daughters. In this poem, we see how our cultural obsession with mothers sacrificing themselves for their children both prohibits daughters from critiquing their mothers because they feel a duty to respect that sacrifice. This valorization of motherhood also traps mothers into the consumption of their own body and soul in order to care for children. This stanza does not offer an answer, but rather challenges the way we desire to see mothers as perfect, which both damages the daughter and invalidates a mother’s desire for support.

The final mirror imagery in “The Double Image” is a culminating moment for understanding Sexton’s perspective on mother-daughter relationships. In the final stanzas of the

poem, Sexton explores the literal and figurative reflection between mother and daughter. This reflection is fraught with the ambiguity of mother and daughter, leading to a question of whether there are borders between them, or whether they ultimately mesh into a messy fusion of two women. Sexton writes,

> "And this was the cave of the mirror,
> that double woman who stares
> at herself, as if she were petrified
> in time — two ladies sitting in umber chairs" (Sexton 41).

There are several potential interpretations for "cave of the mirror." The combining of singular and plural nouns and verbs creates the effect of confusion on who is actually being reflected. For example, the use of "woman" and "stares at herself" suggests that the subject is singular; however, the phrase "double woman" and the phrase, "as if she were petrified," mixes the singular subject with a plural verb. In many ways, the two subjects in the mirror become both fused and separated at the same time. There are also multiple imagery interpretations. For example, the double woman could be the speaker and her reflection, or double image could be the speaker and her mother. If it is both women looking in the mirror, but also staring at each other, it becomes a mirror within a mirror. The multitude of available interpretations makes it impossible to decipher the exact positioning of the mother and daughter. This essentially means that when she looks at herself, she is unsure whether it is a reflection of herself or a woman who has become so identical to her mother that she can't tell the difference.

However, if the speaker is looking at her mother, this means that the mother must also be looking at the speaker. The profound confusion of whether she sees herself or her mother suggests that she's not sure whether she has her own identity or just the identity she has grown

into defined by her mother. In particular, the text is suggesting that these two women only see each other when they try to see themselves. This represents the way in which the mother is defined by daughter and vice-versa. The mother is defined only by her offspring. However, her daughter turns out to be the only identity she is given by a culture that glorifies motherhood so greatly. In turn, the daughter is defined by her mother's standards. The mother's standards for body, personality, and sacrifice are cultivated so deeply in the daughter, that she ultimately becomes simply an image of her mother. This makes obvious a cycle in which the only definition of women allowed is mother, which in turn completely defines how the daughter will turn out. However, perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates that these two women never achieve an identity outside of each other. This is perhaps the most tragic aspect of motherhood: the lack of sense of self.

Finally, the stanza's use of mythic allusion represents a critique of how our culture fantasizes motherly love. As outlined above, our familial structure relies on the trope of "motherly love" being all-encompassing and unconditional. Perhaps one of the most salient critiques of the institution of motherhood in Sexton's poetry is that motherly can in fact be very conditional, based on whether one's daughter embodies the necessary feminine qualities. Sexton's use of mythic imagery as frightening demonstrates how in fact, "motherly love" can be quite conditional and toxic. The speaker says,

> "This was the cave of the mirror/
>
> That double woman who stares
>
> At herself, as if she were petrified in stone" (41)

In this stanza, the first allusion is widely recognized as the Narcissus myth, according to Alicia Ostriker, a prominent literary critic of Sexton (12). The speaker's direct comparison between her

mother and herself to several allusions in such a tight space of the poem suggests an exploration of myth. In alluding to myths the speaker often portrays her mother and herself as trapped in the auspices of the myth. For example, she is fastened to the wall in the allusion to Dorian Gray. The mother and daughter are in a "cave of the mirror," in allusion to Narcissus, which is an underground, enclosed space that is hard to exit. Finally, the Medusa allusion nods to the women being "petrified," meaning that they are hardened into a solidified object. The combination of the allusions and imprisonment in a variety of forms suggests that they are trapped in these myths. The confinement of these myths represents the confinement of the myths we create around motherhood: rather fantastical, if not dangerous. When considering Sexton's own contextual perspective, it becomes clearer that the motherhood myth that Sexton is portraying is the one in which mothers are safe, loving, and protective. Throughout the imagery in "Those Times" about the ways in which Mary Gray contained, examined, and criticized Sexton, we can see how this relationship was not always a safe place for Sexton. Sexton once said herself "I know I was dependent -- but Mother didn't want to be motherly. I clung to her" (Middlebrooke 37). The danger that is presented in these myths metaphorically can be seen in Sexton's life as well. As a young girl, believing in the idea that mother was the paramount form of love, led her to believe that she simply wasn't meeting her mother's expectations in order to receive love. She had to mold herself into what Mary Gray wanted, existing to ease her mother's moods, anxieties, and tensions. By being told that a mother was the most protective form of love, it becomes that much more difficult to cope with the fact that some mothers dole their love conditionally. In fact some psychoanalysts, like Melanie Klein, would suggest that the myth of unconditional love is so false that the human subject will spend the rest of their life "learning to decode and accommodate … the impossibly ambivalent emotion" of the mother's love (Lucas).

**Conclusion**

In reading “Those Times” and “The Double Image” collectively, Sexton provides a forceful interrogation of motherhood practices of the 1950s. From bodily consumption, to doll-like replication of girls, to haunted portraits, to the rich grotesquity of metaphors, “Those Times” and “The Double Image” are a timeless deconstruction of the way our culture perceives mothers. These texts also highlight the way in which mothers can project and ultimately pass down the deep confinement of toxic standards of womanhood: bodily perfection, “feminine” traits, and the expectation of sacrifice.

In my analysis of “Those Times,” I attempted to demonstrate how the motif of containment allows us to see the variety of ways in which a mother might contain their daughter, such as their personality, gender identity, and domestic role. The imagery of dolls builds on the idea of containment because they demonstrate how our patriarchal society creates a system in which girls are only valued for their beauty and ability to mother a child, which ultimately traps the mother in this same system. This poem ultimately demonstrates the virulence of body insecurity and being confined to narrow expressions of gender and identity.

The speaker’s anger towards her mother in “Those Times” shifts to a much more tender, chilling identification with her mother in “The Double Image.” Both the imagery of portraits and mirrors investigates the images that women hold of themselves, as well as how their mothers and daughters hold up images of their expectations to each other. In different ways, these motifs also explore the separation and enmeshing of boundaries between mother and daughter. The discussion of portraits sought to demonstrate the way in which the deep bodily and emotional sacrifice mothers and daughters make for each other are immensely psychologically consuming.

The expectation of mothers to give all of themselves over to their children is equally as toxic as the expectation that mothers sometimes place on their daughters to embody certain standards of femininity. The imagery of mirrors further complicates our understanding of boundaries, suggesting that the mother-daughter relationship can also strip both of a sense of self due to the reliance on the other to define self-worth.

Ultimately, the textual analysis of "Those Times" and "The Double Image" presented in this thesis argues that mothers reproduce psychologically dangerous gender norms in their daughters, such as body image standards, intense regulation of behavior, and the expectation of sacrifice. However, considering these poems in the context of the 1950s and contemporary times, enriches the power of these poems. Sexton's frighteningly eerie portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship demands that we question the construction of mothers as the penultimate source of love and morality. This thesis sought to demonstrate how Sexton's poetry deconstructs the myth of motherly love, suggesting that it can be a deeply fraught, complicated experience that psychologically wounds both mother and daughter. These poems critique the glorification of the mother, in large part because it cloaks the trauma of both mother and daughter.

This interpretation of her poems does not suggest that all mothers are "bad," but rather, to suggest that mothers are as fallible and insecure as we all are. In fact, while perhaps not as present as expressions of resentment, the speakers in these two poems also express intense love and sympathy for the way in which their mothers struggle within the same gender structures that they do. However, mothers also have a particularly intimate relationship with children, especially daughters. This means that, while the mother is not the sole problem in the reproduction of toxic cultural constructions, the mother does hold significant psychological power over her daughter. That understanding is critical for both mothers, daughters, and families to grapple with. How can

mothers attend to the insecurities and femininity standards they pass down to daughters? How can we cultivate daughters with strong self-worth early to push back against their mothers? How can our society, the government especially, provide more support for mothers so that we as a society continue to blur the gender binary of both the workplace and the home?

In large part, these are cultural issues that mothers and daughters can be aware of. While Sexton's depictions of mother and daughters were perhaps more classically toxic, those images are still thoroughly resonant today. For example, while mothers raised daughters to emulate dolls in postwar consumerist America, these capitalist body standards have become repackaged into diet and wellness culture. Wealthy mothers especially can be a source of obsession over health and wellness, which is simply a reification of trying to attain an unhealthy body ideal. And while daughters might not be groomed to be a housewife from the age of six, there are many "feminine" behaviors still expected of girls and not boys. Even the phrase, "boys will boys" is used fervently and excuses everything from not sharing toys to engaging in demeaning "locker-room" talk. Furthermore, girls tend to be quieter and more diligent in class from a younger age, as well as emotionally mature faster (Chaplin & Aldao). While some of that might be biological, the images of containment in "Those Times" illustrate that the socialization of "proper" behavior for girls is quite penetrative. Finally, the emotional expectations of women to sacrifice for others is also still quite present. There is extensive research on the starkly large difference in emotional labor output between men and women, suggesting that women still learn to sacrifice their time and energy much more frequently to support others (Guy & Newman).

In considering the limitations of the scope of this thesis's analysis, perhaps the most unexplored aspect of mother-daughter relationships is "need." Although sacrifice is a patriarchal expectation, the idea of mother and daughter needing each other might be the most complex

aspect of this relationship. As Adrienne Rich once said, there is “knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other… that is subversive” (Houston 155). If subversive is perhaps too indulgent, this preverbal communication creates the potential for liberatory reliance of one another. While Sexton’s poetry on motherhood is quite negative, it leaves room for the understanding that needing one’s mother or daughter is almost inevitable to heal the wounds of patriarchal traumas. In Sexton’s relationship with her daughters we begin to see some of the healing of those wounds. Sexton often wrote about her need for her daughters, but rarely her mother. One of her emblematic comments on motherhood is in fact in a letter to Linda, rather than a poem, and connects the intergenerational love between these three women. I believe it presents a constant evolution of mothering, one that both realizes the healing power of reliance between mother and daughter, while recognizing the importance of self-liberation and self-fulfillment for both mother and daughter: “I love you, 40-year-old Linda. I love what you are and what you do -- Be your own woman. Talk to my poems, and talk to your heart -- I’m in both if you need me. I did love my mother and she loved me” (Sexton et. al, 424).

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