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“I am either all the way there or I am not. I don’t know how to walk this middle line” (Skorczewski 109). The Impact of Manic and Depressive States on Anne Sexton’s Poetic Depictions of Food.

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*This research explores poet Anne Sexton’s use of food imagery in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, focusing on the way food is presented in contextual relation to the manic-depressive cycles Sexton was experiencing. This is placed within the socio-political climate of the 1950s-1960s which influences Sexton’s relationship with food.*

Since her death in 1974, Anne Sexton has been subjected to pathologisation in analysis of her work. From scholars to biographers, the predominant focus has been on her suicide. Many scholars make the error of reading her work with the hindsight of her suicide, rather than viewing it in terms of her life. Often labelled a ‘confessional poet’, Anne Sexton’s work draws heavily on her life experiences, particularly her first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, first published in 1960. Sexton’s psychiatrist, Doctor Martin Orne, recommended that she write poetry to express her feelings, thus came *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Given its origins are in therapy, there has been a scholarly appropriation of Anne Sexton the poet and Anne Sexton the pathological myth. Greg Johnson suggests there exists a “[. . .] fatally glamorous mask of Anne Sexton—part loveable witch, part helpless madwoman—for which she became famous, and which is often discussed as if it were the only self present in Sexton’s poetry” (176). Sexton is defined by her mental illness, leading to an oversight of the structural and linguistic merits of her poetry. Kathleen Ossip, for example, argues that Sexton is mythologised, becoming a package: pretty, housewife, stupid, classy, and dead (12). Critical discourse plays into this myth; Diana Hume George’s *Oedipus Anne* sets up a picture of Sexton as a case study through the mythological evocations in the title, reading her life through psychoanalysis. When Danny Wedding attributes symptoms of cognitive distortion to Sexton, she is positioned as a case study, her work unexplored within the cultural context. Wedding presents a discourse that reads backwards; he understands her work through the hindsight of her death, rather than exploring her development throughout her life.

One of the tensions in Sexton scholarship is the assumption she had Bipolar Affective Disorder. Officially, this diagnosis was not attributed during her lifetime. While one must be careful with posthumous diagnosis, Sexton’s daughter Linda has bipolar, and suggests her

mother lived with the same condition, which the medication she took is now prescribed for (*Mercy Street* 94). Bipolar “[. . .] appears to be the most genetic of the major psychiatric illnesses”, making it plausible, Kay Redfield Jamison going as far to say “almost certain”, that Sexton had a mood disorder (*Touched with Fire* 235, 234). Despite this likelihood, to avoid posthumous diagnosis, this essay shall explore manic and depressive states—which Sexton’s friends and psychiatrists refer to—rather than explicitly labelling her with bipolar. Instead of pathologising Sexton, I intend to explore her poetry in relation to female relationships with food, and how manic and depressive states, intersected with the influence of comorbid disorders, impact Sexton’s poetic and personal relationship with food.

Sexton’s Relationship with Food, Domesticity, and Her Manic-Depressive States

Sexton scholars look at the socio-political importance of representations of domesticity in Sexton’s poetry, but do not explicitly focus on the way food is presented, a crucial lapse, as cooking was a domestic task that Sexton struggled with (*Middlebrook* 333-34). Greg Johnson argues Sexton’s poetry “[. . .] serves as a painfully truthful mirror of the age”, meaning it reflects the changing position of women and engages with the political landscape (172). This notion emphasises the importance of exploring food in Sexton’s poetry, as the changing food industry played a substantial part in the evolution of the role of women in the 1950s-70s. Artemis Michailidou suggests Sexton’s poetry portraying husbands and wives:

[. . .] established most convincingly the connection between enclosure, victimization, and psychological dysfunction. She wrote about oppressive domesticity during an era that advocated social progress, yet largely refused to grant women the privileges of this progress. (88)

The most overt example of this is the poem ‘Housewife’, where the speaker’s house is anthropomorphised and consumes her; she is then violated by men. The domestic woman in Sexton’s poetry is not fulfilled or satisfied with their life: in ‘The Little Peasant’ the domestic woman has an affair; in ‘The Break’ the woman feels her house consume her; in ‘Hansel and Gretel’ two female characters die in the kitchen; in ‘Food’ the speaker feels a conflict in her role as a mother and writer which is conveyed through nourishment and food imagery. Sexton’s female characters feel the psychological consequences of enclosure in a patriarchal society which leaves them unfulfilled. These women succumb to madness, die, or remain stuck in a life they are dissatisfied with.

Suzanne Juhasz proposes that, through poetry, Sexton “[. . .] became a spokesperson for the secret domestic world and its pain” (263). Sexton ‘the poet’ and Sexton ‘the housewife’

existed in conflict with each other, as “[. . .] it was not the woman, who made the peanut butter sandwiches and the marriage bed, whom Sexton liked. It was the poet” (267). Her female wives are not figures of a “proper lady and mother and wife” but of “crude and rude” women who do not fit in their assigned domestic sphere (262). Michailidou and Juhasz both suggest Sexton presents women who are dissatisfied with their domestic lives and cannot complete their expected roles. What is absent from this discourse on Sexton’s relationship with domesticity is the way her poetry engages with food. Critics suggest Sexton conveys her personal struggle with domesticity in her poetry, but fail to hone in on particular elements which fall within the umbrella term ‘domesticity’. There is a fine line between order and disorder in relationships with food, and to suggest a disordered relationship implies there is an ‘ordered’ or ‘normal’ relationship, which is not the case. The socio-political meaning of food goes beyond nourishment; culture, family, wealth, and mental health all impact one’s relationship with food. These factors are performative and all influence Sexton’s relationship with food; food plays a large part in domestic life, and Sexton’s difficult relationship with food comes through in her poetry. There is a lack of a discourse on food in Sexton’s poetry, despite the biographical struggles with food pointed to, and these images are influenced by the poet’s manic-depressive states.

Throughout her life, Sexton had a difficult relationship with food. Biographer Diane Middlebrook goes as far to say Sexton suffered with periods of anorexia (37). It is not clear whether anorexia is being used as a synonym for skinny or is related to food refusal through other sickness, as there is no indication Sexton had a clinical diagnosis of anorexia. Regardless, her relationship with food still proves difficult due to her mental illnesses, in particular her manic-depressive states. As a child, Sexton “[. . .] hated meal times and habitually carried food off to her room, where she would let it spoil- a habit that continued in later life” (9). When Sexton’s husband Kayo went away, she would not eat (32). Her trauma, originating from a mealtime when her father called her acne disgusting and refused to eat with her around, further created negative associations to food (14). Discourse on episodic purging appears in biographies, further highlighting an existing food issue (Middlebrook 334; L. Sexton, *Mercy Street* 49). Sexton’s purging tendencies appear to occur more frequently when she was beginning to fall into depressive episodes. She would make herself sick during meals, alongside being argumentative with her husband at dinner (Middlebrook 334). Orbach asserts that women who tightly control their food intake are “caricaturing the message beamed at all women”, that food is a means to assert control (*Visibility/Invisibility* 137). Food is imbued with cultural

meaning; magazine culture suggests “[. . .] women are the right people, in an almost biologically divined sense, to be concerned about food delivery” (Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* 2 19). This belief system shapes women’s relationships with food: “[. . .] food is what she gives to *others* but must deprive herself of”, as Orbach succinctly asserts (21). When food is situated as a means of control, disordered relationships with food manifest. An argumentative nature surrounding food reflects the control paradox of food production; trying to control food creates a difficult and disordered relationship with food, despite expectations being that women control food production.

Symbolically, purging food can be read as a comment on women’s role in society. Sexton’s therapy tapes showed her distaste towards domesticity. She told Doctor Orne that she did not want to be “some little housewife” and discussed her distaste for housewifery in interviews (Skorczewski 31; A. Sexton, ‘With Barbara Kelves’ 84). Taking the stance that “bulimic vomiting imitates the act of speech, regurgitating food as a substitute for words”, it is significant that Sexton purged in front of her family but was able to use words with Doctor Orne and journalists (Ellmann 48). She told Doctor Orne it felt like Kayo loved her most when she helped around the house, and that she hated this pressure, feeling housework was “beneath me [...] a woman’s place is not in the home” (Skorczewski 103). This testament depicts the dilemma of control within Sexton’s relationship with food, as to prepare the meals is to conform to the domestic ideal. It follows that her bouts of purging removed food and stands as a metaphor for the removal of domestic control over her. Sexton openly told others that she struggled with domesticity, but could not admit this within her family setting, thus I propose that it arose symbolically through purging. Purging is related to nurture; when one purges, they seem to play into the norms of providing nurturance but in private they remove this, posing a challenge to the role of woman as nurturer. Given that Sexton struggled with domestic chores during depressive episodes, it is significant that on a downward turn she resorts to purging.

Manic-depressive states influenced Sexton’s relationship with food. When severely depressed Sexton was unable to complete basic tasks, and when manic it is common to lose hunger cues and forget to eat. Sexton lost weight during a period of severe depression and reached 110 pounds (Middlebrook 378). Sexton’s relationship with food when in depressive states is likely influenced by the socio-political context of the 1950s-70s domestic sphere. In an interview with Barbara Kelves Sexton said:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. [...] I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, [...] it was what my husband wanted of me. (84)

Biography suggests Sexton was less domestic than she claimed, with depression influencing this behaviour. Kayo recalled an incident where he asked Sexton to prepare baked potatoes for dinner. Upon returning from work, "she hadn't even put the baked potatoes in - she 'didn't know how'" (Middlebrook 36). Linda recalls episodes in her childhood where her mother did not feed her, even when she asked for food (*Mercy Street* 40). Further, there were points when Sexton was too unwell to look after the children and the responsibility fell to Kayo's mother, Billie Sexton, causing tension as Sexton wanted to look after her children, a domestic role she, somewhat contradictorily, felt confined by and yet wanted to conform to (Middlebrook 35).

Weight gain from medication can impact an individual's relationship with food because of discomfort with the changing body. Sexton gained weight when she started taking the anti-psychotic drug Thorazine, and was bed bound with a broken hip (*Mercy Street* 136). Thorazine can lead to weight gain from increased food consumption due to cravings, and changes in chemical reactions in the brain. Sexton acknowledged she gained weight from Thorazine in multiple letters. She does not comment on whether she viewed this positively or negatively. In two separate letters to close friend Anne Wilder she wrote "I did tell you that I'm fat. The new me", and "I am size 14-16 [...] big belly [...]" (*Self-Portrait in Letters* 320, 349)¹. The notion of a new self does not seem negative, but there seems to be an ambivalence towards her changing body. The *DSM-5* states approximately 14% of individuals with bipolar have "at least one lifetime eating disorder", reflecting the extremities manic-depressive states have on a person's relationship with food (139).

Sexton's comorbid disorders also influenced her relationship with food and are intertwined with her manic-depressive states. Linda recalls that, towards the end of her life, her mother had "[...] begun to substitute alcohol for food. She lost a tremendous amount of weight with what she called her 'liquid diet'" (*Mercy Street* 173). Sexton struggled with substance abuse throughout her life, argued to be related to her depressive states. According to the American Psychiatric Association, women with bipolar "have a higher lifetime risk of alcohol use disorder than are males and a much greater likelihood of alcohol use disorder than do females in the general population", and "substance use disorder (e.g., alcohol use disorder) occur in over half of individuals with bipolar I disorder" (*DSM-V* 130, 132). Given that

¹ In *A Self-Portrait in Letters* Wilder is given the pseudonym Anne Clarke.

substance abuse is an illness which has symptoms of weight-loss and poor nutrition, it is important to consider the way Sexton's experience of manic-depressive states influences her relationship with food.

Agoraphobia is important to consider on Sexton's personal and a socio-political level. Agoraphobia is often tied to fear around food dominated locations. When considering Sexton's agoraphobia, it is important to note that "[t]he majority of individuals with agoraphobia also have other mental disorders" (*DSM-V* 221). One comorbid disorder is depression, and Sexton's depressive states impacted her ability to leave the house. Further, Sexton's agoraphobia influenced her relationship with food and domesticity, as she "feared grocery shopping [...]; she felt conspicuous at the market, as if people could see that there was something wrong with her" (Skorczewski 196). Agoraphobia with specific anxiety surrounding food shopping is indicative of a difficult relationship with food. The element behind Sexton's agoraphobia related to food could be connected to her ambivalent feelings as a housewife and mother; if food signified a domestic life she was unsatisfied with, then being surrounded by women in her position and food would be anxiety provoking. This fear can be tied to her personal relationship with food; on occasions Sexton would throw up her meal during dinner, or get drunk instead of cooking, hence food at home represented a failing at housewife duties which created an anxiety in seeing others successfully conform during food shopping (Middlebrook 334, 333).

To Bedlam and Part Way Back

To Bedlam and Part Way Back primarily features poems set in a psychiatric hospital. In its historical context, the collection is important given the conditions of psychiatric hospitals in America during a time when medical practice for mental health was changing. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was an increased use of medication to treat mental illnesses without a full understanding of potential side effects. Sexton was first institutionalised in 1956, arriving in care on the cusp of these changes, but prior to the deinstitutionalised approach which emerged in the mid-60s. Treatments such as lobotomies, electroshock therapy, and insulin shock therapy were given more value than talking therapy. Even in private institutions, malpractice was frequent. The private McLean Psychiatric Hospital, known for treating Sylvia Plath in 1953, and later Robert Lowell and Sexton, had a notorious reputation for using

dangerous shock therapies (Beam 78-82). Sexton stayed at Westwood Psychiatric Hospital in 1956 for postpartum depression, which served as the inspiration for her first poetry collection².

One recurring theme in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is an oppressiveness felt within food. In 'Torn Down from Glory Daily', bread fed to pigeons by the patient reflects her feelings of entrapment, and the dehumanisation of patients subjected to a bland and monotonous life, an effect captured through plain bread. This discourse is prevalent in the opening poem 'You, Doctor Martin', an address to her psychiatrist Martin Orne. Throughout the poem, which explores life in a mental health institution, he is the omnipresent man watching over the patients in the hospital. The setting is comparable to a prison; patients are constantly being watched and line up in rows to get their food. The workers in the ward are referred to only as 'they', unlike Doctor Martin, who is directly addressed and positioned as a "god" (l.1, l.9, l.24). The pronoun "they" becomes a tool of dissociation; the reader does not know who "they" are, only that they are in charge as they unlock the door, thus they are always watching. To get their food, the patients "move to gravy in our smock / of smiles. We chew in rows" (l.12-13). The rigid nature of eating in rows is a means of control, each patient is literally and metaphorically kept in line, reflecting the feeling of being watched. The reader is not given the names of the people watching, yet they are given descriptors of the food, thus giving the food greater power in their mind. There is a sense that the food, too, is watching them. The imagery of smiles and chewing reflects the uniformity of teeth. In stereotypes of American dental hygiene, straight teeth and a pearly white smile are valued, reflecting conformity and homogeneity. Like perfect teeth, the patients are all uniform and do not have any distinctive differences, thus removing their identity. Rather than "we eat in rows", Sexton uses "chew" which detaches from the pleasurable aspect of eating through its functionality. This aesthetic reflects the influence of depression on food consumption. Eating is not pleasurable for the speaker. She is only eating as she has no choice; the process of eating has become monotonous.

In psychiatric hospitals, 1:1 feeding observation is often used to ensure patients eat. There becomes a chain of signification where food means being observed, and to observe someone is to hold the position of control. Food controls the speaker of the poem due to rigidity around mealtimes in a mental health institution, and structure arises from the presence of food at certain times of day. This hold is further conveyed in the structure of the poem through a regular rhyme scheme; the first, fourth, and seventh line of each stanza rhyme. Visually, the poem is centred, making each stanza look similar. Jeanne Kammer posits the "[. . .] symmetry

² In 2017 Westwood Lodge was shut down for patient abuse allegations.

of the stanza is opposed, however, by the run-on lines and the failure of the whole to be, in the end, self-contained. The form is both an ironic extension and a contradiction of the content” (126). Kammer goes on to suggest Sexton’s poetry has a sense of “inner control” (128). The rhyme scheme indicates a control over the body of the poem, but this control is lost through the enjambment. The form mirrors the way the speaker attempts to take control, but the institutional setting of the poem prevents her from having real control. There is an attempt to control the poem’s discourse through the structured body, visually there appears to be control through the end of line rhymes and the continuity in the shapes of the stanzas. This control slips away through the use of enjambment, the speaker loses control when food controls her through its omnipresence. Thus, food controls both the body of the speaker and the body of the poem by dictating the structure of their day, with the speaker’s paradox of being both in and out of control mirrored in the structure of the poem.

‘You, Doctor Martin’ sees a distortion of common signifiers, reflecting the way mental illness changes a person’s worldview. This subversion of language is seen in the speaker’s deviation from the social signification of the knife at dinner, viewing the knife through the lens of suicidal ideation. When the patients go to dinner:

our plates
scratch and whine like chalk
in school. There are no knives
for cutting your throat (l.13-16)

The idea that knives are absent to avoid self-harm or suicide is implicit of a distorted relationship with food signifiers. The speaker’s suicidal ideation, which implicitly is her reason for being in hospital, is the lens she sees the world through. Suicidal thoughts are consuming, almost everything around oneself is tainted by this ideation.

Jamison posits a powerful image which encapsulates this distorted signification; “In the mirror I see a creature I don’t know but must live and share my mind with” (*Unquiet Mind* 114). Jamison’s self-dissociation mirrors the speaker’s dissociation from social signifiers. The social implication of knives at the dinner table is to cut one’s food and maintain etiquette. However, for the depressed speaker, the world is coloured by suicide, thus the knife at mealtime is taken to signify violence; by extension food signifies danger. The poem’s structure further reflects the disjointed signification of the knife. The enjambment of the lines: “There are no knives / for cutting your throat” shocks the reader, perhaps unfamiliar with reading such objects through the lens of disordered eating (l.15-16). In the context of a mental hospital, it is

understandable that there are no knives to alleviate the risks of self-harm. However, this chain of signification still shocks, as one who has not been suicidal may not instinctively associate cutlery with self-mutilation or suicide, reflecting the way depressive states impact perception. Eating becomes a source of distress as a feeling of unease is created by the knife signifying harm could take place.

Other poems in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* explore the process of food preparation through the lens of oppressiveness. ‘Her Kind’, one of Sexton’s most famous poems in the twenty-first century, features a speaker who “fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves”, conveying a feeling of displacement, with the speaker later stating she feels ‘misunderstood’ (l.11, l.13). The link between domesticity, food, and manic-depressive states is potent in ‘What’s That’, where a woman in a kitchen ominously waits for something to happen, which, by the end of the poem, is calling her. For Sexton, the domestic setting of the kitchen has both manic and depressive associations. The looming “it” of the poem can be viewed as depression or mania. Sexton’s daughter Linda recalls that one of her mother’s manic habits was baking; on one occasion Linda “worried about how ‘up’ [Sexton] was” when in a flurry of intense baking she loudly sang, cleaned, and urgently asked her to borrow ginger from their neighbours (*Half in Love* 40-41). In manic states the kitchen is an escapism and in depressive states it is oppressive, reflecting the tension in the housewife-poet dichotomy. The speaker in ‘What’s That’ is in limbo in the kitchen space, waiting for either a manic or depressive state to consume and dictate her behaviour; all she can do is passively wait in the kitchen. The imagery of doubles in the poem suggests this notion. The speaker watches a balloon:

Divide

like something I know I know-

a broken pear or two halves of the moon (l.4-6)

This sense of division represents the two sides to the speaker: the manic and the depressive. She does not feel entirely whole, but two halves of a person, waiting to see which half will consume her. The repetition of ‘I know’ becomes a metaphor for the only two states the speaker feels she knows, manic and depressive, not experiencing the unified and neutral middle ground. To have this image occur in the kitchen reflects female relationships with domesticity, the speaker feeling stifled by this domestic sphere where she passively waits to be consumed by mania or depression. This is further apparent in the use of feminine signifiers of the broken pear and halves of the moon. Pears are a body type attributed to women, and the moon has feminine associations to the menstrual cycle. The image being of “two halves of the moon”

rather than the singular ‘half-moon’ reflects the speaker’s feeling of not being a whole self, rather she is made up of two states which, like the domestic setting, control her identity. The speaker becomes defined and consumed by both her role as a woman and her mental health, thus fracturing her identity.

This is not the only image in ‘What’s That’ attributable to Sexton’s manic-depressive states. The image “watched it swell like a new balloon” mirrors the way Sexton will later write about her body following her weight gain from Thorazine (l.3). Swelling being associated with weight reflects the speaker’s discomfort as a woman in a patriarchal society attempting to occupy two spheres: housewife and poet. This image is comparable to one used by poet and close friend of Sexton, Maxine Kumin. In ‘Family Reunion’, the speaker is ‘ballooning to overfill our space’, reflecting the tension within the career-domesticity dichotomy (l.27). The roles of poet and housewife become incompatible, and by attempting to occupy both spheres, women take up too much space. Both Sexton and Kumin look at this social question, predominantly using food imagery to represent the tension inherent in their poetics. Both speakers in ‘What’s That’ and ‘Family Reunion’ are in a domestic space; Sexton’s in the kitchen, Kumin’s at the dining table. Female speakers in domestic spheres, surrounded by food, feel their sense of failure and an impending doom from the inability to be both poet and housewife. These bodies take up too much space, and ultimately cannot be completely successful in either sphere.

Domestic and psychiatric spaces merge through Sexton’s use of food imagery. Sexton ties liquid foods to depressive episodes. In ‘You, Doctor Martin’, the patients are moving towards the “gravy” and in ‘What’s That’, the speaker thinks of her adult years as defined by “the swing of the spoon in soup” (l.12; l.22). ‘What’s That’ has ominous tones of life in a psychiatric hospital, with the image of the “round white plates” mirroring the uniformity present in the dining utensils in ‘You, Doctor Martin’ (l.7). When considering the speaker’s life being defined by living in a psychiatric hospital, liquid food alleviates some of the risk of death, as one is less likely to fatally choke on liquid, evoking the extreme procedures psychiatric hospitals take to prevent suicides on the ward. Depression made it hard for Sexton to eat, thus liquid foods represent the only feasible nutrition. Soup is of particular significance, as in the 1950s the introduction of convenience foods into middle-class households created a tension between convenience and homemade food for the housewife (Shapiro xvii). To some women “even failures tasted better to them than packaged perfection” (xxiii). Many viewed convenience foods as a failure to be a good housewife as it takes away preparation steps and

the necessity of cooking; “[...] the faster the cooking, the less it was going to feel like real cooking, and the greater the potential for guilt on the part of the homemaker” (63). To combat this, advertisers attempted to convey convenience foods as work; when cooking:

[. . .] some degree of hands-on labor was an essential part of the enterprise and justified much of the sense of achievement that constituted one of the chief rewards of cooking. Packaged-food cuisine, by contrast, was painless. That was its main selling point, but it was a drawback as well. One approach to this challenge was to try to make packaged-food cooking look like work, albeit very simple work. (60)

In the poem, it is not mentioned whether this is canned or homemade soup, which conveys the doubling present. The soup could be either homemade, signifying the housewife, or convenience, signifying the poet/working woman. From a mental health perspective, homemade soup could signify mania, and canned soup could signify depression. The food, like the speaker, exists in a limbo where it is not attributed defining features. Instead, the attribution of the speaker’s looming mental state would define the soup, reflecting the consuming nature manic-depressive states have on relationships with food and one’s world view more generally.

Concluding Thoughts

Regardless of whether we attribute the label of bipolar to Anne Sexton, the manic and depressive states she experienced shaped her relationship with food in a time where female relationships with food and their bodies were under continual scrutiny. This is still the case in the twenty-first century. Given more space, a comparison with contemporary authors would be valuable—namely Chris Kraus, Frieda Hughes, and Caitriona O’Reilly—who all explore female relationships with their bodies and food. In *Aliens & Anorexia*, Kraus comments on the consumption of female anorexic bodies by the male philosophical gaze, which views anorexics as selfish and attention seeking. Kraus is critical of the feminist attempt to reclaim the anorexic body as it falls into the same trap as the male gaze by relying on gender stereotypes. Kraus attempts to lift understanding of anorexia out of the base form of bodies and gender stereotypes, into an ontological state of experience. *Aliens & Anorexia* is of particular comparative interest as Kraus openly criticises feminist-sociological scholars cited throughout this essay, namely Ellmann and Orbach (160-161). Hughes and O’Reilly both write poetry on their personal experiences with eating disorders, employing images of discomfort in the body and thinness³.

³ For reference, see: Caitriona O’Reilly *Geis* ‘Mirror’ and ‘Hunger’, *The Nowhere Birds* ‘Thin’; Frieda Hughes *Forty-Five* ‘Fifteenth Year’, ‘Sixteenth Year’, and ‘Seventeenth Year’.

The prominence of these images reflects the consuming nature of eating disorders, and their personal tonality would make an interesting comparison to Sexton's poetry which is labelled as 'confessional'. Sexton's discomfort in her relationship to domesticity is impacted by her manic and depressive states, with these symptoms standing as a comment on the 1950s-70s society in which she lived and worked. As a whole collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is ground-breaking by exploring female breakdown and institutionalisation. However, this innovation resulted in small yet significant motifs being overlooked. An exploration of Sexton's poetic and personal relationship with food enlightens the way manic and depressive states influence one's life on minor, almost obscure, levels, thus reflecting the consuming nature of these states which will necessarily impact the poetic process and poetry Sexton produced.

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